

A “POINTED” DISCUSSION ABOUT THE AMAZING GRACE OF GOD

The 5 points of Arminianism and of Calvinism. Reviewed, questioned, affirmed

Preface

I must say at the outset that the following paper was meant to be as fair and balanced as possible, giving as much Scriptural weight to one side as the other, and perhaps even leaving it to the reader to deal with the solution. While that element is still there in some measure, I must confess that, even though I was unknowingly an Arminian most of my Christian life, I have – similarly unknowingly – leaned in these last couple of years towards the findings of John Calvin, though, as you will become aware later, I never read John Calvin.

So be aware that I write much of what you will read and hear, through the lens of the verse with which I have placed on the cover of that book, a word taken not from some great theologian, but out of the mouth of a pagan emperor who had stumbled across truth in his dynamic dealings with the God of Daniel. “He does what he wills.” Whatever He wants to do, he does. He never asks me if I agree with His reasoning or logic in the matter. Not once has He consulted my feelings or opinions, my great studies and conclusions. He just does what He wants to do.

Neither was Calvin or Arminius or Augustine or Paul offered a chance to weigh in on the subject before He acted. These men are, seeing through a glass darkly, mere reporters of what they think they see. I too. He did what He wanted to do, and I’m going to try to tell you what He did, though I can never tell you why, for He has not revealed that to me. Or to you. That’s what makes His grace so amazing. There is no reason on earth why Bob should have experienced the grace of God. But there is one in Heaven. And only God knows it.

Introduction

A couple years back, I put together a study of the doctrines of grace, something I had only then discovered after a lifetime in Arminian-based churches. I’ve put it in book form and named it *He Does What He Wills*.

More recently, a listener to my regular podcast asked me to address the *five points of Calvinism*. By studying the Scriptures on this subject two years ago, I had already done that, but it seemed it might be helpful to some listeners, to address the subject with Calvinists and Arminians in mind. Although I hasten to repeat, I have never read either of these giants of the faith.

Now, by calling both men giants, I will offend all of my readers and listeners for sure. Both sides seem to be fixed in their position, and truly believe the other side to be consigned to eternal damnation, unless of course God is merciful to them at the last minute.

In fact, all of us have been consigned to eternal damnation and are dependent on His mercy and grace for our salvation. And all of that, salvation grace, has to do with trusting in the shed blood of Jesus, not which doctrinal position I cling to, on most any subject.

I do not mean to say there are two sides to this issue. When God's Word is involved, only one side is allowable on any given topic. I do mean to say that the truth of the matter is not as easy to comprehend as either side might allow. No matter which way a person goes, he is going to run into those "difficult" passages. He is going to experience the "tension" of which John MacArthur speaks. He will perhaps agree with Spurgeon who once commented to the effect that when we get to Heaven, the sign on the gate will say "whosoever will", but after entry and looking back at that same gate, we will see the words "saved from the foundation of the world."

There are elect – chosen ones -on both sides of the strife, and non-elect on both sides. The family portrait seen by the Father is not influenced by these doctrinal wars. But Light is in His Word, and we must walk in it. Then we must ask others to see what we see, joyfully, not with hammer in hand. Only slowly, very slowly, do some come to the truth. And the truth is broader than the wars allow. What if both "truths" are true after all? That is, what if there are not two sides, but one huge side that comprehends both concepts, free will and determination by God?

One thing is certain. We must all look at both sides. One never knows what truth might be lurking "over there." I'm certainly glad I took a chance.

A Little History

The dominant system of the day when all of this current conflict began, in 16th century Europe, was an unyielding Calvinism. To be outside what Calvin taught was simply to be a heretic. Anathemas were placed on the rising Arminian thought, curses that could easily compare with those afforded to Rome. As I have indicated, some of that cursing mentality persists to our own day, and is lamentable.

It might be enlightening to see how many believers in our own day have never even heard the name Jacob Arminius. I suppose some may not even know who Calvin was. Perhaps it does not matter, in one sense. I personally have never read a full book by either man, but based my growing understanding of the issue, on Scripture alone. Men are men. They regularly fail. The best of them are not 100% accurate.

Take Pelagius, for example. Pelagius? Who was that, and why bring up yet another man to cloud the issue of the doctrines of grace? Well, we must begin with Pelagius, as many who are involved in the controversy see him as the forerunner of Arminian thought, while his nemesis in that day, Augustine, they say, foreshadowed Calvinism. Many of course, including Spurgeon, want to trace Calvin's thinking to Paul, not any of the church fathers. It may be a little early in the discussion to cede that point.

Pelagius and Augustine lived in the fourth century. The former was a "British-born ascetic moralist," as Wikipedia describes him. Very scholarly. Learned in theology. Persuasive speaker. An ascetic. His studies and the conclusions thereof quite simply could not allow the concept of predestination, that God had ordained all things ahead of time, and so he presented a rationale for man's free will.

Early in his career he had been praised by Augustine as a saintly man, but when these doctrinal differences began to show, He was accused by that same contemporary, and others, of denying the need for Divine aid in performing good actions. Works theology, they said, won't work.

It seems he also denied original (Adamic) sin. He claimed, some said, that a man could keep the law without God's help. Through rigorous self-effort, a man could eventually obtain perfection. Perhaps he was misunderstood, that he did not mean to leave God out of the picture, but his emphasis on man's part in it all got him eventually declared a heretic by a church Council. His doctrine of free will, and human effort was later known as Pelagianism, and was guarded against through the centuries. It was a heresy. It was laid to rest. But not really.

Pelagius lived in a time, as do we, when moral laxity was on the rise. He blamed Augustine and other modern theologians for this situation. By believing in "grace" so strongly, Augustine, said Pelagius, was encouraging immorality to rise. Men felt they were not accountable for their actions. Of course, Augustine and the others only taught that man needs the grace of God and the implanted desire of God to do the will of God. But to Pelagius it sounded as though man was not involved at all.

Pelagius taught that the human will – created by God, of course, and hence the grace of which Scripture spoke - was sufficient to live a sinless life. God would have to "assist" man as he went along, but it was basically up to *man* as to whether he would walk with God.

There is a fine line to be drawn here, for sure. Human effort, "assisted by God" vs God placing His assistance inside of the man at the beginning of his salvation experience, that is, saving him by grace, and directing his paths in this manner. It could be very tricky trying to tell the difference in those doctrines. But one is salvation by works, and the other is salvation by grace.

