

A STUDY OF ELECTION AND APOSTASY IN PAUL'S WRITINGS

By Dub McClish

Introduction

Election is the immutable purpose of God, by which before the foundations of the earth were laid, He chose out of the whole human race—fallen by their own fault from their primeval integrity into sin and destruction—according to the most free **good pleasure** of His own will, and of **mere grace**, a certain number of men, neither better nor worthier than others, but lying, in the same misery with the rest, to salvation in Christ....

God, who is rich in mercy, from His immutable purpose of election, does not wholly take away His Holy Spirit from His own even in lamentable falls; nor does He so permit them to decline, that they should fall from the grace of adoption and the state of justification; ...So that...by the gratuitous mercy of God they obtain it, that they neither **totally fall** from faith and grace, nor **finally continue** in their falls and perish.¹

The Synod of Dordt formulated the preceding statement in 1619 as a reaffirmation of the doctrine of John Calvin. The Presbyterian *Confession of Faith* of 1839 gives the following somewhat fuller version of the Calvinistic doctrines of election and apostasy:

God, by an eternal and immutable decree, out of his mere love, for the praise of his glorious grace, to be manifested in due time, hath elected some angels to glory; and, in Christ, hath chosen some men to eternal life and the means thereof, and also, according to his sovereign power, and the un-searchable counsel of his own will (whereby he extendeth or withholdeth favour as he pleaseth) hath passed by, and fore-ordained the rest to dishonour and wrath, to be for their sin inflicted, to the praise of the glory of his justice....

They whom God hath accepted in his Beloved, effectually called and sanctified by his Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace; but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved.

This perseverance of the saints depends, not upon their own free-will, but upon the immutability of the decree of election, flowing from the free and unchangeable love of God the Father; upon the efficacy of the merit and intercession of Jesus Christ; the abiding of the Spirit and of the seed of God within them; and the nature of the covenant of grace: from all which ariseth also the certainty and infallibility thereof.²

Observe the following:

1. God elected (“chose”) before the foundation of the world a certain number of men to eternal life
2. He has done this according to His “sovereign power” and His “unsearchable will” by which He arbitrarily extends or withholds His grace
3. He has intentionally “passed by” the non-elect who will be punished in Hell for their sins
4. The elect cannot so fall from grace as to be eternally lost, but will certainly persevere so as to be saved eternally
5. The perseverance of the elect is vouchsafed, not in their free will, but in God’s immutable, arbitrary, and unconditional election of them to eternal life.

Thus we have before us the confused, contorted, and convoluted theological ramblings of men on the grand Biblical themes of election and apostasy. While these statements are particularly from the Presbyterian authorities, all of Protestant Denominationalism is to a greater or lesser degree in concurrence with them. Those who have even a thimble full of knowledge of the Word of God know that the doctrines set forth in the quotations above are not only **not found in the Scriptures**, but that **they are positively anti-Scriptural!**

There could hardly be more consequential, pivotal doctrines than these two. The elect are God's "royal priesthood" and "holy nation" (i.e., His redeemed, those who will be saved [1 Pet. 2:9]).³ If we miss what the Scriptures teach about election (e.g., who the elect are, how one may be included in the elect, etc.), we will not be among those elected and will be lost. Further, if we are led to believe that we are incapable of being lost once we have been redeemed, this may produce a false security that will be the very cause of our being lost!

It is surpassingly ironic that those who teach the above-documented heresies cite passages from the great apostle Paul more than any other New Testament author for their proof texts. Perhaps even more ironic is the fact that some among us have embraced and are now advocating concepts hardly distinguishable from these creedal statements. Were Paul able to be on earth today and to see these and other egregious errors that for centuries have been (and are still being) attributed to him, we believe he would be first incredulous and then enraged. Therefore, the need is obvious to review once more what the Word of God teaches on these themes, and more particularly, what Paul teaches. Having seen what He teaches, we will have seen what all the inspired men teach; the same Spirit inspires all of them, and He does not contradict Himself.

In the course of our study of this subject we will consider the following topics in turn: (1) The Doctrines Defined; (2) The Doctrines in History; (3) The Doctrines in Scripture; and (4) These Doctrines as Taught by Change Agents in the Church.

The Doctrines Defined

Election

Elect and *choose* and their various cognates and related parts of speech are most commonly translated from words which are derived from the Greek word *eklego*. This compound term is from: *ek*—"from or out of," and *lego*—"to say or to speak." Thus literally, the term means "to say out" or "to pick out," thus to select or elect.⁴ Election is the process of choosing, and those chosen are the elect. While God has made choices among men and women (as individuals) and groups of men (e.g., nations) in all ages, the Biblical doctrine of election relates primarily to God's choice of those who will be saved eternally through the Christ.

The controversy that centers on this subject has mainly to do with whether He arbitrarily and unconditionally elects certain **individuals** to salvation or whether He has chosen to save an elect **group** of which men may become members through obedience to God-given conditions.

