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Writing of conditionalism, he states that the debate ‘may test the depth of the evangelical church’s practical commitment to the authority of Scripture. It is very easy to profess that the Bible is our final standard and measure of doctrine. It is quite another matter to actually scrutinize a cherished doctrine, long held by a majority of Christians, in the bright pure light of God’s Word ... Indeed our evangelical will ... is now on the line. May God make us faithful in deed as in word’.<sup>23</sup>

These wise words should guide us as we approach both these issues.<sup>24</sup>

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# Divine Justice and Universal Grace: A Calvinistic Proposal

by Terrance Tiessen

*Printed with Permission (Abridged)*

## THE PROPOSAL

Since Augustine’s time, Christian theologians have not achieved consensus on the role or operation of divine grace in salvation. By the Second Council of Orange (A.D. 529) Augustinianism had been absolved of the charge from Faustus of Riez that it was fatalist, and the church had affirmed the absolute necessity of prevenient grace and the inability of the human will to initiate faith<sup>1</sup> That did not, however, establish a consensus concerning who is *determinative* in the personal appropriation of salvation, the gracious God or the responsive human individual. After centuries of discussion there now seems to be an unresolvable disagreement, within the evangelical community, between Lutheran and Wesleyan theologians, on the one hand, and Calvinists on the other.

Calvinists (within the tradition of Augustine) stand convinced that the grace of God must be the determinative factor in salvation so that boasting of the human contribution

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<sup>23</sup> Fudge, *The Fire that Consumes*, xii.

<sup>24</sup> All the works cited above contain a wealth of references to other material, and the following will also be of interest to those who wish to pursue these subjects at greater depth. The evangelical debate on conditionalism is mentioned in D. Tidball, *Who are the Evangelicals?* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1994), ch. 8. His notes on that chapter also contain helpful references. Suggestions for further reading include: J. Blanchard, *Whatever happened to Hell?* (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 1993); O. Cullmann, *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?* (London: Epworth, 1958) and *Immortality and Resurrection* (London: Macmillan, 1958); P. Cotterell, *Mission and Meaninglessness* (London: SPCK, 1990), esp. chs. 4–6; L. Dixon, *The Other side of the Good News* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1992); A. Fernando, *Crucial Questions about Hell* (Eastbourne: Kingsway Publications, 1991); D. Pawson, *The Road to Hell* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1992); H. Thielicke, *Death and Life* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970).

<sup>1</sup> Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The True Image: The Origin and Distiny of Man in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 192.

is made impossible ([Eph. 2:8–10](#)). Those whom God has chosen to salvation, he brings to faith by means of an efficacious grace which applies to the elect the saving benefits objectively accomplished by Christ's death for his own people. Synergism is viewed as a constant threat to divine grace.<sup>2</sup>

This Augustinian-Calvinist statement of sovereign grace characteristically encounters three objections: [p. 64](#) 1) some biblical texts speak of Christ's saving work in terms that are universal; 2) the Calvinist approach is deterministic and negates the significance of the human decision; 3) the Calvinist scheme makes God unjust in two ways, a) by the particularity of the divine choice which denies saving grace to many people; and b) by the condemnation of those who have no ability to repent and believe.

These objections have been addressed by Calvin and many others after him but the objectors remain unsatisfied. I will not address the scandal of divine particularity in 'unconditional election'.<sup>3</sup> On that point, the answer appears to me to lie in a proper appreciation for the undeservedness of grace. That anyone receives saving grace is a cause for praise greater than our surprise that God should have chosen (for good reasons which have not yet been revealed to us), not to save everyone. I will not attempt to modify that basic tenet of Calvinism. This is, therefore, a 'Calvinistic proposal'. I accept that God has chosen his people from 'before the foundation of the world', that he provided for their justification by the sacrificial, penalty bearing death of Christ for his people (the righteous for the guilty), and that it is these people whom the Father effectively draws to faith in Christ, by an inner working of the Spirit. I hope, however, that the following proposal will alleviate to some extent the offensiveness of the particularity of divine grace, specifically with regard to the question of the justice of divine judgement (objection 3 b above). It may make Calvinism slightly more plausible even to Calvinists.

I will consider three subjects: 1) the accessibility of saving revelation; 2) the extent of an inner enablement to faith by the Holy Spirit; and 3) the divine intent in Christ's work. Calvinist evangelicals have widely asserted that only those who know about Christ's saving work, and who trust in him for salvation, can be saved, and that the Holy Spirit enables only the elect to respond in faith. This teaching often elicits a response that, if it were true, God would be unjust to condemn those who have not received the gospel and those who do receive it but who are unable to believe. It is my proposal, however, 1) that God makes himself known to everyone in a manner that is adequate to elicit a faith which would be justifying; and 2) that this revelation is accompanied at some point by an inner work of grace which remedies the ill effects of the fall so that everyone is able to respond in faith to the self-revelation of God. The position taken on these two points then calls for a brief reexamination of the divine intent in the atonement.

## UNIVERSALLY ACCESSIBLE SALVIFIC REVELATION

John Sanders has helpfully described the manner in which Calvinist theologians have argued for a restrictivist understanding of salvation, that is, that 'all the unevangelized are damned'. As representative of this position, he presents the [P. 65](#) arguments of Augustine,

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<sup>2</sup> Hughes, *op. cit.*, 203. Thus George Whitefield described his main concern to John Wesley: 'You plainly make salvation depend not on God's *free grace*, but on man's *free will* ...' (*Whitefield's Journals* [London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1960]. 587; cited by Alan P. F. Sell. *The Great Debate: Calvinism, Arminianism and Salvation*, Studies in Christian Thought and History [Warthing: H. E. Walter Ltd., 1982], 74).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. G. C. Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, tr. Hugo Bekker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 8.

Calvin and R. C. Sproul.<sup>4</sup> Sanders himself argues for a more inclusivist understanding and presents as representatives of such a hope, John Wesley, C. S. Lewis and Clark Pinnock.<sup>5</sup> What immediately strikes one is that all of these people are non-Calvinistic in their theology. It gives the impression that Calvinism is naturally restrictivist while Wesleyanism is more likely to be inclusivist.

In fact, a variety of approaches taken by Reformed theologians have provided ground for optimism concerning the salvation of the unevangelized. Among the first generation of Reformers we find a view that allows for the salvation of the unevangelized, in Ulrich Zwingli's strong emphasis on divine sovereignty.<sup>6</sup> All the elect will be saved, whether or not they hear the gospel, in accordance with their response to the revelation which they do receive. Those who do not learn of Christ respond to God with a virtuous life, since election is to good works.

