

## “The Problem of Jesus!”

John 6:16-59

December 7, 2008

Dr. Jerry Nelson

### Appendices:

- p. 15 Spurgeon’s Testimony from sermon June 25, 1861
- p. 16 A.W. Pink on the Initial and Continuing “Feeding” on Jesus.
- p. 16 Free Will from *Grace Unknown* by Sproul
- p. 17 John Piper from a sermon delivered on Nov 3, 2002
- p. 19 What is Election? By Sam Storms

### Jesus is a problem!

In fact, it seems that Jesus is the problem for most people who call themselves religious or spiritual.

- They like the idea of God as long as they get to define what God is like.
- And they like the idea of religion or spirituality as long as they determine what their religion or spirituality demands.

But when Jesus starts defining God and life, it gets sticky.

Even many who call themselves Christians don’t like the exclusive language Jesus uses to describe himself as the only way to God.

But Jesus continually makes himself the issue.

And he keeps on forcing the question of how you respond to **him**.

### **Listen to Jesus in John 6:25-59 (READ or VIDEO)**

Author Stephen Neill of England wrote of an encounter he had some years after World War II.

He was sitting in a cafe on the bank of the Rhine River visiting some German friends.

One of those friends had been a diplomat in Hitler's government and had risen to a high rank.

The man was reminiscing that evening and commented that he knew Hitler well and many people made the great mistake of underestimating him.

The man said, "You could lead me blindfolded through ten rooms and I could tell you without error in which room the Fuhrer was standing.

There was an electric power that sparked out of him.

He added, "If you have to deal with a man like that you have only three choices: Either you give up politics and retire to the country OR you sell yourself out to him body and soul OR you 'bump him off.'"

Stephen Neill then wrote, "If you are confronted with Jesus Christ there is no country in which you can escape him, the choices then are not three but only two." (*The Supremacy of Jesus*, 22)

When it comes to Jesus, you must either sell yourself out to him body and soul or pretend he doesn't exist.

The idea of believing he exists but not embracing him and humbly bowing to his authority in life is both logically inconsistent and eternally damning.

"What are you doing with Jesus?" is the question.

Either we receive him into our lives so that he is the source of our lives, the purpose of our lives and the destination of our lives or what we believe about him is false and worthless.

Last week, with Pastor Dan, you looked at what John, the author of this gospel, called the miraculous sign of Jesus multiplying five loaves and two fish into more than enough to feed 5000 men, probably plus the women and children.

At the end of that text John told us: John 6:14-15 "After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, 'Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world.'"<sup>15</sup> Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself."

Back in verse 4 we were told that this whole incident and the discussion that followed took place when “The Jewish Passover Feast was near.”

Passover celebrated Israel’s miraculous escape from Egypt under the leadership of Moses.

Central to that escape was the sacrifice of a lamb whose blood was smeared over the doors of the homes of the Israelites.

When the angel of death came through in judgment, it passed over those people who had trusted God enough to place the blood of the sacrifice on their homes.

Later, in our text today, Jesus will allude to that sacrifice when he refers to himself as the sacrifice for the world.

In the context of Passover, there would also be discussion of the Manna God provided for the Israelites as they marched through the desert after leaving Egypt.

So when Jesus fed them miraculously, the people quite probably had in mind Moses’ statement in Deuteronomy 18:15 “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet **like me** from among your own brothers. You must listen to him.”

Excited by the prospect that Jesus was that prophet or possibly even the Messiah, the crowd went searching for Jesus the next day.

The night before, while Jesus went off to pray, the disciples got in boats and began to return to other side of the Sea of Galilee.

It was during the night, as they fought a storm to get to their destination, that they saw Jesus walking on the water.

While we don’t know for certain why John included that event in his gospel, one thing is certain, it would have made a deep impression on the disciples – adding to their understanding of his deity.

And when the crowd, that had been fed the day before, found Jesus we heard Jesus interpreting what had happened the day before – the rest of

chapter 6 uses the miraculous feeding to make the points Jesus wants to make.

It begins with Jesus responding to the crowd with a rather confrontational statement:

Verse 26 “Jesus answered, ‘I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, **not because** you saw miraculous signs **but because** you ate the loaves and had your fill.’”