Apostasy

The English word, *apostasy*, does not appear in either the KJV or the ASV. However, the Greek word, *apostasia*, from which it is transliterated, appears twice. This word means a falling away, defection, or apostasy.⁵ In Acts 21:21 Luke used it in reference to the accusation against Paul that he taught Jews to “forsake” (i.e., defect or apostatize from) Moses. In the second passage Paul used the term to prophesy the general “falling away” of the church from the Truth, which would precede the coming of the “man of sin” (2 The. 2:3). The controversy surrounding the doctrine of apostasy involves the question of whether one who is among the elect is able or unable ever to pass to the state of the non-elect and thus be lost eternally. While the inspired writers employed *apostasia* only twice in the New Testament, there are scores of additional passages that advance the concept by use of other terms (e.g., 1 Cor. 9:27; 10:12; Gal. 1:6; 5:4; 6:1; 1 Tim. 1:19–20; 5:15; 2 Tim. 2:17–18; Heb. 2:1–2; 3:12–15; 6:1–6; 10:26–30, 38–39; 2 Pet. 2:20–22; 3:17; 1 John 1:7–10).

The Doctrines in History

It will perhaps contribute to our understanding of these doctrines to see a few details concerning their historical development. The quotations from the Presbyterian *Confession of Faith* with which we began this study constitute the doctrinal system commonly called “Calvinism” (so called after John Calvin, the brilliant Swiss religious reformer of the sixteenth century [1509–1564]). However, they might more correctly be called “Augustinism,” for Augustine, “bishop of Hippo” (A.D. 354–430), first enunciated the principal doctrines now popularly known as “Calvinism.” Calvin simply borrowed Augustine’s basic tenets, mixed in a few ideas of some others, along with his own deductions, and produced his systematic theology. Through the strength of his intellect, the force of his personality, and the great quantity of his writings he wielded an immense influence on the Reformation that continues to be seen in Protestant denominationalism to the present.

The entire system is based upon a heinously mistaken view of the nature of God and of man. God is depicted as an arbitrary tyrant who whimsically blesses some by zapping them with the Holy Spirit (the elect). These alone not only **can**, but **must**, be saved, not because of their faith or obedience, but “just because” God chanced to pick them! All the rest of humanity (the non-elect) has the sad misfortune of being sentenced to Hell by this same God, who delights in making them suffer for their sins. Man is totally passive and can do nothing whatsoever toward

his own salvation. Each person's election (or non-election) is totally apart from anything he may or may not think, believe, say, or do—it is absolutely unconditional. Further, man has no free will: If God elects him, he cannot resist. If God does not elect him, he has no power of will or ability whereby he may serve God.

The fundamental tenets of Calvinism are popularly summarized in the following five statements, arranged as an acrostic to spell the word **TULIP**:

- **T**—Total Hereditary Depravity: All men are conceived and born sinners, incapable of doing good or turning to God on their own.
- **U**—Unconditional Election: God chose before Creation (predestined) the very persons whom He would save unconditionally.
- **L**—Limited Atonement: The death of Christ was not for all men, but for the elect only.
- **I**—Irresistible Grace: Sinners upon whom God chooses to bestow His grace (because they are elect) are powerless to resist it.
- **P**—Perseverance of the Saints: The elect, who have received God's grace, cannot so apostatize as to be lost in Hell.

The Presbyterian Churches in Great Britain and America are the last strongholds of Calvinism in all of its essential parts. Various modifications of Calvin's theology which somewhat softened it began to be made during the period of "revival" ushered in by the fiery preacher, Jonathan Edwards, in the first half of the eighteenth century in Colonial America. The response of audiences to the preaching of Edwards and other Calvinistic preachers of that era was seen to contradict the dictum that man was powerless in his unregenerate state to respond to God. Thus, the door was opened widely enough for man's faith to be recognized as a condition of salvation (election). "These modifications account for various differences concerning conversion [requirements, DM] among Primitive Baptists, Free Will Baptists, Southern Baptists, Presbyterians, and Reformed Churches."⁶ Thus typical Baptist doctrine has modified Calvinism sufficiently to advocate its "faith only" condition for salvation, while holding on to its Calvinistic roots in its doctrine of "impossibility of apostasy" (i.e., perseverance of the saints). For well over one and one-half centuries, those who have been pleading for a return to primitive Christianity have challenged proponents of Calvinistic concepts in public debates. Were our spiritual forebears justified from the Scriptures in opposing these concepts?

The Doctrine of Election in Paul's Writings

Without doubt Paul taught the fact of God's election of some men unto eternal salvation. Only two passages will suffice to represent many others:

For whom he foreknew, he also foreordained to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren: and whom he foreordained, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also

glorified;... Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth" (Rom. 8:29–30, 33).

Even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blemish before him in love: having foreordained us unto adoption as sons through Jesus Christ unto himself, according to the good pleasure of his will (Eph. 1:4–5).

