

May 12, 2017

Dear Dr. Sproul:

I have been wanting to write to you for a long time and am glad I now have the opportunity to do so. I will start out by saying something positive. I enjoy your radio show and also have appreciated some of your books such as *Knowing Scripture*, *The Holiness of God*, and *Thy Brother's Keeper*.

However, I also have some big differences with you on issues expressed particularly in *Chosen by God*. I know you wrote that book a long time ago, but you do make a lot of the same statements currently on *Renewing Your Mind*.

For the record: I call myself a Reformation Arminian, a concept that has been written about by theologians such as Roger Olson, Robert Picirilli and Matthew Pinson within about the last 15 years. That is, I draw much of my theology (though not all) about issues such as the atonement, election and free will from the writings of Jacob Arminius himself—who, whether you accept it or not, was Reformed in many ways. He had a very high view of God and Scripture, accepted all of the “solus” and—believe it or not— accepted total depravity and believed that a radical work of grace is necessary to bring someone to salvation (just not irresistible grace). I have been studying the Calvinism vs. Arminianism controversy for more than 20 years and have debated Calvinists online countless times. I also participated in a formal debate against a Calvinist pastor in 1999.

A little background about myself: I have just completed a distance-learning M.A. in Biblical Studies program from Trinity Theological Seminary and am now starting a Ph.D. program in Christian Apologetics. I am also the editor of four Arminian theological works (meaning I took an old book in each case, heavily revamped it and got the new version in print): *Redemption Redeemed: A Puritan Defense of Unlimited Atonement* by John Goodwin, *Freedom of the Will: A Wesleyan Response to Jonathan Edwards* by Daniel Whedon, *Arminius Speaks* by James Arminius, and *Grace for All: The Arminian Dynamics of Salvation*, Pinnock and Wagner, editors. (Note this last book was a heavily revised version of *Grace Unlimited*, a 1975 collection of articles assembled by Pinnock when he was a mainstream Arminian, long before he advocated “open theism.”) I have in the past sent you complimentary copies of the first two listed books.

One more point here: you frequently equate Arminianism with semi-Pelagianism. That charge is quite inaccurate, and something that Arminians tire of correcting. Semi-Pelagianism says man has enough good in himself to turn to God on his own without God's grace. Arminius vehemently rejected both Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism. The real Arminianism, i.e. Reformation/Classical Arminianism, says the grace of God, i.e. prevenient grace, convicts and draws the sinner first before anything more is done by the unbeliever. (I will discuss this in more depth later.)

To get to the points in *Chosen by God*, I will first note your two listings of “Reformed” and “Opposing” theologians in earlier and contemporary church history concerning the Calvinistic

version of predestination. On the opposing side for earlier theologians, you listed Pelagius, Arminius, Melancthon, Wesley and Finney. Though Pelagius and Finney are prominent names in church history, if I were making your list, I would disregard both as not in mainstream Arminian or pre-Arminian thought. Who should be named instead? For the very early church, there are many choices. The book *God's Strategy in Human History* by Marston and Forster helps here. In an appendix, they prove that for approximately the first 300 years of the church, all of the early theologians (before Augustine in his debates with Pelagius) were free-will oriented and essentially pre-Arminian. Their list quotes from sixteen early theologians, including Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Athenagorus, Origen, Jerome, Chrysostom, and even the early Augustine.

Personally, I would include Jerome and Athanasius on the opposing side in place of Pelagius and Finney. An alternate choice would be Athanasius and Luis de Molina. That would make your early Reformed and Opposed lists more even.

On your modern-theologian list for Reformed and Opposed, I would not have then included Pinnock. (This is not a contradiction of my previous mention of him. He was advocating open theism when CBG was published in the 1980s.) I would also not include Billy Graham, who is really more an evangelist than a theologian. Better choices would be I. Howard Marshall and Thomas C. Oden, both world-renowned Wesleyan theologians.

Next, there are thoughts you gave about the sovereignty of God. You apparently advocate the sub- or infralapsarian view as opposed to supralapsarian Calvinism on foreordination. You write, "That God in some sense foreordains whatever comes to pass is a necessary result of his sovereignty... To say that God foreordains all that comes to pass is simply to say that God is sovereign over his entire creation. If something comes to pass apart from his sovereign permission, then that which came to pass would frustrate his sovereignty.... All that means is that God must have allowed it [the entrance of sin into the world] to happen."

I have no problem with that! The issue here seems to be how one defines "ordains" or "foreordains." Calvinists I debate on the internet consistently argue that "ordain" means to decree. I ask them, "Did God decree the Holocaust?" "Did God decree the killing fields of Cambodia?" "Did God decree every act of rape, torture and murder that has ever taken place?" And they say yes! Unbelievable.