Moïse Amyraut (whose 'hypothetical universalism' is discussed below) also asserted the possibility of salvation for an individual who does not hear the gospel 'provided that he profit from the testimonies of mercy that God gives him'.<sup>7</sup> As Roger Nicole sums up Amyraut's approach, 'In nature there is a sufficient presentation of the truth so that men may exercise faith if they only will do so.'<sup>8</sup> In our own century, Karl Barth has been noted for his more hopeful view of the final destiny of humankind, all of whom are elect in Christ. Somewhat reminiscent of that approach is the proposal by Neal Punt that we should assume everyone to be elect in Christ except those whom Scripture specifically excludes. Thus, only those who explicitly reject God are reprobate.<sup>9</sup>

My own thesis may share elements of these proposals but it differs from all of them in significant ways. I affirm Christ's unique position as Saviour of the world, in the sense that no one is (has been or will be) saved on any ground other than the obedient life and death of Jesus. ([In. 14:26](#); [Acts 4:12](#); [1 Tim. 2:5-6](#); [Rom. 5:12-19](#)). I further affirm that this salvation, which was objectively achieved for all time, by [p. 66](#) Jesus Christ, is subjectively appropriated by faith. Salvation is now, and always has been, only by God's grace, through faith and not by our own good deeds ([Rom. 3:24-28](#); [5:9](#), [19](#); [8:1](#); [10:4](#); [1 Cor. 1:30](#); [6:11](#); [2 Cor. 5:21](#); [Gal. 2:16](#); [3:11](#); [Eph. 2:8-9](#); [Phil. 3:9](#)).

It is in regard to the necessary content of saving faith that restrictivist positions are unsatisfactory. Scripture teaches clearly that, in God's justice, he holds people accountable only for the revelation concerning God and his will which has been available to them. People are not condemned for not responding properly to revelation which they did not receive. Only God knows for certain when an acceptable faith exists in a person's life, but

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<sup>4</sup> John Sanders, *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 51-59.

<sup>5</sup> Sanders, *op. cit.*, 249-64. Cf. Clark Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> See Justo L. González, *A History of Christian Thought* vol. 3: *From the Protestant Reformation to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Abingdon, 1975), 69, citing G. W. Locher, "Die Prädestinations-lehre Huldrych Zwingli's," TZ 12 (1956): 526-48.

<sup>7</sup> *Brief Traitté de la predestination et de ses principales dependances*. 1634 ed., 81; 1658 ed., 68. Cited by Brian G. Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy: Protestant Scholasticism and Humanism in Seventeenth-Century France* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), 211.

<sup>8</sup> Roger Nicole, 'Amyraldianism', in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, ed. Edwin H. Palmer (Wilmington, Delaware: The National Foundation for Christian Education, 1964), 1:186.

<sup>9</sup> Neal Punt, *Unconditional Good News: Toward an Understanding of Biblical Universalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

its presence is generally evident in the honour and thankfulness that is expressed toward God, and in a will to obey God's commands. The necessary focus or object of that faith varies according to the content of the revelation which God has made available to each individual.

These theses could be expanded and demonstrated biblically, but it is an area that has been given much attention in recent years. I have written regarding it elsewhere<sup>10</sup> and will simply outline the main biblical rationale for my position here.

### **Divine Judgement According to Knowledge**

On the question of the salvation of the unevangelized, whether they be infant mortalities or adult pagans, evangelicals often plead ignorance about the eternal destiny of others and cite the rhetorical question of Abraham, 'Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?' ([Gen. 18:25](#)). We all know that he will. We also recognize that there is a fundamental injustice at work when people who are inculpably ignorant of some fact are condemned for not having acted according to a truth they did not know.

Paul states this principle in [Romans 2:12](#), 'all who have sinned apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law.' By 'the law' he means the law as given by special revelation to Moses. He is not suggesting that anyone is actually without some knowledge of God's law. That would leave all the unevangelized sinless. On the contrary, he asserts that the Gentiles also have a knowledge of God's moral will through their consciences, the law of God 'written on their hearts'. The witness of the conscience is not reliable and it must be reeducated on the basis of Scripture, but we must treat it formally as God's voice to us.<sup>11</sup> [p. 67](#)

God has thus left no one without a moral witness and we are judged according to the knowledge we have, not according to a knowledge that we do not have. On this basis, we acknowledge that people who lived before the Word became flesh were saved by grace through faith, though not through faith in Jesus. They did not know about Jesus and so they were not obligated to believe in him. When that knowledge came to them, of course, their obligation changed. [John 3](#) is very explicit about the fate of those who see the light in Jesus and reject it because they prefer darkness. It says nothing, however, about those upon whom that light has not shone. The principle Paul stated concerning the Old Testament scripture is true also of the New Testament. 'All who have sinned apart from the law [the Scriptures] will also perish apart from the law [the Scriptures]' ([Rom. 2:12](#)). Judgement will be according to knowledge.

In both of Paul's sermons to Gentile audiences, in Acts, he assumed this principle that judgement is proportionate to revelation. To the audience of idolaters in Lystra, Paul said that 'in past generations he [God] allowed all the nations to follow their own ways; yet he has not left himself without a witness in doing good—giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, and filling you with food and your hearts with joy' ([Acts 14:16, 17](#)). It is highly implausible that Paul is suggesting that God accepted all the various forms of worship and conduct which the nations chose in their ignorance of God through lack of revelation. His point is that: 1) God had given them some revelation, in the form of his

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. 'Can the Unevangelized Be Saved?: A Review Article', *Didaskalia* 4/2 (Nov 1993); 'Salvation of the Unevangelized: A Position Paper Prepared for Delegates of the SEND International Council, 1996', an unpublished paper; and *Irenaeus on the Salvation of the Unevangelized*. ATLA Monograph Series, No. 31 (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1993).

<sup>11</sup> Paul spells this out specifically with regard to believers. Those who violate the voice of conscience sin against God, even if they do not break God's moral law. 'Those who have doubts are condemned if they eat, because they do not act from faith' ([Rom. 14:23](#)).

providential care for them. As indicated in [Rom 1:21](#), this left them culpable if they did not respond by honouring God as God and giving him thanks. 2) In Paul's generation, they were receiving a clearer revelation of God's truth and of his will and their obligation was increasing accordingly.

To the philosophers of Athens, Paul is even more explicit about this principle. 'God has overlooked the times of human ignorance' but 'now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead' ([Acts 17:30–31](#)). Clearly, there is an ignorance that is not culpable. When the gospel concerning the resurrected Jesus is preached, the ignorance is dispelled and God's 'overlooking' is therefore no longer appropriate.

Some assume that the end of the 'times of ignorance' is the point at which Christ's earthly work is done.<sup>12</sup> It seems more likely that Paul locates it at the point of knowledge of that event. For the Athenians, it did not happen until Paul proclaimed this truth to them. The same would then be true for all [p. 68](#) people prior to the proclamation of the gospel to them.<sup>13</sup>

Jesus speaks very specifically to this matter, on another occasion, when he says: 'If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin' ([In. 15:22](#)). It is those who receive the light and prefer the darkness that are here described, not those who have no knowledge of the light that came into the world in Jesus. This does not mean that it is better not to remove people's ignorance by preaching the gospel even though it increases their culpability. They were culpable of sin with regard to the revelation they had received before the gospel arrived. Their ignorance was not so complete as to vindicate them entirely.<sup>14</sup> The gospel will, indeed, increase the guilt of those who reject it. But, to those who believe, it is the power of God to salvation, and those who have been 'destined for eternal life' will become believers through the proclamation of the gospel ([Ac. 13:48](#)).