Calvin: Election Is Personal

One of the pillars of Calvin's system is the assumption that God's election of men to eternal life is particular—that it pertained to individuals—as the following excerpt from him demonstrates:

By predestination we mean the eternal decree of God by which he determined with himself whatever he wished to happen with regard to **every man**. All are not created on equal terms, but some are preordained to eternal life, others to eternal damnation; and, accordingly as **each** has been created for one or other of these ends, we say that he has been predestinated to life or to death (emp. DM).⁷

That God did choose or elect some individuals through the ages is unarguable. Such were Noah, Abram, Jacob, King Saul, David, Jeremiah, Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus, John the Baptizer, Saul of Tarsus, et al.). From among the larger pool of His followers, the Lord chose twelve to be His apostles (Luke 6:13). However, such acts of "election" pertained to various purposes or tasks relating to earthly works that God, in His providence, needed to be done. **It is important to understand that these specific assignments did not relate to the eternal salvation of the individuals chosen.** This is manifest from the stated purpose or purposes of these respective "elections." It is further manifest from the fact that some of the chosen individuals were Pagans when they were elected for their tasks and that they died as Pagans (e.g., Nebuchadnezzar [1 Chron. 6:15; Jer. 27:6, 8], Cyrus [2 Chron. 36:22–23; Isa. 44:28; 45:1]).

What about the choosing/electing Paul mentions in Romans 8:29ff, one of Calvinism's favorite passages? Does Paul say that the foreordination and calling of God's elect was done on a personal, one by one basis, without any conditions laid upon those called? Indeed, he does not! All that the passage states is that God foreordained, called, justified, and glorified His elect. He simply states the **fact** of it, not the **particulars** at all. He could not have been teaching unconditional personal election without engaging in the most blatant self-contradictions, as demonstrated in the following facts:

1. The very theme of Paul in Romans is that men are justified on the basis (condition) of their faith in the Christ (1:16; 3:22, 26; 5:1; et al.), rather than unconditionally and arbitrarily.
2. Moreover, Paul argued in Romans that the faith which justifies is an obedient faith (1:6; 16:26). Justification (election) is thus dependent upon man's obedient response to God's grace, rather than upon Divine caprice.

3. Paul clearly taught that a saving, obedient faith involved obedience to a “form [i.e., pattern] of teaching” (6:17–18), which is consummated by a burial in and resurrection from baptism to the new life of salvation (6:3–5). This further emphasizes the fact that election/salvation is not arbitrary, but conditional.
4. Rather than teaching that only the individuals specifically and arbitrarily foreordained to election could be saved, Paul taught that “the gospel is the power of God unto salvation to **everyone** that believeth” (1:16; emph. DM). He argued that just as death came upon all through Adam, so through Christ **salvation is made available to all men** (5:17–18). In God’s plan mercy is available to **all** (11:32).

Another textual campground of Calvinists is Ephesians 1:4–11. Undeniably, in this passage Paul taught that God chose and foreordained before the foundation of the world those who would be His adopted sons (vv. 4–5). Verse 11 continues the theme by saying the elect were “...foreordained according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his will.” However, again, the apostle merely states the **fact** of God’s election of men, not the **method** or **means** of it. Notice that Paul does not affirm **unconditional individual** foreordination and election, the **arbitrary** exercise of God’s will, or salvation **exclusively** for predetermined chosen **individuals**.

The apostle could hardly have been teaching any of these essential planks of the Calvinistic platform on the basis of his aforementioned statements in Romans. Likewise, several statements elsewhere in Ephesians make it clear that Paul was not a Calvinist!

1. Man’s foreordination/election/redemption, rather than being unconditional, came/comes through his hearing the Word of Truth and believing in the Christ (1:13).
2. Man’s election to salvation, rather than being an arbitrary, incomprehensible exercise of Divine Will, was/is according to Divine purpose, which He has revealed to us through the Gospel of our salvation (1:9, 11, 13).
3. Election/salvation is not merely for specific individuals chosen by Divine fiat to the exclusion of any others who exercise their own wills to serve God. Instead, Paul was commissioned to preach the plan of God for man’s redemption, not only to the Gentiles, but also “...to make all men see...” it (3:9).

Besides the passages from Romans and Ephesians quoted above numerous additional statements from Paul contradict the Augustinian-Calvinistic heresies on the way God elects men to salvation. By way of summary, we may state that every statement from him that mentions (1) the ability of men to respond of their own free will to the Gospel, (2) any condition which is required of men for them to be saved, or (3) that the Gospel is for all, is an exposure of this false system.

Paul: Election Is Corporate

Not only do we need to see that Paul denies Calvinistic election in every one of its several parts, we also need to demonstrate the doctrine of election which he affirms. It is

fundamental to understanding Paul's (and thus the Bible's) teaching on election to salvation, to see that said election is **corporate rather than individual**. (This is where Calvin made one of his most egregious blunders. He not only deduced that God's election of men to salvation was of particular individuals, but **he made this deduction a basic thesis of his entire system**.)