So we come to the time, one thousand years later, when the division between these two systems of thought, seemed to rise again. Does man have totally free will? Can he chart his own course? Can he say no to God, even if God really wants to save him? Is man capable of living a holy life with only an “assist” by God, or does he need an infusion of grace initially and constantly?

Jacob Arminius (1559-1609) was also a very brilliant and very spiritual man, hailed by his peers as a true man of God. But slowly he began to come against some of what Calvin had been teaching. Conflicts ensued. Not with Calvin himself, for that great Reformer had passed away when Arminius was only five years old. But Calvin’s heirs were everywhere, and ready to defend everything Calvin had taught.

Arminius himself died in 1609, leaving behind him a respectable trail of followers, also. The year after his death, “five points” were presented to the church of Holland. They are as follows:

The five points of Arminianism

- Human Free Will--This states that though man is fallen, he is not incapacitated by the sinful nature and can freely choose God. His will is not restricted and enslaved by his sinful nature.
- Conditional Election--God chose people for salvation, but only based on His foreknowledge, where God looks into the future to see who will respond to the Gospel message. Knowing who says “yes”, He chooses them.
- Universal Atonement--The position that Jesus bore the sin of everyone who ever lived.
- Resistable Grace--The teaching that the grace of God can be resisted and finally beaten so as to reject salvation in Christ.
- Fall from Grace--The teaching that a person can fall from grace and lose his salvation.

This system of thought, known today as Arminianism, was popularized by the Wesleys and their movement of Methodists. And many others. The great majority of Christians in the West, think as Arminian. Though they do not know Jacob, the founder of their thought! In fairness, they too wish to trace their beginnings to the Bible.

Don’t we all?

The Five Points of Calvinism

As we said, Calvin died in 1564. But his teachings did not. The Reformation adopted much of what he said, and formed it into a system, a system which was “reaffirmed by the Synod of Dordt in 1619 as the doctrine of salvation contained in the Holy Scriptures.” (reformed.org)

And at the same time, 1619, the system was put into a more manageable order by creating five points of its own, as an answer to the Arminians.

According to Calvinism: (Per reformed.org)

“Salvation is accomplished by the almighty power of the triune God. The Father chose a people, the Son died for them, the Holy Spirit makes Christ's death effective by bringing the elect to faith and repentance, thereby causing them to willingly obey the Gospel. The entire process (election, redemption, regeneration) is the work of God and is by grace alone. Thus God, not man, determines who will be the recipients of the gift of salvation.”

Some very creative brother or sister came up with a way of remembering Calvinism's five points: An acrostic using the word “tulip.”

T is for Total Depravity (or perhaps better, Total *Inability*)

At the outset, a problem in vocabulary. *Depravity* in modern vernacular is corruption, even perversion. One thinks even of insanity, or craven decadence. Well, it can be all of that. But what was originally meant, is that sin has extended to every part of the personality. His thoughts. His emotions. His will. Sin is a pervasive disease, and some have the sickness worse than others, but all are affected. All. From birth. Nay, from conception.

Again, from reformed.org, “The unregenerate (unsaved) man is dead in his sins (Romans 5:12). Without the power of the Holy Spirit, the natural man is blind and deaf to the message of the gospel (Mark 4:11f). This is why Total Depravity has also been called “Total Inability.” The man without a knowledge of God will never come to this knowledge without God's making him alive through Christ (Ephesians 2:1-5).”

U: Unconditional Election

God chose the ones whom He would later call to Himself, based on His own will, not anything man did or decided. This means He has also chosen others for damnation (Romans 9:15-21). He did all this before there was a world (Ephesians 1:4-8)

Still, man has the responsibility of believing the Gospel. To deny this leads to what is called “hyper-Calvinism”. To deny God's sovereign choices, however, is to affirm Arminianism, that it is man who chooses to “accept” Christ.

In this system, good works are the fruit, not the root, of salvation (Ephesians 2:10).

Reformed.org: "This is what Peter means when he admonishes the Christian reader to make his "calling" and "election" sure (2 Peter 1:10). Bearing the fruit of good works is an indication that God has sown seeds of grace in fertile soil."

L: Limited Atonement (Particular Redemption)

For whom did Jesus die? Whose sins were forgiven at the cross? All men? Or all that God gave to Jesus (John 17:9)? (Matthew 26:28). Though some fear this doctrine kills motivation behind evangelism, the command of Jesus to go and preach is not affected by us not knowing who will come and who will not. The fact is, the preaching of the Gospel will call the elect, and we must keep preaching for their sakes.

We all agree that all men will not be saved, so in fact Jesus' death did not affect all men, but only the saved. The Arminian wants to have a potential salvation for all, a phenomenon the Calvinist sees as unnecessary.

I: Irresistible Grace

When the Holy Spirit calls a man by the Word of God, that man will respond. There may be a struggle, but God will win that struggle in His elect. John 6:37 makes this clear. See also John 6:44, and Romans 8:14. The most unlikely of surprises have demonstrated this awesome fact through the years!

P: Perseverance of the Saints

We trivialize this concept into "once saved, always saved," then write it off as ridiculous in the light of all the people we know who were "saved" then fell away. But Romans 8:28-39, coupled with John 6:39 speak of a God who is able to keep us to the end, if we truly were His to begin with.

Credit: This description of the Five Points of Calvinism was written originally by Jonathan Barlow but totally revised and edited by yours truly. It could be denied in some parts by various adherents of the Calvin-dom Empire. Yes, Calvinism has splintered much, even as has Arminianism. People have division in their belly, and seem to love a good fight. Others are truly searching but have only found a certain measure of the truth.

Now let's take a closer look at the five huge issues, with their sub-issues, before us, and see whether any preliminary conclusions can be made.

Importance

Before we go on, though, we must address again the importance of this study. “Does it really matter?” one might ask. Do I need this information to get to Heaven? Will being on the right side assure my place in Heaven?

Well, yes, it really matters, but no, your salvation does not depend on your knowledge of this portion of theology. Probably. I say “probably” for this reason:

If one is still drinking at the Pelagian well, and thinking that he is indeed the one responsible for his salvation, that he must work to save himself, that the blood of Jesus makes no real difference, and likewise the Spirit of Jesus, this study is extremely important! The salvation-by-works dogma is damning, and read a certain way in Arminian teaching, can destroy a man’s soul.