## **The content of Saving Faith**

### **Old Testament Revelation and Faith**

Old Testament believers were saved by grace through faith although they did not know of Jesus' death and did not, therefore, put their trust in him. The writer of Hebrews identifies the minimum content of saving faith: 'without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him' ([Heb. 11:6](#)).

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<sup>12</sup> E.g. John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad: The Supremacy of God in Missions* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, c1993), 115, cf. 131.

<sup>13</sup> I. Howard Marshall also understands the text in this way. He writes, 'Until the coming of the revelation of God's true nature in Christianity men lived in *ignorance* of him. But now the proclamation of the Christian message brings this time to an end *so far as those who hear the gospel are concerned* [emphasis mine]; they no longer have an excuse for their ignorance. God was prepared to overlook their ignorance, but now he will do so no longer....' *The Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction and Commentary*. The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 289–90.

<sup>14</sup> As Don Carson rightly asserts: 'The idea is not that if Jesus had not come the people would have continued in sinless perfection—as if the coming of Jesus introduced for the first time sin and its attendant guilt before God.... Rather, by coming and speaking to them Jesus incited the most central and controlling of sins: rejection of God's gracious revelation, rebellion against God, decisive preference for darkness rather than light.' *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 526.



The particular faith which was exercised by individuals under the old covenant is very instructive. Noah 'built an ark ... and became an heir to the righteousness that is in accordance with faith' (v. 7). Abraham 'obeyed ... and he set out, not knowing where he was going' (v. 8); he 'considered him faithful who had promised' (v. 11); and so he 'offered up Isaac', believing 'that God is able even to raise someone from the dead'. 'Isaac invoked blessings for the future on Jacob and Esau' (v. 20), and Jacob blessed the sons of Joseph (v. 21). Joseph, in turn 'made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave instructions about his burial' (v. 22). p. 69 Moses' parents hid him for three months. Moses left Egypt unafraid 'for he persevered as though he saw him who is invisible. By faith he kept the Passover, (vv. 27-28). Rahab 'received the spies in peace' (v. 31), and many others underwent unspeakable forms of persecution for their faith but refused to give up their firm trust in God and the future that he had prepared for them (vv 32-38).

The people of Israel demonstrated their faith in God by obedience, by trust in his faithfulness and by an expectation of the fulfilment of his promises. It was not the mere practice of the prescribed rituals of sacrifice that brought them forgiveness of sin, but sincere faith in God, which was demonstrated in acts of obedience and mercy, which elicited God's approval. The animal sacrifices were instituted by God as types of Christ's perfect sacrifice and those who brought such sacrifices for sin were explicitly acknowledging their guilt, repenting of it, and casting themselves upon the mercy of God for forgiveness. They were not saved by the animal sacrifices but by the sacrifice of Christ which was typified in them ([Heb. 9](#)).

This is not an assertion of two covenant theology, namely, that God has established two ways of approach to himself and that the old covenant continues to be his way for Jews, so that evangelism among them is not necessary. But, it is quite artificial to make the historical occurrence of Christ's death and resurrection the critical dividing line epistemologically, so that no Jew could be saved after Christ without explicit faith in Christ, though it was possible before Christ came.<sup>15</sup> The problem created by making this chronological divide is particularly evident in the case of those whom Paul describes as the true circumcision ([Rom 2:29](#)). They were inwardly, spiritually of the faith of Abraham. Such people were 'saved' without explicitly having placed their faith in Jesus, just as Abraham had been. We can not suggest that, on the day that Jesus rose from the dead, they suddenly lost their salvation.

*General Revelation and Faith* The problem is greater with reference to those who do not have the special revelation that God gave to Israel. Clearly everyone has enough knowledge to be justly condemned. Apart from original guilt in Adam, all who live to moral consciousness violate their own consciences. All fall short of God's glory ([Rom. 3:23](#)). Is it possible that God has given many people sufficient revelation to constitute them justly condemned but insufficient revelation to permit them to be saved? [Romans 1:18-23](#) is frequently cited as evidence that general revelation is sufficient p. 70 grounds to condemn people but insufficient to lead them to salvation.<sup>16</sup> This is because people have the law

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<sup>15</sup> It is interesting to find this distinction between the chronological and the epistemological in the writing of an unknown preacher of the fourth or fifth century, Pseudo-Chrysostom, *Homily on Easter* 1,7 (*Sources Chrétiennes* 36, 61), cited in Francis Martin, *The Feminist Question: Feminist Theology in the Light of Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 3. He wrote: 'As far as we are concerned, Christ's immolation on our behalf takes place when we become aware of this grace and we understand the life conferred on us by this sacrifice.'

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Bruce Demarest's review of the positions of Luther, Calvin and the Puritans on general revelation and its value for salvation. *General Revelation: Historical Views and Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1982), 43-73.

written on their hearts and they break it. They are culpable sinners. But the revelation of God in conscience, creation and providence purportedly offers no knowledge which could elicit a faith which would be instrumental in justification. Special revelation is necessary for salvation to occur.

J. Herbert Kane finds a thread of hope in [Romans 2:6, 7](#). There Paul asserts that God will 'repay according to each one's deeds: to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life'. Kane suggests that 'in the light of [Rom 2:6-7](#) we must not completely rule out the possibility, however remote, that here and there throughout history there may have been the singular person who got to heaven without the full light of the gospel'.<sup>17</sup> We need to be wary, however, of anything that attributes a saving effect to human works. Paul has been very clear that salvation is always by grace through faith and never by works ([Eph. 2:8, 9](#); cf. [Rom. 3:20](#); [Ac. 13:39](#); [Gal. 2:16](#); [Psa. 143:2](#)). [Romans 2:6-7](#) cannot be suggesting that there are some who might be saved by 'patiently doing good', if that implies that deeds of personal righteousness can ever be the ground of final justification. On the other hand, we should not rule out the possibility that the Spirit of God might do a work in the heart of those who have only general revelation which would elicit a response of trust in the Creator and Judge and of thankfulness. In such cases, the patient doing of good is evidence of a seeking after 'glory and honour and immortality' which is effected by the work of the Spirit, and this would account for God's giving such people eternal life ([2:7](#)).

Frequently, Paul's statement in [Romans 1:18](#) has been pushed further than Paul's own argument takes it. Paul teaches that 'the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of *those who* by their wickedness suppress the truth' (italics mine) and it is often assumed that Paul is indicating that everyone, ultimately and finally, does this,<sup>18</sup> but he does not say so. By God's grace, people stop doing this or none would be saved. What Paul does clearly state is that those who do suppress the truth of creational revelation and do not honour God as God or give him thanks ([1:21](#)) are without excuse and that this sinful response to general revelation, when it persists, leads to increasingly more serious forms of sin.