As earlier observed, Paul teaches the doctrines of foreordination and election. However, it was His church **as a body** (not scattered individuals randomly chosen) that God foreordained before the foundation of the world to the election of eternal salvation. The eternal Divine purpose mentioned in the context of foreordination and election in Ephesians 1:9, 11 is consummated in the **church** (3:10–11), rather than in isolated, random individuals. Thus, individuals are the elect of God only as they become identified with God's church (His elect body) by entering it. Individuals only **incidentally** and **contingently** are elected to salvation **as and when they become part of the church**.

Observe the way God's eternal plan of election (and to whom said election refers) is demonstrated in Paul's phrase, "holy and without blemish":

1. God, before the world was created, chose us to be "holy and without blemish" (Eph. 1:4). (Remember, this is a favorite passage of those who espouse Calvin's "personal election" dogma.)
2. He also reconciled us through the death of His Son that He might present us "holy and without blemish" (Col. 1:22). (However, Paul does not say one word that demands the restriction of these words to individuals, which is how Calvinists apply them.)
3. When we turn to Ephesians 5:27 Paul defines the sphere of fulfillment of his *holy-and-without-blemish* phrase: "That he might present **the church** to himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that it should be **holy and without blemish** (emph. DM)."

On the basis of Ephesians 5:27 we conclude that God chose unto salvation the church **as an entity** (as opposed to specific persons individually) before the world was created (Eph. 1:4). Likewise, based on Ephesians 5:27, it was the church **as an entity** (as opposed to specific individuals, arbitrarily chosen) that He reconciled through Christ's death (Col. 1:22). Some "election" passages appear to be pointing to specific individuals (e.g., 1 The. 1:4; 2 The. 2:13), but even these do not contradict the actual corporate nature of the election.

The chosen, elect ones of 2 Thessalonians 2:13 were called to their elect status not by some mysterious, random, or arbitrary decision of Deity, but **through the Gospel** (v. 14). The church, by definition, consists of the called out ones, for such is the meaning of *ekklesia*, the Greek word translated "church." Note:

1. The elect are those called by the Gospel (2 The. 2:13–14).
2. The church is God's people, called out of the world (by definition).

3. Men are called out of the world and added to the church upon hearing, believing, and obeying the Gospel (Acts 2:38, 41, 47), thus called by the Gospel into the church.
4. By the same means (the Gospel) men are constituted “elect” and added to the church.
5. It follows that election to salvation and membership in the church of Christ are tantamount to the same thing.

Thus the Thessalonians as individuals were among the elect **because** of their inclusion in the church (1 The. 1:1; 2 The. 1:1). Individuals are foreordained to be the elect unto eternal salvation only as they become part of the foreordained elect body, the church.

Robert Shank well states the contrast between the central thrust of Calvin’s and Paul’s doctrine of election, respectively: Calvin’s: “The election to salvation is of particular men unconditionally, who comprise the corporate body incidentally.” Paul’s: “The election to salvation is corporate and comprehends individual men only in identification and association with the elect body.”⁸

It must follow as the daylight does darkness that if we can learn the way men may become members of the church we can learn how to receive the election of God unto eternal life. Acts 2:37–47 tells us the way the people on the day of Pentecost became members of the elect body. Upon hearing the Gospel preached they were brought to believe in Jesus (whom they had crucified seven weeks earlier) as the Christ, the Son of God. Their agonizing question (v. 37) is at once evidence of their belief and a tacit confession of it. Peter told them they must repent and be baptized in order to receive the remission (forgiveness) of their sins (i.e., to be saved) (v. 38). About three thousand of them did and they were added to the church (thus they were made part of God’s elect) that same day (vv. 41, 47). The Lord has continued to add men to His church upon the same conditions day by day (v. 47). The key to election is the sinner’s obedience to the conditions of the saving Gospel, whereupon the Lord adds him to His elect church!

Sundry Pauline Statements That Relate to Election

Paul enunciated several miscellaneous principles, which incidentally, yet powerfully, refute Calvinistic election. Some of them are as follows:

1. Paul emphasized that God does not show respect of persons (Rom. 2:11; Gal. 2:6; Eph. 6:9; Col. 3:25). The Calvinistic dogmas of predestination and unconditional election are based upon the premise that God is a respecter of persons. Were God to elect specific individuals to salvation and certain others to eternal reprobation, apart from any exercise of will or ability on their part whatsoever, He would blatantly show respect **solely** on the basis of “person.”