But if one is drinking only Christ, and His revealed Word, being filled with the one Spirit of God, growing in the grace of God, fruit will begin to be produced regardless of the presence of some imperfect teachings.

So why? A right understanding can bring confidence in one’s position in Christ. A right understanding can bring huge appreciation of Christ’s sacrifice and a resultant praise life that is enhanced. A right understanding can bring a humility of soul and an awareness of self that is the true mark of a child of God. Pursue this study. It is not going away any time soon. The church has nearly always had to struggle with this teaching. Rest not in intellectual acumen but in the simple words of Scripture. You may be surprised at what emerges.

Very importantly, it may be necessary to put aside the shouting that has come from both sides. It is hard to concentrate, reflect, listen to the still small Voice, when someone is shouting. Hear Jesus, not above, but far below all the shouts. Your soul will be refreshed.

Depravity

First then we deal with Depravity, and in this discussion, its opposite, namely free will. So how can free will be the opposite of depravity? Remember we said above that the corruption of the human race extends to all areas of a person’s life, and one of those areas is the will. Calvinism declares that man’s will has been affected so negatively that it is no longer possible for him to choose God or even good. Left to his own devices, man will always, ultimately, choose his own flesh, his own way.

I will not quote Arminius or Calvin in any of these discussions. The Scriptures can speak for themselves. Where shall we start? Why not Romans? The apostle has much to say about all this.

7:18 is in the middle of a discussion, but it seems a great place to begin: “I know that in me, that is, in my flesh, dwells no good thing.” That’s pretty plain. Sin has corrupted so badly that I can actually say that there is nothing good in me. This is a far cry from the “I’m OK, you’re OK” philosophy that inundates us today, finding its way into the church via high-sounding ideas like “self esteem” and “self worth”. Paul would have none of that because he had none of that! In his flesh was nothing good. Flesh only means

human nature. Man before God enters. There's nothing good there, folks! It's a tainted view of God, in whose image we were made. Yes there are glimpses of the original, but Paul says corruption has set in.

Has this affected the will? Paul goes on: "To will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find." So the "want-to" part of our will says yes, but the "do-it" part says no. In my dreams and wishes I am a good man. But in my efforts, I fall flat. I'm corrupt. And so are you. All of you.

The Arminians hold that the free will is not restricted and enslaved by the sinful nature. Paul says it is. I simply cannot be good. They say I can freely choose God any time I want. But the question is, why would I want, unless God has chosen me first, and come to me to advise me of the choice? Why would I want God if I am so full of self?

For me, the Spirit of God worked many ways. As I tell you about them, you will surely recall your own line of communications that brought you to Christ. Here the two camps come together. Here the grace of God is given its place in our testimony. We all start with, God did this and God did that. And this is the point. We, at first, were not seeking Him. He was seeking us. I will produce some accompanying Scriptures later.

First it was the woman across the street, mother of my childhood playmate. She saw the discouraged look I always had, and simply mentioned that I should "try God." I followed her advice, tried God in an area of my life that was needy at the time, and God came through for me. I was not "officially" saved in those days, but in the mind of God this thing had been settled for aeons.

Then came invitations to church. A local church placed a bag of groceries on our step. I was taken in by that local church for many years, and learned the basics of the faith. Still not aware of the forgiveness of my sins in any dynamic way. Then fired from the ministry of that church for believing more than they had taught me. This led me into a wilderness of searching. But as in Jesus' time in the wilderness, it was the Spirit of God who led me there. When the find came, I could never credit my search, but only the movement of the Spirit that caused the search. Then that wonderful night listening to the preacher, expecting nothing in particular. Suddenly a sorrow for sin arose from deep inside me. Many tears. Later, a joy, an assurance that God had heard and forgiven. More tears, of joy. Incredible joy.

You see how it works. Though we want to say it was that woman or that search or that preacher, we have our eyes opened to the great fisher of men who has caught another one of His chosen. I had nothing to do with it. I was caught, and loved it. This is the way of salvation. He initiates, He calls, He provides all along the way.

Arminians and Calvinists alike can enjoy this experience. I was an Arminian then and most of my life. It did not change my experience. Knowing the rest of the story now also does not change it, but causes me to enjoy it so much more.

To the testimony of Scripture again:

John 3:6. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh." (period) "That which is born of the Spirit is spirit."
Two separate births, both of which we have nothing to do with. John 6:63. It is the Spirit that gives life.

The flesh profits nothing. My flesh is corrupt and cannot un-corrupt itself. Cannot give life to itself. Cannot give birth to itself.

Ephesians 2:1-5. "You has he brought to life, who were dead..." How can you "choose God" as a dead man. He chooses you first, gives you life, and you wake up and start crying, like the new-born you are. "When we were dead... [He] made us alive..."

Romans 1-3. Paul traces the history of sin in the world, how it went from bad to worse to utter corruption, both Jew and Gentile. He concludes that only an inward work can save us, for (3:23) "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

But the very next verse states that His grace freely justifies us. What Jesus did saves us from this awful disease. Therefore (v. 28) "we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law."

Ephesians 2:8 shows the same progression of things: "For by grace you are saved through faith, and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God." Putting Romans and Ephesians together we see the whole picture. Man is dead in sin. God's grace is revealed in Christ and communicated to the believer, whose faith saves him. But is it the believer's innate faith? Does that faith originate from within carnal man?

Let's take a closer look at Ephesians 2:8. Saved by grace. Grace working through faith. "That" not of yourselves. What not of yourselves? Grace? Salvation? Faith? Commentators are all over the map on this one. And there is no way to solve it by the normal appeal to the Greek. "That" is neuter. But "grace" and "faith" and even "salvation" are all feminine. No easy connection. What is the "gift of God" of which Paul speaks.

My take is this. Paul is not saying that grace is the gift of God, I believe. Why? Grace *means* "gift". He would not repeat himself, in my opinion. It sounds to me like he is revealing an unusual truth here, but one that is consistent with other passages we will see. Grace works through your faith, but *even your faith* is not from you, but is God's gift. Hence, salvation is God, from start to finish! That would fit in with the idea of birth we explained above. There are things over which we have no control. Conception and birth are two of them!