David Clark has suggested that [Romans 1:18-23](#) is 'consistent with the claim that natural revelation fails to bring salvation to those who are p. 71 rebellious and wicked, but potentially leads to salvation for those who respond to it'.<sup>19</sup> Clark Pinnock suggests that salvation is available on the basis of three covenants, the covenants, with Noah, Abraham and the one ratified by Jesus. It is faith that pleases God. The content of theology is less essential. Prevenient grace makes faith possible for all. Like Paul, we should build upon the truth that people already possess. We need to be modest both epistemologically and ecclesiastically while maintaining a firm confidence in the uniqueness and decisiveness of Jesus for salvation.<sup>20</sup>

The major problem, at this point, is the lack of biblical examples of people whom God accepted on the basis of their proper response to general revelation. In the Old Testament, people who evidence a proper relationship to God, outside of Israel, all had special revelation in some form. Cornelius, in the New Testament, was certainly blessed with special revelation through his synagogue worship. On the other hand, evangelicals may

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<sup>17</sup> J. Herbert Kane, *Christian Missions in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976), 164.

<sup>18</sup> This is for instance, the reading given by John Piper, *op. cit.*, n. 23, 164; n. 39, 166.

<sup>19</sup> William V. Crockett and James G. Sigountos, *Through No Fault of Their Own? The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 41.

<sup>20</sup> Pinnock, *op. cit.*, 97.



have a common tendency to underestimate the extent to which special revelation is experienced.

A more realistic assessment of the situation of the peoples of the world in regard to divine revelation must take into account the following factors: 1) the remnants of the pre-Babel knowledge of God which have been passed on (however distortedly) in their cultural and religious traditions; 2) the contact of the peoples and of the religions of the world with the inspired Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments; 3) the fact that God still encounters people directly (in dreams, visions and theophanies), as he did in the Old Testament, and that a host of angels also serve him as messengers;<sup>21</sup> 4) the fact that the Word operates throughout the world, just as he did before the Incarnation, in ways not limited by his embodiment; 5) the ministry of the Holy Spirit, who works in a special way in and through those whom he indwells in new covenant blessing but whose work is not restricted to the church; 6) the possibility of universal encounters with Christ, at the time of death. In short, it is doubtful that people come to God in acceptable faith through general revelation alone but we must not underestimate the extent to which special revelation reaches the peoples of the world, and the extent to which the Holy Spirit's convicting and enlightening work utilizes that revelation to draw them to God.

### **The Necessity of Preaching**

[Romans 10](#) is widely cited, within the evangelical tradition of missionary motivation, to argue for the [p. 72](#) necessity of the preaching of the gospel for people to be saved. The conclusion is often drawn that no one can be saved unless this gospel is heard from missionaries and is believed. But this use of the text has distorted it from its context in Paul's letter.

C. E. B. Cranfield aptly states the point that is being made in the much cited verses [14-15a](#).

At this point Paul is concerned to show that the Jews have really had full opportunity to call upon the name of the Lord in the sense of vv. [12](#) and [13](#), and are therefore without excuse. That all along the law which was constantly on their lips was pointing to Christ, that all along He had been its innermost meaning, did not by itself constitute this full opportunity. The fullness of opportunity was not present for them until the message that the promises have indeed now been fulfilled had actually been declared to them by messengers truly commissioned for the purpose by God Himself. Paul makes his point by asking the question whether this fullness of opportunity has really been present for the Jews by means of this chain of related questions, and then answering in the affirmative in v. [15b](#).<sup>22</sup>

Paul's argument is that, in the case of the Jewish people, by and large, three of the necessary conditions for salvation had been met, 1) God had commissioned messengers; 2) the messengers had preached; and 3) their 'report' (cf [Isa 52:7](#)) had been heard. But, in spite of this, Israel had not believed, and so the final necessary condition had not been fulfilled. A possible explanation for Israel's unbelief in the Christ might have been that

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<sup>21</sup> It has been estimated that 'fully half of Muslim converts in some countries experienced a dream or vision that convinced them to accept Christ'. Related to me in an E-mail message from Ken Guenther, Philippines, Jan 4, 1996. As a missionary in India, my father met many people whose first meeting with Christ was in a dream or vision.

<sup>22</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*. Vol. II. International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979), 533.

they had not heard, but Paul states strongly that this is not the case: 'Did they not hear? Of course they did' ([10:18](#)).

In verses [19–20](#), Paul then goes on to demonstrate that his people have 'ignored so many of its own scriptures which are now being fulfilled in Israel's rejection and the nations' acceptance of the word of faith'.<sup>23</sup> If the Gentiles, who are a 'no-people' have believed, it can certainly not be argued that Israel has not heard. As Cranfield sadly notes, 'the ignorance which is blameworthy has been characteristic of them; but *the ignorance which would have constituted an excuse* they cannot claim [emphasis supplied]'.<sup>24</sup> For, as Cranfield correctly notes concerning verse [18](#), 'had the Jews not heard, they would have had an excuse for their not having believed.'<sup>25</sup> (Cf. [In. 15:22](#).)

Paul declares that Israel is without excuse for their failure to experience the 'righteousness that is by faith' in Jesus because the gospel was taken to them by divinely commissioned preachers, and they refused to believe. Paul is not making a statement about whether they would have been guilty of unbelief if they had not heard the gospel. The point is that they did hear it and so they [p. 73](#) were guilty. The basic principle of salvation by faith, which comes by hearing the 'word' applies to *all forms* of revelation. As indicated above, however, there is no one without some form of divine self-revelation. To imply from Romans chapter ten that only through hearing the gospel concerning Jesus can people be saved, is to beg the question at issue, namely the salvific value of other forms of revelation. In the case of the Jewish people of whom Paul is thinking, that revelation had included the gospel concerning Jesus.

### At Death Encounter with Christ

Will there be people who have not known the Son but whom the Father will receive? This seems highly implausible, given Jesus' insistence that no one comes to the Father except through the Son and that no one knows the Father except the Son and 'anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him' ([Mt. 11:27](#)). One legitimate approach would be to stress the revelatory activity of the Son in all forms of divine self-revelation so that whatever revelation of God one responds to is one that has been mediated by the Son. In fact, then, no one does come (or ever has come) to the Father except through the Son's mediatory and revelatory work. There is a logic about the economy of the Trinity, however, that makes the hypothesis of an at-death-encounter with Jesus an attractive position. It allows one to confess that faith in Jesus Christ is necessary, while not placing an overemphasis on the need to know information about Christ before death. It is a particularly useful hypothesis with regard to the salvation of those who die in infancy or who are mentally incompetent.<sup>26</sup>

Paul expected to be with Christ at the point of his departure from the body, and I take this to be descriptive of the situation of all believers in Christ ([2 Cor. 5:6–8](#); [Phil. 1:23, 24](#)). There is nothing in Scripture which would exclude the possibility that a meeting with Christ is the experience of all people, not only believers, though it is obviously not a joy for those who have lived in disbelief and rebellion against God. This is a view that has been

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<sup>23</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9–16*. Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1988), 631.