2. Paul taught that it is God's will that all men be saved, which they do by coming to a knowledge (in obedience) of the Truth (1 Tim. 2:3–4). God thereby made provision for the salvation of all by allowing His Son, the Christ, to die as a ransom for all men (v. 6). Calvinism teaches that it is God's mysterious, imponderable will that only a few individuals whom He selected should be saved and that all others should be damned. Moreover, according to Calvin's disciples, Christ died only for those few whom God elected.
3. Paul taught by precept and example that man is a creature of choice, a "free moral agent." Thus he addressed those who heard him preach the Gospel as those who were capable of making a decision for or against Christ and the Gospel, for their own salvation or their damnation (Acts. 13:38–39; 46; 14:1, 4, 21; 16:14–15; 17:2–5; 32–34; 18:5–8; et al.). In Calvin's system man is a mere robot, pre-programmed by God in eternity and incapable of effecting his own eternal destiny by any choice he may make or any thing he may say or do.
4. Paul taught that the Word of God is powerful, even to the saving of the souls of men (Rom 2:16; 1 Cor. 1:18; cf. Rom. 10:17; Heb. 4:12). In Calvin's system, election to salvation is not based upon man's obedient response to the God-endowed Gospel, but upon a mere Divine whim, which causes Him to operate miraculously upon the heart of man and turn him to God. If this is the case it is pointless to preach the Gospel to sinners. Execution of the great commission (under which Paul tirelessly labored and for which he suffered much) is at once unnecessary and an exercise in futility.
5. Paul taught that while the power to reconcile man to Himself lies in God, that man nonetheless has a part in his own reconciliation. God has placed the "word of reconciliation" (the Gospel) in the hands of men through which He commands men, "Be ye reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:19–20). Calvinism teaches that man is absolutely powerless to do anything concerning his own reconciliation.
6. Paul taught that God is a Being characterized by love (Rom. 5:8; 2 Cor. 13:11, 14; et al.), mercy (Rom. 15:9; Eph. 2:4; et al.), and justice (Rom. 2:5, 3:26; 2 Tim. 4:8; et al.). However, whimsically consigning first one individual to eternal life and then another to eternal torment without extending any opportunity to said individuals to serve God because they so choose is neither loving nor merciful. It is cruel and sadistic! There is no righteousness, justice, or fairness in judgment that is executed upon creatures who are either saved in spite of their rebellion against God or who are condemned without consideration of their desire to serve Him. Such judgment is a mockery of justice. Yet, such is the concept of God required by Calvinism.

The Doctrine of Apostasy in Paul's Writings

Calvin: The Elect Cannot Fall so as To Be Lost

In the creedal quotations with which we began this study the Augustine/Calvinistic doctrine concerning apostasy was set forth. The doctrine is often referred to as the doctrine of “perseverance.” Simply put, it consists of the teaching that the eternal security of those whom God elects to eternal life is certain and can never be forfeited. The doctrine is also called that of the “impossibility of apostasy,” “eternal security,” or “once saved, always saved,” for these words describe the contentions of its advocates. This doctrine is the logical descendant of the Calvinistic dogmas of predestination and election. Since God by His **sovereign and immutable** will predestined those certain individuals whom He would elect to salvation, those elect ones have no ability to so sin as to be lost, just as the non-elect have no ability of their own to turn to God so as to be saved.

Calvinism makes allowance for sins and imperfections in the elect, but not eternally fatal sins. Those who are apparently among the elect, but who totally fall away, are just that— **apparently** among the elect. Thus Calvinists are wont to distinguish between mere “professors” and “possessors” of salvation and between “nominal” and “real” saints. In Calvinism’s doctrinal labyrinth one who totally apostatizes could never, by definition, have been more than a “professor” or a “nominal” saint.

One can see the monstrous and awful danger of this doctrine with but little contemplation. It presents a strong disincentive for any servant of God to serve Him diligently. To one who counts himself among the elect, it is an inherent encouragement to sin. I have known of those who were members of churches who taught this deadly doctrine to excuse their chronic absence from the assemblies of their denomination by saying that it mattered not since they could not be lost anyway. I have talked with others who were members of churches subscribing to this doctrine who denied that their denomination taught it because of its obvious absurdity.

Paul: The Elect May Apostatize and Be Eternally Lost

There are so many passages in the writings of the prince of apostles that set forth not only the possibility, but also the real danger, of apostasy, that I will be able to call attention to only a small percentage of them.

1. I suggest that there are some **entire epistles** that are specifically addressed to Christians who had so apostatized as to place their souls in jeopardy. Paul’s letters to the Galatian churches and to the Hebrew Christians particularly fall into this category.⁹ The recipients of both of these epistles were on the verge of renouncing the Christ in favor of Moses. Some other epistles share in this reclamation purpose to a lesser extent as well (e.g., 2 Cor., Col., 1

Tim., 2 Tim., Tit.). If it is not possible for men, once among the elect, to lose their eternal reward, I suggest that these letters (at least those portions of them that warn of apostasy) occupy space needlessly in our New Testaments.