Romans 8:8. "Those who are in the flesh cannot please God." So how can this fleshly person make a "decision" while he is still in the flesh that will bring him to Heaven? The teaching seems to be that while we were in our sins, He died for us. And while we were in our sins, He gave us life, and the ability to reach out to Him. It looked like we were making a decision for Christ, but in fact He had already done the choosing.

Romans 8:26. We do not even know how to pray as we ought! The Spirit even intercedes through us

John 6:37. "All that the Father has given to Me will come to Me. And him that comes to Me I will in no wise cast out." And John 6:44. "No man can [is able to] come to Me unless the Father Who sent Me, draws him." These are slam dunk verses. Useless trying to explain them away. You are incapable of coming to Christ on your own! If you have truly come to Christ it was because the Father found a way to draw you to Himself!

Still not convinced? Even David knew this principle: (Psalm 51:5) "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me." As he confesses his present sin, he is brought back to the origin of it all. From his very birth he had been a sinner. He had inherited what was passed down to him from Adam and Eve.

Genesis 3 records the awful story of sin's entrance. Though man was created "good" as was all else His hand made, man soon corrupted his way by yielding to the enemy. Soon after this we see animal sacrifice introduced, by Abel, to picture the great sacrifice that would have to be made for sin later. All after Genesis 3 were sinners. By Genesis 6 things have gotten so bad that destruction is promised. How bad is it now? Sin is everywhere around us. The world is corrupt. God's judgment is again imminent. And in some places has already begun.

Adam and Eve, it could be said, had their free will. We see where it led them. Man, left alone to his own nature, freely chooses evil. Yet God has a people who will serve Him, and He has known them from the foundation of the world.

Noah "found grace" in the eyes of the Lord. That grace upon him caused him to come out from his world and follow Jehovah. The same with Abraham and the other patriarchs. Imperfect men indeed, but chosen of God, led of God.

We have taken many trails to look at this one question of depravity vs free will. Where have they led us? What can we say about it all? Does the Arminian or the Calvinistic system line up with the facts of Scripture? Is man, though fallen, still able to, on his own, seek for and find God? If this were theoretically true, does the Scripture show us a man like this, a man who on his own was able to be made right with God? Did "righteous" Job have it? Or did God have to show even him that it is only God Who can justify and be justified? Did any of the prophets, even holy Daniel, initiate prophecies from their own nature, or was it God's message that first came to them? Did Jesus ever say that we could do anything, anything, without Him? Or did He say the opposite, "Without Me you can do nothing!" Was the famed Paul a man who was seeking after the salvation in Jesus, or did Jesus have to come to Him, and reveal Himself to the persecutor?

I think the Bible pattern is clear. I was born in sin. I continued in sin. My carnal nature even after Christ, wants to sin. Who shall save me from this body of death? Only Jesus. He has come to me and made me His own, because He wanted to. Not by the will of man, not by the will of the flesh, but born of God, with no help from me. I couldn't do it. He knew it. So He did it. Enough said.

God's choices or men's? Election

"God sees the future. He sees who will make a decision for Him, and saves those people," or,

"Before there was a world, He chose His disciples, the ones He would call out of this evil world, and then visited those chosen ones with His salvation, causing them to love Him and serve Him all their days."

Left to ourselves, our carnal way of thinking, I know which one of these appeals to us, because we have a sense of "fairness" that may not be God's sense of fairness. Since we do not want to depend on our own intellect in this matter, we must rely on the revelation he gave us through prophets and apostles. Agreed? Whatever they said, along with Jesus' own testimony, we must say.

Personally, I never liked it when we chose up sides when I was in grade school. There was no doubt I was going to be among the last chosen, if chosen at all. The games we played demanded skills I didn't have, and was not likely to acquire during the game.

Most of us shy away from this "choosing" doctrine because we are afraid we might not be one of the elect ourselves. But the doctrine is still there, and we may as well deal with it. He does what He wants and chooses whom He wants, for His own purposes. That's what it says.

If you are expecting me to turn to Romans 9 as some sort of proof text in this matter, you are absolutely right. Why not go to the most difficult passage of all? Why not stop explaining it away, and making excuses for Paul's radical statements?

Let's start with verse 10. Rebekah is pregnant. Twins, you'll recall. In those days, no way of knowing anything personal about either child, even their gender. And as in all days, no way of knowing their character or how they would be favored by God or man. No way.

Except one way. God knew. And God told her. The older shall serve the younger. That's foreknowledge. But it is also something else, according to Paul. It is choice. And it is choice based on the purposes of God, not whether the boys had done anything good or bad. I've made a decision, says God. I'm not just telling the future. The older one will serve the younger one. That's how it will be.

We all wish Paul had not taken it a step further, but he did. "Jacob I loved. Esau I hated." Deal with it. Why bring the prophet Malachi into this? (Malachi 1:2) The prophet begins his book with this very statement about his preference for Jacob, who became Israel, which became God's mighty nation of the same name. Esau, on the other hand, became Edom, and was eventually extinguished. Why? The reason ultimately is known only to God. Not about human characteristics. Yes, Esau blew his chances at a blessing and a birthright. But Jacob's character was not squeaky clean either. We're talking about the purposes of God. Before either of them had shown their hand.

Not convinced? Paul is not finished. It gets more intense than Jacob and Esau. He could tell people were already getting nervous with his illustration, though, and he affirms that there is no injustice with God! Our minds say there is. Paul says, and we know, there is not. To prove his point, he quotes God Himself:

“I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” It’s My business, says God. Make no conclusions about what I should or should not do.

Verse 16 sounds a lot like the verse in John 1 we quoted above: “It does not depend on the person who *wills* it, or the person who tries hard, but on God Who has mercy.” God saves sinners, not righteous people, remember? He saves Gentile outcasts, Jewish aristocrats and even Pharisees. He chooses the worst and confounds the best. That’s just how it is.

Pharaoh is next up. To that world ruler God gives this piece of information: “For this purpose I raised you up [chose you!], to demonstrate My power in you.”

Paul’s summation (not mine): God has mercy on whomever He desires, and likewise He hardens the ones He wants to harden. Don’t like that? Why? Well, how can He blame me for something He chose, after all?

Answer: There is no answer. Keep your mouth closed. You’re talking back to God. You’re criticizing His ways, which you obviously do not comprehend. You’re a created thing, like a cup in a potter’s hand. He can make you into a chalice for a King or a spittoon for a leper if He wants. And you must say nothing in response! (I paraphrase Paul.)