<sup>24</sup> Cranfield, op. cit., 538.

<sup>25</sup> Cranfield, op. cit., 537.

<sup>26</sup> It is interesting to recall that, for Irenaeus, in the second century, a major purpose of the millennium is so that Old Testament believers might meet Christ and thus be prepared for the vision of the Father. I have noted the interesting prospects of this view also for the unevangelized who respond properly to general revelation. Terrance Tiessen, *Irenaeus on the Salvation of the Unevangelized*, 168–70.

more commonly found among Catholic than among Protestant theologians.<sup>27</sup> (I do not consider [1 Peter 3:19–21](#) to be helpful on this point, though many do who accept the basic proposal of p. 74 a universal encounter with Christ.<sup>28</sup>) It is very important that we do not confuse this at-death-encounter with a ‘second chance’. This is not a chance for those who rejected Christ during their life time to accept him afterward. It is an opportunity, rather, for those who have had faith that God is and that he rewards those who diligently seek him ([Heb 11:6](#)), who had honoured God as God and given him thanks ([Rom 1:21](#)) but who had never met Jesus. Having responded, by God’s grace, to the form in which God revealed himself to them during their lives, they will then respond with faith and joy to the Son who had been at work in their lives, though they were ignorant of much about him.<sup>29</sup>

## UNIVERSALLY SUFFICIENT GRACE

### Traditional Calvinism on Human Depravity

I have attempted to show that God has made himself known to all people in a manner that enables them to respond to him with a faith that is justifying. This removes any ground for the charge that God is unjust in condemning people for not believing in Christ when they have not heard of him. The traditional Calvinistic understanding of human depravity and of efficacious grace, however, leaves the charge of unjust condemnation still unanswered. Calvinists have asserted that the fall was totally spiritually debilitating. It left all of Adam’s descendants guilty before God by virtue of their solidarity with Adam in his original disobedience ([Rom. 5:12–21](#)). It also made them subject to death and placed them in bondage to sin and Satan. Their natures have been so seriously depraved that they can do nothing which pleases God. Being in a state of rebellion, their wills are bound. They sin willingly but they are unable not to sin, and specifically are not able to repent of their sin and trust in God for salvation.

Unless the Spirit of God intervenes and frees sinful human wills, people will not (and in a sense, cannot) believe.<sup>30</sup> They are, nevertheless, culpable for this unbelief because their inability is self-incurred, in their union with Adam.<sup>31</sup> God graciously frees the wills

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<sup>27</sup> A luminous presentation of this view is found, for instance, in the work of Ladislaus Boros, an Hungarian Jesuit, now teaching in Austria, *Pain and Providence*, tr. Edward Quinn (Mainz: Matthias-Grüne-wald-Verlag, 1965; reprint, London: Burns and Oates Ltd., 1966). It is also the position favoured by Clark Pinnock (op. cit.), and it is beautifully portrayed in allegorical form in the final work of C. S. Lewis’s delightful Narnia series, *The Last Battle*, when the Calormene soldier who had sincerely served Tash all his life is met by Aslan at the moment of his death and is greeted as a ‘son’.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. the material in Sanders, op. cit., 181–88.

<sup>29</sup> John Sanders cites Donald Bloesch as arguing the benefits of this proposal if one assumes that people can be ‘condemned to hell only for explicit rejection of Jesus as Lord’ (op. cit., 70–71), and he gives an extended treatment of the hypothesis of ‘eschatological evangelization’ (177–214).

<sup>30</sup> A representative statement of this position is found, for instance, in Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1949), 246–50.

<sup>31</sup> E.g., Louis Berkhof, op. cit., 250: ‘We should not forget that the inability under consideration is self-imposed, has a moral origin, and is not due to any limitation which God has put upon man’s being. Man is unable as a result of the perverted choice made in Adam.’ The concept of ‘self-incurred inability in Adam’ is a difficult one for individualistic westerners to comprehend, and even more difficult to accept. The legitimacy of such an arrangement should be more evident, however, if we consider that it is on a similarly constituted ground of union with Christ, the righteous one, that God is able to be just while justifying sinners ([Rom 3:25](#)).

of those whom he intends to save (often spoken of as regeneration), so that they entrust themselves to [p. 75](#) God's mercy, willingly and joyfully, and are saved.

Even if we grant the propriety of a self-incurred inability in Adam, through a divinely established solidarity of the race with Adam, it is striking that 'Scripture universally relates man's ultimate judgement to his own moral "works", which fall short of God's standards, and not in the first instance to his union with Adam (e.g. [Mt 7:21-27](#); [13:41](#); [25:31-46](#); [Lk 3:9](#); [Rom 2:5-10](#); [Rev 20:11-14](#)).'<sup>32</sup> If human responsibility is consistently attributed to actual or personal rather than original sin, it is peculiar that the inability which made that sin unavoidable should remain located in the Adamic fall. Likewise, the biblical expressions of God's hatred ([Hos. 9:15](#); [Jer. 12:8](#); [Psa. 5:5](#); [11:5](#)) and anger ([Ex. 32:10-11](#); [Jdgs. 2:14](#); [Jer. 10:24](#); [Psa. 30:5](#); [106:40](#); [Rom. 2:5](#); [9:22](#)) toward his people because of their sin are focused on the wicked and rebellious deeds which they were doing at the time. The strength of this divine disapproval is difficult to understand if these people were absolutely incapable of repentance and faith.

The grace given to the elect is efficacious. This is not to deny that the non-elect experience the grace of God. There is a 'common grace' which all people experience. It is seen in a variety of ways: 1) the good gifts of rain and harvest that God gives to both righteous and unrighteous, regardless of their undeservingness of these gifts; 2) the institutions which God has established for the restraint of sin in society, the state and the family; 3) the humanly praiseworthy deeds of the unregenerate who often show a large measure of unselfishness, courage, kindness and other virtues; and 4) the patience of God toward sinners who deserve death, and to whose consciences and hearts God speaks in ways that pull people toward himself. What only the elect experience, however, is the special grace that enables them to repent of their sin and to believe. When this grace is given to them it is effective in securing their salvation.

