

# **AMAZING GRACE**

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# AMAZING GRACE I

## Historical Background

The doctrines known as the Doctrines of Grace represent the teachings concerning salvation that formed the heart of the Protestant Reformation, particularly as that Reformation developed in Switzerland, France, the Netherlands, Scotland, and England. Though this view of salvation is often called “Calvinism,” such terminology can easily give the impression that the teaching in question arose for the first time in the sixteenth century. In order both to erase that impression and place the famous Five Points in their proper context, we will begin our series by surveying the historical development of the doctrine of salvation in the church.

### THE EARLY CHURCH

In the first four hundred years of the Church’s history, the doctrine of salvation received little direct attention for the simple reason that everyone assumed a common understanding of the matter. While it was true that heretics like the Gnostics taught bizarre views of salvation (e.g., through esoteric knowledge), the orthodox Church firmly held that salvation came through Christ alone, and that those who were saved were responsible to live holy lives. In the fourth century, different emphases began to develop in the churches of the East and the West. While the Eastern churches emphasized the Incarnation as the foundational saving work of God, and thus saw salvation as a matter of God becoming man so that man could be like God (John Chrysostom was one of the chief exponents of this view), the West focused on the death of Christ, emphasizing salvation as God’s remedy for man’s sin.

### AUGUSTINE AND THE PELAGIAN CONTROVERSY

As with all other doctrines of the Church, the doctrine of salvation first became a burning issue when the orthodox understanding of the matter was challenged by a popular and charismatic personality - in this case a British monk by the name of Pelagius. Pelagius taught the inherent goodness of man and insisted that, while all were undoubtedly sinners, this sin came from following bad examples, which had been with us since the time of the Fall. Christ came to set a good example. Those who followed that example, albeit not perfectly, would be accepted by God. The Church Father Augustine of Hippo responded to the teachings of Pelagius by setting forth in clear language the Pauline doctrine of man, sin, and salvation. He asserted that men were wholly evil by nature as a result of the sin of Adam, and that they were thus incapable of following good examples of any kind. Only by the grace of God could a person be saved, and that grace was given only to those who were chosen by God. [It is worth noting that Augustine, like all the Catholic theologians of his day, viewed that grace of God as being communicated through the sacraments.]

The Church soundly rejected Pelagianism at the Council of Ephesus in 431, but remained uncomfortable with Augustine’s predestinarian views; many feared that such teachings undermined the free will of man. A monk in Gaul named John Cassian championed a theology known as Semi-Pelagianism, which asserted that man’s sinful nature was a weakness rather than a disability. Thus man is able to choose to accept or reject the grace proffered by God, making salvation a cooperative effort between God and man. Though Semi-Pelagianism was rejected by the Council of Orange in 529, the Church was still unwilling to espouse a full-blown Augustinianism. Instead they opted for

what has been called Semi-Augustinianism, which asserts that, while man is sinful and unable to contribute to his salvation, God gives His grace to all (through the sacraments, of course), enabling them to respond in faith if they so choose. This continues to be the basic understanding of salvation found in the Roman Catholic Church.

While a few lonely souls in the Middle Ages spoke out in favor of Augustinian soteriology (Gottschalk, Thomas Bradwardine, Gregory of Rimini), most of the pre-Reformers, such as John Wycliffe, John Huss, and Girolamo Savonarola, spoke of true Christians as being those who lived holy lives. While this was an improvement on sacramental grace, the true successors of the great Augustine did not appear until the time of the Protestant Reformation.

## THE REFORMERS AND SALVATION BY GRACE ALONE

All of the leading Reformers - Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, and Knox - were deeply influenced by the writings of Augustine. They rightly noted that any understanding of salvation that pictured it as a cooperative effort between God and man - even if God's part was very large and man's part was very small - was inherently Pelagian, since man's small part was the decisive one. While different Reformers emphasized different aspects of the issue - for Luther the key was justification by faith, while for Calvin it was the sovereignty of God - the Protestant Reformation saw itself as standing against the Catholic teaching that what a man did determined his eternal destiny.

Luther's views, which were carried on in the state churches of Germany and Scandinavia, were later modified by Melancthon to incorporate a significant amount of synergism, which continues to characterize Lutheran teaching today. Calvin's teachings, meanwhile, influenced the Protestant churches of France, Scotland, the Netherlands, and England (particularly early Reformers like William Tyndale, Thomas Cranmer, Hugh Latimer, Nicholas Ridley, and later the Puritans). In the early seventeenth century, a branch of the English Puritans adopted believer's baptism and became the Particular (or Reformed) Baptists, from whom we are descended. Other English Puritans migrated to New England, where they laid the foundation for a new church in a new world.

## ARMINIANISM AND OTHER CHALLENGES

The emphasis on divine grace in salvation among the Protestant Reformers was not without its challengers. The earliest of these were the Anabaptists, who arose in Zurich in 1525. Because of their understanding of the church as a voluntary association of committed believers, it was very easy for them to fall into an understanding of salvation that emphasized man's choice as the key to salvation and his holy living as the key to perseverance. Most Protestants rejected such teachings as unbiblical, however.

A more serious challenge to the teaching of salvation by grace alone arose in the Netherlands in the early years of the seventeenth century. In the fifty years after Calvin's death, his followers had refined and expanded upon his system and had placed great emphasis on God's sovereign decrees. Such Protestant Scholasticism produced painful disputes over matters such as infralapsarianism and supralapsarianism. Among the most vocal in these disputes were Theodore Beza, Calvin's successor in Geneva, and the Dutchman Gomarus. A professor at the University of Leyden, Jacob Arminius, objected to these wranglings and sought to set out a more practical understanding of the Bible's

teachings about salvation. His understanding was set forth a year after his death in a document called the *Remonstrance* (1609), which expounded in five points the views of Arminius. These five points stated that God's election was based on foreknowledge of faith or unbelief, that Christ died for everyone (though only believers are saved), that God's grace is needed for man to do any good deed, that God's grace may be accepted or refused, and that it may be possible for believers to fall from grace. In 1618-19, the Synod of Dordt, made up of Protestant leaders from all over Europe, met to consider the *Remonstrance*. They soundly condemned its teachings and drew up five points of response to the Arminians - the famous Five Points of Calvinism [TULIP] (Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace, and Perseverance of the Saints).

As had happened with Augustine, attempts to compromise such God-centered doctrine arose immediately. One of the more notable was that proposed by Moses Amyraut in France, which amounted to essentially a Protestant Semi-Augustinianism.

## WESLEY AND CONTEMPORARY EVANGELICALISM

Later protests against Calvinism arose largely as matters of practice. The Pietists in Germany opposed the dead but doctrinally sound Lutheran orthodoxy of the eighteenth century by emphasizing personal conversion, commitment, and holiness. Following in their train, John Wesley in England led a revival with his evangelistic preaching. Wesley was no theologian (while he described himself as differing from Calvin only by a hair's breadth, he shied away from preaching predestination because he feared that it would deaden evangelistic zeal, and he called his magazine *The Arminian*, though he did not espouse all points of the *Remonstrance*), but his enormous influence on evangelical Christianity in both England and America produced a wide variety of churches that espouse part of the Calvinist system while rejecting other parts. Though not all modern revivalists followed the path of Wesley (George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, other preachers of the First Great Awakening in the American colonies, and pioneer missionaries such as William Carey and Adoniram Judson are notable examples), most have rejected the Calvinism of the Synod of Dordt, the Westminster Standards, and the London and Philadelphia Confessions.