But that sounds mean! That’s not fair! By whose standards? By My own, says God. Yours don’t count. Only mine count.

Let it all sink in. God is God. He is good. Sin is against the good God. Men have chosen, with their free will, sin. They are all doomed to be cursed, because that’s the rules. The soul that sins, dies, an eternal death. But, because of His grace and mercy, He chooses a few out. A relative few. Actually many, many, people, but in comparison to Earth’s populations over the millennia, a few. And you are one of them. Christ lives in you. You feel the promise of eternity in your heart. You serve God while around you is the Devil’s self-serving crowd. You are different. You are saved.

Now, isn’t grace suddenly amazing? You actually were chosen! You’re on the team. You’ll be in Heaven. Choosing suddenly isn’t such a bad thing after all.

Once you see this choosing thing, it pops up all over Scripture, and you begin to yield to it. You have discovered one of His attributes, and you delight in it.

Ephesians 1:4. God chose us in Him before the foundation of the world. Yes, before you blew it all those times, and in spite of your future failures, He chose you. I have no idea why.

It’s everywhere. Jesus spends all night in prayer, then chooses 12 disciples. What was wrong with all the other men? Why not just have an open-ended discipleship? Anyone that wants to be with me, come. There was some of that, and those numbers fluctuated through the months. But the chosen group, even Judas, stayed intact. Why weren’t you one of the Twelve? Not fair, you say, I lived 2000 years too late!

Persecution comes to the church. The Pharisees continue their attacks. But God chooses one of them to confound the others. Why Paul? And as the "other" Judas asks in John, "Why will you manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?" Why not stop all the persecutors with a dream or a vision or an encounter? Why only Paul? Just think, Jesus, what you could do with 25 Paul's or 100 or 1000?

Jehovah needs no advisors. His plan is His plan. His choices are His choices. We are the ones with the questions. So be it.

Go back in history. He calls Cyrus by name, and says, Cyrus, you are to release my people and let them re-build their temple! Cool. But why only Cyrus? Why not Antiochus Epiphanes? He was a religious enough man. If you had appeared to him, he would have done what he was told and would have freed Israel from the torments he placed on them. Why not speak to the Caesars of Jesus' day and the apostles' day? And the religious and irreligious leaders of our own day? Why not go into North Korea and have a chat with Kim Jong Un? Tell him to set Your concentration camp prisoners free. Tell him he is not God but You are. Like You spoke to Nebuchadnezzar, in dreams.

Why? I ask all these questions and remind myself of the book of Job where it was God Himself asking Job question after question to which he had no response. Do we really think we have fathomed the ways of the Lord because we have read His book a few times? Read it again. Live a while. Then read again. Then live some more. Ever so slowly the wise among us get it: God is in charge. He does what He wants to do. He chooses whom he wills. Whether you are particularly enamored with His plans or not.

Based on our inability to choose (point one, above, depravity) God chooses. Would you rather have a world where *man* makes the choices and decisions? I think not.

In all of our talk of choosing we cannot forget two others chosen of God:

1. The chosen people, Israel. As we learn more of this special nation we understand that the choosing is not only of a physical people but of a Spiritual people. Israel will survive forever, but not according to the flesh. The tree's branches have been lopped off and replaced with Gentile branches, but in the mind of God that was the original choosing. A people who would love Him from the heart, and do His bidding without question. Israel still stands, elected of God forever.
2. And of course, The Servant King, Jesus. Isaiah calls Him the chosen one in whom God's soul delights. Jesus is chosen. His followers are chosen. His reign is chosen. The place of His reign is chosen. The very dates of that reign are chosen. The specifics of the Kingdom in terms of people and objects and duties... all chosen. The kingdoms of this world and their rulers, are chosen. Are you chosen?

Many are called, but few are chosen. Yes, the Gospel is preached in all the world as a witness. Many, many hear. But God has chosen only a few of those to respond to that Gospel. Scripture admonishes us all to make not only our calling, but our election, sure. Was it the Gospel that called you, or a friend you wanted to go to church with? Was it the Savior or a free meal? Was it Jesus, or was it a business contact? Did you love His Kingdom or were you trying to make a Kingdom of your own? Have you truly

been called? Have you truly been chosen? Is your life now bearing the fruit of a child of God? Do you love people? Are you joyful, peaceful, kind? Do you reach out to souls with God's Word?

If you have been called by the true Gospel, even if at first the call was earth-based, grace came into your heart to respond to it. You are one of His, and the fact that God hasn't chosen everyone doesn't discourage you any longer. You rejoice in your election, live it out, and let God take care of His business.

For Whom Did Jesus Die?

Jesus died for every single soul that ever lived or ever will live (unlimited atonement) or, Jesus died for His own, the ones God saw from the beginning, the elect (limited atonement).

With the "L" of the Tulip, we come to a bump in the road for many. Trying to use the Calvinistic mindset, many "problem" Scriptures arise, including everyone's favorite, John 3:16.

Frankly, this one has been a problem for me, too. One thing I never want to get into is the practice of "explaining away" obvious Scriptures, becoming so defensive and protective of my system, that I become blind to the Scriptures.

Are we caught here? Does this element of the system expose all the others as implausible and unnecessary? Does it all unravel here? No, we've seen that Scripture strongly supports man's condition of depravity, and God's elective choices. No need to give up ground won with such clear words from the Lord.

So why is a limited atonement necessary to the Calvinistic way, or the Biblical way? Or is it? Can we not pick and choose here and see where Scripture, not John Calvin, leads?

Let's at least see for a moment what these men were seeing.

How were you "justified" from our sins? By Jesus' death on Calvary, correct? But does not Romans 8 tell us that the same group that was foreknown and predestinated was also *justified*? That verse alone cries out for a limited atonement. Those that He saw and chose, He justified, and only those. Only a certain number of people were given to Jesus by the Father, right? (John 6)

Look also at the issue of sin's debt and its payment. Jesus is the Redeemer. He paid the debt for our sins on the cross. But if Jesus paid the debt for all sin and sinners, why must sinners go to Hell and pay even more? Here, Arminianism sounds a bit like Universalism, by claiming that, since Jesus died for all, all sins are paid up and Hell is canceled.

