

Who Does What: A Study of the Relationship between God's Sovereignty and Human Responsibility

By John Feakes, JF-M-525

Though details may differ vastly, virtually all religions have a soteriological element. For the Hindu, salvation is *Moksha*, or the liberation of the soul from countless reincarnations (*Samsara*).¹ Depending on the specific branch of Hinduism, *Moksha* can either mean an individuality-obliterating union with Ultimate Reality or a mysterious, everlasting relationship with the divine in which individuality is retained.² For the Buddhist, salvation is the eradication of suffering. Since suffering is believed to stem from the misconceived notion of individuality and the personal desire that attends it, the Buddhist seeks to disabuse himself of this faulty notion through prescribed rituals and meditation techniques.³ If successful, he will become fully aware of his own non-existence, thus marking the end of all suffering (*Nirvana*). The Muslim on the other hand, sees salvation as the attainment of eternal sensual enjoyment in heaven, which is only possible by submitting fully to the god Allah.⁴ This means reciting the prescribed confessions and prayers, giving alms, observing the fast of Ramadan, and making a pilgrimage to Mecca.⁵ Even the secular humanist has a conception of salvation. "Humans

¹Philip Wilkinson, *Religions* (New York, NY: DK Publishing, 2008), p. 169.

²Michael D. Coogan, *Eastern Religions* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 29-30.

³Garth Jones and Georgina Palffy, *The Religions Book* (New York, NY: DK Publishing, 2013), pp. 139-141.

⁴Christopher Jay Johnson and Marsha G. McGee, *How Different Religions View Death and the Afterlife* (Philadelphia, PA: The Charles Press, 1998), pp. 142-143.

⁵John R. Hinnells, *The Penguin Handbook of the World's Living Religions* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2010), p. 180.

are responsible for what we are or will become. No deity will save us; *we must save ourselves.*” So reads the second Humanist Manifesto.⁶

As in other religious systems, the concern with personal salvation attends Christianity as well. There are, however, a number of important differences. Chiefly, whereas other systems prescribe means by which a person can achieve salvation through self-effort, Christianity insists that salvation is a work of God alone (Ephesians 2:8-9). The Bible teaches clearly that salvation cannot be earned (Romans 4:4-5); it can only be accepted and received or denied and rejected. There is no third option. This salvation message, which flatly denies man’s ability to save himself, is firmly rooted in the biblical account of human origins.

According to the Bible, when God created the world it was “very good” (Genesis 1:31). The first man, Adam, was made morally upright (Ecclesiastes 7:29) and given dominion over the earth (Genesis 1:26-28; Psalm 8:4-9). His willful rebellion against God, however, brought a curse upon himself and entire created order under him (Genesis 3:17; Romans 8:19-22). Adam’s disobedience resulted in his acquiring a corrupt and mortal nature, which he passed on to all of his descendants (Romans 5:12). “Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean?” The patriarch Job lamented, “Not one” (Job 14:4).⁷ Man has nothing in himself to commend himself to God. He is a corrupt lawbreaker by nature and cannot help but continue to break God’s wise laws (John 1:8; Romans 3:23). Nothing he does can restore a right relationship with his Maker who is “of

⁶*Humanist Manifesto II*, Available at http://americanhumanist.org/Humanism/Humanist_Manifesto_II, [Accessed October 4, 2015].

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All Scripture from the *King James Version* of the Holy Bible.

“purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity” (Habakkuk 1:13). Man has incurred a sin debt to God that he cannot pay. The punishment is eternal conscious torment in the lake of fire (Revelation 14:9-11; 20:11-15). This is Christianity’s bad news.

The good news (the gospel) is that God sent his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to rescue people from their deserved punishment (Matthew 20:28; John 3:16-17; 12:47; 1 John 4:14). His sacrificial death on the cross was sufficient to pay the entire world’s sin debt (1 John 2:2). Those that believe the gospel and accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour receive not only the forgiveness of sins (Acts 5:31; 13:48; 26:18; Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:14; 1 John 1:9) but Christ’s own imputed righteousness (Romans 5:19; 1 Corinthians 1:30; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Philippians 3:9). They receive a new nature (Ezekiel 11:19; 18:31; 36:26, 2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15; Ephesians 2:10) and a new citizenship in Heaven (Ephesians 2:19; Philippians 3:20; Hebrews 12:22; Revelation 21:2-3).