## MODERN LIBERALISM

A far more serious departure from biblical teaching about salvation appeared with the advent of theological liberalism in the nineteenth century. The way had been paved for this by the humanism of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, but the liberals went farther than either of those movements in rejecting the authority of Scripture and affirming the goodness of man. Liberalism concluded unsurprisingly that all men were saved. To such theologians, the very notion of eternal damnation was an anachronism, belonging to an earlier and less enlightened age. With such teaching dominating professing Christendom, it is no wonder that the Calvinistic focus on the holiness and sovereignty of God should suffer eclipse in the popular mind, and indeed be subject to considerable ridicule (When did "Puritanical" become an epithet?).

## A NOTE ON THE USE OF LABELS

The terminology used in discussing the issue of salvation can be confusing. Calvinists are wont to refer to anyone who denies the complete sovereignty of God in salvation as an Arminian.

In fact, few in the church today would espouse the five points of the *Remonstrance*. True Arminians consider anyone who believes in eternal security to be a Calvinist. Liberals, on the other hand, refer to anyone who still believes that God actually condemns some people to hell while saving others as a Calvinist - I was shocked to find some liberal church historians discussing Arminianism as a minor variation of Calvinist teaching! Among those who stand somewhere between Calvin and Arminius, choosing some of the points while rejecting others, few would identify themselves as either Calvinists or Arminians (two-, three-, or four-point Calvinists, perhaps). Those who shun the Calvinist label consider anyone a Calvinist who is more Calvinistic than they are, while those who are willing to call themselves Calvinists in a general sort of way refer to those whose rigor exceeds their own as “hyper-Calvinists.”

In conclusion, labels are very confusing in this area, and are often counterproductive. It is vital that people examine the teaching of the Bible about salvation rather than diligently seeking to affix labels to themselves or others.

## **AMAZING GRACE II**

### Total Depravity - Biblical Basis

The first of the “Doctrines of Grace,” the T in TULIP, is Total Depravity. In some ways, this is the least controversial of the Five Points of Calvinism. After all, every Christian believes that man is a sinner. So while debate rages about election, the atonement, regeneration, and perseverance, all readily acknowledge the fundamental sinfulness of man. Unfortunately, the matter is not quite so simple as it may seem.

While all evangelicals would affirm the total depravity of man in principle, different people understand the doctrine to mean radically different things. For instance, the *Remonstrance* compiled by the followers of Arminius affirmed the total sinfulness of man, but then undermined that assertion by stating that God had given sufficient grace to all men to enable them to respond to His gracious offer of salvation. Thus, to the Arminian, total depravity is a theoretical construct that does not in fact characterize any individual, since all are recipients of God’s enabling grace. Others would affirm a watered-down understanding of human sinfulness that sees the will as weak, yet able to respond to God’s grace. Both of these must be seen to fall short of the biblical teaching about the sinfulness of man. The Bible does not picture sin as a weakness, nor does it describe human depravity as a theoretical condition that has already been overcome by the universal enabling grace of God.

The issue of total depravity is foundational to a correct understanding of the Bible’s teaching about salvation. If man’s condition is not rightly understood, how can we possibly comprehend the nature of God’s remedy? Only those who see man as capable of contributing to his own salvation would dare to affirm that it is necessary for him to do so. Those who give to man the decisive role in salvation do so only because of an inadequate understanding of the Bible’s teaching concerning human sinfulness.

What, then, is total depravity? In simple terms, it means that man since the Fall has been and continues to be corrupt in every part of his being - physical, moral, emotional, intellectual - and is thus both deserving of God’s judgment and totally incapable of doing anything to change his condition. Today, we will look at what the Bible teaches about this subject. Next week, we will discuss two questions frequently raised in connection with the Bible’s teaching on human sinfulness - the matter of “free will” and the problem of evil.

The doctrine of total depravity is composed of a number of biblical teachings, including the following:

#### **SIN IS UNIVERSAL IN THE HUMAN RACE**

The only person born into this world who escaped the taint of sin was Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The clearest statement of the universality of sin is found in Romans 3:9-20, 23, much of which is composed of Old Testament quotations. Other passages that teach the same truth are II Chronicles 6:36; Psalm 130:3; 143:2; Proverbs 20:9; Ecclesiastes 7:20; Isaiah 53:6; I John 1:8, 10. Scripture also describes the human race in general as characterized by darkness and corruption - Genesis 6:5; Ecclesiastes 9:3; Jeremiah 17:9; Mark 7:21-23; Ephesians 4:17-19; 5:8; Titus 1:15.

## HUMAN BEINGS ARE SINFUL FROM THE BEGINNING

God created Adam and Eve sinless in the Garden of Eden, but because of their sin, the human race fell. Since that day, all who have been born have inherited a sinful nature, and thus are corrupt from birth. While Romans 5:12 states this truth most clearly, it is also taught in Psalm 51:5; 58:3. Note that Psalm 51:5 traces sin from the point of *conception*.

## THE HUMAN CONDITION IS ONE OF SPIRITUAL DEATH

Man's sin is no mere weakness. The Bible compares the sinner to a dead man. No analogy could convey the helplessness of the sinner in his sin more graphically. God's warning to Adam and Eve spoke of the death that would result should they disobey His command (Genesis 2:16-17). Because they did disobey, their descendants are described as dead in sin - Ephesians 2:1-3; Colossians 2:13. For the same reason, salvation is described as "new birth," "new life," or even "new creation" - John 1:12-13; 3:5-7; II Corinthians 5:17.

## THE HUMAN CONDITION IS ONE OF SPIRITUAL SLAVERY

Another image the Bible uses to portray the helplessness of man is that of bondage or slavery. The unsaved person is described as being a slave to sin, in bondage to the devil - John 8:34, 44; Romans 6:20; II Timothy 2:25-26; I John 5:19; Titus 3:3.

## PEOPLE LACK THE ABILITY TO REMEDY THEIR SINFUL CONDITION

Sin is so pervasive in human nature that it renders man totally incapable of changing his condition - Jeremiah 13:23; Matthew 7:16-18; John 6:44, 65; Romans 8:7-8; I Corinthians 2:14. These verses would have no significance if they spoke only of a theoretical condition that had already been remedied in all by the grace of God.

## PEOPLE LACK THE DESIRE TO REMEDY THEIR SINFUL CONDITION

In laying a foundation for the discussion we will be undertaking next week, we must see specifically that the will of man is under the bondage of sin. The Bible clearly teaches that men are not only incapable of doing spiritual good, but that they also have no desire to do so - John 3:19; Romans 3:11; 8:7.



## **AMAZING GRACE III**

### Total Depravity - Related Issues

When brought face to face with the Bible's teaching about the utter sinfulness of man, two questions often arise. These questions are in reality two of the strongest criticisms usually directed against Calvinism. The first of these has to do with man's free will (Calvinism reduces men to the level of puppets), the second with the sovereignty of God in relationship to evil (Calvinism makes God responsible for sin). Both of these are dilemmas in which the Christian should seek biblical teaching rather than seeking rational proof. God's ways are not our ways, and these questions are ones that deal directly with the ways of God.

#### GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY AND MAN'S FREE WILL AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

Most of the confusion here results from inability to separate the volitional freedom of man from the moral freedom of man. All human beings are free to make rational choices, but those choices are circumscribed by a number of factors. These factors include our abilities, our resources, our circumstances, and, most importantly, our natures. As we saw last week, human nature is unremittingly evil in every respect. It should thus come as no surprise that the Bible teaches that those whose natures are evil desire only that which is evil. Left to himself, man will always rebel against God. Perhaps the most graphic picture of this human trait is the one painted by Paul in Romans 1:18-32. The universal light of creation, which clearly reveals God's character and power, is universally rejected by sinful man, who in his pride worships the creature instead of the Creator. Thus Scripture pictures man as free to choose within the limits of his nature, resulting in perpetually sinful (yet free) choices. Man is thus *responsible* for his immoral and rebellious choices, yet unable to choose what is good.

Those who think about this argument, as many have done, will quickly see that it raises another problem. How can God hold someone responsible for following his nature? Can the lion be held accountable for murder when he kills and eats the antelope? When a man can do no other than what he does, whence culpability? In other words, we arrive at the question of Romans 9:19 [NOTE: We will examine the critical Romans 9 passage next week when we talk about election]. The ultimate end of this line of reasoning is to lay the responsibility for evil at the feet of God Himself, the sovereign creator of mankind and the one who decreed man's fall into sin. This, of course, leads us to our next topic.

#### GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

The problem of evil consists of three components - the existence of evil, the love of God, and the power of God. All who seek rational solutions to the problem of evil do so by denying one of its three fundamental components. Pantheists, including Hindus, Buddhists, and New Agers, deny the reality of evil (or, more accurately, deny that there is any ultimate distinction between good and evil); Muslims, and all too often hyper-Calvinists as well, deny the love of God, reducing Him to a capricious deity who cares little for His human creatures; dualists of all sorts and humanists, as well as Arminians, deny the power of God, wishing instead to place ultimate control of man's fate in the hands of man himself.

We must take note of the motives of Christians who would espouse these different explanations. While the Calvinist who pictures God as harsh and arbitrary wishes to communicate clearly His sovereignty in human affairs and rightly emphasizes the truth that God's ultimate aim is His own glory rather than man's salvation, the Arminian engages in theodicy, seeking to absolve God of the blame for man's sin and damnation. Is there any alternative to crediting God with sovereign power at the expense of compassion or upholding His love at the cost of His sovereignty?

This is one of those issues where we must conclude by admitting that, while the Bible does not teach us how to resolve this dilemma, it does clearly teach the validity of each of the three components of the problem. Thus a Christian is forced to affirm the reality of evil, the sovereign power of God, and the love of God, while acknowledging that he doesn't know how the pieces fit together. After all, if we could comprehend the ways of God, would He be God?

Though the Bible does not solve the dilemma for us, it does teach us how we ought to deal with the consequences of evil in the world on the practical, everyday level on which we encounter it. The lesson, found in Jesus' parable of the fig tree in Luke 13:1-9, is that the existence of natural disasters and human cruelty in the world is not intended to call into question either the power or the love of God, but instead is intended to remind people of their sinfulness and call them to repentance. All deserve instant judgment; that only a few receive it is evidence of God's mercy, not callousness or capriciousness on His part. The book of Job also provides an extended treatment of the problem of evil, leading to the conclusion that God is so far beyond man's understanding that one ought not demand answers of Him. The ultimate answer to the problem of evil, however, is the Cross, which clearly demonstrates the reality of evil, the love of God, and the sovereign power of God all in one great work of grace.

## AMAZING GRACE IV

### Unconditional Election - Biblical Basis

In the Five Points of Calvinism, the U in the TULIP stands for Unconditional Election. The doctrine states simply that God has chosen those who are going to be saved on the basis of His sovereign will, not on the basis of something in the nature, character, or deeds of those who are chosen.

This second point is perhaps the most familiar badge of the theological system popularly known as Calvinism. To most non-Reformed Christians, Calvinists are those strange people who “believe in election” or “believe in predestination.” Anyone who makes such a statement does little more than reveal his own ignorance of both the Bible and theology, however. Calvinists are not the only Christians who believe in election and predestination. Anyone who believes the Bible must accept these teachings, which are clearly presented in the pages of Scripture. What sets Calvinists apart from other evangelicals is that they believe that the electing grace of God is *unconditional* - that it is rooted in nothing other than God’s free choice and has nothing to do with the suitability (through works or foreseen faith) of the person who is chosen.

This week, we will look at a variety of passages in Scripture that enunciate and explain the Bible’s teachings on election and predestination, including the forceful discussion provided by Paul in Romans 9. Next week, we will concentrate on the unconditional character of election, both with regard to works and with regard to foreseen faith.

#### ELECTION

When the Bible uses the word “election” or “elect,” it means simply that God chooses certain people or groups of people for certain purposes. The Bible applies the term to the nation of Israel (Deuteronomy 10:14-15; Psalm 33:12; 106:5; Isaiah 45:4), chosen by God to be the vehicle by which He brought His law and His Son into the world of sin and rebellion. Being God’s Chosen People did not always seem to Israel to be an advantage (Amos 3:2, cf. Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof* - “. . . but why couldn’t you choose somebody else?”). The term is also used to describe those angels who did not follow Satan in rebellion against God (I Timothy 5:21).

The use with which we are most concerned, of course, is that which is applied to Christians in the New Testament. On many occasions the Bible speaks of Christians as God’s chosen ones, or His elect (Matthew 24:22,24,31; Mark 13:20; Luke 18:7; Romans 8:33; 11:4-6,28; I Corinthians 1:27-29; Ephesians 1:4; Colossians 3:12; Titus 1:1; I Peter 1:1-2; 2:8-9; Revelation 13:8; 17:8,14). There can be no doubt on the basis of these passages, which provide examples but by no means constitute an exhaustive list, that the Bible teaches that God chooses those who are to be saved. As I said earlier, no Bible-believing Christian could seriously question this. What people do question, of course, is the basis upon which God makes that choice, and that will be the subject of next week’s lesson.

## PREDESTINATION

Though the terms “election” and “predestination” are often used interchangeably, they are not really synonyms. While election speaks of the *fact* that God has chosen those who are to be saved, predestination speaks of the *purpose* for which He has chosen these individuals. Like the word “foreknowledge,” which we will examine next week, the word “predestination” is easy to study because it only occurs a few times in the Bible - six to be precise. These passages are Acts 4:28, Romans 8:29-30, I Corinthians 2:7, and Ephesians 1:5,11-12. The first reference speaks of the death of Christ being foreordained by God, while the one in I Corinthians speaks of the plan of salvation as destined by God. The other four references speak of the fact that God predestined individuals, and thus are more relevant to our study. In Romans, Paul speaks of Christians as those who have been predestined to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ and to be part of God’s family, while in Ephesians he speaks of those who were predestined to be adopted into God’s family in order to bring praise and glory to God. Those who have been chosen by God are thus destined to attain a new nature, become part of a new family, and bring praise and glory to the God who chose them. Again, no Christian could legitimately question the teaching that God has destined His chosen people to fulfill these purposes.

### WHY MUST GOD CHOOSE?

Arminians object to the Reformed doctrine of predestination because they see it as an affront to the freedom and dignity of man. This is the point at which a proper understanding of this doctrine rests so heavily on what we talked about the last two weeks. God’s sovereign choice is not an affront to man’s freedom; it is man’s only hope of salvation. Left to his own devices, man would without exception choose to follow his nature into a life of corruption, deceit, and rebellion. As Romans 1 makes clear, the light of nature is both given to all and rejected by all. No man chooses God. Consequently, if God did not choose to save some, no one would be saved. All would be condemned to an eternity in hell, and justifiably so. There can also be no question that God had the power to save all had He chosen to do so. Yet He chose, for reasons that He has not revealed, to save some while leaving others to their just condemnation.

