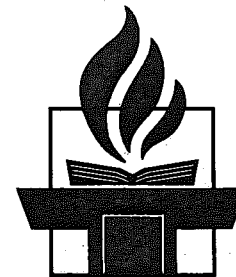


Reformation
& Revival



A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership

Volume 3, Number 1 • Winter 1994

Often people respond to doctrinal teaching by saying, “What difference does it make if I believe this doctrine?” Put another way, they wish to know, “Is there usefulness in understanding and believing this truth?”

The biblical teaching regarding the sovereignty of God in grace has been often misunderstood. Terms like “irresistible grace” and “limited atonement” have put many off from hearing the scriptural truths behind these terms. Serious divisions have resulted from attempts to articulate these scriptural doctrines of grace. Quite often Christians have seen these great doctrines as downright counterproductive. As a result many have felt that these particular truths should be reserved for those given to intellectual niceties, not for those involved in missions and evangelism. In light of the great need of the church today what place does such doctrine have in our time?

It should be affirmed at the very outset that the *usefulness* of any truth is not that which qualifies that truth for dissemination or confession by the church. The “whole counsel of God” must be taught and proclaimed for no other reason than that it is “the whole counsel of God.” Even if the proclamation of a truth drove men away from Christ, if He taught the doctrine which is in question, then we ought to teach it openly and plainly, letting God be true and every man a liar. While it is true that some have erred by teaching nothing but these doctrines—teaching for example the sovereignty of God in saving sinners to the exclusion of teaching man’s personal responsibility to repent and believe—any thinking person should immediately recognize that this is not the major problem confronting most of evangelicalism in our day. We stand before an entire generation which has cut its teeth on the notion that men can be saved any time they are ready, at any place, and almost, it seems, whenever they please. It is this prideful spirit of our time that I will address in what follows in this two-part series.

Dead or Alive? The Doctrine of Human Inability

Consider for a moment the utility of the doctrine called “total inability.” This doctrine, in short, says that every faculty of man’s being has been pervaded by sin through the fall of Adam. As a result, the whole man—his heart, mind, and especially his will—has been affected so radically by the fall that he is in a state of utter and complete inability to comply with God’s commandments. His problem is far deeper than simply his “will not.” He is not just spiritually sick, or injured, he is spiritually *dead*, in a state best described by the word “cannot.” Does man, in such a state, have “free will”? If what you mean by this oft-used term is “free to choose” then the answer is clearly “yes.” Man is free to choose, but a man in bondage to sin, and spiritually dead, will always and only choose to sin against God! Jesus taught this truth when He said the nature of a tree determines the nature of the fruit that tree bears (Matt. 7:17-18). In like manner, the fallen nature of the sinner will determine the nature of his choices. Therefore, though the Scripture declares that a lost man *must* be born again, it teaches just as clearly that such a new birth occurs by the sovereign and free will of God, not through the free will of man (John 1:13). Though the scripture very plainly teaches that men *must* come to Christ to be saved, it just as plainly declares that men cannot come unless God effectually draws them (John 6:44-45). Though it declares that men *must* believe on Christ to be saved, it just as clearly declares that the faith that saves the soul is a gift of God’s grace (Eph. 2:8-9; Phil. 1:29). Though it declares men *must* receive the things of the Spirit of God to be saved, it just as clearly declares that such things cannot be received by lost men (1 Cor. 2:14).

Let me illustrate this doctrine more plainly. Several years ago a young man, complaining about this doctrine, declared to me, “I think salvation works like this: Lost men are in a condition like a sick man in a bed dying of pneumonia. Christ

is like the antibiotic which God has placed on the nightstand next to him. The message of the gospel is that if the sick man will only reach out to the nightstand and take the medicine, he’ll be saved!” I replied to him in this way: “I agree with your illustration, as far as it goes. Certainly Christ is ‘medicine,’ if you will, the remedy for man’s need. God has set Him before men, and has commanded all men to lay hold of Him. But here your illustration breaks down. If I have pneumonia, my body may be attacked by the sickness, but my will to choose or reject treatment remains untouched. But in the case of a lost sinner, it’s especially his will that is sick! He refuses to take the medicine for the simple reason that he loves his sickness and despises the remedy. In fact, he’d rather die than take the medicine. So you might as well have a dead man lying in the bed to make your illustration fit the facts of the case.”