The Bible is clear that a person is saved by God’s grace alone (Romans 3:24; Ephesians 2:8), through the exercise of faith alone (Romans 3:22-30; 4:5; 5:1 Galatians 3:24; Ephesians 2:8), in Christ alone (John 3:16; 14:6; Acts 14:12; 1 John 2:23). For the great apostle Paul, the gospel’s simplicity, which makes it possible for even a child to grasp (2 Timothy 3:15), was a thing to be guarded (2 Corinthians 11:3). Nevertheless, Paul desired that Christians not only believe unto salvation, but that they move on to understand and appreciate deeper biblical truths (1 Corinthians 3:1-2; 1:20; Ephesians 4:14; Hebrews 5:12-6:2). The Bible testifies of Jesus Christ (John 5:39) who is at once God himself (John 1:1, 14; 20:28; Romans 9:5, Philippians 2:5:11; Hebrews 1:1-6) and

the greatest of men (Matthew 7:29; 12:6, 41-42; John 7:45-46; 8:13-14, 23). The supreme intellectual and spiritual attainment for man is knowledge of God in Christ and his redemptive plan (Jeremiah 9:23-24; 1 Corinthians 2:1-2).

As one strives to move beyond “the first principles of the oracles of God” and “of the doctrine of Christ” (Hebrews 5:12-6:2), questions inevitably arise concerning the relationship between God’s sovereignty and human responsibility. The Bible states categorically that God is sovereign over all historic eventuation. “Whatsoever the LORD pleased, that did he in heaven, and in earth, in the seas, and all deep places” (Psalm 135:5-6). The Lord himself stated, “I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure” (Isaiah 46:9-10). Paul reminded the Ephesians of God’s sovereignty even over their own salvation when he wrote that, “in [Christ] we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will” (Ephesians 1:11). This includes the attitudes and actions of men (Proverbs 16:1, 9; 20:24; 21:1; Daniel 4:25), even the sinful ones (Psalm 105:25; Acts 4:27-28).

The Bible is equally clear that though God is sovereign over whatsoever comes to pass, man is nevertheless not a mere puppet. Man is a free moral agent who is still responsible to God for his attitudes (1 Samuel 16:7; 1 Chronicles 28:9; Psalm 7:9; Jeremiah 11:20) and actions (Psalm 62:12; Isaiah 3:1-11; Matthew 16:27; 1 Peter 1:17; Revelation 2:23; 20:11-13). Particularly with respect to salvation, the ablest theologians and philosophers have striven to understand the relationship between God’s sovereignty and human responsibility.

Reformed theologians attempt to explain the relationship between the two by placing maximal emphasis on both God's sovereignty and human depravity. On this view, God's other attributes of greatness, such as omniscience, omnipresence, and omnibenevolence, are subservient to God's raw self-determination. Man on the other hand, since the fall, has become hopelessly corrupt and incapable of doing anything spiritually commendable. The Bible describes fallen man as being "dead in trespasses and sins" (Ephesians 2:1), and for the Reformed theologian, this means that fallen man cannot even understand the gospel, let alone respond affirmatively to it.⁸ Man is so utterly depraved he cannot even cry out for God's mercy. Reformed theology states that God has chosen from all eternity, for reasons known only unto him, whom he will save and whom he will abandon to eternal conscious torment. Though some Reformed theologians acknowledge God's genuine omniscience, they flatly deny that God's knowledge of future events, including a person's future attitudes or actions, have anything to do with whom he elects to salvation.⁹

As noted above, salvation entails the conferral of a new spiritual nature. The Scriptures refer to this work of the Holy Spirit as *regeneration* (Titus 3:5) or being *born again* (John 3:3-8). On the Reformed view, because man is so depraved that he cannot believe or even understand the gospel, his regeneration must precede his coming to faith. In this way, argues the Reformed theologian, repentance and faith are gifts of God, which are bestowed upon God's elect *prior to* their belief in Christ. Lorraine Boettner states

⁸James White, *Debating Calvinism: five Points, two views* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2004), p. 63-69.