What about Calvin on this issue? You deny he was supralapsarian, claiming God's positive-positive, double-predestination, but excerpts from his writings strongly suggest that was his position. Calvin was quite straightforward on saying God decreed the Fall, writing:

...whence does it happen that Adam's fall irremediably involved so many peoples, together with their infant offspring, in eternal death unless because it so pleased God?...The decree is dreadful indeed, I confess. Yet no one can deny that God foreknew what end man was to have before he created him, and consequently foreknew because he so ordained by his decree...God not only foresaw the fall of the first man, and in him the ruin of his descendants, but also meted it out in accordance with his own decision." (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.23.7)

That seems to go beyond mere "permission." He also wrote:

The predestination by which God adopts some to the hope of life, and adjudges others to eternal death, no man who would be thought pious ventures simply to deny...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 these ends, we say that he has been predestinated to life or to death (*Institutes of the Christian Religion* 3.21.5).

We also read:

From this it is easy to conclude how foolish and frail is the support of divine justice afforded by the suggestion that evils come to be not by [God's] will, but merely by his permission. Of course, so far as they are evils, which men perpetrate with their evil mind, as I shall show in greater detail shortly, I admit that they are not pleasing to God. But it is a quite frivolous refuge to say that God otiosely [= idly] permits them, when Scripture shows Him not only willing but the author of them...Who does not tremble at these judgments with which God works in the hearts of even the wicked whatever He will, rewarding them nonetheless according to desert. Again, it is quite clear from the evidence of Scripture that God works in the hearts of men to incline their will just as he will, whether to good for his mercy's sake, or to evil according to their merits." (*Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, 177)

Other famous Calvinists say, for example, "The Sovereignty of God over all, and his independency, clearly shew, that whatever is done in time is according to his decrees in eternity." (John Gill, *A Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, p. 173)

Or "As a builder draws his plan before he begins to build, so the great Architect predestined everything before a single creature was called into existence." (Arthur Pink, *The Doctrines of Election and Justification*, p.9)

Or "Surely if God had not willed the fall, He could, and no doubt would, have prevented it; but he did not prevent it: ergo, He willed it. And if He willed it, He certainly decreed it." (Jerome Zanchius, *The Doctrine of Absolute Predestination*, p. 88)

So, by claiming supralapsarianism is "anti-Calvinism," you are dismissing not only prominent Calvinists from the past, but also Calvin himself.

In your radio show broadcasts, I recall you saying that everything that happens in human history ultimately comes from God, which implies God decreed everything (even if through secondary causes) after all. However, if God allows something to happen that is not his perfect will, which he does, then the person who commits that deed has a certain amount of autonomy.

In CBG you quoted someone as saying, "God's sovereignty can never restrict human freedom" and then added: "Imagine a Christian thinker making such a statement. This is sheer humanism." This is a straw man. One doesn't have to go as far as the person you quoted. I wouldn't say God's sovereignty can "never" restrict human freedom. Of course, it can. But I would argue that God in his sovereignty allows for a certain amount of freedom. There are just way too many

Scriptural passages in which people sin and rebel in a manner that is clearly not God's will and in which he is angry.

Look at Matthew 23:37-39: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. Look your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'" What is Christ's emotional state here? He is angry. (This is further clarified in Luke 19: 41-44, in which Christ wept over Jerusalem.) What did he want? He wanted the Jews of Jerusalem to come to him. But they wouldn't! How come no sovereign election or regeneration here? Was there a rift between Christ and the Father? Or why didn't Christ just serenely say, "Oh well, I guess you're not of the elect." I have yet to hear a convincing answer from a Calvinist on this passage.

Or how about Luke 7:30: "But the Pharisees and experts in the law rejected God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John." They rejected God's purpose for themselves! And Calvinists say that's impossible.

There are many more in the Old Testament, such as Isa. 65:12: "But I will destine you for the sword, and you will all bend down for the slaughter; for I called but you did not answer, I spoke but you did not listen. You did evil in my sight and chose what displeases me." Another is Jer. 3:7-8: "I thought that after she had done all this, she would return to me but she did not, and her unfaithful sister Judah saw it, I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries."

According to Calvinists (for the most part, anyway), all of this was decreed by God. That view makes God engage in a mass contradiction in which he calls people to repentance and salvation, but has decreed that (even if it was through secondary causes) the non-elect people addressed would disobey him and then have the wrath of God on them as a consequence.

Let me deal next with the issue of your concept and use of the Greek word *helkō*, commonly translated "draws" in John 6:44. *Even if you reject everything else I write here, please accept this one. You really did not get this right.* And Calvinists who have read CBG have passed on this incorrect information. You quoted Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, and claim because that word means "drag" or "compel" in a physical context such as Acts 16:19 and James 2:6, that therefore it means "drag" or "compel" in the spiritual context of John 6:44.

The evidence indicates it doesn't. I assume you are aware that a Greek word can have more than one meaning. I looked at Kittel and I see for *helkō* in regard to John (i.e. 6:44, 12:32) it means, "a beneficent 'drawing of God...of drawing to oneself in love. This usage is distinctively developed by Jn., perhaps with some influence of Gnosticism. Force or magic may be discounted, but not the supernatural element." The abridged version of Kittel says, "There is no thought here of force or magic. The term figuratively expresses the supernatural power of the love of God or Christ which goes out to all (12:32) but without which no one can come."