Now where does this leave man, the sinner? Opponents of this truth say, “In despair, with no hope at all.” If you mean that it leaves men despairing of any hope in *themselves*, then I must wholeheartedly concur with you. In fact, that’s precisely where a man must be brought if ever he would be genuinely converted. He *must* despair of his own goodness, his own ability, his own righteousness, and cast himself entirely and solely on the mercy of God in the person and work of Jesus Christ. His cry must be that of Toplady: “Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling.”

It is most rare today to find a man in such a condition. The vast majority of our generation have cut their teeth on a teaching that tells them that God has done all He can to save them, and now it is all up to them to “accept” Christ (terminology which is nowhere used in sacred Scripture) and His offer of salvation to them. Notice who this leaves in the driver’s seat in this approach. It’s no small wonder that we labor among a people who think that they can be saved if, when, and how they please—and are quite indignant

when you tell them that the case is quite otherwise. Rather than bringing them to despair of self, this teaching specifically points them to themselves as the critical contributor to their salvation. Jesus, they are told by the well-meaning evangelist, is much like a beggar knocking outside their heart's door. He is pleading with them to "let" Him come in so that He might save them, all, of course, with their permission. (Notice again who is in charge in this approach.) Rather than stripping man of his grounds for boasting, this system leaves man at least one act of which he may justly be proud and boastful—his vaunted "choice" which *allowed* the work of Christ to be effectual and the will of God not to be frustrated.

The true gospel of Christ has a far different effect upon sinners. It produces "knocking" and "pleading" for sure, but, in this case, it's the sinner who is doing it. Notice how Paul introduces Jesus Christ to the Athenian philosophers on Mars Hill in Acts 17. Analyze his sermon carefully. These men had never heard of Jesus Christ. How does Paul introduce them to the person and work of Christ? Notice that the very first glimpse he gives these pagans of the Savior is not as a beggar at their back door, but as the One who holds their destiny in His own hands! The question for man, the sinner, is not what will you do with Jesus, but what will He do with you. Left to yourself, you'll bar the door of your heart to the King of Glory. Were it not for His power to open the barred hearts of men (Acts 16:14), no man would be saved.

Does such teaching lead to passivity and fatalism? Why should it? Suppose I have a deadly disease and left to myself I will surely die. Yet I've heard of a great physician who is able to treat and cure cases like my own. Do I despair? Of myself, yes, I surely do. But what is to prevent me from camping out at that doctor's doorstep, pleading with him to take my case, and appealing to whatever mercy there might

be in his heart? "But," says someone, "this treatment is incredibly expensive, and you don't have a red cent to your name!" What's to keep me from begging him to take me on as a charity case? Nothing. Nothing, that is, except my proud heart. Ah, there's the rub. Now we've hit upon the real issue. God offers salvation freely. He offers it to hell-deserving sinners like you and me—but you'll have to come down off your "high-horse" to receive it.

At the conclusion of a parable in which a publican is justified by casting himself on God's mercy, and a proud Pharisee is rejected, Christ says, "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 18:14). That is just as much a universal declaration as John 3:16, is it not? Does one of these verses apply, but not the other? Where do we find warrant for our selectivity in these matters? No, the matter is quite clear to see. Salvation is found only by men who have drunk deeply from the cup of genuine humility. To put it very simply, if God were to leave you a leg to stand on, you would always try to stand on it! If He leaves you any other hope than Christ alone, you'll flee to that other hope. If He were to leave you any hiding place other than Christ you would flee to it. If you could find any ground to stand on besides Him you would always choose the sinking sand rather than the Solid Rock! It may be humbling to utterly turn your back on self, but it is absolutely essential. Scripture uses analogies and metaphors to make this truth plain throughout. The truth is plain—God has placed a Rock in Zion, and you will either fall upon that Rock, and be broken, casting yourself upon Him for mercy, or you will be judged by that Rock, and ground to powder in the last day. There is no middle ground here.

The ax must be laid to the root of the tree of sinful human pride. If you are to be saved I know of no other truth so calculated under God's divine power to bring you to Christ for mercy than the doctrine of total inability. This truth

declares that there is no soundness in you, from the crown of your head to the sole of your feet. It trumpets out with clarity—your righteousness, your best works—all are filthy rags in God's sight. All must bow down to the testimony of God Almighty, and cry for divine mercy and grace.