As we have heard, most of this crowd didn’t get it and wouldn’t get it!

They saw Jesus as possibly the means to their desire ends, food and political liberation from the Romans, but they didn’t see him or want him for who he truly was.

In just a minute Jesus will say in verse 36 “But as I told you, you have seen me and still you do not believe.”

For this and other reasons, I don’t think the crowd is Jesus’ primary audience here.

Now clearly he’s speaking to the crowd, but I think he says these things because of what he wants his disciples to hear.

And included among his disciples would be any in the crowd whom God was drawing to himself.

And so Jesus continues in verses 27-29 “Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will **give** you. On him God the Father has placed his seal of approval.<sup>28</sup> Then they asked (Jesus), “What must we do to do the works God requires?”<sup>29</sup> Jesus answered, “The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.”

**The first thing Jesus wants them to accept as true is the gift of Jesus!**

Jesus will say to his disciples, and the others who would come, that a relationship with God comes as a **gift** through trusting Jesus.

It does not come by earning it.

Now that may be a common theme to many of you but you must remember that Jesus’ disciples were learning.

And this idea was contrary to everything they previously thought and the world still thinks.

Tim Keller has written in his excellent book, *The Reason for God*, “Most people in our culture believe that, if there is a God, we can relate to him and go to heaven through leading a good life. Let’s call this the ‘moral improvement’ view. Christianity teaches the very opposite. In the Christian understanding, Jesus does not tell us how to live so we can **merit** salvation. Rather, he comes to forgive and save us through his life and death **in our place**. God’s grace does not come to people who morally outperform others, but to those who admit their failure to perform and who acknowledge their need for a savior.” (Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God*, 19)

Jesus’ disciples, and others who would come to Jesus, must accept this truth.

God does not accept people for being better than others; He accepts only those who accept Jesus and his righteousness as an unearned gift.

Later through the Apostle Paul, God would say, Titus 3:5-7/ Romans 3:22 “He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.” “This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.”

Now the crowd seems to understand that Jesus is saying something about his uniqueness and so they want him to do something to further prove who he is.

In essence they ask, “Can you out-perform Moses?”

Look at verses 30-31 “So they asked him, “What miraculous sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do?

<sup>31</sup> Our forefathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written: ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’”

They are comparing Jesus to Moses but they are not thinking about embracing Jesus, they are thinking, “What have you done for us lately?”

And so Jesus presses his point.

Verses 32-33 “Jesus said to them, ‘I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. <sup>33</sup> For the bread of God is **he** who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.’”

Yes, Jesus fed them but the real food they need, the “true bread” they need is from heaven; it is given by God and **it is a person**, the person who has come down from heaven.

And how do the people respond?

Verse 34 “Sir,” they said, “from now on give us this bread.”

I can’t believe they don’t understand that Jesus is speaking metaphorically.

So I think their response is disingenuous, even sarcastic.

But Jesus pushes the point even further.

Verse 35 “Then Jesus declared, “I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.”

**So the second thing Jesus wants them to understand is the Necessity of Jesus.**

**Jesus is teaching his disciples, and those others who will come, that this life which he offers comes only through receiving him.**

He is the source of life and only through coming to him and believing him do we receive that life.

The world hates Christians for claiming exclusive access to God.

Doesn’t Jesus do the same?

Later Jesus will say verse 53 “I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, **you have no life in you.**”

Could any statement of exclusivity be clearer?

Later in John 14:6 Jesus would say it this clearly, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

Or as the Bible would declare it later in Acts 4:12 “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.”

Some may not like the doctrine, but they must admit the Bible clearly teaches that Jesus alone is the way to God.

To his disciples and all who would come, Jesus is declaring that:

- He alone is the way whereby people have access to God.
- He alone is the true truth about God.
- He alone is the source of eternal life.
- He alone is the one we can trust through the mysteries and injustices of life.
- He alone is the one who puts the stories of our lives into the story of God and gives our lives purpose and destination.

I can't imagine trying to convince myself of any purpose in life, any justice in life, any future in life if I thought my story was all there was.