Did you get that? Both summaries dismiss force, which would be consistent with “drag” or “compel” (though I agree that would be accurate when the word is used in a physical context). Just wondering why you didn’t mention that! Let’s put your position to rest with more citations:

1. BDAG: has *helkō* in John 6:44 as "draw, attract."

2. *Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament* by William Mounce says *helkō* means “to draw mentally and morally, John 6:44; 12:32.”

3. *The Hebrew-Greek Key Study Bible* by Calvinist Spiro Zodhiates: “Helko is used of Jesus on the cross drawing by love, not force” (Jn. 6:44; 12:32).

4. *A Critical Lexicon and Concordance to the English and Greek New Testament* by Ethelbert W. Bullinger, p. 235: *Helko* means "to draw, esp. implying a certain attraction mentally or morally; also to draw to a certain point." This source also mentions *surō* as a word more consistent with how Calvinists interpret *helkō*. *Surō* generally implies a violent dragging. This source defines it as "to draw, drag or trail along as a net; esp. with the notion of force and sometimes with violence."

5., *The Renaissance New Testament* by Randolph Yeager, says about *helkō*:

It does not necessarily involve coercion, though it does involve persuasion and motivation--John 6:44; 12:32.... [*Helkō*] does not imply coercion in the two places where it is applied to the elect [the two just-mentioned verses]. Swords, fish nets and political prisoners (John 18:10; 21:6, 11; Acts 16:19) may resist, but the element of resistance is not implicit in the word itself....

6. *Greek and English Lexicon of the New Testament* by Edward Robinson, say *helkō* means "to draw by a moral influence, John 6:44, 12:32."

Please notice that none of these sources indicate that *helkō* means drag or compel in John 6:44. And your version is especially problematic for John 12:32. Do you believe God drags all men to himself? So it’s kind of funny that the Arminian professor you debated didn’t need to cite some “obscure Greek poet.” The info is clear in many lexicons and similar sources. And by the way, contrary to what you experienced, in the formal 1999 debate I was in against a Calvinist pastor, he repeated your argument on *helkō* and I nailed him on this point.

And that ties into the issue of the nature of unsaved man. You write, “If a person who is still in the flesh, who is not reborn by the power of the Holy Spirit, can incline or dispose himself to Christ, what good is rebirth?” This is another strawman. Classical Arminians do not believe man can “incline or dispose himself ” all by himself. Arminius wrote strongly of man being depraved and dead and that man needs the heavy convicting and drawing of the Holy Spirit. However, he completely rejected irresistible grace, the biggest oxymoron I can think of. And as for rebirth, that comes after faith, not before.

You slightly acknowledge the idea of prevenient grace and then ask “If so, where” does the Bible teach this concept? Did you even make any effort toward finding an answer for this? Well, John 6:44, which I have proven is not about “dragging,” is one. Furthermore, let’s recall John 16:8,

saying that the paraclete “will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment in regard to sin because men do not believe in me.”

The Greek for “convict” is *elenchō*, and has the connotation of a trial attorney making a legal and moral argument to a jury. In this case, the Holy Spirit conducts that function in the human heart—but not in irresistible manner. Other verses include John 1:9: “The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.” Also, John 12:32, in which Christ says, “When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw (*helkō*) all men to myself.” But this is also not irresistible.

Describing prevenient grace, Thomas C. Oden writes:

Prevenient grace antecedes human responsiveness so as to prepare the soul for the effective hearing of the redeeming Word. This preceding grace draws persons closer to God, lessens their blindness to divine remedies, strengthens their will to accept revealed truth, and enables repentance. Only when sinners are assisted by prevenient grace can they begin to yield their hearts to cooperation with subsequent forms of grace....

Does scripture teach the concept of prevenient grace? There is no one passage that lays out a systematic definition of it, however, the concept becomes apparent throughout the overall tenor of scripture. Here are some passages that refer to the different aspects of prevenient grace:

Prevenient Grace Draws:

John 6:44 No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day.

John 12:32 And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself.

Prevenient Grace is Universal:

Titus 2:11 For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men.

John 1:9 The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.

John 16:7-8 But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment:

Romans 1:18-19 The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.

Prevenient Grace Convicts the Non-Believer:

Acts 16:14 One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message.

Acts 16:29-30 The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

Prevenient Grace Works in Combination with the Hearing of the Word:

Acts 2:37 When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”

Romans 10:17 Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.

Prevenient Grace is Given Generously:

Romans 8:32 He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?

Romans 2:4 Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?

Acts 17:26-27 From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.

Prevenient Grace Can be Rejected:

Matt. 23:37 O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.

John 5:34,39,40 Not that I accept human testimony; but I mention it that you may be saved... You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.

Acts 7:51 You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit!

Heb 4:2 For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith.

Heb 10:29 How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace?

Prevenient Grace Results in Saving Grace when it is Accepted:

Ephesians 5:14 For it is light that makes everything visible. This is why it is said: “Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.”

Ephesians 2:8-9 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. (Source: <http://wesleyanarminian.blogspot.com/2009/05/prevenient-grace.html>.)