This truth is a humiliating one for all of us. This is especially true in a generation like that of our time where an atmosphere of self-love, self-confidence and self-glorification is so prevalent. As painful as this is, no one ever died of humiliation, even though he acts like he might. No one ever perished of brokenness. Indeed, biblically and experientially this is always the first step down the road that truly leads to life.

Why Me? The Doctrine of Election

Election. Now there is one word almost certain to stir up a ruckus in our day. Its very introduction into religious conversation will be met with either open-mouth ignorance, unbelievable hysteria, or downright hostility. Obviously, this doctrine hits a sore spot with many. From the reaction it generates, one might be tempted to think that the only fruit this teaching produces is pride in its adherents, anger in its detractors, and general conflict among most of the saints. However, that's not the case at all. Not only is it an antidote for many of the poisonous errors of our time, it also produces, when rightly apprehended, the very fruit so sadly missing in contemporary evangelical circles. Let me explain.

The doctrine of election ensures grace. The most casual Bible student admits that Scripture indeed employs the language of election when speaking of God's eternal purposes. Yet most seek to dodge the implications of that language by fleeing to the refuge of *conditional* election (i.e., that God's choice, or election, of certain men to salvation is *conditioned* by His foreseeing faith in those men). I'll leave

the task of showing that this "time tunnel" hypothesis will not fly to the many excellent treatments which deal most adequately with this subject. Better yet, see it for yourself by getting your Bible and thoroughly studying the many references of Scripture concerning this subject. I intend to deal not so much with the proof of the doctrine as with its ramifications.

If *conditional* election is true—if God's choice of me is determined by my choice of Him—the practical effect of this teaching is no different than if there were no election at all. The proof of this assertion is seen in the fact that the groups who hold to this view of election seldom, if ever, mention this subject. And why should they? To what purpose? Since it's taught that God has done all He can do to save, and now it's up to man, the will of man becomes the determining and dominant factor in salvation. Whenever you make God's choice of men to salvation hinge upon what He foresees in man—be it his work, his faith, or his choice—you have effectively undermined the whole concept of salvation by *grace alone*. Either salvation depends upon God's free choice and good pleasure, which is the principle of *grace*, or it depends upon something man himself produces, which is the principle of *works*. It really matters not whether this thing which God foresees is something tangible, seen outwardly in the man's life, or something intangible, seen inwardly only by God. It matters not whether it's a huge thing, or whether it's a tiny thing. So long as man's part is the critical, determinative part, you have a system based upon *works*, not *grace*.

Let me illustrate. Suppose you came to me and said, "Mark, I have a \$15,000 car here. If you will pay me \$15,000 I will give you the car." We'd agree, I am sure, that's not *grace*, that's *works*. But suppose you said, "Mark, I've got a \$15,000 car here, and I'll simply give you the car," we'd all agree that's *grace*, not *works*. But now let's try to mix the two

concepts. Suppose you said, “Mark, here’s a \$15,000 car. I’ll be \$14,999 gracious to you if you’ll simply pay me \$1.” Have we succeeded in mixing *grace* and *works*? No! For what’s the practical difference between that last offer and you simply saying “Mark, here’s a \$15,000 car—I’ll sell it for \$1”? Do you see? You’re still coming to me on the basis of “selling,” not of “giving.” You’ve not changed your principle, you’ve simply lowered your price. This is precisely Paul’s point in Romans 11:5-6. An *unconditional* election is the only concept of election consistent with salvation by free grace.

Election excludes human boasting. Scripture tells us in passages like Romans 3:27; 1 Corinthians 1:26-31; and Ephesians 2:8-10, that God intentionally designed salvation so that no man could boast of it. He didn’t merely arrange it so that boasting would be discouraged or kept to a minimum—He planned it so that boasting would be absolutely excluded. Election does precisely that.

At this point I need to make several things clear. First, election in no way limits the free offer of the gospel. There are many promises in Scripture extended promiscuously to all men. We are commanded to preach the gospel to every creature, conveying to all men everywhere the gracious invitation therein. Election was never intended to tell us who *may* come to Christ—whosoever will *may* come. Rather, election tells us who *will* come to Christ. It answers the question, “Why me?”