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Ibid, pp. 91-92.

categorically that “a man is not saved because he believes in Christ; he believes in Christ because he is saved.”¹⁰

These Reformed doctrines necessarily entail a third, namely, the limited extent of Christ’s atonement. Though Christ’s supreme sacrifice was infinitely more than sufficient to pay the world’s sin debt, its saving benefits are nonetheless only applied to those whom God has unconditionally elected to salvation. On this view, though God *could* save the world, he freely chooses not to. Boettner again writes that “the value of [Christ’s] suffering was infinite. . . .The atonement, therefore, was infinitely meritorious and might have saved every member of the human race had that been God’s plan.”¹¹ Corollary to these doctrines is that of *eternal security*, sometimes referred to as *the perseverance of the saints*. Because God has decreed from all eternity that a specific subset of humanity would be saved, it is impossible that any of that elect group could apostatize after regeneration.¹²

The Reformed view of God’s sovereignty and human responsibility has much to commend it. First, it appears rigidly consistent. Man’s total depravity, God’s unconditional election, the limited extent of Christ’s atonement, the irresistible grace extended at conversion, and the perseverance of the saints, all cohere together in a logically consistent, tightly-bound system of thought. Secondly, there are a number of verse passages that seem to support the Reformed position (Romans 9:6-26; Acts 13:48; Ephesians 1:3-6). Thirdly, the Reformed view magnifies God as the absolute, sovereign

¹⁰Lorraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Philadelphia, PA: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1978), p. 101.

¹¹

Ibid, p. 151.

¹²

Ibid, p. 182.

potentate over all creation. This view insists that God be seen as the supreme ruler whose plans and purposes cannot be thwarted. Fourthly, this understanding of God's sovereignty and human responsibility was, and is, espoused many (if not most) of the church's most learned, influential, and godly men. Augustine of Hippo, John Wycliffe, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Blasé Pascal, Charles Hodge, B. B. Warfield, Cornelius Van Til, Louis Sperry Chaffer, Louis Berkhof, R. C. Sproul, and John MacArthur are only a few of the brilliant churchmen who have championed the Reformed position over the last 1,500 years.

Though the Reformed position has much to commend it, it is not without its problems. For instance, the doctrine of unconditional election and its corollaries, reprobation and limited atonement, cut strongly against common moral sensibilities and rational adjudications. The Reformed theologian responds by rightly pointing out that it is the *Scripture* that stands as the final court of appeal; human reason and moral sensibility must be subservient to God's word, not vice versa. Of course no faithful Christian can disagree. However, if the moral sensibilities that are offended are *God-given*, and the rational problems stem from contradictions between Reformed theology and the clear teachings of Scripture, then the objections are obviously legitimate. It would not be the case then, as many proponents of the Reformed position often allege, that objections to Reformed theology are based merely on emotionalism and unaided human reason.¹³

Whatever the case, the doctrines of unconditional election, reprobation, and limited atonement at least *appear* to be incongruent with the common understanding of God's benevolent character. God not only expresses love for the world (John 3:16-17), God *is* love (1 John 4:8, 16). Merrill Unger notes that "the Scriptures contain no

¹³Ibid, pp. 277, 341.

equivalent statements with respect to other qualities of the divine nature. Love is the highest characteristic of God, the one attribute in which all others harmoniously blend.”¹⁴ Love, according to 1 Corinthians 13:4, is *kind*. The Greek term (χρηστεῖομαι) means “to show oneself useful”, that is, to “act benevolently.”¹⁵ Clarke noted concerning this verse that love “is tender and compassionate in itself, and kind and obliging to others; it is mild, gentle, and benign; and, if called to suffer, inspires the sufferer with the most amiable sweetness, and the most tender affection.”¹⁶ By no stretch of the imagination can it be considered kind to consign those who *could* have been saved to eternal conscious torment. This objection forms the backbone to one of the most comprehensive critiques of Reformed theology.¹⁷

Furthermore, the Reformed doctrines of election and reprobation are virtually irreconcilable with the claim that God’s offer of salvation to the non-elect is *genuine*. In their treatise defending the Reformed position, Peterson and Williams express their agreement that,

John 3:16 and similar texts speak of God’s love for every person. We understand these passages to teach that God assumes a saving posture toward his fallen world. When asked how we reconcile these passages with those that teach God’s special love for the elect, we admit that our theology contains rough edges.¹⁸

¹⁴Merrill F. Unger, *Unger’s Bible Dictionary* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1978), p. 669.