### DOESN’T THIS MAKE GOD UNFAIR?

The next question that naturally arises is whether such a teaching makes God arbitrary and unfair. We must admit that such charges have some justification. God appears arbitrary because He has not revealed to us the basis for His choice. Yet to demand such a reason would be to challenge both God’s sovereignty and God’s wisdom. The parable told by Jesus in Matthew 20:1-16, though told for another purpose, certainly underscores the sovereign right of God to give some what they deserve while at the same time showing mercy to others.

More significantly, the charge of unfairness is faced head-on by Paul in Romans 9:14-29. In this passage, Paul points out that God is glorified by the destruction of the wicked as well as by the salvation of the righteous, and that the Creator certainly has the right to do as He chooses with His creatures. It should be noted that, like the workmen in Matthew 20, those who suffer the judgment of God have no basis for complaint, since they receive what they deserve. On the other hand, those who have received mercy have great reason for gratitude, praise, and humble

thanksgiving. Those who challenge God's decisions in these areas are both displaying their lack of gratitude for what God has done for them and their lack of conviction that the judge of all the earth will do right.



## AMAZING GRACE V

### Unconditional Election - Related Issues

Last week we looked at the Bible's teachings concerning election and predestination. Today we will spend our time on the key issue that divides evangelical Christians in this area - the question of the basis upon which God chose who was to be saved. For the sake of completeness, we will examine two common arguments related to this issue, though the first one is almost universally rejected by evangelicals.

#### ELECTION AND GOOD WORKS

The belief that God has chosen to save those who do good is called *synergism* - the idea that man and God work together in salvation. When Roman Catholics or cultists of various stripes speak of election, it tends to be along these lines. But the Bible makes it clear that God's choice had nothing to do with human works. Romans 9, which we looked at last week, indicates in verses 11-16 that God's choice was not based upon character or works (cf. II Timothy 1:9; Titus 3:5). I Corinthians 1:27-29 is even stronger, teaching that God's choice was not only not on the basis of character or deeds, but in fact contrary to them in most cases. In fact, the Bible pictures good works as the result of God's electing grace rather than the cause of it (John 15:16; Ephesians 1:12; 2:10). Nor does God's Word teach a general election whose individual participants emerged later on the basis of their own decisions (Revelation 13:8).

#### ELECTION AND FOREKNOWLEDGE OF FAITH

While evangelicals bluntly reject any hint of salvation by works as represented in the first argument, many espouse a subtler form of the same thing. Rather than arguing that God chooses those who are of good character or those who do good deeds, they argue that God chooses those who believe (thus making faith a work of the unregenerate heart), or, even more subtly, that He chooses those He knew from all eternity *would* believe. Such an argument rests strongly on two passages - Romans 8:29 and I Peter 1:2. Both of these verses would appear to teach that God's choice of individuals is based upon foreknowledge. It is important to note, however, that such an interpretation rests upon a faulty understanding of what foreknowledge means. In order to arrive at an understanding of the term, we should again look at all the verses in the New Testament in which it appears, which is easily done since there are only seven of them. In addition to the two already mentioned, we have Acts 2:23, 26:5, Romans 11:2, I Peter 1:20, and II Peter 3:17.

What do these verses teach us about the meaning of foreknowledge? In French, there are two words that may be translated "know" - *savoir* and *connaître*. The former speaks of knowing facts, while the latter refers to personal relationships. Clearly, the type of "knowing" to which our key verses refer makes a world of difference in our understanding of them. Of the verses mentioned, only the one in II Peter can possibly refer to previous knowledge. All others speak clearly of a prior personal relationship. In fact, it was common among the Jews to use the word "know" as a euphemism for sexual intimacy - about as personal a relationship as one might imagine. Consequently, when the Bible speaks of God choosing those He foreknew (note that our key verses speak of God foreknowing people, not facts), it is saying that God chose to save those upon whom

He had set His love - those with whom He had determined to establish a personal, intimate relationship.

It is important to notice that the Arminian approach has other problems, as well. First of all, it implies that God *knew* something that He did not *plan* - a slander against His sovereignty. Isaiah 46:9-10 makes it clear that God knows everything *because* He plans everything. Furthermore, the Arminian approach really leaves no more room for human freedom than the Reformed one. After all, if God knew before time began that certain people would repent and believe, would that leave any chance that such people would not be saved? Would it leave any chance that those whose faith had not been foreseen in eternity past would come to salvation? In short, the Arminian approach manages to impugn God's sovereignty without in any significant way preserving man's freedom to choose God of his own accord.

We should also note at this point that the Bible teaches that faith, like good works, is the result of God's electing and saving grace rather than the cause of it. We will look more carefully at this truth when we examine the fourth point of our studies, irresistible grace.



## AMAZING GRACE VI

### Limited Atonement - Biblical Basis

In many ways, our studies thus far in this course have traced the typical pilgrimage of a Christian who encounters for the first time the Doctrines of Grace. His first objection is that Calvinism undermines the free will of man and makes man a puppet in the hands of a capricious God. Only a proper understanding of the extent of human depravity will overcome such an objection. He next balks at the Bible’s teaching concerning the electing grace of God, feeling that it must be based on something in the chosen one in order for God’s choice to be deemed fair and equitable. Such an objection may be overcome by analyzing the way the Bible uses the term “foreknowledge” and by recognizing that foreseen faith does not resolve the Arminian’s objection in any case. The last barrier at which our hypothetical Christian arrives in his journey is then the one that we will be considering in the next two weeks - the doctrine of Limited Atonement or Particular Redemption. Most Christians, when first confronted with this particular teaching, find it horribly offensive to the point of being unthinkable. Is it not a slander against the character of God and the work of Christ to suggest that when Jesus died on the cross, He died only for certain people, while leaving others without hope of salvation?

Today we will look at the major positions taken on the issue of Christ’s atonement. Next week, we will examine two related questions - the continuity of God’s plan of salvation and the concept of federal headship.

#### BASIC VIEWS OF CHRIST’S ATONEMENT

		FOR WHOM DID CHRIST DIE?	
		EVERYONE	THE ELECT
WHAT DID CHRIST’S DEATH DO?	ACCOMPLISH SALVATION	UNIVERSALISM	CALVINISM
	MAKE SALVATION POSSIBLE	ARMINIANISM	_____

As you can see, the variety of positions on the Atonement derive from two basic questions, for each of which two answers are possible. Before examining these two questions, though, we should note that the terminology usually used to carry on this debate is somewhat misleading. The phrase “Limited Atonement” to describe the Calvinist position fits nicely into the acronym TULIP, but it should be noted that both Calvinists and Arminians teach a limited atonement. Calvinists teach that the Atonement was limited in its intention, while Arminians teach that the Atonement was limited in its effectiveness. The only ones who teach an unlimited atonement are the universalists, who affirm that it was God’s intention to save everyone, and that Christ’s death accomplished just that.

## FOR WHOM DID CHRIST DIE?

The passages of Scripture that address this issue are generally viewed as presenting the crux of the problem. The difficulty arises when some passages of Scripture appear to speak of Christ's death as directed toward a specific group of people, while others speak of it as having a universal scope. What are we to make of this?