2. Romans 16:17–18 warns of those in the church who would cause “occasions of stumbling” and would “beguile the hearts of the innocent” by teaching things “contrary to the doctrine” which the faithful had learned. If the Roman brethren could not apostatize so as to be lost what would it matter if they “stumbled” or were “beguiled” through imbibing false doctrine? Clearly, Paul addressed these people as faithful (“real,” not “nominal”) saints and expressed concern that they might be lost.
3. In 1 Corinthians 9:27 Paul wrote: “But I buffet my body, and bring it into bondage: lest by any means, after that I have preached to others, I myself should be rejected.” Was Paul merely a “professor” or was he a “possessor” of salvation? Assuming that all agree that he was as strong in the faith as one can be, what does he mean by the word, *rejected*? (Paul used this same word in 2 Corinthians 13:5 [where it is rendered “reprobate”] to warn Christians against apostasy. He used it in 2 Timothy 3:8 in reference to some who had departed from the faith.) If words have any meaning, even Paul could have so apostatized as to be condemned and rejected of God at last!
4. The Galatian Christians were rapidly moving away from the Lord in Whose grace they had been called (Gal. 1:6) and if they continued to follow the false teachers so as to reject the Law of Christ in favor of the Law of Moses, they would sever themselves from Christ and fall from grace (5:2–4). Surely, at least some of the saints in the Galatian churches had been “genuine” Christians, yet there was the distinct danger that they would fall from God’s grace and thereby be lost.
5. Paul wrote to Timothy about Hymenaeus and Alexander (1 Tim. 1:19–20). They, apparently, had once been faithful saints, but this did not prevent their making “shipwreck concerning the faith.” They had been guilty of blasphemy, and Paul turned them over to Satan to try to shock them into repentance. If they died as blasphemers and faith-wreckers who had received the apostle’s severest discipline, were they saved or lost?
6. The aforementioned brother at Ephesus named Hymenaeus, along with another named Philetus, had erred from the Truth (2 Tim. 2:17–18). (Perhaps this is the way Hymenaeus had “made shipwreck concerning the faith.”) They were teaching that the general resurrection had already occurred (one of the “cornerstone doctrines” of Max King’s A.D. 70 heresy, incidentally). Not only had these men apostatized from the Truth themselves, but through their teaching they had caused the faith of others to be overthrown. Clearly, it was not impossible for these false teachers or their followers to become involved in eternally fatal error.
7. To these may be added numerous explicit warnings that are utterly meaningless if it is impossible for faithful children of God to be lost. Why should one “...take heed lest he fall” if it is impossible for him to fall (1 Cor. 10:12)? Why should Christians “...give the more earnest heed to the things that were heard, lest haply we drift away from them” if Christians are so eternally secure that they cannot drift away so as to be lost (Heb. 2:1–3)? What need is there for the urgent warning that brethren should “...take heed...lest haply there shall be in any one of you an evil heart of unbelief, in falling away from the living God,” if God will prevent us from experiencing such a fall (Heb. 3:12–15)? Many similar passages state the very same

warnings, but these we have noticed are more than ample to prove the case for those who will accept what the Bible teaches.

Admittedly, several passages give assurance that one who has his heart set on eternal life will be able, by the grace of God, so to live as to realize that glorious ambition. Neither the devil nor any man has enough power to snatch us out of the hand of the Father or His Son (John 10:28–29). Paul echoes this theme in several statements in Romans 8 (viz., vv. 31, 35, 37–39). Further, God—in His mercy and grace—will not allow His children to be tempted or tried beyond their capacity to endure, but will furnish a “way of escape” (1 Cor. 10:13). However, the numerous warnings of apostasy give abundant evidence that **we can, by our own wills, remove ourselves** from the security of “God’s hand.” Trial and temptation will overwhelm and destroy the saint who fails to utilize the God-given escape route. While Paul does not teach that Christians certainly **will** apostatize so as to be lost, he most certainly teaches (as do the Scriptures throughout) that we **can** so fall.

These Doctrines as Taught by Change Agents

We come now to a great irony. Our spiritual ancestors have fought hardly any heresies more consistently or energetically over the past almost two centuries in striving to advance primitive Christianity. They correctly perceived the following:

1. Calvinism held the multitude of Protestant denominational devotees in its grip through the creeds and church manuals in which it was firmly imbedded.
2. This system of theology was diametrically opposed to New Testament doctrine on every major point, distorting the nature of both God and man and mutilating the scheme of redemption through Christ in the Gospel.

Faithful Gospel preachers have engaged adherents of Calvinism in scores, if not hundreds, of public oral debates over the years. The number of books, tracts, and articles published and the number of sermons preached demonstrating the fallacy of this harsh and ungodly theology is incalculable. The numerical growth of the kingdom could for decades be charted almost in direct proportion to the public exposure of this heresy.