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James Strong, *The New Strong’s Complete Dictionary of Bible Words* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1996), p. 727.

¹⁶Adam Clarke, *Clarke’s Commentary*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon).

¹⁷Dave Hunt, *What Love is This? Calvinism’s Misrepresentation of God* (Bend, OR: The Berean Call, 2006).

¹⁸Robert A. Peterson and Michael D. Williams, *Why I am not an Arminian* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 2004), p. 212.

Reformed apologist Cornelius Van Til concurred: “I simply admit that I cannot logically penetrate the situation. The Bible teaches God’s sovereign electing grace. It also teaches the universal offer of the gospel. I cannot logically comprehend the relation between these two, but this fact does not lead me to a denial of either one of them.”¹⁹

Other difficulties attend the Reformed position as well. For instance, Loraine Bottner states that God’s eternal purpose,

is represented as an act of sovereign predestination or foreordination, and unconditioned by any subsequent fact or change in time. Hence *it is represented as being the basis of the divine foreknowledge of all future events*, and not conditioned by that foreknowledge or by anything originating by the events themselves.²⁰

Nevertheless, he quotes the *Westminster Confession of Faith* affirmatively, which states that “although God knows whatsoever may or can come to pass upon all supposed conditions; yet hath He not decreed any thing because he foresaw it as future, or as that which would come to pass upon such conditions.”²¹

Boettner’s own view, namely, that predestination is the basis of the divine foreknowledge, contradicts the very confession he affirms. His quote from *The Westminster Confession* teaches that God *does* have knowledge of future events, but insists that this knowledge is not the basis of his decrees. Chafer sides with Boettner, insisting that, “nothing could be foreknown as certain that was not made certain by foreordination. . . . Nor could [God] foreknow as certain to come to pass that which he

¹⁹Cornelius Van Til as quoted by Greg Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1998) p. 659.

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Ibid, p. 15, emphasis added.

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Boettner, p. 13.

had not made certain by predestination.”²² This was certainly Calvin’s view,²³ and many (if not most) Reformed theologians hold firmly to the belief that God only knows that which he has determined to actualize.²⁴ The Reformed theologian’s dogmatism on this point, however, is not based upon any clear Scriptural references, but certain creeds and confessions (most notably, *the Westminster Confession of Faith*).²⁵

The Scriptures forbid such dogmatism where there they themselves are reticent. In expositing 1 Corinthians 4:6, Jamiesson, Fausset, and Brown note that Paul’s message to his readers was to “revere the silence of Holy Writ, as much as its declarations: so you will less dogmatize on what is not expressly revealed.”²⁶ Psalm 139 is instructive in this connection. Here the psalmist, contemplating the omniscience of God, writes

O LORD, thou hast searched me, and known me. Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising, thou understandest my thought afar off. Thou compassed my path and my lying down, and art acquainted with all my ways. *For there is not a word in my tongue, but, lo, O LORD, thou knowest it altogether.* Thou hast beset me behind and before, and laid thine hand upon me. *Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain unto it* (Psalm 139:1-6, emphasis added).

Albert Barnes understands the Psalmist to be saying that concerning God’s foreknowledge, “It is high, I cannot attain unto it - It is so exalted that I cannot grasp it; I

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Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* Vol. 3 (Dallas, TX: Dallas Seminary Press, 1978), pp. 173, 235.

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Hunt, p. 182.

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Ibid.

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Boettner, p. 13, 97-98.