The passages that speak of Christ's redemption as particular - including but not restricted to such Scriptures as Matthew 1:21; John 6:35-40; 10:11,14-18,24-29; 17:1-11,20,24-26; Acts 20:28; Romans 8:32-34; Ephesians 5:25-27 - teach that God and His Son had a well-defined group of people in mind (the elect) for whom the Atonement was carried out.

Passages that appear to speak of a universal atonement - such as John 1:9,29; 3:16-17; 4:42; Romans 5:18; II Corinthians 5:14-15,19; I Timothy 2:4-6; Hebrews 2:9; II Peter 3:9; I John 2:1-2; 4:14 - refer to Christ dying for "all" or for "the world." These must be read in the context of the Jewish exclusivism of the New Testament era. The Jews were convinced that they alone were the chosen ones of God, and this attitude was retained by many Jews who were converted to Christianity. Thus Jesus and the apostles go to great pains to show that God's plan of salvation extends to Gentiles as well as Jews - to all without distinction rather than to all without exception.

Of course, in all fairness we should note that, while Calvinists arrive at their interpretation of the second set of passages on the basis of the first set, Arminians do exactly the opposite. For them, the verses that teach that Christ died for the elect are interpreted on the basis of the definition of conditional election examined last week. For the Arminian, the "all" and "world" verses provide the controlling basis for interpreting the extent of the Atonement.

Does that then mean we are at a standstill in which the two sides simply throw dueling Bible verses at one another? Must we acknowledge that the two sides simply interpret the inconvenient verses on the basis of the ones that fit their theological presuppositions? Not at all - as we shall see, the answer to the second question provides all the guidance we need in order to arrive at the biblical teaching about the first one.

## WHAT DID CHRIST'S DEATH DO?

It is in response to this question that the Arminian position collapses, for there is not a single verse in the Bible that speaks of the death of Christ as making salvation possible. In every instance, the Atonement is said to accomplish what Christ set out to do. By His death, Christ saved (Matthew 1:21; Luke 19:10; Galatians 1:3-4; 3:13; I Timothy 1:15; Titus 2:14; Hebrews 9:12; I Peter 3:18), reconciled (Romans 5:10; II Corinthians 5:18-19; Ephesians 2:15-16; Colossians 1:21-22), justified (Romans 3:24-25; 5:8-9), and sanctified (Ephesians 5:25-26; Hebrews 13:12) His people.

If anything, the universalists are on firmer ground here than the Arminians. They assert the perfect accomplishment of a universal intention. Only the Bible's teachings on the damnation of the wicked show the inaccuracy of their interpretation.

In fact, the original Arminians did not even believe that Christ's death was a payment for sin. Instead, they taught what is known as the Governmental View of the Atonement. This teaching maintains that Christ died in order to show God's moral governance over the world, while at the same time displaying His love for mankind. In other words, God sent His Son to the cross to show that He was deadly serious about sin - enough so to take out His anger on His sinless and beloved Son - and thus motivate men to deal with their own sin by repenting and turning to Christ. In addition, God's magnanimous gift showed how much He loved His wayward creatures, and was thus intended to make them love Him in return.

We thus assert that the Bible teaches that Christ died to save those who were chosen by God before the world began. He gave His life, not as an act of general benevolence, but as a substitutionary sacrifice for the sins of those who, in turn, received His righteousness, and with it the gifts of repentance and faith. Next week, we will see how this teaching, so unpalatable to many, fits easily within the context of broader biblical teachings on salvation.



## **AMAZING GRACE VII**

### Limited Atonement - Related Issues

Last week, we saw that the Bible teaches that Christ died specifically for God's elect and that His death accomplished everything necessary for their salvation. Today, we want to place that teaching in the larger context of what the Bible tells us about God's plan of salvation.

#### THE CONTINUITY OF THE PLAN OF SALVATION

The Arminian position undermines the continuity of God's plan of salvation by asserting that, while the Father chose to save certain people and the Holy Spirit works salvation in the hearts of these same individuals, the Son died as an act of general benevolence to make salvation possible for all. This is certainly not the picture given in Romans 8:29-30, where we see continuity from beginning to end of the salvation process. Furthermore, John 6:35-40 tells us that Jesus came to save those who had been given to Him by the Father, and that every one of these individuals will be raised to eternal life in the last day. Once we have demonstrated that the Father's electing love is directed to certain specific individuals, it is ludicrous to believe that the Son of God was sent into the world on an imprecise mission, to perform a task whose results are by no means clear. How much better is it to view the Son's work as the implementation of the Father's purpose, so that He paid for the sins of those same ones upon whom the Father had set His affection? That the Son's saving work should then be applied to those same individuals by means of the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit is the truth that will be the main focus of our attention in the two weeks to come, in which we will examine the doctrine of Irresistible Grace.

#### THE CONCEPT OF FEDERAL HEADSHIP

Perhaps the most important passage in all of Scripture to the doctrine of Particular Redemption is one that does not even mention the death of Christ. In Romans 5:12-21, we find Paul's exposition of the doctrine of Federal Headship. He explains that God has designated Adam and Christ to be the representatives of two groups of people. Such a concept is easily understood by those who live under a federal system of government. Our leaders act on our behalf, and we receive the consequences of their actions. Those who are represented by Adam - the entire human race - bear the guilt and consequences of his sin in the Garden of Eden. Those who are represented by Christ - the elect - bear the righteousness and receive the life that flow from His obedience to His Father in coming into the world, living a perfect life, and giving His life as a ransom for sin. The phrase "in Christ" is reserved in the Bible for Christians. They are the only ones who were represented by Jesus when He lived a perfect life and died an atoning death on the cross. Note that this passage is perfectly coherent with Jesus' own assertions in John 6 and John 17 that certain people had been given to Him by His Father.



## **AMAZING GRACE VIII**

### Irresistible Grace - Biblical Basis

We now arrive at the fourth point of Calvinism, the I of the TULIP - Irresistible Grace. Like Unconditional Election, this doctrine is viewed as an affront to human freedom by those who insist on believing that salvation is a cooperative effort between God and man. In simple form, the doctrine states that God the Holy Spirit will infallibly apply the saving work of Christ to those for whom it was intended - those who have been chosen by the Father. As pointed out last week, this doctrine underscores both the Trinitarian nature and total continuity of the divine plan of salvation.

In discussing the biblical teaching on this subject, two issues generally provide most of the confusion and controversy. These are the biblical use of the term “call” and the nature of faith and repentance.

#### WHAT IS A CALLING?

The confusion here arises because the Bible uses the word “call” in at least two different ways. The first of these refers to the universal proclamation of the Good News, often spoken of as the “universal call” or the “Gospel call.” This usage appears in Jesus’ frequent assertion that “many are called but few are chosen” and is implied by the open invitations issued in numerous places in Scripture, such as Isaiah 55:1-2 and Matthew 11:28-30.

Much more frequently, however, the Bible equates those who are called with those who are chosen rather than distinguishing them. Such passages include Romans 1:6-7; 8:29-30; 9:23-24; I Corinthians 1:1-2,9,23-31; II Timothy 1:9; Hebrews 9:15; I Peter 2:9; 5:10; Jude 1; Revelation 17:14. This type of calling is designated in theological circles as the “effectual call.” It implies that, when the Holy Spirit calls a person in this way, the calling itself conveys God’s enabling grace, while at the same time giving the person a new heart that reaches out in love to God rather than rejecting Him in hatred and rebellion.