It is my life in the context of the far bigger and eternal thing that God is doing that gives me purpose and hope.

The Necessity of Jesus!

**The third thing we see in this encounter is the Initiative of Jesus.**

There are a lot of things I don't know but there is one thing of which I am certain.

I do not have a relationship with God through Jesus because I am better or smarter than those who don't.

I now realize that apart from the grace of God I would never trust Jesus. Even though reared in a Christian home and church, I would have continued on my own way, probably feigning and faking a faith but in actuality living for myself **if God had not taken the initiative** and rescued me from myself.

Verses 37-45, “All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away.<sup>38</sup> For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me.<sup>39</sup> And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day.<sup>40</sup> For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day...”<sup>44</sup> **No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him**, and I will raise him up at the last day.<sup>45</sup> It is written in the Prophets: ‘They will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me.

I believe Jesus wanted his disciples to hear that the difference between their belief and the crowd’s unbelief was not due to the disciples being smarter or better but was due to God’s gracious actions.

The Bible says in Ephesians 1:4-5 “For (God) **chose** us in (Jesus) before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he **predestined** us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will...”

And later in Ephesians 2:1-5 “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins,<sup>2</sup> in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.<sup>3</sup> All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.<sup>4</sup> But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy,<sup>5</sup> **made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions**—it is by grace you have been saved.

Jesus told Nicodemus, “You must be born again!”

Nicodemus couldn’t possibly understand what Jesus was teaching; he couldn’t possibly trust Jesus unless the Spirit of God caused him to be born again so that he might believe.

Oh, disciple of Jesus, do you see it?

- Is your heart filled with gratitude?
- Do you bow in humility and thanksgiving?
- God has invaded your life!

- God has drawn you to himself.
- You were spiritually dead and incapable of responding to Jesus except to refuse him.
- In fact, like the crowd in front of Jesus, you were hell-bent on having your own way.

Remember, no one will go to hell against his or her will.

As C.S. Lewis reminded us, at the judgment will be those who said to God, “Thy will be done,” and those to whom God will say, “Thy will be done.” (The Great Divorce, 69)

Hell is locked from the inside.

So what turned the disciples around; what causes us to believe?

Jesus said this is the way the OT prophets described it: Verse 45 “It is written in the Prophets: ‘They will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me.

Jesus will describe it this way in John 16:8 “When he (the Spirit) comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment...”

In the 17<sup>th</sup> Century the Reformers captured it beautifully with these words which I have quoted recently in another context:

“Effective calling is the work of God’s Spirit by which convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, he both persuades and enables us to embrace Jesus Christ as he is offered to us in the gospel.”

Some will say that this initiating, compelling work of God contradicts free will.

They ask, “Suppose someone doesn’t want to come?”

Charles Spurgeon responded: “I cannot suppose any such thing, for He says they “shall come.” They shall be made willing in the day of God’s power. God knows how to make a passage through the heart of man; and though man is a free agent, yet God can incline him, willingly, to come to Jesus. (C. Spurgeon, June 25, 1861)

Again from Spurgeon, “Others, of their own accord, stubbornly refuse the mercy to which the whole world of mankind is invited. All men, by nature, refuse the invitations of the gospel. God, in the sovereignty of His grace, makes a difference by secretly inclining the hearts of some men, by the power of His Holy Spirit, to partake of His everlasting mercy in Christ Jesus. I am certain that, whether we are Calvinists or Arminians, if our hearts are right with God, we shall all adoringly testify: “We love Him, because He first loved us.” ( C. Spurgeon, June 25, 1861)

Praise God he took the initiative!

You who do not yet trust Jesus, do you feel the resistance of your own self-will but at the same time find yourself attracted to this Jesus?

If you do, that is God wooing you, calling you to himself.

### **Now the fourth thing we see is The Assurance of Jesus.**

John 6:37-45, “All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. <sup>38</sup> For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. <sup>39</sup> And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. <sup>40</sup> For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day...” <sup>44</sup> “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day.

And he will say it again in John 6:54 “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.”

Do you hear the assurance Jesus gives? Do you hear the promise?