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Robert Jamiesson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan).

cannot understand how it can be.”²⁷ John Wesley likewise understood the Psalmist as saying that he cannot “apprehend in what manner [God] dost so presently know all things.”²⁸ Henry paraphrases the psalmist thus: ““It is such a knowledge as I cannot comprehend, much less describe. That thou knowest all things I am sure, but how I cannot tell.”” He concludes, “We cannot by searching find out how God searches and finds out us; nor do we know how we are known.”²⁹ The psalmist is profoundly wise in his humility. Perhaps he understood that to draw limits around anything is to transcend those very limits.³⁰ It is presumptuous in the extreme to draw a limit around how God can know what he does. The psalmist is content to admit that such knowledge is simply “too wonderful” for him. In contrast with the psalmist’s humility, the Reformed theologian insists that such knowledge is not too wonderful for him. That is, he claims to know that God’s foreknowledge is *necessarily* based upon his raw determination. Without clear Scriptural support, however, there is no good reason to accept this assertion.

The Reformed account of God’s foreknowledge is not only unjustified by Scripture, but *it runs against its own account of God’s relation to evil*. Boettner describes the asymmetrical relationship: “The good acts of men then are rendered certain by the

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Albert Barnes, *Albert Barnes’ Notes on the Bible*, Available at <http://www.studylight.org/commentaries/bnb/view.cgi?bk=18&ch=139> [Accessed Oct 4, 2015].

²⁸John Wesley, *John Wesley’s Explanatory Notes on the Whole Bible*, Available at <http://www.studylight.org/commentaries/wen/view.cgi?bk=18&ch=139> [Accessed Oct 4, 2015].

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Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1961), p. 724.

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Norman Geisler, *The Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: 1999), p. 4.

positive decree of God, and sinful acts occur by His *permission*.”³¹ He then quotes David S. Clark, who concludes that, “the most reasonable explanation is that the sinful nature will go to the boundary set by the permission of God; hence God’s bounding sin renders certain what and how much comes to pass.”³² W. D. Smith brings these thoughts together, stating that, “when it is known, certainly, that it will be done unless prevented, and there is a determination not to prevent it, it is rendered as certain *as if* it were decreed to be done by positive agency.”³³ The contradiction here is obvious. On the one hand Reform theologians ardently deny that God decrees anything based upon foreknowledge while on the other they claim that the limits God sets on sinful man’s freedom are based upon his knowledge of what man would do with this freedom.

One way to deal with such apparent doctrinal contradictions is to suggest that, though they appear difficult and irreconcilable by the mind of man, they nonetheless come together in a logical, unified system of thought in the mind of God.³⁴ It is true, of course, that the fact that theologians cannot reconcile certain difficult doctrines does not necessarily bring down the conclusion that these doctrines are *actually* irreconcilable. This response, however, while perhaps logically possible, is nonetheless expensive. It renders the Christian apologist without any principled complaint against self-contradictory competing systems of religious thought. It makes the command to

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Boettner, p. 242 (emphasis added).

³²David S. Clark, *A Syllabus of Systematic Theology*, as quoted in Boettner, p. 242.

³³W. D. Smith, *What is Calvinism*, as quoted by Boettner, p. 242 (emphasis added).

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William MacDonald, *Believer’s Bible Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1995), p. 1623.

rationally defend the faith (1 Peter 3:15; Titus 1:9; Jude 3) and to expose error (Ephesians 5:11) extremely difficult if not impossible to fulfill.

A complete understanding of God's sovereignty and human freewill and responsibility are obviously beyond the grasp of finite human minds. Nevertheless, a thorough study of the Scriptures reveals many important and helpful truths. To begin with, the Scriptures sometimes have different causal explanations for the same event. For instance, the Scriptures declare in one place that "Satan stood up against Israel, and provoked David to number Israel" (1Chronicles 21:1). According to 2 Samuel 21:2, however, "the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and *he* moved David against them to say, Go, number Israel and Judah" (emphasis added). The Bible is clear that God does not tempt people or cause them to sin (James 1:13), but always provides a way of escape (1 Corinthians 10:13). It is impossible, therefore, that David's actions could have been strongly actualized by God. Rather, God allowed an enemy to influence David to number the people. That God allowed this to occur was sufficient for the biblical writer to attribute the action to God. Clearly, the Bible does not require that God necessarily strongly actualize an event in order to be considered the event's cause. A second instance is found in the ninth chapter of 1 Samuel. This text describes how Kish's animals wandered off and how his son Saul and his servant went to search for them. When the men reached the land of Ziph they asked two ladies if Samuel the prophet was there. They responded:

He is; behold, he is before you: make haste now, for he came to day to the city; for there is a sacrifice of the people to day in the high place: As soon as ye be come into the city, ye shall straightway find him, before he go up to the high place to eat: for the people will not eat until he come, because he doth bless the sacrifice; and afterwards they eat that be bidden. Now therefore get you up; for about this time ye shall find him" (1 Samuel 9:12-13).

The text goes on to say that Saul and his servant did find Samuel there, but then includes an interesting detail:

Now the LORD had told Samuel in his ear a day before Saul came, saying, To morrow about this time *I will send thee a man out of the land of Benjamin*, and thou shalt anoint him to be captain over my people Israel, that he may save my people out of the hand of the Philistines: for I have looked upon my people, because their cry is come unto me (1 Samuel 9:15-16, emphasis added).

Though God stated that *he* would send Saul to Samuel, he clearly did not accomplish this through direct means. Instead, God *weakly actualized* their meeting through multiple events, such as the behaviour of Kish's animals and the kind and helpful direction of the townsfolk. The Scriptures abound with such examples. Sarah declared, "God hath made me to laugh, so that all that hear will laugh with me" (Genesis 21:6). Obviously God did not strongly actualize Sarah's laughing. Similarly, because God caused David success in battle with the Philistines, "and the fame of David went out into all lands," it could rightly be said that, "*the LORD* brought the fear of him upon all nations." (1 Chronicles 14:16-17, emphasis added).

Paul wrote to the Corinthian believers, "God, that comforteth those that are cast down, comforted us by the coming of Titus" (2 Corinthians 7:6). In Paul's mind, both the safe arrival of Titus and his encouraging report were brought about, ultimately, by the sovereign, enabling, and directing hand of God. These and many other Scriptural examples prove that God needn't strongly actualize something in order to rightly be called its cause. Consequently, it is not necessarily the case that God must strongly actualize a person's salvation by regenerating them prior to their exercise of faith. Scriptural language certainly warrants the supposition that God *actualizes the*

circumstances in which a person freely chooses to place their faith in Christ as their Lord and Savior.

Reformed theologians insist that God chose, *unconditionally*, from all eternity whom he would save. Ephesians the first chapter contains a common proof text:

According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved (Ephesians 1:4-6).

That God chose whom he would save is undeniable. That he chose *unconditionally* is an unsubstantiated assertion. The apostle Peter identified believers as “elect *according to the foreknowledge of God the Father* (1 Peter 1:2, emphasis added). If the Reformed view of election were correct, one would expect Peter to write that his fellow believers were “foreknown according to their election.” E. C. Bragg suggests that it is best to understand *the elect* as a class whose members grow as people are converted. That is, prior to the creation, there were no *actually* elect people even though God certainly knew who would freely chose to accept Christ’s offer of salvation.³⁵ Bragg’s view makes better sense of Paul’s description of people prior to conversion as being *by nature the children of wrath* (Ephesians 2:3). This description of a person prior to salvation is at odds with the Reformed assertion that an elect person is an object of God’s love and mercy from all eternity. As in classic Arminian theology, Bragg sees 1 Peter 1:2 as evidence that God chose to save from all eternity those whom he knew would exercise faith in him.³⁶

³⁵E. C. Bragg, *Soteriology*, Audio Lecture Series (part nine), mp3 available at www.trinitycollege.edu/academics/ecbragg/soteriology [Accessed Sept 15, 2015].

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Ibid, Lectures Five and Ten.

Reformed theologians balk at this, insisting that if this were the case, God's sovereignty would be seriously compromised; his choice would be dependent upon those of his creatures.