### **The Lutheran Proposal of Enabling Grace**

Lutheran theologians have generally been unwilling to affirm the particularity of efficacious grace and the priority of divine unconditional election of those who are saved. It is posited, instead, that the proclamation of the gospel is accompanied by an enabling grace which empowers the hearer not to resist the Word of God and hence to respond in faith. Paul Althaus indicates that, in the theology of Martin Luther, God's word 'is never merely an external word, spoken by human lips and heard with human ears. On the contrary, at the same time that this word is spoken, God speaks his truth in our hearts so that men receive it not only externally but also internally and believe it. This is the work of the Spirit.'<sup>33</sup> [p. 76](#)

As the Formula of Concord stated the situation, 'With this Word is present the Holy Spirit, who opens the hearts of men, in order that, as Lydia did ([Acts 16:14](#)), they may diligently attend, and thus may be converted by the sole grace and power of the Holy Spirit, whose work, and whose work alone, the conversion of man is.'<sup>34</sup> Helmut Thielicke points out that, in the Lutheran understanding, 'the work of the Spirit is not an element

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<sup>32</sup> Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth: A Handbook of Christian Belief* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1982), 106.

<sup>33</sup> Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. by Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 36.

<sup>34</sup> Article II, Affirmative III. Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of the Evangelical Protestant Churches* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1877), 108-9.

that is added to God's words and deeds'.<sup>35</sup> It is 'a Word that contains the Spirit, i.e., a Word in which God himself is present. To refuse this Word is ... hardening, *non* salvation.'<sup>36</sup> It is in this way that the baptism of infants is understood to be justifying in its effect although justification is by faith. Infants, given this enablement, are assumed not to resist the Word of God and hence to respond with infant faith and thereby to be justified.<sup>37</sup>

The Formula of Concord speaks of a universal mercy of God ([Rom. 11:32](#); [Ezek. 18:23](#); [33:11](#); [2 Pet. 3:9](#); [1 Jn. 2:2](#))<sup>38</sup> and states that [Matthew 22:14](#) 'is not to be so understood as if God were unwilling that all should be saved, but the cause of damnation of the ungodly is that they either do not hear the Word of God at all, but contumaciously contemn it, stop their ears, and harden their hearts, and in this way foreclose to the Spirit of God his ordinary way, so that he cannot accomplish his work in them, or at least when they have heard the Word, make it of no account, and cast it away. Neither God nor his election, but their own wickedness, is to blame if they perish' ([2 Pet. 2:1f](#); [Lk. 2:49, 52](#); [Heb. 12:25f](#)).<sup>39</sup> The Saxon Visitation Articles (1592) taught that God 'wills that all men should be saved', and that everyone is commanded 'to hear Christ', and promised 'by his hearing, the virtue and operation of the Holy Ghost for conversion and salvation'.<sup>40</sup>

### **The Wesleyan Proposal of Universal Preventive Grace**

The influence of Wesleyan theology is far wider than the Methodist Church and extends to many (numerous Baptists for instance) who are quite unaware of the manner in which John Wesley enunciated the soteriology that they affirm. Unlike the later Arminians, [p. 77](#) Wesley stressed the fact that original sin is not merely a disease (corruption without guilt), but is really and truly sin and makes a person guilty before God. This guilt is imputed to all Adam's descendants, so that even a child born of two perfect Christians would be a sinner.<sup>41</sup> But the original guilt is cancelled by the justification of all people in Christ. This is one of the universal benefits of the atonement. Wesley, therefore, denied that humans, as they are by nature, have any ability whatever to cooperate with the grace of God. They are morally depraved and totally dependent on God's grace for salvation.

In Wesley's view, no one actually exists in that state of inability. In view of the universal character of redemption, God endows everyone with sufficient enabling grace so that they can turn to God in faith and repentance. The earliest Arminians held that it was only just that God should enable people to believe, since they could not be held accountable without spiritual ability. (This was also Charles Finney's position.)

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<sup>35</sup> Helmut Thielicke, *The Evangelical Faith. Vol. III*, tr. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982), 8.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:9.

<sup>37</sup> Larger Catechism IV., 494; cited by Adolf Harnack, *History of Dogma. Vol. VII* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1899), 251, n. 2. Cf. Edmund Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961), 151–54. Althaus notes that, as late as 1521, Luther declared that 'children are baptized on the basis of the faith and the confession of the sponsors', *op. cit.*, 364. In 1522, 'in order to preserve the insight that we are saved not through someone else's faith but through our own', Luther began to teach infant faith, *Ibid.*, 364–65.

<sup>38</sup> Art XI, Affirmative IX. Schaff, *op. cit.*, 168.

<sup>39</sup> Article XI, Affirmative XI. Schaff, *op. cit.*, 168–69.

<sup>40</sup> Article IV. Schaff, *op. cit.*, 185.

<sup>41</sup> John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (1777 ed. reprinted, Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1966), 50.



Wesleyans, however, believed that this was of the free grace of God, through preventing or prevenient grace. Everyone has grace in some measure and they sin only because that grace is not used.<sup>42</sup> People are thus responsible, free agents.

In his essay 'Predestination Calmly Considered', in 1773, Wesley argued for a universal call which assumes an ability on the part of hearers to respond in faith. This is the only way that a person could be justly acquitted or condemned.<sup>43</sup>

And shall this man, for not doing what he never could do, and for doing what he never could avoid, be sentenced to depart into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels? [cf [Matt. 25:42](#)]. 'Yes, because it is the sovereign will of God.' Then you have either found a new God, or made one! This is not the God of the Christians. Our God is just in all his ways; he reapeth not where he hath not sowed. He requireth only according to what he hath given; and where he hath given little, little is required.<sup>44</sup>

Wesley's concern regarding the justice of God is clear. If people are unable to believe, yet judged responsible to do so, then God is reaping where he has not sown. He is demanding more from people than he has made it possible for them to give. Both the Lutheran approach and the Wesleyan approach put sinners in the position of being graciously enabled to respond with faith to God's offer of salvation. In both cases, this faith is the fruit of grace. To the Calvinist, however, the effect of this approach is problematic because it means that the decisive factor in a person's salvation is that [p. 78](#) person's own decision. It is hard to see how this avoids a synergism between God and the person saved. Since the difference between those who are saved and those who are not lies within the action of the believer, it seems that these believers have cause for self-congratulation and that God's glory in salvation has been compromised ([Eph. 2:8-9](#)).<sup>45</sup>

### **Universal Sufficient Grace: a Calvinistic Proposal**

As a Calvinist, I do not question God's right to show grace and to have mercy on whomever he wishes and to judicially harden whomever he wishes ([Rom. 9:18](#)). On the other hand, I do feel the force of the sense of injustice that those who are unable to believe should be condemned for not doing so. Even though I accept the divine prerogative to establish humanity in solidarity with Adam, I do not find in Scripture the teaching that the inability incurred in Adam is the cause or ground of eternal condemnation for unbelief. I affirm the sovereign right of God to choose those whom he will save but I am uncomfortable with the grounds for the condemnation of those who are left in their sin, as these have been stated traditionally by Calvinist theology. I have also found it rather difficult to understand some passages of Scripture which describe God's distress at the unbelief of those who reject him. A case in point is the pain of Jesus at the rejection by most of the

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<sup>42</sup> *The Works of John Wesley*, 6:512; cited by Justo L. Gonzalez, op. cit., 313.