Second, election is unto salvation but it is not salvation. Those chosen to salvation in Christ before the foundation of the world enter this life “children of wrath, even as others” (Eph. 2:3). The elect must *obtain* this life in Christ (2 Tim. 2:10), and they obtain it by meeting certain conditions. *Election is unconditional, but salvation is not!* Men must repent of sin and believe on Christ if ever they are saved. Yes, God offers salvation as a gift, *but* I must take it through repentance and faith. Election in no way does away with

that necessity. Yet election makes clear that I should repent and believe because of God’s gracious work in me, and not because I have produced such things of myself (Phil. 2:12-13; 2 Thess. 2:13-14). While admitting that I cannot boast in the *production* of the gift of salvation, I might be tempted to boast in my *reception* of that gift. Election effectively removes this last possible ground of boasting. What I am, I am totally and completely by the grace of God alone!

Perhaps a personal anecdote would be helpful here. A few years ago, while pastoring in Nashville, Tennessee, a member of my church had a co-worker who belonged to a large Southern Baptist Church in the area. This man invited the member and me over to share our beliefs in a Sunday evening Bible class he was teaching. It seems this class had been studying various cults, and this man, upon learning of our beliefs, obviously felt that we qualified for his “Cult of the Week” class. I began the session by explaining that the truths we held were hardly “cultish,” and were, in fact, the very truths which Southern Baptists themselves held in their earlier days. After giving a brief survey of these doctrines of sovereign grace, I asked for questions from the class. One lady, in particular, was quite troubled. She said, “This is the most awful thing I’ve ever heard! You make it sound as if God is intentionally turning away men who would be saved, receiving only the elect.” I answered her in this vein: “You misunderstand the situation. You’re visualizing that God is standing at the door of heaven, and men are thronging to get in the door, and God is saying to various ones, ‘Yes, you may come, but not you, or you, or you—yes, you may come, and you, and you, but not you, etc.’ The situation is hardly this. Rather, God stands at the door of heaven with His arms outstretched, inviting all to come. Yet all men without exception are running in the opposite direction towards hell as hard as they can go. So God, in election, graciously reaches out and stops this one, and that

one, and this one over here, and that one over there, and effectually draws them to Himself by changing their hearts, making them willing to come. Election keeps no one out of heaven who would otherwise have been there, but it keeps a whole multitude of sinners out of hell who would otherwise have been there. Were it not for election, heaven would be an empty place, and hell would be bursting at the seams.” That kind of response, grounded as I believe that it is in scriptural truth, does put a different complexion on things, doesn’t it?

If you perish in hell, blame yourself, as it is entirely your fault. But if you should make it to heaven, credit God, for that is entirely His work! To Him alone belong all the praise and glory, for salvation is *all of grace*, from start to finish!

Election guarantees the success of the gospel ministry. A final product of this doctrine is a confidence in the gospel as the power of God unto salvation. Consider Acts 18:1-11. Paul came to Corinth preaching the gospel without much apparent success, and was preparing to move on, it would seem. Yet Christ came to him one evening in a vision and told him to remain there and preach, “because I have many people in this city.” Where were they? Paul couldn’t see them. Yet Christ knew His own, and would bring them to salvation through the preaching of Paul. Surely this should sound a note of encouragement to the many of us who seemingly labor on and on with so little fruit to show for it. It tells us that we do not need to soft-pedal the demands of Christ in order to gain Him new disciples. It tells us that we do not need to rely upon psychological gimmickry and persuasive techniques to wrangle “decisions” from men and women. It tells us that we need not worry that if we had sung just one more verse of “Just As I Am,” or had we said things in a different manner, or employed a better illustration, someone might have responded who didn’t. It tells us quite simply to keep our noses to the grindstone and preach

the gospel just as clearly and plainly as we can, and let the chips fall where they may. It is this proclamation of the truth that God blesses and will surely use in bringing His elect people home to salvation.