While the Reformed theologian's concern for God's sovereignty is commendable, his reaction to the Arminian position falls short of being a cogent refutation. A sovereign king can conscript anyone he chooses into his army; he might even freely choose for his army only those that want to be there. Similarly, the Lord was free to choose whom he would bring into his kingdom. He was certainly free to choose those whom he knew would exercise faith in him. This understanding of God's election makes much better sense not only of 1 Peter 1:2, but of Paul's statement that those "whom [God] did *foreknow*, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren" (Romans 8:29, emphasis added).

It seems reasonable, therefore, to suppose that God not only chose to save those whom he knew would freely accept his offer to save them *given certain circumstances*, but that God ordained, orchestrated, and therefore ensured that just those circumstances would be actualized. In this way, God remains sovereign over the entire salvific transaction. This account of God's sovereignty and human freewill and responsibility is attractive for several reasons. First, this view makes better sense of the biblical description of love as the greatest virtue (1 Corinthians 13:13) and the prime attribute of God (1 John 4:16). His posture towards his human image-bearers is unchangeably one of genuine love. Love seeks the best for its object and the greatest good for man is love relationship with God. This is reflected in the greatest command, i.e., "Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy

strength” (Mark 12:30). Love, however, cannot be coerced. In fact, forced love is a contradiction in terms.³⁷ This is why God *pleads* with people to repent (Ezekiel 14:6; 18:32; 33:11) and regrets that they don’t (Isaiah 5:1-4, Matthew 23:37-38). God gives man irrefutable evidence not only of his existence (Psalm 19:1; Romans 1:18-20; 2:14-15), but of his benevolent character as well (Acts 14:17; Romans 5:8). God has not only enlightened the minds of all men to his self-witness (John 1:9), but he has enabled them respond affirmatively to it (Acts 3:36). In this way he shows himself maximally lovely to his fallen creatures. It is the *goodness* of God that leads to repentance (Romans 2:4).

Second, it does not make God’s knowledge subservient to his raw determination. God has *true* omniscience; he knows all true propositions, including counterfactuals of creaturely freedom. Though finite human minds may never discover *how* God knows what the free actions of a person would be in every given set of circumstances, *that* he has such knowledge is beyond dispute (Exodus 13:17; 1 Samuel 23:12; Matthew 11:20-24; 1 Corinthians 2:8). Third, this view takes the universal language of the Bible at face value. It recognizes that God loves *the world* (John 3:16) and that Jesus tasted death for *every person* (Hebrews 2:9; 2 Corinthians 5:15), thereby paying the world’s sin debt in full (1 John 2:2). Nevertheless, it recognizes that the saving benefits of Christ’s atoning work are only *applied* to the believing. “We trust in the living God,” wrote Paul, “who is the Saviour of all men, *specially of those that believe*” (1 Timothy 4:10, emphasis added). The *universal extent* of Christ’s atoning work and its *limited application* could hardly be better described. Fourth, this view recognizes the legitimacy of God’s offer of salvation to even the non-elect. Because Christ died for the whole world, Christians have a gospel

³⁷Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology in One Volume* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2011), p. 820.

to preach to the whole world (Matthew 28:19-20; Mark 16:15; Colossians 1:28-29). Paul wrote that, “God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation.” (2 Corinthians 5:19).

Fifth, this view avoids a major epistemological difficulty engendered by the Reformed position. On the Reformed view, God does not actually love the non-elect, Christ did not die for them, and he does not intend that they should be saved, *even though a plain reading of the Bible indicates otherwise* (John 3:16; 1 John 2:2; 2 Peter 3:9). The logical consequence of denying the plain meaning of words leads to skepticism regarding God’s entire revelation. If God’s word permitted all manner of interpretation, then pure contingency would be ultimate and no knowledge, theological or otherwise, would be possible. The view suggested in this paper is based on the supposition that words such as “love,” “all,” “desire,” and “world” are to be understood in their ordinary sense. This supposition is congruent with the belief that the benevolent intentions of the God of the Bible, who is incapable of lying (Titus 1:2; Hebrews 6:18), and who is not the author of confusion (1 Corinthians 14:33), may be understood by simply reading His word.

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