<sup>43</sup> William C. Placher, *Readings in the History of Christian Theology. Volume 2. From the Reformation to the Present* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988), 98.

<sup>44</sup> *Works of Jn Wesley*, 11:234M; in Placher, op. cit., 98.

<sup>45</sup> From numerous conversations with Wesleyans, I know that this perception is difficult for them to understand. It is argued that believers cannot boast since they simply accepted a free gift. Even granting that no one is saved without grace, where the difference between those who believe and those who do not is found in the believers, rather than in God's gracious work, surely believers are to be commended for having responded to grace. If two of my sons are offered something by a hostess and one of them accepts with thanks while the other turns up his nose and spurns the gift, I commend the grateful one and am disturbed by the behaviour of the other one. Is this not an expected response to such a situation?



inhabitants of Jerusalem: ‘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*’ ([Mt. 23:37](#), emphasis supplied). Why, I have wondered, is Jesus so disturbed, when he knows that only those whom the Father draws will come to him ([Jn. 6:44](#)) and that all of them will do so? ([Jn. 6:37](#)).

Thomas Flint has argued the benefits of a Molinist (middle knowledge) explanation of the inter-relation of the human and divine agency for our understanding of predestination.<sup>46</sup> In the Molinist scheme, ‘efficacious grace is not intrinsically different from sufficient grace: it is merely sufficient grace that “works”.’<sup>47</sup> The grace is ‘only contingently efficacious, and its being efficacious is determined by us, not by God’.<sup>48</sup> I propose a different p. 79 approach to the issue which conforms to the Calvinist understanding of efficacious grace. It may be that God gives everyone sufficient grace to enable them to believe in him but only draws and persuades effectively the elect. The contingency would then lie with God, rather than the human agent, preserving the sovereignty of saving grace. If this were so, it would solve some of the problems we have identified.

## The Benefits of this Construct

### God’s Justice

Jonathan Edwards granted the legitimacy of the Arminian concern about ‘the justice of damning men for those things that are necessary’.<sup>49</sup> Alan Clifford considers John Owen’s concept of a single intent for the atonement (namely, the salvation of the elect) to be problematic because it ‘cannot make sense of the sin of unbelief. If unbelievers are guilty of rejecting Christ, whence their guilt, if Christ was not given for them?’<sup>50</sup> Clifford’s own answer to the problem is to affirm the hypothetical or conditional universalism of Amyraut or of Richard Baxter. The matter of the intent of the atonement will be addressed later, but at this point we need only note that the problem which Clifford identifies with a limited intent of the atonement (for the elect) is more clearly a problem at the subjective level of human ability, as Edwards rightly discerned.

Against Owen, Richard Baxter asserted that Christ’s sacrifice for sin was ‘satisfactory and meritorious for all’ people and that no one ‘shall be damned for want of a Saviour to die for him, and fulfil all righteousness, but only for abusing or refusing his mercy’.<sup>51</sup> Two things are necessary, if Baxter’s concern is to be properly addressed, namely, 1) the death of Christ must be sufficient for all sin, as Dort affirmed, and 2) sinners must be in a position

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<sup>46</sup> Thomas P. Flint, ‘Two Accounts of Providence’. In *Divine and Human Action: Essays in the Metaphysics of Theism*, ed. Thomas V. Morris, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 161.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> A Careful and Strict Inquiry into the Modern Prevailing Notions of that Freedom of Will, Which is Supposed to Be Essential to Moral Agency, Virtue and Vice, Reward and Punishment, Praise and Blame’. in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 2 vols. (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust), 1:65. To deal with this concern he proposed a distinction between natural and moral inability or necessity.

<sup>50</sup> Alan C. Clifford, *Atonement and Justification: English Evangelical Theology 1640–1790: An Evaluation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 100.

<sup>51</sup> *Richard Baxter’s Catholick Theologie* (1675), I, ii.51, cited by Clifford, op. cit., 101.

to accept or reject that salvation. To accept the first condition, we need not assert a hypothetical universalism, but the second truth does require a universal enabling grace. Describing the inability as moral (per Edwards) does not evade the difficulty that Arminians have identified, so long as that moral inability is traced back to original sin, which makes the weight of final condemnation rest ultimately on sin in Adam. In a recent Wesleyan soteriology, Thomas Oden speaks well when he asserts that ‘no human being has been condemned for Adam’s sin alone, but in so far as anyone is subject to condemnation and judgment, it is due to p.80 one’s own freely collusive cooperation with the conditions of sin resulting from the history of sin following Adam. The principle of free moral agency is preserved in and through the doctrine of sufficient grace.’<sup>52</sup>

The justice of divine judgement is no longer an issue if all people receive a grace that remediates the effects of sin sufficiently to enable them to believe, if they will. There is thus no question about their not having been able to do so. People who do not believe *could*, if they *would*. The problem is that, given the rebelliousness which characterizes us, we are still prone not to submit to God and receive his provision for our salvation. Without coercing us, however, God is able to draw us ([In. 6:44](#)), to open our hearts ([Acts 13:14](#)), to illumine our minds, so that we will to come. As with the Lutheran accompanying grace and the Wesleyan prevenient grace, this work of God is sufficient but not efficacious. But, as in traditional Calvinism, the explanation of the faith of those who do believe is not found in themselves but in the effective working of God which woos them to exercise an ability which all have graciously been given, but which only these people use to respond to God’s call. The act of saving faith is explained on the basis of efficacious grace, not on the basis of human choice, although that choice is freely willed by the human agent (not coerced by God).

The demand of justice does not require that people be continuously enabled, with each experience of divine revelation. Scripture speaks of a hardening of the heart that occurs as one resists God’s gracious drawing. Paul speaks of people storing up wrath for the day of God’s righteous judgement by their ‘stubbornness and unrepentant hearts’ ([Rom. 2:5](#)). He tells the Thessalonians about people who ‘perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved’ ([2 Thess. 2:10](#)). God sends such people a powerful delusion so that they believe the lie ([2:11](#)). Here we have indication of the judicial hardening that results when people resist and refuse grace.<sup>53</sup> They become ‘darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their p.81 hearts’, and the consequent loss of all sensitivity ([Eph. 4:18](#)).

Paul describes this process of judicial abandonment in [Romans 1:24–27](#). Those who spurn God’s grace may put themselves beyond the point where it will be offered again ([Heb. 6:4–6](#); [10:26–31](#)). There comes a time when God no longer accompanies the objective revelations of himself with a gracious enabling. The personal responsibility for

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<sup>52</sup> Thomas C. Oden, *The Transforming Power of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 45.