Romans 8:28-30 “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. <sup>29</sup> For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. <sup>30</sup> And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified... <sup>38</sup>. For I am convinced that neither death nor

life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, <sup>39</sup> neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

There is nothing that gives me greater reason to go on in a world that is filled with violence and injustice, poverty and disease, and uncertainties and calamities than the sure knowledge that this life is **not** all there is.

Jesus is coming again and he has promised that he will guard and keep us to the very end.

The Father has given us to him, he has drawn us to himself, he has wooed us and we have believed.

Again hear what Jesus said in verse 40 “My Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.”

Believer, can any truth be more precious?

You who have not yet responded to him, can you see it – Jesus is trustworthy – come to him and he will never leave you or forsake you.

**The last thing I want you to see is Our Response to Jesus.**

Listen to Jesus’ strong words: John 6:51-58 “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone **eats** of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world... <sup>53</sup> I tell you the truth, unless you **eat** the flesh of the Son of Man and **drink** his blood, you have no life in you. <sup>54</sup> Whoever **eats** my flesh and **drinks** my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. <sup>55</sup> For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. <sup>56</sup> Whoever **eats** my flesh and **drinks** my blood remains in me, and I in him. <sup>57</sup> Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who **feeds** on me will live because of me. <sup>58</sup> This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your forefathers ate manna and died, but he who **feeds** on this bread will live forever.”

Unless you are a cannibal, it is quite clear that Jesus is using this language metaphorically.

Just one comparison makes this very clear:

Verse 40 Jesus said, “Everyone who **looks to the Son** and **believes in him** shall **have eternal life**, and I will **raise him up at the last day**.”

Now listen to the words he uses to describe the same results in verse 54 “Whoever **eats my flesh** and **drinks my blood** has **eternal life**, and I will **raise him up at the last day**.”

Before I try to show you from the text what Jesus means by these words, it might be useful to acknowledge that these words make many people think of the Lord’s Supper.

- Later Jesus would take bread and say “This is my body.”
- And he would take the cup and say, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood.”

And we eat the bread and drink the wine.

But we don’t believe the bread and wine become flesh and blood but that they represent the body and blood of Jesus.

If John, the author of this gospel, had meant for these words of Jesus to be an explanation of the Lord’s Supper, it is more than telling that John does not even include the account of Jesus instituting the Lord’s Supper.

No, we do not believe John is here describing the Lord’s Supper.

We think that New Testament scholar Colin Brown captured the relationship between this passage and the Lord’s Supper best when he wrote, “**John 6 is not about the Lord’s Supper; rather the Lord’s Supper is about what is described in this chapter.**” (Colin

Brown, cited in Carson, 280)

So if Jesus here was not describing the Lord’s Supper, what was he describing?

Using many different words and metaphors Jesus was describing the response he calls for, from us.

Even many today will say, “I believe in Jesus,” or “I accepted Jesus into my heart.”

Or some who will say, “I accept him every time I take communion, the Eucharist, the Lord’s Supper.”

All those responses are indications they think they have met the minimum requirement for being accepted by God.

But let’s go back and review the words Jesus uses:

6:29 “**believe** in the one (the Father) as sent.

6:35 “I am the bread of life. He who **comes** to me will never go hungry, and he who **believes in me** will never be thirsty

6:37 “All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever **comes to me** I will never drive away.

6:40 “For my Father’s will is that everyone who **looks to the Son and believes in him** shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.”

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

6:45 “It is written in the Prophets: ‘They will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who **listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me**.

6:47 “I tell you the truth, he who **believes** has everlasting life.

6:54 Whoever **eats my flesh and drinks my blood** has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. <sup>55</sup> For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink.

6:57 “so **the one who feeds on me** will live because of me.

All of these words are used by Jesus to describe the response he calls for.

This is not just mental agreement that Jesus existed or even agreement that he died for sins and rose again from the dead, though those are necessary prerequisites.

The response Jesus calls for is to:

accept him, trust him, believe him,  
embrace him, draw him into our lives, follow him,  
obey him, engage him, remain in him,  
make him the center of our lives, the reason for living,

the arbiter of every decision, the very Lord of our lives.