Power in the Blood: The Doctrine of Particular Redemption

For whom did Christ die? The great mass of modern evangelicals assume they know the correct answer to this query without further discussion. “Christ died for everyone,” we are assured with great certainty. And by this, *everyone* is the operative word which is stressed. For every child of Adam who ever has or ever will live; for both the believer and the infidel; for the man who goes to heaven and the man who goes to hell. In fact, most of the so-called “plans” of salvation employed in witnessing today confront the sinner with the “fact” that Christ has died for him and then he is told, “It is up to you to receive the benefits of what Christ has done for you already.” How could anyone presume to question a doctrine which is so obviously taught in Scripture, so vital to the faith of believers, and so central to the “plan” of salvation? Well, to be very blunt, I answer, “Because nothing could be further from what Scripture actually teaches about the atonement and nothing is so destructive to saving faith, or so misleading to the lost sinner!”

Limited atonement. The atonement of Christ must be considered as to both its scope and its power. Unless you believe in universalism—the unscriptural notion that everyone will eventually go to heaven—you must limit the atonement in one way or another. You must either limit it regarding its scope (for whom it is offered) or in regarding its power (what it accomplished). You simply cannot have it both ways. The reason I believe in a “limited” atonement is because I do not believe in a “limited” atonement. That is, I believe that the atonement was limited in its scope to the

elect, but it is unlimited in its power to save. To prove this assertion from Scripture is beyond the scope of this article, so again I refer you to the numerous works on this subject. For now, open your Bible and note that the Scriptures declare that Christ died for His “sheep” (John 10:15) and for His “church” (Acts 20:28; Eph. 5:25). Further, the Scriptures present the atonement as efficacious, purging sin (Heb. 1:3), obtaining eternal redemption (Heb. 9:12), putting away the sin (Heb. 9:26), and perfecting forever (Heb. 10:14) all those for whom it is offered. If you are perplexed by passages like John 3:16 and the like, I refer you to John Owen’s classic work, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*. However, I must limit my thoughts now to the utility, or usefulness, of such a doctrine.

A meaningful atonement. There’s no better way I can think of to make the atonement of Christ absolutely meaningless than to teach that it was done for each and every man. Suppose I go to a man’s wife and tell her, “Oh, how your husband loves you! I’ve never seen anything quite like it. He’s so thoughtful, caring and considerate towards you. And do you know what the very best thing there is about your husband’s love? He loves every other woman up and down the block just as much as he loves you.” Well, it all sounded pretty good until we got to the last part. The best way to make a husband’s love meaningless is to extend it promiscuously to all women. It’s the *particular* love that a husband has only for his wife that makes his love mean something. In a very similar way, when the death of Jesus is extended to include all men without exception, the atonement is robbed of its significance and meaning.

You may sing “Power in the Blood” with all your might, but if Christ’s blood was shed equally and promiscuously for both those who will be saved and those who will perish, it’s clear that the “power” to save *cannot* be in the blood of Christ. Obviously the power must lie somewhere else—

namely, in the will of man. But if, on the other hand, Christ’s dying for a man is an act that secures the salvation of that man, then we are correct in singing, not only “Power in the Blood,” but also:

Dear dying Lamb, Thy precious blood,
Shall never lose its pow’r;
‘Til all the ransomed church of God
Be saved to sin no more!

The death of Christ, when seen in this light, becomes far more than a mere “attempt” or “gambit” on God’s part to save each and every person. Rather, Christ’s death becomes the centerpiece in a divine plan of redemption that actually accomplishes its purpose. Therefore, instead of utilizing the name “limited” atonement to refer to this doctrine of redemption, I much prefer the name “definite” or “real” atonement. The main difference between the doctrine that Christ died for sheep and goats alike, and the teaching that He died for His sheep only, is not so much in the number for whom Christ died, but in the *nature* of the atonement itself.

Blood that you can trust.