John 3:16 does indeed say that God loved the world, but John 3:17 says that all this happened that the world through Jesus might be saved. The world? It's the same word in both verses, and drives some to the Universalist position. God loved the world. Jesus died for the world. The whole world will be saved.

That's why John 3:16 will need a second look. Love it though we do, and desire to hallow it as we must, there's something that really does need "explaining." If the world means every single person that ever lived, then Jesus paid for the price of Hitler's sins, and Judas's, and for a whole host of Old Testament

age nations who, we are told, were cursed and destroyed. Will the blood of Jesus now go back and avail for all? Then all are saved?

Perhaps though, John 3:16 means that God saved a planet and its people system, by sending His Son into it, to rescue it, the world, collectively, from eternal loss. Perhaps He wasn't talking about every single person after all, but the world, as a unit.

Nevertheless, I see why some have trouble going that far, coupling that verse to other statements of Scripture. Look at 2 Peter 3:9, for example. "The Lord is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance." There is an argument that makes sense that says that "all" refers to all of His elect. Possible. But again, do we stretch too much?

And what of 1 Timothy 2:4-6? God desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth...Jesus Christ gave Himself a ransom for all! But then in Titus 2:14, Paul tells us that Jesus Christ gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us... Understood, but in my mind, not a conclusive answer.

2 Corinthians 5:14-15 weighs in here also, and weighs heavily. "We judge thus: that if one died for all, then all died; and He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him Who died for them..." If the "all" and the "them" are the same group, we can salvage this verse for the "Calvin" side too, but again, a little bit strained is this interpretation.

And how do we deal with 1 Timothy 4:10 where Paul calls Jesus the Savior of all men? He goes on to add, especially of those who believe. If I were an Arminian, I'd jump on this verse saying that He indeed died for everyone, but only those who believe will benefit from it.

It is true, isn't it, that when all is said and done, Jesus' death will bring to Heaven only those who believe? *Practically* speaking, Jesus died only for the ones God saw from the beginning. Jesus was the means by which God brought many sons to glory, the same sons in God's view from the foundation of the world.

In this scenario we see the Gospel message being the call of God to an entire world, a world that God did not *want* to consign to Hell (God is not willing that any should perish), but had to. In other words, here is the "many are called" part of Jesus' formula. But "few are chosen." The chosen of God limits the work of the atonement, for all rejecters have nothing to do with it. Recall, it was their choice, their free will, to turn away from God to begin with, and they deserve eternity away from Him. Only by grace do we claim any special treatment from our God.

If this portion of the discussion leaves you less than satisfied, so be it. I refuse to twist Scriptures for the purpose of having a flawless theology system. Better to say there are things I do not understand for now. I do see it dimly, the way it all fits together, but the vision will clear as I move along. Yours too.

Though I speak with less certainty on this point as with others, it is not as though a limited atonement is unknown to Scripture. Look in the book of Exodus. Is not the entire exodus story an accounting of a limited atonement? After all, Egyptians were not told about the blood, were they? Didn't He love the

Egyptians? Why couldn't they be saved? Or all the other nations around them? Why single out Israel and tell them about the sacrificial Lamb and the blood that would save them?

And as we often hear, what about all those people who never heard about the Gospel throughout history and in our own day? Did Jesus die for them? Will we be punished because not everyone heard? Is it our unfaithfulness that caused billions to be lost in Hell, or has God ordained that chosen people out of every nation will indeed be saved, and the others hardened?

All nations will be represented in Heaven. But not every person of every nation will be there. *Many* are called. But not all are even *called*. Again, how special it is that we *have been* called to this awesome feast. What amazing grace!

John 3:16 could be interpreted that God let Jesus die so that *those who believe* in Him could be saved. If He had not died, it wouldn't matter whether you believed in Jesus or not. There had to be a death first, to accommodate the coming flow of faith that would come from people all over the world wanting to join Israel as the promised chosen people.

God loved the world. But He knew most would not love Him back. Nonetheless He gave Jesus so that those who did love Him could be saved.

That's as far as I can see. I know there are many people who lean toward the doctrines of grace but reject this point altogether. They call themselves 4-point Calvinists. TUIP's, I guess.

Can a man resist God?

Now that too, on the surface, seems like an easy question to answer. God's Word has been published for these many years. The Judaeo-Christian value system has been proclaimed all over. Why, the very creation cries out about who God is and how He ought to be feared! But men *resist* these messages every day, every minute! Surely men resist God! This is how man exercises his "free will." All men turn away from God, by nature. There is none righteous, no not one! We are all corrupt, depraved. We established that in point one.

So let's move on to the next point.

Whoa! Not so fast, not so fast. All we are talking about so far is justice. God as law-giver and Judge. Man as law-breaker and condemned. Man has resisted God's law. But there is another process going on at the same time as justice, in the world. It is grace. Can a man resist grace?

God knew from before the beginning which way man was going to go. He knew that man was incapable of fellowshiping with Him, if He did not receive supernatural assistance. All men were given the chance to believe, to obey. All men refused.

But case not closed. Grace was operating in that pre-world era too. When God was doing all His deciding and planning. And grace said that some would be saved. Grace said, did it not, that God's Son would die for that group?

You say, why just that group? Why can't all come to know Him? They have all decided against Him, and are worthy of what they will receive. But grace is a different world, based on His own purposes and desires, not yours or mine. And when that grace enters a man's heart, He is overwhelmed. He cannot kick against the goad any longer. His will yields to this powerful Lover from Heaven. It is irresistible.

Yes, I have just given the classic Calvinist position. But is there not strong Scriptural support?

John 6:44. "No one can come to Me (Jesus) unless the Father Who sent Me draws him..." How does He draw? Through the Gospel, you say? But many are "called" by the Gospel, and many refuse it, because the Gospel message is external only. It cannot penetrate the hard heart of man unless there is a "drawing" that comes from the Father. Internally.

These Pharisees to whom Jesus was speaking, were prime examples of hardness. And Jesus allowed it to be so. He even told His disciples that the Pharisees could not understand parables because it was not "given" to them to do so. It had been "given" to the disciples (Matthew 13:10-17). Why? I have no idea. Nor does anyone, that I know of.