It is to make him a part of us as much as the food we eat becomes part of us.

It is to continually feed on him as much as we continually need food and drink; it is to learn from him, talk with him, and respond to him.

Jesus is describing the closest of possible relationships.

That is the response Jesus calls for.

That is what “receiving” and “believing” Jesus mean.

Are you believing him?

The Gift of Jesus – unearned Grace.

The Necessity of Jesus – without him we cannot know God or life.

The Initiative of Jesus – He works in us and moves us to follow him.

The Assurance of Jesus – He will never fail us.

Our Response to Jesus.

It is all about him.

Will I learn about him, trust him, and embrace him;

Will I be loyal to him, obey him and follow him?

Are you? Will you?

**Permission:** You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that you do not alter the wording in any way and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. For web posting, a link to this document on our website is preferred. Any exceptions to the above must be approved by [SoundLiving.org](http://SoundLiving.org).

## Additional Notes:

### Spurgeon's Testimony from sermon June 25, 1861

"Why was I made to hear His voice,  
And enter while there's room;  
When thousands make a wretched choice,  
And rather than come?

"'Twas the same love the spread the feast,  
**That sweetly forced me in;**  
Else I had still refused to taste,  
And perish'd in my sin."

Yes, "sweetly forced me in;"--there is no other word that can so accurately describe my case. Oh, how long Jesus Christ stood at the door of my heart, and knocked, and knocked, and knocked in vain! I asked: "Why should I leave the pleasures of this world?" Yet still He knocked, and there was music in every sound of His pleading voice; but I said, "Nay, let Him go elsewhere." And though, through the window, I could see His thorn-crowned head, and the tears standing in His eyes, and the prints of the nails in His hands, as He stood and knocked, and said, "Open to Me," yet I heeded Him not. Then He sent my mother to me, and she pleaded, "let the Saviour in, Charlie;" and I replied, in action, though not in words, "Nay, I love thee, my mother; but I do not love Christ, thy Saviour." Then came the black hours of sickness; but in effect I said, "Nay, I fear not sickness, nor death itself; I will still defy my Maker." But it happened, one day, that He graciously put in His hand by the hole of the door, and I moved toward Him, and then I opened the door, and cried, "Come in! Come in!" Alas! alas! He was gone; and for five long years I stood, with tears in mine eyes, and I sought Him weeping, but I found Him not. I cried after Him, but He answered me not. I said, "Whither is He gone? Oh, that I had never rejected Him? Oh, that He would but come again!" Surely the angels must then have

said, "A great change has come over that youth; he would not let Christ in when He knocked, but now he wants Christ to come." And when He did come, do you think my soul rejected Him? Nay, nay; but I fell down at His feet, crying, "Come in! Come in! thou Blessed Saviour. I have waited for Thy salvation, O my God!"

### **A.W. Pink on the Initial and Continuing “Feeding” on Jesus.**

"Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day" (John 6:54). Notice the change in the tense of the verb. In the previous verse it is, "Except ye eat"; here it is "whoso eateth." In the former, the verb is in the aorist tense, implying a single act, an act done once for all. In the latter, the verb is in the perfect tense, denoting that which is continuous and characteristic. Verse 53 defines the difference between one who is lost and one who is saved. In order to be saved, I must "eat" the flesh and "drink" the blood of the Son of man; that is, I must appropriate Him, make Him mine by an act of faith. This act of receiving Christ is done once for all. I cannot receive Him a second time, for He never leaves me! But, having received Him to the saving of my soul, I now feed on Him constantly, daily, as the Food of my soul. Exodus 12 supplies us with an illustration. First, the Israelite was to apply the shed blood of the slain lamb. Then, as protected by that blood, he was to feed on the lamb itself. A.W. Pink from his commentary on John