Clearly, the Arminian confuses these two uses of the word “call.” He views the universal call of the Gospel as enabling, or at least as implying innate capacity or previous enablement, but not as saving. But the universal Gospel invitation no more presupposes the innate capacity of man to respond than Matthew 5:48 presupposes the innate capacity of man to be perfect.

#### FAITH AND REPENTANCE AS GIFTS OF GOD

Arminianism is a system of salvation by works because it views the decisive factor in salvation as something done by man rather than by God. Simply put, it views faith and repentance as works rather than as gifts. The Bible, however, clearly portrays both faith and repentance as gifts of God rather than human works. Passages such as Acts 5:31; 11:18; 13:48; 16:14; 18:27; Ephesians 2:8-9; Philippians 1:29; II Timothy 2:25-26 portray repentance and faith as gifts of grace given by God to those whom He has chosen.

Many Arminians deal with these passages, however, by readily agreeing that faith and repentance are gifts, but by further asserting that these gifts are offered to all and may either be

accepted or rejected. Though this is more subtle than the previous argument, it is still salvation by works, even though the work in this case is nothing more than extending an empty hand to God to receive His gracious offer. As long as what I do makes the difference between being saved and being condemned, my salvation rests on works.

The Bible, however, makes it clear that only those whose hearts are changed by the power of God could possibly respond to an offer of the Gospel, no matter how freely it is extended. Only one who has already been born again (regenerated, given new life and a new nature) by the Spirit of God can see or understand the Gospel -Deuteronomy 30:6; Ezekiel 36:26-27; Matthew 11:25-27; 13:10-11; John 3:3-8; 5:21; 6:37,44-45,64-65; I Corinthians 2:14; II Corinthians 5:17-18; Ephesians 2:1,5; Colossians 2:13. NOTE: Be sure not to get the wrong idea here. It is not possible for a person to be regenerated but not yet believe. These works are simultaneous, but one is logically prior to the other. It is only the changed heart that is able to reach out to God in faith, and such a changed heart will naturally and willingly do just that.



## **AMAZING GRACE IX**

### Irresistible Grace - Related Issues

In addition to the free will question, which we have already considered in an earlier lesson, the issue most frequently raised in connection with the doctrine of Irresistible Grace is that of evangelism. One of the charges most frequently directed against Calvinism is that it inhibits or even kills evangelistic zeal. How are we to respond to the charge? If God chooses who is to be saved, then infallibly works in the hearts of those same people through the Holy Spirit to bring them to faith and repentance, why is there any reason to witness? After all, those who have been chosen will be saved no matter what they or others do, while those who have not been chosen cannot be saved, despite the efforts of the most zealous evangelists.

To begin with, we must admit that the charges have not always been without merit. Though history is filled with great Calvinistic evangelists - beginning with Calvin himself and continuing with the likes of George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, William Carey, Adoniram Judson, and Charles Haddon Spurgeon - there have also been many Calvinists who, either overtly or in practice, have denied the validity of the Great Commission. Though Wesley's fear of predestination was grounded in a misunderstanding of the doctrine, it reflected considerable sad experience on his part.

How then are we to understand the relationship between the Great Commission and the Doctrines of Grace? There are two related issues that must be considered if we are to understand the Bible's teaching on this subject.

#### THE ROLE OF THE EVANGELIST

In general, the Bible indicates that God accomplishes His work in this world through means. Though He does on occasion intervene supernaturally in the affairs of this world through miracles, the fact that they are called miracles denotes that they are indeed the exception rather than the rule. Though God sometimes heals in a supernatural fashion, He most commonly works through doctors and medicines.

Similarly, though God sometimes saves through the unaided, direct work of His Spirit (e.g., Paul's Damascus Road experience), His normal procedure is to work through means. And the way that God Himself has chosen for His saving grace to be conveyed to the hearts of sinners is through His Word. The Great Commission itself indicates this, as does the famous missionary passage in Romans 10:14-15. I Peter 1:23 speaks of the Word of God as the means by which regeneration occurs. The Bible is the instrument used by the Holy Spirit to change the hearts of those who have been chosen by God.

The evangelist does not therefore save people, but is the mouthpiece through whom the Word of God is communicated. It is that same Word that is then applied by the Holy Spirit and brings about the conversion of the sinner whom God calls to Himself.

## THE MOTIVE OF THE EVANGELIST

The Arminian would seem here to have an advantage. He can plead with people to reach out and pluck from the fumes of Hell those who are perishing. He can tell his listeners that, without their help, millions will go unhindered to an eternity without God. But what does this approach imply? First of all, it implies that God's work will fail if Christians do not fulfill their responsibilities. In the same way that the Arminian pictures Christ's work on the cross as incomplete without man's contribution, so he pictures the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit as ineffective apart from the witness of the believer. In addition, the motivation provided is largely one of guilt, which is great for manipulation, but hardly biblical in its thrust.

Furthermore, the Arminian approach tends to encourage manipulative evangelistic methods. Like Charles Finney's *New Measures*, the methods of the evangelist are governed by what elicits a response. After all, with eternal souls at stake, isn't almost any approach justified in order to deliver them from an eternity in Hell?

Finally, the motives of the Arminian breed problems in the heart of the evangelist no matter what the outcome of his work. If his witnessing succeeds, there comes with it a great temptation to pride, along with the tendency to canonize whatever method produced the results and travel around the country teaching it to others. On the other hand, if conversions are not forthcoming, discouragement sets in ("What am I doing wrong?"), along with the temptation to search out a new and more effective technique that will produce better results.

How, then, does the Calvinist motivate people to do the work of evangelism? The simplest answer is that any Christian whose heart has been changed by the Holy Spirit wants to obey the law that has now been written on his heart. As with any other area of Christian obedience, the Christian preaches the Gospel because God has commanded it, not because of some salutary results that are associated with obedience. In fact, the Bible makes it clear that there will be many occasions on which obedience does not produce salutary results. The Christian does not know the identity of those who have been chosen by God for salvation, but he knows that God has chosen a numberless multitude from every people and tribe and tongue and nation. He also preaches with confidence, knowing that the Word of God is the instrument chosen by God to accomplish His work in the world.

And how will the Calvinist deal with the results of his witnessing, both positive and negative? When someone responds as a result of his witness, he will know that the change of heart he has seen take place was the result of God's power rather than the cleverness of his presentation. He will therefore remain humble rather than being tempted to pride, and will know better than to put his trust in some canned method of presentation. Should a person not respond, however, the Christian will not be discouraged, knowing that God's Word will not fail to bring forth the fruit that He has ordained.

## AMAZING GRACE X

### Perseverance of the Saints - Biblical Basis

The last of the Five Points is the P in the TULIP, which stands for Perseverance of the Saints. If Limited Atonement is the doctrine that distinguishes full-fledged Calvinists from those who merely lean in that direction, Perseverance (or rather, the denial of it) is the what distinguishes full-blown Arminians from those who have Arminian tendencies. In other words, most American evangelicals who would in other ways be classified as Arminian do believe in perseverance.

The doctrine that will be the subject of our discussion for the next two weeks states simply that those who are God's children can never lose their standing in the family of believers, but will unfailingly continue in the faith and be eternally saved. This week, we want to note some distinguishing characteristics of the doctrine and look at the biblical support for it. Next week, we will cover two related issues - the question of what makes a person a Christian and the matter of assurance of salvation.