There are actually three very good books on this issue of prevenient grace: *The Transforming Power of Grace* by Thomas C. Oden, *Prevenient Grace* by W. Brian Shelton, and *Streams of Mercy* by J. Gregory Crofford.

You speak of the need of a nonbeliever to first be reborn before he can do anything else in relationship with God. In your novel, *Thy Brother's Keeper* (which I actually enjoyed, as a story), on p. 58, you described irresistible grace as a “a holy rape of the soul.” Though this is a fictional story, I cannot imagine you using that kind of phrase if you did not believe it. I reject such a concept entirely.

You quote certain Scriptures to support this—incorrectly, in my opinion. “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” (John 3:3) The crucial question here is what did Christ mean by “see.” I notice that you just take the English at face value here and do not look into the Greek. The Greek for “see” is *idean*, lexical form *horaō*. The latter has many definitions depending on context. But the outstanding Greek scholar, A.T. Robertson in his *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, says specifically for John 3:3 it means “to participate in it [the kingdom] as in Luke 9:27.” Yes, that’s participate in or experience. That is what happens the moment you are saved/born again. You seem to interpret “see” as understanding or perceiving. You write, “How can a man enter a kingdom he cannot see?” If one has a correct understanding of *idean/horaō*, once again meaning to participate in or experience, then there is no problem.

I will also point out that F.F. Bruce in his Gospel of John commentary has an end-times concept of this, saying, “To ‘see the kingdom of God’ meant to witness (and have a share in) the final consummation of God’s rule, when it would be accepted and obeyed universally.” But that doesn’t support your understanding of this either.

You also quote John 3:5, which says, “Unless someone is born of water and spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” Of course you have to be born again before you *enter* the kingdom! That does not support regeneration preceding faith and I have no problem with that at all.

To bolster your argument, you cite Romans 8:7-8: “The fleshly mind is enmity against God; for *it is not subject to the law of God*, nor indeed can be. *So then*, those who are in the flesh cannot please God.” What is Paul’s thrust here? A nonbeliever cannot please God trying to earn or merit his way to salvation via the law. There is, however, one thing that Christ said a person can do to please God: “In the same way, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (Luke 15:10). Christ was comparing the “sinner” there with the people such as tax collectors and others (Luke 15:1-2) who gathered to hear Christ and who were condemned by the Pharisees and teachers of the law. I will also note 1 Cor. 1:21b: “God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.” If God is pleased to give salvation to believers, I would argue that he is also pleased that they believe.

And then there are the arguments you give from Jonathan Edwards. I will not go into great detail about this. But if you have not looked at it, I highly recommend you read *Freedom of the Will: A Wesleyan Response to Jonathan Edwards* by Daniel Whedon, a 19th century Wesleyan theologian. One of my seminary profs raved about it, as it utterly dismantles Edward’s

arguments. You write, “ ‘The will always chooses according to its strongest inclinations at the moment.’ This means that every choice is free and every choice is determined. I said it was tricky. This sounds like a blatant contradiction... But ‘determined’ here does not mean that some external force coerces the will.”

First, yes, it is a contradiction. Second, rather, there is an internal force driving the will into only one necessitated decision/direction and no other, which is no freedom at all. Whedon argues that one can only decide his inclinations and desires if the will digests and analyzes them first. He writes, “What is in truth meant by the highest or strongest motive must be derived from the Will itself; and thence we have this definition, all-important to this discussion, that the so-called strength of the motive is the comparative prevalence that the Will assigns it in its own action.” He also notes that sometimes people can be quite subjective and irrational and may even decide against their strongest motives.

Whedon also addresses Edwards’ “natural ability” vs. “moral ability” argument and says it is meaningless. He writes:

Where there is no moral ability there can be no natural ability. Where there is no power to will, there is no power to execute the behest of the will. That behest cannot obey it if it does not exist. If there be no adequate power for the given volition, there is no volition to obey, and so no power to obey. An impossible volition cannot be fulfilled....Hence it is helplessly absurd to propose a ‘natural ability’ in the absence of a ‘moral ability’ as a ground of responsibility.

Those are not complete summaries of the arguments, but hopefully you get the idea. Edwards’ arguments are not impregnable, contrary to what Calvinists may think.

Returning to your issue of fallen man, you quote Romans 3:11: “There is none who understands, no one who seeks God.” I completely agree. That is man’s natural direction. No one seeks God in himself, in his flesh apart from the convicting and drawing of the Holy Spirit. You also quote Ephesians 2:1, “you were dead in your transgressions and sin.” You take that very literally. However, let us remember some of Scripture’s universal passages, which you barely acknowledge in CBG. The apostle Paul also wrote in 1 Timothy 2:3-6, “This is good, and pleases our Savior, who wants all men to be saved can come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men—the testimony given in its proper time.”

Christ himself said, “For God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but so that the world through Him might be saved.” (John 3:17) Also, “This bread is by flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.” (John 6:51) And let’s recall other words by Paul: “Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of righteousness was justification and life for all men.” (Romans 5:18) I take those as clear and straightforward, despite Calvinist eisegetical gymnastics.