### **Free Will**

We all know that we have the ability to make choices. We call that freedom or free will. But if we investigate the concept a little more carefully, we understand there are limitations to our free will. We usually define free will as the ability to choose with absolute indifference – under no compulsion of any kind (internal or external). This would suggest that the human will is “inclined to neither good nor evil but it exists in a state of moral neutrality.” But that is contrary to what the Bible teaches. The Bible

says we are not morally neutral, we are limited. We are influenced in our choices. The Bible says we are influenced by sin – we are captive to sin, we are dead in our sins. In fact we are influenced by the strongest inclination at the moment. R.C. Sproul illustrates it this way: We want to lose weight and decide to diet. We do well until hunger becomes a stronger inclination than our desire to lose weight. We choose based on inclination. (ibid) We are free to make choices but our choices are limited. Think of it this way: Does God have free will? Of course, he does. God is totally free. But even God is limited; he is morally unable to sin. He is free, but only for goodness. He has no desire or inclination to sin. And yet we would say he is totally free. So it is with the unregenerate, the non-Christian. He is totally free to do what he is capable of. And the Bible says that he is incapable of doing anything righteous. And judged by God's holy standard, the unsaved person is able only to sin. He is free but only within the bounds of his moral nature. Yes we have free will, freedom, but only within the range of options available to us. The non-Christian is not free to follow God, nor does he want to. It will take the supernatural intervention of God's Spirit through regeneration and effectual calling to give the non-Christian the ability to believe and follow Christ. (ideas and quotes from Sproul, *Grace Unknown*, 131)

### **John Piper from a sermon delivered on Nov 3, 2002**

"When I entered seminary I believed in the freedom of my will, in the sense that it was ultimately self-determining. I had not learned this from the Bible; I absorbed it from the independent, self-sufficient, self-esteeming, self-exalting air that you and I breathe every day of our lives in America. The sovereignty of God meant that he can do anything with me that I give him permission to do. With this frame of mind I entered a class on Philippians with Daniel Fuller and class on the doctrine of salvation with James Morgan.

In Philippians I was confronted with the intractable ground clause of chapter 2 verse 13: "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling; 13 for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure," which made God the will beneath my will and the worker beneath my work. The question was not whether I had a will; the question

was why I willed what I willed. And the ultimate answer – not the only answer – was God.

In the class on salvation we dealt head on with the doctrines of unconditional election and irresistible grace. Romans 9 was the watershed text and the one that changed my life forever. Romans 9:11-12 said, "Though they [Jacob and Esau] were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad – in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of his call – she was told, 'The older will serve the younger.'" And when Paul raised the question in verse 14, "Is there injustice on God's part?" He says, no, and quotes Moses (in verse 15): "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." And when he raises the question in verse 19, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" He answers in verse 21, "Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honored use and another for dishonorable use?" Emotions run high when you feel your man-centered world crumbling around you. I met Dr. Morgan in the hall one day. After a few minutes of heated argument about the freedom of my will, I held a pen in front of his face and dropped it to the floor. Then I said, with not as much respect as a student ought to have, "I [!] dropped it." Somehow that was supposed to prove that my choice to drop the pen was not governed by anything but my sovereign self.

But thanks be to God's mercy and patience, at the end of the semester I wrote in my blue book for the final exam, "Romans 9 is like a tiger going about devouring free-willers like me." That was the end of my love affair with human autonomy and the ultimate self-determination of my will. My worldview simply could not stand against the scriptures, especially Romans 9. And it was the beginning of a lifelong passion to see and savor the supremacy of God in absolutely everything."

## What is Election?

By Sam Storms

Divine election is certainly one of the more profound and controversial doctrines in Holy Scripture. To some it is an idea conceived in hell, a tool of Satan wielded by him to thwart the evangelistic zeal of the church and thus responsible for populating hell with men and women who otherwise would have been reached with the gospel message. To others divine election is the heart and soul of Scripture, the most comforting and reassuring of biblical truths apart from which grace loses its power and God his glory. To the former, then, election is a primary reason why people are in hell. To the latter, it is the only reason why people are in heaven!

Much of the disagreement and most of the animosity concerning this doctrine proceeds from a fundamental misunderstanding of what it means. Our analysis of divine election must, therefore, begin with an attempt to clarify precisely what is at stake and, at the same time, correct misrepresentations of it.