Nothing is quite so destructive of saving faith as the teaching that Christ died for everyone. True, saving faith is a faith that turns its back on all other hopes and rests itself solely and wholly upon Christ and His work at the cross. If Christ did precisely the same thing for both the person going to heaven and the person going to hell, how, pray tell, can a sinner trust himself to the work of Christ alone? Let me illustrate what I mean here. Consider Paul’s question in 1 Corinthians 4:7: “For who makes you different from anyone else?” Here is a man going to hell, and here is a man going to heaven. *Who* makes the difference? Be careful how you answer, for your answer will reveal who it is you believe your “savior” to really be! Most people believe that in spite of all that Christ did, He did not make the difference between

heaven and hell—their “free will” did. And that’s precisely the problem—they believe they saved themselves. Yes, they did it with God’s help, they will say, and no, they couldn’t have done it without God’s help through what Christ did on the cross, but in the final analysis, *they* made the difference. But let me ask you another question: What makes the difference? Here is a person going to heaven and here is another going to hell. If Christ did precisely the same thing for both, it’s clear that what He did was not the difference. Now be careful how you answer. Your answer to this question will tell us what you are trusting in for your salvation. How can a person trust the salvation of his soul to that which he can see did not make the difference? Whatever he perceives as making the difference, that is what he *must* trust. And that is precisely why we have people trusting their decisions, trust their having walked an aisle, trusting their prayers, trusting just about everything imaginable but the blood of Christ alone. But a faith that sees the death of Christ as a saving thing, will abandon all other hopes and cleave to Christ’s blood alone. A man with such faith can truly sing: “Nothing in my hand I bring, Simply to Thy cross I cling!”

All men admit that there is a great obstacle in the path of a sinner going to heaven. That’s why, all agree, Christ came into this world and died at Calvary. But the question is this: Did His death remove *every* obstacle, or did it simply remove *some* obstacles, leaving it to us to remove the rest? If it’s the latter, we’re still operating on the basis of man’s works and merit. Christ, in this case, came so that God could put salvation “on sale,” making it affordable. But if it’s the former, then God indeed justifies men *freely*, for the sake of Christ’s blood alone.

What do you tell a sinner? As mentioned earlier, the modern “plan” of salvation always assures a sinner that Christ has died for him, and then pleads with him to “accept” what

Jesus did for him at the cross. In fact, many can’t even conceive of how they would go about the work of evangelism if they could not make this kind of assertion. Yet no one in all the Bible ever preached to lost sinners that Christ died for them specifically. Neither does Scripture say that what Christ did at the cross is offered to men. Rather Christ offered Himself “up” in sacrifice (Heb. 7:27), i.e., to God His Father. Most will admit the very basic fact that Christ took upon Himself all the sins of those for whom He died (whatever their number might be), and that He died to render a full and complete satisfaction to the broken law of God. Well, if God was satisfied in the death of His Son (and the resurrection is the proof that He was), how then can He justly put any person in hell for whom Christ has rendered a full and complete satisfaction? If Christ at the cross has paid in full for each and every sin of each and every person, then for what sin will God put *any* person into hell? Is God so just that, on the one hand, He demands that the price of sin be paid, but on the other hand, so unjust, that He demands payment *twice*—once from His Son at the cross, and then again from the sinner in hell? I know some will say, “But we must receive what Christ has done.” You miss the point. Atonement is secured *not* when Jesus or His work is acceptable to you, but when *you* are made acceptable to God “in the One He loves” (Eph. 1:6).

What then do we tell lost sinners? To where do we point them? To the risen and enthroned Savior. Yes, from God’s point of view, there is a “plan” of salvation; He does everything according to a purpose and a scheme. But from man’s point of view, there is no “plan” of salvation by which he completes certain steps and is saved. Rather, there’s a “man” of salvation, the God-man, Jesus Christ, seated at the right hand of God His Father with all power in heaven and on earth in His hands! The question to be asked by the sinner seeking salvation is not whether Christ died for him. The

question is this: Does that Man seated on that throne have the power to save a sinner like me? To that question, the Scriptures leave no doubt whatsoever; “He is able to save to completely those who come to God through Him” (Heb. 7:25). There is infinite merit in the work of Christ at Calvary, enough to save a million worlds of people. The question is the intent in the atonement, or its design in the plan of God—for *whom* was this redemption accomplished? The Scriptures plainly answer that question: It was for all of those who will come to Christ in saving faith. Who are they? The very ones the Father gave to His Son to save—the ones He chose in Christ before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:3-6; 2 Thess. 2:13-14; 2 Tim. 1:9-10).

Next Issue: “What Difference Does It Make?” Part 2

Author

Rev. Mark Webb serves as pastor of Grace Baptist Church, Olive Branch, Mississippi, and is a writer and producer of hymns and music which reflect the themes of grace as taught in Scripture. He is a conference speaker as well.