<sup>53</sup> Roger Forster and Paul Marston note that, in the case of Pharaoh, it was only after five warnings and penalties had been ineffective that God did the hardening. ‘Submission now would have meant prudence, not penitence; and it was against prudence, not penitence, that he was hardened’ ([Ex. 9:12](#)). For Pharaoh, ‘the last five plagues were not disciplinary, but wholly penal’, *God’s Strategy in Human History: God’s Sovereignty and Man’s Responsibility* (First British ed. Minneapolis: Bethany House. 1973; reprint, Crowborough, East Sussex: Highland Books, 1989), 172. They further comment that ‘it appears, then, that the Lord is never said to debauch Pharaoh’s heart, but only to strengthen it against prudence and to make it dull; that the words used do not express the infusion of evil passion, but the animation of a resolute courage, and the overclouding of a natural discernment; and, above all, that every one of the three words, to make hard, to make strong, and to make heavy, is employed to express Pharaoh’s own treatment of himself, before it is applied to any work of God, as actually taking place already’.175

this self-incurred inability can surely be denied by no one. It is in this vein that we may understand the biblical truth concerning the slavery that grows as one continues to sin ([In. 3:34](#); [2 Pet. 2:19](#); [Rom. 6:17](#)). When people choose to believe the lies of Satan rather than the truth of God, in spite of God's gracious enabling, Satan blinds them ([2 Cor. 4:4](#)) and enslaves them ([2 Tim. 2:26](#)). Having surrendered themselves into his power by these acts of their own will, they are responsible for this. The reality of death in sin becomes ever more obvious ([Eph. 2:1-2](#)).<sup>54</sup> It is in this light that I understand the warnings to the Hebrews that they not harden their hearts when the Spirit gives a desire to repent ([Heb. 3:7-8](#); [12:17](#)), because the opportunity will not last forever ([Heb. 3:15](#)).

There is much cause for praise when we hear testimony of lives in which this hardening and blinding process had gone on for years in a descending spiral, yet God graciously moves in and frees them from the bondage that they have chosen and gloriously saves them. God owes no one grace, but his grace shines brightest where sin reigns most evidently ([Rom. 5:20-21](#)).

*God's Distress at Human Rejection* The distress of Jesus as he looked down over Jerusalem now becomes more comprehensible. They *could* have come at his call. Nothing kept them from doing so except their own stubbornness. That resistance gave him great pain. We are left, of course, with mysteries: why did God not effectively woo them all? why did the Father not reveal to all of them, as he had to Peter, that Jesus was the Christ ([Mt. 16:17](#))? Paul provides some insight into God's work of grace, hardening part of the nation in pursuit of his wider plan of grace for the Gentiles ([Rom. 11:25-32](#)), and that only temporarily ([Rom. 11:25-26](#)). Nevertheless, we echo Paul's sense that God's judgement is 'unsearchable' and 'his paths beyond tracing out' ([Rom. 11:33](#)) and we give him glory ([Rom. 11:36](#)). As I indicated at the outset, I have not avoided the scandal of particularity, but I have hopefully ameliorated the sense of injustice. We can agree with Thomas Oden that 'grace is effective as p. 82 it elicits willing cooperation and sufficient in so far as it does what is necessary to lead the will to cooperate, even when the deficient will is resistant.'<sup>55</sup> I differ from him, however, in the conviction that when the grace is effective, its efficacy lies in the peculiar working of the Spirit not in (*though not apart from*) the response of the human will.

*God's 'Desire' for People to Be Saved* It may be that this proposal of God's universal grace offers us additional help in understanding some of the New Testament texts which speak in a language that has a universal ring to it. Roman Catholic theologians often speak of God's 'universal salvific will'.<sup>56</sup> This is a manner of speaking which is open to Wesleyans and Lutherans but is problematic to Calvinists, if 'will' is identified with God's eternal purpose. On the understanding being proposed here, however, Calvinists can speak of 'universal salvific grace', indicating that God has indeed enabled all to believe, although he has not been uniformly persuasive in his gracious calling. There is universal grace which is salvific in its enabling though it does not achieve universal salvation because it is

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<sup>54</sup> On the basis of [Titus 2:11](#) ('For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all'). Thomas Oden asserts that 'to no one, not even the recalcitrant unfaithful, does God deny grace sufficient for salvation. Prevenient grace precedes each discrete human act' (op. cit., 48). Oden doubts that God ever ceases to give sufficient grace, even to the obdurate (81). Given the Scriptures we have cited, however, this is too optimistic a statement.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Flint, op. cit., 169, fn. 44: 'It is not quite *de fide* that God wills all to be saved; see Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, pp. 188-189. Nevertheless, I am aware of no Thomist who would deny God's universal salvific will.'

resisted by many. Thus, when Peter asserts that God is ‘not wanting anyone to perish’ ([2 Pet. 3:9](#), NIV), his ‘wanting’ (NRSV: ‘wishing’) is easier to understand if he has given everyone grace sufficient to make salvation possible. One of the universal benefits of Christ’s death is this grace.

With [1 Timothy 2:4](#) (cf. [2 Pet. 3:9](#)) in mind, Philip Hughes has asked ‘How can it be said that God desires all men to be saved, if by a fixed decree many are destined never to be saved and cannot therefore be helped by our prayers?’<sup>57</sup> Traditionally, Calvinists have responded by 1) describing God’s will in this instance as preceptive, that is, in the sense of God’s command that everyone repent and believe; and 2) pointing out that, in the context (cf. verses [1–2](#)), Paul is making reference to ‘all kinds’ of people.<sup>58</sup> Arminian theologians frequently protest the ‘paradoxical notion of two divine wills regarding salvation.’<sup>59</sup> Wayne Grudem has very aptly demonstrated that Arminians ‘*also* must say that God *wills* something more strongly than he [p. 83](#) wills the salvation of all people, *for in fact all are not saved*.’<sup>60</sup> In the case this is because God chooses to preserve human free will, whereas Reformed theologians attribute it to God’s purpose to glorify himself. We may go further, in addressing this passage, however, if we posit that God actually enables everyone to repent and believe.

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## Book Reviews

### GOD’S EMPOWERING PRESENCE

by Gordon D Fee

(Peabody, Mass., Hendrickson, 1994 pp967)

(Reviewed by Francis Foulkes)

It takes some conviction to recommend the purchase of a book of nearly 1000 pages at a price commensurate, but I do so in relation to this book without hesitation. Subtitled, ‘The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul’, the book deals in turn with all the passages in the Pauline epistles in which the Holy Spirit is mentioned, and a number of others where the work of the Spirit is implied. Gordon Fee gives detailed exegesis in a scholarly but highly readable

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<sup>57</sup> Hughes, op. cit., 173.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Robert C. Letham, *The Work of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1993), 242–43. Jaroslav Pelikan observes that [1 Tim 2:4](#) ‘had always been a conundrum to Augustinian doctrines of predestination and the will of God’, *Reformation of Church and Dogma* (1300–1700), Vol. 4 of *The Christian Tradition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 237. Bucer, Calvin and Ursinus all followed Augustine in understanding the text as a reference to ‘all classes’ of people.

<sup>59</sup> Clark Pinnock, ed., *Grace Unlimited* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1975), 13; cited by Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 684.

<sup>60</sup> Grudem, op. cit., 684.