We're talking grace here. Amazing grace. Made all the more amazing because not founded on our normal expectations. Jesus prayed all night, and the next morning He chose 12 disciples. Why those 12? I don't know. They seem like ordinary men to me. Oh, we call them saints now, and so they are, but look at them before Jesus. Fishermen. Tax collectors. You know the list. Not random choosing, but surely choosing known only to God. None of them refused the call of God.

Why you? Why me? No clue. But I do remember the time when the Gospel was so clear to me that there was no way I could have refused it! Irresistible. The words came from outside, from the preacher, from the Bible. The "drawing", the tears, the clear invitation, from within.

The same theme is earlier in John 6: "All that the Father 'gives' to Me *will come* to Me. And Him that comes to Me I will in no wise cast out!" Just as all those chosen disciples came to Jesus, chosen disciples of all ages still come to Jesus. They can't help it. They don't want to help it.

From the foundation of the world, a group of believers has been assigned to Jesus. They will come to Him. Some in tears, some groaning, some jumping for joy, some with serious professions of faith, but they will come. They will come. And they will not be cast out. (More of that concept in the last point.)

I made mention of "kicking against the goad" above. That's from the conversion story of Saul of Tarsus. Saul was dead set against Jesus. One doesn't get more venomous in his attacks against Christians. He was so very sure that his place in life was to annihilate the Christian name and witness.

Then Jesus came. Quietly at first, it seems. A little nudge here and there. Viewing the victorious death of the first martyr, Stephen, surely helped. The shepherd's stick began to cause greater and greater pain. What's happening to me, Saul must have thought? Why am I losing my enthusiasm for this? Why the doubts and fears about Moses and the law and the Pharisaic way of life?

Then Jesus came big time. You know the story from there. And you now recall the words Jesus spoke: "It is hard for you to kick against the goad." That's the idea. The goad. The stick used by shepherds to push their sheep into the right place when the sheep are going the wrong way. God's grace is entering in. Human habit does try to keep it out at first. But eventually, the love and power of Jesus are so real that the "victim" lays flat waiting only for orders.

Christ conquers the human heart. Human hearts touched by the Father want to be conquered in this way. They yield. Not because they are being given to the Son by the Father in that moment, but because they were given to Him before the foundation of the world. The preaching of the Gospel was merely the means by which God did what He intended to do for eons.

Consider. Saul was not seeking for Jesus. Jesus had been trying to get through to him. Saul was not trying to feel something. Saul was on a mission to oppose this Jesus. What an unlikely candidate! The story makes no sense in the light of many of our evangelistic efforts.

And know this. Trying to reach other "Saul's" in our own day will not work, though God has called a few. The point is that God calls Who He wills. Trying to explain the why and wherefore only leads to confusion. Targeting this group or that because of their "likeliness" to convert is fruitless.

Many persecutors of Christians continue their persecution and kill believers quite successfully. Many "Peter's" go on fishing for fish and care not at all for your Jesus. There are no rules when it comes to the grace of God. Our job is to preach the Gospel, and let God do the drawing. He will.

Remember the text, "You has He made alive, who were dead..." When God's life overshadows a person, death itself cannot resist His will. Saul was essentially dead. And in a moment He was claimed by Jesus. New life entered. Saul had nothing to do with it.

But wait a minute, you say. What about the rich young ruler? He truly wanted Jesus, and Jesus put a roadblock in front of Him. He "came to Jesus" but Jesus cast Him out.

Wait a minute. Jesus was not calling this man first. This man, as you say, came to Jesus. And though Jesus loved Him, and ultimately does not want to reject any man, He knew that this man had already used His free will like all other men, to choose against God, though he seemed so righteous outwardly. This man had another god, and worshiped that god fervently. There was no room in his heart of hearts for the message of Jesus. Jesus did not create this man's problem, but merely exposed it. The man knew Jesus had spoken the truth, and went away in sorrow.

Pursuing God by keeping the law won't do it. God's heart is placed within the man who will truly find God.

When Jesus calls a man, that man knows from the inside that he is being called to give all. Zacchaeus was a rich man also. He was merely a man in the crowd, trying to see the miracle worker. He wasn't planning to confront Jesus. But Jesus knew this was one that had been given to Him. He called him out of the tree where he was watching Jesus, then invited Himself to his home. Salvation came to that house that day.

Why Zacchaeus and not the rich young ruler? The heart of the former was invaded by God, the heart of the latter was not. Notice again that, in the Gospels, whomever Jesus calls, comes? That's the clue we need to see. Only those that the Father calls, will come, even now.

God calls whom He wills, and whom He wills, He hardens. This is difficult to say, but I stand with Paul in saying it, as awful as it sounds to our ears.

What must we conclude? No man truly wants God unless God has first dealt with His heart. This is what caused the disciples to question, "Who then can be saved?" and "Are there many who will be saved?" Indeed the number is a lot smaller than we have imagined.

This bothers you, amazes you, surprises you? Think Noah. One family out of how many in that world? Noah found "grace" (there it is again!) in the eyes of the Lord. Noah. Eight people out of the world.

Think Joshua and Caleb out of all Israel, permitted to enter the Promised Land out of that original group. Joshua and Caleb had hearts for God. Can you see now how they got those hearts?

Paul quotes Hosea (in Romans 9:25-26) as saying that one day He (God) is going to call those who were not His people, His people. It's that simple. There are many surprises still in store from the grace of God. But as we make our rounds in the preaching of the Gospel, God will suddenly speak within people's hearts, and they will know, "I'm one of His. I truly want to follow this Jesus." And Jesus will save them on the spot.

We are not the Savior of the world He is. He will do it. He will change the stubborn heart as we put His truth out there where it can be reached.

Can I lose my salvation?

My, the conversations this has stirred up among us through the years. It's obviously not as clear as one would like it to be. Again we hang on God's every word, and lean not to our own understanding or interpretation or favorite theologian or author.

There are a few lines of thought we can use from the "no" side. No, you cannot lose your salvation, says the "Calvinist" (sorry to keep mentioning his name, but that's how it is viewed today).

Why? Paul: Romans 8 again. Verses 29-31. (I paraphrase)

"There's this group of people. God knew them a long time ago. He decided that this group of people would be born again, made in the very image of His Son Jesus. Jesus would then be the firstborn in that New Family, and all the ones the Father knew ahead of time would be considered brothers and sisters of Jesus. So, this same group, the ones He saw and planned, He called out from the world. (He called many others too, but this group was also *chosen*... "many are called but few are chosen).