And yes I do believe nonbelievers are dead in their trespasses and sin—meaning they are cut off from God, in no relationship with God, guilty before God and on their way to God’s wrath in hell. But let’s remember a couple of other passages that help our understanding: “I tell you the

truth, a time is coming and has now come, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.” (John 5:25) My NIV Study Bible note says it is “A reference not only to the future resurrection but also to the fact that Christ gives life now. The spiritually dead who hear him, receive life from him.”

Leon Morris writes in his commentary on John, “Those who are spiritually dead hear his voice, and those who hear it live. ‘Hear,’ of course, means ‘hear with appreciation,’ take heed.” Another key verse is John 20:31: “But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” Now, why would John write the person would have “life in his name” by believing if the person already has life, i.e. is born again beforehand via sovereign regeneration? I think that is problematic for your position. Scripture is clear that we must repent and believe in faith to lead us to salvation. (Acts 16:31 Luke 13: 3, 5; John 3:16; Acts 2: 21, 38; Rom. 10:9, 13, etc.)

The Bible is clear with passages such as those above and Christ saying, “For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” (John 6:33) “Come to me, all you who labor and heavy laden and I will give you rest.” (Matt. 11:28) And “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink.” (John 7:37b) Christ even announced the availability of salvation to his enemies, saying, “but I mention it (the truth) that you may be saved.” (John 5:34b) And let’s recall Peter saying to a crowd of thousands, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.” (Acts 2:38) Let’s also recall Christ’s command for the Great Commission: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations...” It doesn’t say “in all nations,” (such as for the elect) but *of all* nations.

The major question that comes up here is: Are these passages sincere or are they not? You acknowledge what is called the “general call” to all. I argue that Calvinism makes that call utterly insincere, a rigged game and a lie. This is especially true because there is no way salvation can be genuinely offered to all, when according to Calvinism, Christ did not die for all people and therefore did not atone for all people.

Next, let me address election/predestination. First, I am aware of the common description for the Arminian view of election, used to describe God’s foreknowledge: “God looked down the corridors of time, saw who would be open to the Gospel and sovereignly determined those people would be saved.” I just wonder where this description came from. I did a search for it in a digital version of Arminius’ Works and did not find it. I find it misleading and inaccurate. Rev. 1:8 tells us that Christ is “the Alpha and Omega,” the beginning and the end.” And hopefully you accept that when God created the heavens and the earth, time was a component of that creation. The point is that God is not bound by time, so when we read of “foreknowledge,” it really refers to knowledge. God knows who will accept the Gospel message under the influence of the convicting and drawing of the Holy Spirit and that person becomes saved.

There is another crucial element here about election which I have never heard you mention. Election is Christocentric—i.e. it is “in Him,” or “in Christ.” Those phrases are used dozens of times by Paul in the New Testament. Here is the key application: First, Christ is the true chosen person of God. We read in 1 Peter 1:20: “He was chosen before the creation of the world,...

See also Luke 9:35 and Isa. 42:1. This means when anyone is “in Him,” they enter into his chosenness. Ephesians 1:4 tells us: “For he chose us *in him* before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.” Notice he does not say “us to be put in him,” but “us in Him,” i.e. we who are in union with Christ through a living faith. And since we are in Him, we are predestined for the blessings of salvation, including adoption as sons (1:5), redemption through his blood and forgiveness of sins (1:7), and the multiple blessings of those God knew/foreknew as mentioned in Rom. 8:29-30. See also Eph. 1:4-6.

You quote Romans 9 as proof par excellence of your view of predestination. But I will present a very different view than you have. (Note: I politely dissent from Arminius on this issue.) In *Chosen by God*, you wrote: “The ninth chapter of Romans was the clincher. I simply could find no way to avoid the Apostle’s teaching on that chapter.” I heard you say on the radio about that chapter, “I tried all the outs, including that it was about Israel.” Well, I really wonder how hard you tried, though I do realize far more information is available today than in your youth. I have studied this chapter and what scholars say about it—and have taught on it. I have concluded that to a large extent, it *is* about Israel, i.e. the lineage leading to Israel, then about Israel the nation and the Israel of faith—though there is a larger context that God has a right to use people and nations as he sees fit.

Since I can go into only so much detail here, I am including an article from *Grace for All*, about Romans 9. The original was written by the late James Strauss, but I did some significant editing so I claim the title of co-author.

There are two very important rules for understanding Romans 9. The first is to read Romans 9, 10, and 11 together as a literary and theological unit. Doing so will give the reader a very different perspective as opposed to just reading Chapter 9 alone. For example—Paul writes in Rom. 10:1: “Brothers, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved.” That is a continuation from 9:30, and is obviously referring to Israel the nation. Why would Paul write such a thing in 10:1 if Romans 9 is about God’s sovereign individual election to salvation? That would make no sense at all.

And then there is the open-ended, free-will oriented language of Romans 10 in general, such as vv. 10-13: “For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. As the Scripture says, ‘Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame.’ For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for ‘Everyone who calls on the Lord will be saved.’” And in chapter 11:32: “For God has bound all men over to disobedience, so that he may have mercy on them all.”