When I am asked, and I am asked often, “Sam, are you a Calvinist?”, I immediately respond with a request of my own, “Tell me what you mean by ‘Calvinist’. Then I’ll tell you if I’m one!” Often the person then defines “Calvinism” as a rigid, fatalistic system of theology, devoid of life and joy, in which God is portrayed as a celestial bully who takes sadistic glee in sending people to hell whether they deserve it or not. “If *that* is what you mean by ‘Calvinist’, then I most assuredly am *not* one!”

The problem is that Arminians often run into an equally distressing caricature of their own position. Sadly, many Calvinists think of Arminianism as an intellectually flabby, overly sentimental view of the Christian faith that borders on liberalism, if not universalism. The “God” of Arminianism, I once heard someone sarcastically say, is actually “man” spoke of in a very loud voice. I hope these studies will go a long way in dispelling such unkind and terribly misleading caricatures of what people really believe.

Whereas much may and will be said of election in these studies, the point of dispute is surprisingly simple. No one who believes in the Bible

disputes the fact that election is taught there. It isn't the reality of election, or even its source, author, time, or goal that has elicited so much venom among professing Christians. It is rather the basis of divine election, that is to say, why and on what grounds some are elected to salvation and life and others are not. There are essentially only three options, the first of which is more pagan than Christian.

First, it has been argued that God elects those who are good. In this view, election is a debt God is obliged to pay, not a gift he graciously bestows. It is on the basis of inherent or self-generated righteousness that God elects men and women. This is the doctrine of Pelagianism, named after the British monk Pelagius who popularized the view in the fifth century. One would be hard-pressed to find an advocate of this perspective within the professing Christian church.

Second, others contend that God elects some who are bad who, notwithstanding their being bad, choose to exercise faith in Jesus Christ. It is on the basis of this *foreseen faith* that God elects them. This is the doctrine of Arminianism, named after the Dutch theologian James Arminius (1560-1609). It has also been called Wesleyanism because of the influence of John Wesley.

Third, there is the view that God elects some who are bad who, because of their being bad, are not of themselves able to exercise faith in Christ. It is on the basis of his own sovereign good pleasure that God elects them. This is the doctrine of Calvinism, named after the French theologian John Calvin (1509-1564).

We are concerned with the latter two options. The question reduces to this: Does God elect people because they believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, or does God elect people in order that they shall believe in Christ? Jack W. Cottrell, an Arminian, is to be complimented for acknowledging that this is in fact the issue separating Calvinists and Arminians. "The Calvinistic mind," says Cottrell, "sees election as bringing about the transition from unbelief to belief, hence making unbelievers the object of election. The Arminian says that this transition is made by a free act of will; election then is an act of God directed toward the believer after the transition has been made" (Jack W. Cottrell, "Conditional Election," in *Grace Unlimited*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock [Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship,

1975], p. 72). Perhaps the most cogent recent exposition of Arminianism, particularly in its view of God, providence, and predestination, is Cottrell's work, *What the Bible Says About God the Ruler* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1984). The article cited, "Conditional Election," has been revised and included in this more recent work in the chapter "Predestination," pp. 331-52.

**Thus the Calvinist says that God elects unbelievers and predestines them to become believers. The Arminian, on the other hand, says that God elects believers and predestines them to become his children.**

The issue is not whether there is a cause or basis of God's choice of people, but whether that cause is some condition (faith) fulfilled by an individual acting from free will or the sovereign good pleasure of God. Does God elect a person because that person wants God, or does God elect a person because God wants that person in spite of the fact that the person does not want God? We are not disputing whether faith and repentance are necessary for salvation. Indeed, one may even speak of faith and repentance as the *condition* for salvation, in the sense that one must believe and repent in order to be saved. The question, rather, is this: Are faith and repentance produced by free will and thus the cause of election, or are they produced by the Holy Spirit and thus the effect of election? According to Arminianism, election is that act of God whereby he foreordains to eternal life those whom he foresees will respond in faith to the gospel. According to Calvinism, election is that act of God whereby he foreordains to eternal life those who, because of sin, cannot respond in faith to the gospel. Which of these two views is the one the Bible teaches? Or is there a third, mediating option? That is the question which I have set myself to answer in these studies.

**<http://www.enjoyinggodministries.com/article/what-is-election>**

**See the rest of the study at the above website.**