Here is the irony: In the past third of a century a class of journalists, preachers, and professors has arisen among us who can correctly be called “Neo-Calvinists.” They have decided that Augustine and Calvin knew more about the Gospel than Paul the apostle of Christ! The influences of Calvinism on some of our leftist brethren that particularly relate to the doctrines of election and apostasy are centered in their new mantra of *grace-only-salvation* emphasis.

The first inklings of this phenomenon began to be heard in the early 1960s. Some began to charge that Gospel preachers had overemphasized the **plan** of Christ (e.g., the conditions of

pardon, the pattern for the church, the positive and negative commands of the Law of Christ, et al.) while under emphasizing the **Man**, Christ Himself (e.g., His perfect life of good works, His traits of kindness, willingness to suffer for righteousness' sake, empathy for those who suffered, et al.). (These critics seemed somehow oblivious to his repeated debates with the Pharisees and Sadducees and the forthright and sometimes scathing language He used in His rebukes of them!).

This charge was a "straw man" that, in the very nature of the case, was unprovable. About the same time came the accusation that we had been harsh, negative, condemnatory, dogmatic, and self-righteous in our preaching and teaching efforts. A few years of the aforementioned charges (emanating from certain preachers, college classrooms, and some upstart liberal journals) prepared an opening for the next charges: "We have neglected grace," "We do not understand grace," and "We do not even believe in salvation by grace, but salvation by works." The next logical step was for some to begin overemphasizing grace while simultaneously disparaging law, commands, and works.

As early as 1932 a brother by the name of K.C. Moser began advocating the Calvinistic dichotomy between grace and law, arguing that they are mutually exclusive, which position he emphasized more fully in 1957.¹⁰ He was, however, ahead of his time for any wide acceptance of his theme. But by the beginning of the last decade of the twentieth century, the climate among brethren was sufficiently prepared that some could boldly begin trumpeting the theme of "salvation by grace alone" after the manner of Calvinism (and doubtless because of Calvinistic influences, whether consciously or unconsciously).

Consider the following examples: In 1990 Rubel Shelly wrote the following: "It is a scandalous and outrageous lie to teach that salvation arises from human activity. We do not contribute one whit to our salvation."¹¹ This is an unmistakable reflection of Calvin's insistence that God exclusively—with no human effort or inclination whatsoever—initiates the sinner's salvation. Remember, Calvin's system mandates that God's grace is utterly unconditional from the viewpoint of man's activity.

In 1991 Shelly added the following:

"My salvation is on grace alone. Not by anything I've added to it. He didn't do 98% of it and I have to add 2%.... And, no, I'm not going to debate anybody on the theory of whether salvation is by grace or by grace alone; because the Bible just makes that too plain."¹²

It is not merely an allegation, but a fact, that Shelly is teaching salvation by grace alone apart from human effort or work.

But he is not by himself. Read on. Denny Boultinghouse, editor of *Image* magazine, must have heard Shelly's July 1991 speech at the Nashville Jubilee and been greatly influenced by it. He wrote the following in an editorial a few months later: "To say that we are saved by Christ's work **plus** our work is to suggest that the work of Christ at the cross was inadequate. To say that God does 99% and we do 1% undermines what Christ did at the cross."¹³ (So he forgot the percentages Shelly used; we are all human.)

Bill Love spouted unadulterated "grace only" Calvinism in the following statements: "Salvation is not a human achievement but the free gift of God.... Can you see that there is absolutely nothing you can do to heal our alienation?" He goes on to say that "...what man should do for salvation [is] secondary."¹⁴

These are but a few samples of many such statements that have become a prevailing theme of liberals in the church. They would like for us to think that these are ideas they have recently discovered in the New Testament. Hardly so. These brethren, in their anti-works, antinomian, grace-only dictum, are parroting John Calvin's platform of unconditional election. If these brethren are consistent they will have to dispense with faith, repentance, confession, and baptism as unnecessary and ineffective deeds on the part of men who seek salvation. It is likely that some have already reached this point.

The subject of apostasy and its counterpart, perseverance, has also become one on which liberal brethren are becoming increasingly bold. The "umbrella of grace" idea, whereby whatever a Christian does is "automatically" forgiven, is simply a version of Calvinistic perseverance. Two statements from contemporary preachers who have a well-earned reputation for their radical liberalism will suffice. In his Nashville Jubilee speech of 1993, Shelly said the following: "The father has chosen; the Son has executed a redemption plan; the Spirit of God is guaranteeing that, by his power working in you, you're gonna [sic.] get where you're wanting to go."¹⁵ (We recoil at the "slanguage" certain liberal preachers favor, apparently in an effort to be "hip" so as to relate to young folk.) Notice that Shelly advances the idea that the Holy Spirit will **guarantee** your arrival in Heaven! This can hardly be harmonized with the numerous statements on this subject from Paul cited earlier.