The verses (and others I could cite), raise serious questions at a minimum about the sovereign-individual-election view of Romans 9. I said there were two rules to help understand it. The second one is about the fact that Paul often quotes or alludes to Old Testament verses in Romans 9. It is important to go back to those verses and look at them in context. This is an increasing trend in hermeneutics called intertextual exegesis. Specifically, I am referring to vv. 12-16 and 21. You discussed v. 13: ‘Just as it is written: ‘Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated,’ saying, “Nations

are made up of individuals. Jacob was an individual. Esau was an individual. Here we see clearly that God sovereignly elected individuals as well as a nation.” (You then say “Paul extends this treatment of election beyond Israel in verse 24...” which mentions the Gentiles. But that is 11 verses later and is a separate point.)

But you are missing the point here. A key question is: what source is Paul quoting from in v. 13? Genesis, when Jacob and Esau lived? No, he is quoting from Malachi 1, which was written more than 1,000 years after Jacob and Esau lived. That is a crucial point. As much as you deny it, Paul is referring here (at least primarily) to nations, with Jacob representing Israel and Esau representing Edom. God chose Israel over Edom as his chosen nation to produce the Messiah. Numerous commentators have given this interpretation.

Leon Morris in his commentary on Romans wrote about Romans 9:12-13:

It is election to privilege that is in mind, not eternal salvation. Moreover it seems clear that Paul intends a reference to nations rather than individuals... The words quoted say specifically that the elder will serve the younger, but Esau did not in fact serve Jacob, though the Edomites in time came to serve the Israelites. We must also bear in mind that the oracle Paul quotes has earlier said, ‘Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated’ (Gen. 25:23). The argument concerns Israel as a whole and its place in the purpose of God.

On hated, he says. “This accords with the stress throughout this passage on the thought of service. God chose Israel for this role; he did not choose Edom.”

And Charles Cranfield writes in his Romans commentary:

It is important to stress that neither as they occur in Genesis [see above quote] nor as they are used by Paul do these words refer to the eternal destinies either of the two persons or of the individual members of the nations sprung from them; the reference is rather to the mutual relations of the two nations in history. What is here in question is not final salvation or damnation, but the historical functions of those concerned and their relations to the development of the salvation history.

Let me add some info about verse 12b, “The older will serve the younger.” This is about Rebecca in Gen. 25:23, and God saying to her: “Two nations are in your womb, and two people from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger.” Esau never did personally serve Jacob, but there were times when the Edomites were under Israel.

I will argue that Romans 9, and the election mentioned in verse 11, is not about God’s sovereign individual election to salvation. It is about God’s much bigger sovereign plan to fulfill the most important component of the Abrahamic covenant as mentioned in Gen. 26:4b: “And through *your seed*, all nations on earth will be blessed.” What does this mean? It is about election of the covenant-bearer lineage of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (and onward to Israel)—to extraordinary

historical destiny to produce “the seed.” You know who the seed is—it is Christ and the Israel of faith who are in Christ (Galatians 3:16, 29). Those in Christ are saved by grace through faith.

You also heavily emphasize Rom. 9:16: “It does not, therefore, depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy.” You say, “This is the coup de grace to Arminianism and all other non-Reformed views of predestination... This verse is absolutely fatal to Arminianism.” Not at all! First of all, let me note that salvation is not directly mentioned here. Instead we see the word, “it,” which has an element of ambiguity. For the moment, let’s assume for the sake of argument this is about salvation. What does it therefore mean? It is referring to the ultimate, originating source of salvation. We do not will our salvation or earn it. It comes totally from God.

But I look at this verse in the context of vv. 11-13, which I have already covered. And the same is true about v. 15, which goes back to Exod. 33:7-19 and the faithful Israelites and Moses at the tent of meeting. Therefore, I believe that v. 16 is referring to God’s sovereign choice and mercy over Israel. (Note: again, there is also the bigger meaning that God has the right to deal with people and nations in whichever way he chooses.)

Let me also review the issue of the hypothetical complainers in this chapter. In v. 14, Paul cites the expected argument (and his answer), “Is God unjust? Not at all!” You present that as a logical complaint to your view of predestination. But it can just as easily apply to God choosing one nation for extraordinary blessing and destiny above all others. You also cite the complaint of: “But who are you, O man, to talk back to God.” I agree with the perspective I have read that—contrary to what many believe—the hypothetical objector completely misunderstood and was vehemently accusing God of using overwhelming brute force against Pharaoh in v. 19. But God did not do so, if we read the Exodus account. Pharaoh was already a wicked tyrannical ruler and God resorted to a judicial hardening—the further hardening or strengthening of an already hardened heart. (He also did this at times with the Israelites.) And let us also remember that the story tells us that multiple times Pharaoh hardened his own heart.

There is also v. 21, “Does not the potter have the right to make of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?” Once again, this is about Israel and is further explained in Jer. 18:5-10, which tells the reader that if a nation or kingdom “repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned.” And if a nation “does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended for it.” The point is that what happens to the clay is conditional.