#### DISTINGUISHING CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DOCTRINE OF PERSEVERANCE

The most important point to be made here is that the doctrine of perseverance promises eternal salvation only to those who are truly born again. The Bible makes it clear that not all those who profess faith in Christ are genuinely saved (Matthew 7:21-23). Final salvation is only assured for those whose hearts have been transformed by the work of the Holy Spirit.

It is important to note that perseverance becomes problematic when it is isolated from the other doctrines we have already discussed. The only thing that guarantees the permanence of an individual's standing before God is the fact that his standing results from God's work rather than his own. We should anticipate that, if God has chosen a people for Himself before the foundation of the world, entrusted those people to His Son for the purpose of redeeming them from their sins, and sent the Holy Spirit into the world to regenerate those whom He has chosen and for whom His Son has died, then He will complete the work He has begun by bringing those same people to eternal salvation. The confidence of perseverance in the faith is thus rooted in God's faithfulness to His own purposes.

For an Arminian, the denial of perseverance is also consistent with his other teachings. Because he views salvation as a cooperative effort between God and man on some level, he logically concludes that, while God will never turn back on His part of the work, man can at any time fall away, and thus break the bond that has been forged between God and himself. In short, if you must do something to gain salvation, you can also conceivably do something to lose it. This leads the Arminian to confuse faith with mere profession and to make a continuing credible profession a condition for maintaining one's salvation.

The American evangelical who is neither fully Calvinist nor fully Arminian must approach the issue in a different way, however. While he would not argue that all who profess faith in Christ are truly saved, he would affirm that *a genuine (i.e., sincere) profession of faith seals a person's membership in God's family independent of any change in behavior or life*. This may not be the DAISY of the Arminian ("He loves me, He loves me not"), but it is assuredly one of the great

plagues of the American evangelical church - what has often been called “easy believism.” It is for this reason that it is so important to answer the question we will be discussing next week - “What is a Christian?” - in connection with the whole issue of perseverance.

## BIBLICAL BASIS FOR THE DOCTRINE OF PERSEVERANCE

There are a number of ways in which the Bible indicates the sure standing of those who belong to Christ. To begin with, the final salvation of the elect is part of the eternal purpose of God (Romans 8:29-30); this is so certain that Paul expresses it in the past tense. The Bible also teaches that those who are saved have received (not “will receive”) the gift of eternal life (John 3:16,36; 5:24; 6:47; I John 5:11-13). Furthermore, they will never be subject to the wrath of God (Romans 5:8-10; 8:1). This is the case, not because of their own faithfulness, but because of the faithfulness of God Himself, who has promised to keep those who belong to Him (John 6:35-40; 10:27-30; 17:11-15; Romans 8:35-39; I Corinthians 1:7-9; 10:13; Hebrews 10:14; 12:28; I Peter 1:3-5; Jude 1,24-25). The Holy Spirit is the means by which this perseverance in the faith is maintained (Ephesians 1:5,13-14; 4:30; Philippians 1:6; I Thessalonians 5:23-24). In fact, those who do not persevere give evidence by so doing that they were never saved to begin with (I John 2:19).

## PASSAGES OFTEN THOUGHT TO CONTRADICT THE DOCTRINE OF PERSEVERANCE

Though a number of Jesus’ parables are sometimes cited by those who maintain that salvation can be lost (Matthew 13:18-23; 18:21-35; 25:1-13,14-30, etc.), the passage most frequently cited is Hebrews 6:4-8. While an Arminian would look at these passages and argue that those described were Christians who fell away and lost their salvation as a result, we would see them as pictures of those who made false professions of faith that were revealed as such by the subsequent behavior of the people involved. While Peter is a sterling example of the perseverance of God’s people, even through times of serious sin, Judas provides a clear picture of one who makes a false profession of faith, only to fall away and be finally lost. Again, next week’s examination of “What is a Christian?” becomes critical to a right understanding of this issue.

## **AMAZING GRACE XI**

### Perseverance of the Saints - Related Issues

Last week, we began our discussion of the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints by noting the different ways in which the doctrine is handled by Calvinists, Arminians, and those in between. We also looked at numerous passages of Scripture that taught the eternal security of God's people, along with a few cited by those who deny eternal security. One stream that flowed throughout last week's discussion was the importance of defining precisely what a Christian is in order to gain a right understanding of the Bible's teaching about perseverance. This question will be our first matter for discussion today. We will then move on to the corollary question of assurance.

#### WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN?

This is an important question because those who answer it wrongly tend to develop perverted views of eternal security. As we saw last week, an unbiblical answer to this question is at the heart of "easy believism" and the false view of assurance associated with it. The best way to develop a good answer to this question is to look at a bad answer first. We will concentrate today on evangelical answers, and thus will pass over those who might argue, for instance, that a Christian is one who has been baptized into the church.

The most common answer given to this question is that a Christian is one who believes in Jesus Christ. Too often, however, this "belief" is defined either in terms of intellectual knowledge or assent, or as some one-time crisis decision ("accepting Christ" or "receiving Jesus into your heart"). As Jesus' Parable of the Sower makes clear, however, a conversion experience may be true or false, but it is rarely in and of itself self-authenticating. Many who have conversion experiences later fall away. The disastrous result of such a definition of a Christian is that it gives false assurance to those who have no basis for confidence with regard to their spiritual standing.

The Bible provides the basis for no such blanket assurance, however. The writers of Scripture constantly exhort their readers to examine themselves to be sure they are in the faith (II Corinthians 13:5 and II Peter 1:10 are good examples of this). The famous passage in James 2:14-26 teaches that a profession of faith that does not result in a transformed life is no faith at all. When John sets out to comfort and reassure his readers in his first epistle, he does not point to their conversion experiences, but rather encourages them to examine their lives (I John 1:6-7; 2:3-6,9-11,15-17,24,28-29; 3:6,9-10,14-15,21-24; 4:7-8,13-18,20-21; 5:1-3,18). This should not surprise us, since Jesus Himself said much the same thing to His disciples (John 14:15 and 15:14 give general statements, while the numerous passages in the Gospels dealing with discipleship give a variety of specific exhortations). Thus, while we assert that a man can do nothing to save himself or even to retain his salvation, since all is of grace from beginning to end, we also affirm that one who has been truly saved will live in a way that gives evidence of the transforming work of the Holy Spirit in his life. Thus the doctrine of perseverance not only teaches us that those who are truly saved will persevere to the end, but also that perseverance in itself provides evidence of the fact that a person belongs to God.

## HOW DOES ASSURANCE OF SALVATION RELATE TO PERSEVERANCE?

Though the ideas are often confused, perseverance and assurance are not directly related to one another. Eternal security and assurance of salvation are not the same thing.

First of all, we should note that some who have a subjective, internal assurance of their salvation are sadly mistaken because that assurance is grounded in a mistaken notion of what it means to be a child of God. We need look no further than Matthew 7:21-23 to see the truth of this assertion. Thus, one can have assurance (albeit false) without perseverance.

Secondly, the Bible makes it clear that not all who are truly saved carry with them the internal confidence that they belong to God. If this were the case, the apostle John never would have had to write his first epistle. Consequently, it is possible to persevere without having a sense of assurance of one's salvation.

Finally, we must observe that the normal condition of the believer is one where perseverance itself produces assurance. While one important component of assurance is the subjective confidence provided by the indwelling Spirit of God (Romans 8:14-16), the changed life that God produces through gradual sanctification provides the clearest foundation for confidence in one's spiritual standing.