Calvin Warpula argued that those who use instrumental music in worship (particularly those in the Independent Christian Church) would not go to Hell for so doing. The ground of his argument was as follows:

We have also discovered grace and know its need in our own lives. If we deny grace to other brethren over some mistakes they make [a reference to ICC folk and their use of instruments,

DM], then we deny grace to ourselves. In that case, none of us could be saved eternally for no one is without sin, error, or fault in some moral, doctrinal, or behavioral situations.¹⁶

According to Warpula (even if he counts the use of the instrument in worship sinful) one does not have to confess or repent of sins in order to be forgiven. He argues this on the grounds of grace that provides “automatic forgiveness.” This being so, we are perplexed concerning how anyone who is a child of God could be lost. Thus we see the doctrine of **Calvin** Warpula agrees with the doctrine of John **Calvin** in respect to perseverance!

Conclusion

A pair of doctrines more absurd, ridiculous, and patently and obviously anti-Scriptural than Calvin’s doctrines of election and perseverance could hardly be imagined. It is one of the great mysteries of all time that so many millions of people who have had ready access to the Bible have been deceived by them over so many centuries!

There is really no practical need for the first five books of the New Testament if the Calvinistic doctrine of election is true. These books are intended to (1) establish the Sonship and Saviorhood of Jesus of Nazareth, (2) record how God sent His Son to die for man’s salvation, and (3) reveal through precept and example how men may respond in faith and obedience and be saved. Calvinistic predestination and election make all of this information unnecessary and unhelpful. The written Word and man’s response to it have absolutely nothing to do with effecting man’s election according to Calvinists.

There is likewise no place for Romans through Revelation if Calvin’s system is true. These documents were all written to teach the elect how to live so as to please God and to encourage them to live in harmony with those teachings. However, per Calvinism, it makes no difference how one lives. If one is elect he cannot be lost, and if he is non-elect, he cannot be saved.

People are willing to believe almost anything in religion—as long as it is not in the Bible. It is amazing enough that so many millions in the “believing world” at large have been led to believe such a Biblically bankrupt doctrinal system. Even more amazing is the fact that some of our brethren have now fallen into this same trap. “Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall” (I Cor. 10:12).

Endnotes

1. Quoted from Ben A. Warburton, *Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1955), p. 84.
2. *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (containing *The Confession of Faith*, *The Catechisms*, and *The Directory for the Worship of God*: together with *The Plan of Government and Discipline* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1839 [adopted, amended by the Presbyteries, and ratified by the General Assembly, 1821–35]), pp. 179–180, 95–97.

3. All Scripture quotations are from the American Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.
4. Joseph Henry Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (New York, NY: Harper and Brothers, 1889 rep.), pp. 196–197. Also, for an exhaustive discussion of this word family see Gerhard Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1981 rep.), 4:144–192.
5. Thayer, p. 67.
6. William Woodson, “Calvinism,” in *God’s Amazing Grace* (Memphis, TN: Getwell Church of Christ, 1995), p. 210.
7. As quoted by Robert Shank, *Elect in the Son* (Springfield, MO: Westcott Pub., 1990), p. 47.
8. Shank, p. 48.
9. It is my conviction that Paul is the inspired writer of the Hebrews epistle, although I realize that some do not so believe.
10. K.C. Moser, *The Way of Salvation* (Delight, AR: Gospel Light Pub. Co., 1932), pp. 39, 44, 50. Also see K.C. Moser, *The Gist of Romans* (Delight, AR: Gospel Light Pub. Co., 1957), pp. xi, 17.
11. Rubel Shelly, “Arbeit Mact Frei” in *Love Lines*, Woodland Hills Church of Christ (10/31/90). The elders of the Knight Arnold Church of Christ, Memphis, TN, challenged Shelly to defend this statement in public debate with Garland Elkins. He refused.
12. Shelly, from transcription of taped speech at “Nashville Jubilee” (1991), as quoted by William Woodson, *Change Agents and Churches of Christ* (Athens, AL: School of Bible Emphasis, 1994), p. 236.
13. Denny Boultinghouse, “100% Grace” in *Image* (11-12/91), p. 4, as quoted by Dennis Gullede, “A Christian Can Fall from Grace” in *God’s Amazing Grace* (Memphis, TN: Getwell Church of Christ, 1995), p. 226.
14. Bill Love, *The Core Gospel: On Restoring the Crux of the Matter* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1992), pp. 31–32, 48, 71–72, 142, as quoted in Curtis A. Cates, *The “Core/Bull’s Eye Gospel” Concept Refuted* (Memphis, TN: Cates Pub., 1994), p. 75.
15. Woodson, *Change Agents*, p. 234.
16. Woodson, *Change Agents*, pp. 282–283.

[**Note:** I wrote this MS for and presented a digest of it orally in two lectures at the Memphis School of Preaching Lectures, Memphis, TN, March 31–April 4, 1996. It was published in the book of the lectures, *The Apostle Paul—Great Soldier of the Cross*, ed. Curtis A. Cates (Memphis, TN: Memphis School of Preaching, 1996).]