You say the two complaints only come up in Reformed/Calvinist theology. Actually, that is not true for at least one. For the “unjust” accusation, let me cite how this can come up in protest to Arminian theology: An Arminian evangelist is talking to a nonbeliever and tells him that a) Christ is the only way to God, and b) He must make a decision for Christ or he will go to hell. What is a common reaction? (I did this myself as a nonbeliever.) It is, “What about all those people in the jungles and the remote areas of the earth who never hear this message. They’ll go to hell? Well, I think that’s unfair!”

Let me also address v. 22: “What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known bore with great patience the objects of wrath, prepared for destruction?” As explained in the enclosed article (and I have read this in multiple sources.) Paul is speaking in passive or middle voice and the verse better translates as “the objects of wrath, who prepared themselves for destruction.” And why does it say God “bore” with these people “with great patience”? Because in his graciousness, he wanted them to repent.

And finally, let’s examine the issue of the extent of Christ’s atonement. Referring to unlimited atonement, you say, “Arminianism has an atonement that is limited in value.... A potential atonement is not a real atonement.” However, unlimited atonement is not just from Arminianism. It is the position of the vast majority of theologians in the history of the church.

I quote from Elwell's Evangelical Dictionary of Theology in the "Extent of the Atonement" article, saying unlimited atonement

is the historic view of the church, being held by the vast majority of theologians, reformers, evangelists, and fathers from the beginning of the church until the present day, including virtually all the writers before the Reformation, with the possible exception of Augustine. Among the Reformers, the doctrine is found in Luther, Melancthon, Bullinger, Latimer, Cranmer, Coverdale, and even Calvin in some of his commentaries.

This is very significant and ties into the additional issue that in all probability, Calvin and the Reformers did not believe in limited atonement. One book advocating this is *Union With Christ and the Extent of the Atonement in Calvin* by Kevin Dixon Kennedy. Also, I have read the recent huge book, *The Extent of the Atonement* by David Allen. Much of his book makes an encyclopedic coverage of all the theologians worth mentioning from the beginning of the church to recent centuries. He makes an overwhelming case that virtually nobody, including those among Augustinian thinkers, denied that Christ died for humanity, until about 1590. Those with the Augustinian bent argued that Christ still just intended to save the elect—as inconsistent as that sounds.

Allen writes that the doctrine started developing about 1590 under the influence of Theodore Beza and continued from there, including in the writings of John Owen. However, he notes that even with the Synod of Dordt, there was ambiguity in their summary about extent of the atonement because the English delegation believed Christ died for all humanity.

As for Calvin, I have been amazed at some of his statements from his multi-volume commentary on the Bible. For example (out of a larger list):

Isa. 53:12 - “He bore the sin of many. I approve of the ordinary reading, that He alone bore the punishment of man, because on Him was laid the guilt of the whole world. It is evident from other passages, and especially from the fifth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, that ‘many’ sometimes denotes ‘all’.”

Mark 14:24 - “The word many does not mean a part of the world only, but the whole human race.”

John 1:28 - "And when he says the sin of the world he extends this kindness indiscriminately to the whole human race."

John 3:16 - "He nevertheless shows He is favorable to the whole world when He calls all without exception to the faith of Christ, which is indeed an entry into life."

John 3:17 - "The word world comes again so that no one at all may think he is excluded."

John 4:17 - "He declared that the salvation He had brought was common to the whole world, so that they should understand more easily that it belonged to them also."

John 12:47 - "For He delayed pronouncing judgment on them, because He had come rather for the salvation of all."

John 14:30 - "For the word world here embraced the whole human race."

In favor of limited atonement, you give some of John Owen's arguments that have since been answered. You say, "It [unlimited atonement] does not cover the sin of unbelief. If Christ died for the sins of all men, if he expiated all our sins and propitiated all our sins, then everybody would be saved."

I cannot emphasize enough, that is absolutely not true. First of all, you are not distinguishing *provision* as opposed to *possession*. Scripture is very clear that Christ died for all. See e.g. John 3:16-17, John 6:51, 1 John 2:2, 1 Tim. 2:6, and Heb. 2:9. Christ died *for* all people, but not automatically *in* all people. Why? Because people must appropriate that salvation through repenting and believing in faith. You will say, "But they were dead!" We've already gone over that issue. Again, in the context of the above passage, "dead" means separated from God.