## **AMAZING GRACE XII**

### Communicating the Grace of God

One of the primary purposes for teaching this unit was to enable those who know and appreciate the Doctrines of Grace to communicate them effectively and graciously to others. While there is good reason to wish to enlighten Arminians about these glorious biblical truths, this should be the least of our priorities. It is far more important to be able to communicate the Gospel clearly to unbelievers. We also need to know how to discuss these matters with our own children. One of the stimuli for scheduling this course was the realization that we were raising a group of young Arminians, more by neglect than anything else. Our teens have since had a number of spirited discussions on the subject, while some of our younger children have shown their ignorance of these matters. What should we as parents do about this? In our final lesson, we will therefore be looking at communicating the grace of God - to unbelievers, to other Christians, and to our own children, whichever of the above categories into which they may fall.

### GOD'S GRACE AND UNBELIEVERS

The first point to note here is that the Five Points of Calvinism are not the Four Spiritual Laws - they were never intended to provide an outline for evangelism. Except for very rare circumstances in which a person may have been raised in a Reformed church and rebelled against his childhood experience, most unbelievers would have no knowledge whatsoever of Calvinism. What little they know about Calvin would probably be distorted and unpleasant. In other words, don't even try to use the Five Points to explain the Gospel to an unbeliever.

What approach should we use, then? Obviously, that will depend on the nature of our relationship with the person and the nature of the conversation. But there are certain things that our study of the Doctrines of Grace should tell us about the right way and the wrong way to present the Gospel.

First of all, we have learned that no one can understand the Gospel and appreciate the grace of God apart from a clear awareness of personal sin and guilt. In the same way that Arminianism stems from a weak view of depravity, so the true Gospel has its roots in a strong view of human sin. Jesus' conversations with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman in John 3-4 show clearly the importance of establishing a person's need for salvation before presenting the solution to that need.

Secondly, it is important that God not be pictured as the supplicant. Too often Christ is pictured as desperately pleading for the sinner to respond. Such a picture dishonors the sovereign God. Instead, the sinner must be the supplicant, humbly pleading for forgiveness before the sovereign Lord of all things.

In the third place, the famous "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life" is clearly unscriptural. While it is not quite appropriate to tell an unbeliever that "God hates you and has a terrible plan for your life unless you repent," this is really closer to the truth. There can be no faith apart from repentance. "Easy-believism" produces too many false professions and sends people on the easy road to hell.

Lastly, it is not the job of the evangelist to provide assurance of salvation. Too often assurances given by others lead people to think that perseverance is not necessary. Instead, perseverance should in itself produce assurance, since it is the Holy Spirit working within a person's life that leads him to the conviction that he is indeed a child of God.

## GOD'S GRACE AND ARMINIAN CHRISTIANS

Most arguments between Calvinists and Arminians, both historically and in everyday life, fall into the category of casting pearls before swine - and I am not necessarily suggesting that swinish behavior is the exclusive property of Arminians. While it true that Arminians often reject Calvinism because it represents an assault against human pride, it is also true that some reject it because of the evident pride of those who espouse it. The following points should be noted.

First of all, communicating the truth of God's grace to Arminians should be carried out with the kind of humility that gives evidence of a recognition that what I am and what I understand both may be credited entirely to the grace of God. If any man is humble in dealing with others, it should be the Calvinist. Spiritual pride is a contradiction of all we believe and teach.

Secondly, such discussions are futile unless carried on in an environment of mutual respect and the desire to examine the Scriptures and expound them faithfully. God is not honored by debate that seeks to do little more than score points.

Thirdly, even when discussing the issue with an honest seeker after truth, giving attention to such controversial issues as particular redemption is often counterproductive, since they wind up being viewed out of context. As we saw in our study, the fundamental point to be communicated is the strength of the Bible's teaching concerning the sinfulness of man. Once a person has realized the depth of man's sin, much of the rest falls into place easily. Trying to convince a person that Christ died only for the elect is a hopeless task unless the person is convinced that man can contribute absolutely nothing to his own salvation.

In the fourth place, the Doctrines of Grace must be placed in proper perspective in any conversation with an Arminian. Contrary to the attitude of some, "converting" an Arminian to Calvinism generates significantly less angelic rejoicing than the salvation of a sinner. While the Doctrines of Grace are extremely important and influence many areas of life for the individual Christian and the Church, those who differ on these issues may still treat one another as brothers in Christ. The faith we all share is shared despite the variety of ways in which all of us misconstrue aspects of it. Unlike unbelievers with whom we speak, we may be sure that God loves the Arminian with whom we are conversing (and has a wonderful plan for his life), if indeed he is God's child.

## GOD'S GRACE AND OUR CHILDREN

Why is it that children in our church are growing up with an Arminian understanding of salvation? There are probably a number of reasons.

First of all, human pride naturally gravitates toward an understanding of human spirituality that places man at the center. If our children are sinners from birth as the Bible teaches, it should



not surprise us that one of the manifestations of human pride in them would be an understanding of God's work of salvation that puts the emphasis on man's role in it.

Secondly, those of our children who have been trained in Christian schools have absorbed an Arminian understanding of salvation from fellow students, teachers, and chapel speakers all through their early years. It should not surprise us that they have absorbed these teachings and consider them to be the way in which all Christians understand these issues.

Thirdly, however, we should recognize that part of the problem stems from our neglect. Although we teach our children in Sunday School in a way that avoids communicating false views of salvation, we often say little to them about what the Bible does teach on the subject. Consequently, they grow up ignorant of the very doctrines their parents consider of vital importance.

What, then, is to be done? I am not convinced that the implementation of a family catechism is the answer, though it certainly is not without value. Since many of our children remain unbelievers, it is as fruitless to communicate the Doctrines of Grace to them in a systematic fashion as it would be to do so to an adult unbeliever. But if teaching total depravity to toddlers is not the answer, what is?

First of all, parents have the responsibility to converse with their children about spiritual things. Such conversations often provide much more fruitful opportunities to deal with the kinds of questions we have been considering than do formal teaching situations. For instance, we make it a practice to discuss each week's Sunday School lessons in the car on the way home from church in the morning. This allows us to find out, not only what the children are learning, but also how they are responding to the subject matter covered in class. The same thing could be done with the sermon, depending on the age of the child involved.

Far more importantly, parents need to hold conversations of this kind with their children about things that happen at school. No matter what kind of school the children attend, their experiences will provide teaching opportunities. In public and Christian schools alike, daily incidents allow reflection on the sinfulness of man and the changing work that God does in the heart of a Christian. For students in Christian schools, more direct opportunities should arise through discussing Bible classes and chapels. Christian schools are intended to help parents with the task of raising and educating their children, not to do the job for them. You cannot afford to abdicate your responsibility to your child's teachers, no matter how well-qualified or well-intentioned. You must be your child's most valued teacher.

In dealing with our children about their own spiritual condition, we obviously cannot afford to give them false assurance of their standing in Christ. On the other hand, we should not be so cautious about affirming any evidence of God's work that we frustrate and discourage them. They must know that salvation is God's work, but they should also experience the encouragement that comes from other believers (including their parents) recognizing evidence of the work of God in their lives where such evidence exists.

Finally, when our children do become Christians, it is our responsibility to educate them about the Bible's teaching concerning salvation. We cannot allow them to become Arminians by

default. Our teenagers have recently become much more aware of this issue - with some significant results. With the number of young people we have approaching the teenage years, we cannot afford to assume that they will absorb the Doctrines of Grace by osmosis. Those who know Christ should be taught to appreciate the grace that brought them to the place of salvation.