Secondly, on the sin of unbelief, here are two answers in published works:

We conclude that God has provided atonement for all sins that are pardonable. These are the sins, of whatever character, that have been committed by the elect. The same sins, committed by the non-elect, are covered by the same sacrifice...Then Christ did not die for all the sins of all men? Not if the sins of blaspheming the Holy Spirit and final impenitence are included. Owen knew very well that none holds that He died for these sins, which are intrinsically unforgiveable....Yet Christ did die for the sin of everyday unbelief, for even Saul of Tarsus was pardoned. All who, like him, renounce their unbelief, get pardon, the same as they get pardon for any other sin duly repented of. (Norman Douty, *Did Christ Die Only for the Elect?*)

Owen's argument may be reversed and the problem stated this way: If Christ's death apart from any other considerations included the sin of unbelief, why does God ask men to believe since they would not be lost for not believing? A request from God for faith to apply the benefits of the cross becomes redundant. Why should God ask men to believe if that is not the sole condition of salvation? Or why does it matter whether they believe or not if their rejection and unbelief in Christ has been paid for? Why ask men to exercise faith for salvation if they are saved already by virtue of election and the atonement? Limited redemptionists not only remove the voluntariness from faith but they also make it an unnecessary routine, the refusal of

which Christ atoned for and the exercise of which cannot be avoided. This argument of Owen's and all limited redemptionists only serves to prove what we have sought to establish earlier, namely, that limited redemptionists believe the death of Christ saves. Faith, in actuality, becomes a rather unnecessary thing, and salvation has no condition whatsoever. (Robert Lightner, *The Death Christ Died*)

You say, "A potential atonement is not a real atonement. Jesus really atoned for the sins of his sheep." Oh, but unlimited atonement is a real atonement and really did pay for the sins of the world. Once again, all people have to do is appropriate it through faith.

I have heard you recommend Owen's book, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, as the definitive work on limited atonement. Calvinists are fond of saying "it has never been answered." Not true. First, there was a book written back in that era refuting it titled *The Open Door for Man's Approach to God* by John Horn, which is accessible online. Admittedly, it is very hard to read due to its archaic type font. However, in modern times a seminary student named Neil Chambers (apparently a four-point Calvinist) wrote in 1998 a massive 416-page master's thesis with a review and critique, titled *A Critical Examination of John Owen's argument for Limited Atonement in The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*. One of his main arguments is that Owen makes great use in his exegesis of the very questionable doctrine of the Covenant of Redemption, which makes Christ's atonement something like a business deal. But he says a lot more as well. His thesis is available through the Theological Research and Exchange Network online. Additionally, there are answers to some of Owen's individual arguments in Douty's and Lightner's books cited above as well as in *Chosen but Free* by Norman Geisler.

You say that the universal passages with the words "all" and "the 'whole world'...cannot mean the entire human family. It must refer to the universality of the elect (people from every tribe and nation) or to the Gentiles in addition to the world of the Jews." This is eisegesis that is so typical of Calvinism and such a claim is utterly foreign to the koine Greek. And surprisingly, you address this point so briefly that you don't even cite the passages you are referring to.

In my exchanges with Calvinists, I have noticed that in recent years they have backed away from the idea that world/*kosmos* means the elect within all nations. I have had a few seriously say to me, "I don't know anyone who says that." What they commonly do instead these days is say world/*kosmos* in the universal passages means "all nations." But then as you continue in dialogue they start changing the goal posts to the elect within all nations, which is an entirely different issue!

Regardless, let me address the meaning of world/*kosmos*. I have done a survey of more than a dozen lexicons, theological dictionaries, and theological encyclopedias on their entries for "world" and "*kosmos*." This includes Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vine's *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, Black's *Bible Dictionary*, Mounce's *The Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament*, Robinson's *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, Cremer's *Biblico-Theological Lexicon of the Greek New Testament* and many others. None of these impartial sources has in their listed definitions that "world" or "*kosmos*" means "the elect," "the elect within the all nations," or "the world of the elect." I openly

challenge any Calvinist to show me a lexicon, theological dictionary, or theological encyclopedia that does. There are none or virtually none.

The above paragraph is devastating to Owen's position that world/kosmos in the universal passages means the elect. I also recommend the Arminian counterpart to Owen's work (I am the editor): *Redemption Redeemed: A Puritan Defense of Unlimited Atonement* by John Goodwin, a great book! Goodwin (1593-1665) of England was a former Calvinist turned Arminian during the same era in which Owen lived.

I note that in CBG, you quoted John 17:9, "I do not pray for the world, but for those you have given me." You add, "Did Christ die for those for whom he would not pray." That's a pretty weak argument. Christ was not praying for the world in *that instance* when he was praying specifically for his disciples. On the other hand, he did include the world twice in 17:21 and 23, saying each time "so that the world may believe that you sent me" and "so that the world may know that you sent me." Furthermore, when Christ was crucified he prayed for his enemies there saying, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). And what about his statements already given, such as in John 6:51: "This bread is my flesh that I will give for the life of the world"? (And sorry, but once again, claiming the world here means the elect is poor exegesis.)

I'll end here. About the Augustinian/Calvinist view of predestination, you said: "After I awoke to the truth of predestination I began to see the beauty of it and taste its sweetness. I have grown to love this doctrine. It is most comforting."

I cannot love such a doctrine that utterly contradicts the universal passages, God's love for the world, and the universal "general call" to salvation. Predestination is in the Bible, but we wrangle over its meaning.

As far as I am concerned, the concept that election/predestination is by God's knowledge/foreknowledge and is Christocentric—based on us being "in Him"—does much more justice to the Biblical message and the passages with "world" and "all." God's grace is, believe it or not, *gracious*. There is no "holy rape of the soul." Your concept writes off most of humanity.

Sincerely,

John D. Wagner