This same group that He knew, and made into the image of His Son, and called out from the world, He justified through the blood of the Lamb, Jesus. And this same group is the group that shall share the very glory of God forever. Now, who can come against such a group as this? They are God's chosen, that is,

they are God's justified or saved or ransomed. Who could possibly separate this group from God if God has decreed that they are His own?"

A fair translation, I think? A reasonable position, taken from Holy Scripture. Who can deny it? Who would want to? Such security! If I am known, I am always known. If I am conformed to Jesus, I am always conformed. If I am called, I'm always called. If I am justified, I'm always justified.

If God has put His stamp of approval on me, will He take it away?

This is not just from Paul. John gives us a parallel passage from the lips of Jesus Himself in chapter 10, verses 27-30. Again allow me to modernize the text, while you are reading originals:

"As a Shepherd of My people, I know how to speak in such a way that they (my sheep) will hear My Voice. I have a personal knowledge of each one. I speak and they listen. If I say 'Follow', they follow, wherever I want them to go. Each one of them receives eternal life from Me. I mean *eternal*. Never, never will they be lost, or perish. Absolutely no one has the power to take them back from Me once they are Mine! No one. Not the Devil, not even themselves.

"They are secure. And that is not their only security. You see, before the Heavens were, My Father gave Me those very sheep. He said, 'This one, and that one, and that one over there, they are all Yours, Son. Take care of them. I give them to You. But though I give them totally to You, they are still totally Mine. They are in My hand as well as Yours.' So you see, the true sheep of God have the double protection of My hand, and the hand of My Father around them. Of course, I and My Father are also One..."

Even our favorite John 3:16 states that whoever believes in Jesus will never perish! And the great apostle adds to this security statement in his first epistle:

2:25. This is the promise Which He Himself made to us: eternal life.

So there you have it. Jesus gives us life. He doesn't take it back somehow. Promise made, promise kept. Case closed.

But I see in the back of the room a hand waving violently to catch my attention, and I now hear a voice crying out "Hebrews, Hebrews!"

What about the Jewish people? What has that got to do with it? "No, no, not that Hebrews! The *book of Hebrews*, filled with warnings about losing your salvation!"

Oh. That Hebrews. Case not closed. Not yet.

One thing for sure. If Paul really was the writer of Hebrews, it is certain he is not going to contradict in this book what he said in Romans! Even if he did not write it, if our teaching about the inspiration of Scriptures is correct, there is not going to be contradiction from any other Spirit-filled first century author. But maybe a different emphasis, a different point of view.

Let's deal with Hebrews, then with a couple things Paul says elsewhere that may trouble us too. And remember, verses that trouble us may be game changers for honest people, or they may merely be challenges to and tests of and fuller meanings of the teaching that is found clearly in other places.

All right. Let's look at Hebrews, prayerfully. (And let's not forget John while we are here. Let the words whisper in your ears, "...and they shall never perish...")

Hebrews 6:4-6 seems to be in opposition to Hebrews 6:9-12. Seems like two different groups of people within just a few verses of each other. There is a fallen away group in the former verses, and a persevering group in the latter. Do you see them?

The question is, fallen away from what? From salvation, or from some personal, but not saving, experience with Christ. Perhaps like some of you, I had encounters with God that were not saving, only *leading* me to salvation. I had a very dramatic answer to prayer as a boy, but I did not experience forgiveness of sin until I was an adult.

There were many Jews - and the letter, after all, is clearly addressed to Jews - who had experienced great miracles at Jesus' hands when He was here. The powers of the coming Kingdom were manifested all around them. They followed this Jesus. Then, as it is recorded in the Gospels, for one reason or another, many just stopped walking with Him. They had never dealt with the sin problem and so were still unsaved sinners, regardless of the power of God on them for healing or other miracles.

Here is a severe warning to those in our own day who trust in the encounter, the answered prayer, the financial blessing, the healing, some claim even the resurrection from the dead. None of these will avail when the Lord calls His own to Himself one day. They shall claim only the blood of Jesus as their cover, their entry fee into Emmanuel's Land. We hear with clarion call the words of Jesus in Matthew 7, "Depart from me [prophets, exorcists, miracle workers] you who work iniquity. I never knew you."

Hebrews 6:4-6 seems to describe persons who came oh! so close to Heaven, but who ultimately fell away. And in full light of revelation they said no to the Son of God. They shall never now say yes to Him. For them it is "once lost, in this brilliant Light, always lost."

For those who cannot see these verses this way, I suggest that the warning itself becomes the means by which the truly saved will stay saved. A saved person looks at this passage and trembles, even if it does not apply to him. The fear of the Lord in him makes it impossible for him to fall away.

But the writer is also addressing saved Jews, and tells them he is convinced that salvation is theirs and will be. That is that other group starting in verse 9. Notice how quickly he goes from negative to positive talk. Yes there are those surface believers who will turn away. But not you. It is obvious you are different.

Hebrews 10:23-39 is another passage in the book that causes concern to a serious student of these matters. The theme of the verses is "holding fast." We can hold fast because a promise was given to us by one who is faithful, says the writer. We will hold fast because of His promise, His character, and the

means by which He has made all this possible: the church's commitment to "stimulate one another to love and good works", a stimulation that includes this very passage!

Verse 26 says there is no other sacrifice available for one who rejects the sacrifice of Christ. If, like the group described above, one is surrounded by a knowledge of the truth, but not sealed by the Spirit of God unto a salvation that acknowledges the blood shed for him, he is without hope. If he decides to continue in his sins and reject the call of God, there is no hope. If Christ is among us and one does not reach out to Him for salvation, there is no hope.

But once more the writer describes a second group. He is talking also to those who were "enlightened", then persecuted, then friends of the persecuted. To them He issues a warning, which they will obey. Yes, if they shrink back – if that were possible – God would have no more pleasure in them.

But they won't shrink back (vs 38-39), says the writer of Hebrews. They are of a special class of people who will have grace to endure to the very end, the preserving of the soul. Read it for yourself. Far from being a passage against the perseverance of the saints, Hebrews 10:39 is a clear description of God's faithful hand on His own, the ones He gave to Jesus. The ones who will prevail. The ones who will not shrink back. The ones safely in the Son's and in the Father's hand.

What think ye of this? Satisfied yet? Secure yet? "No," you say. "Paul talked about branches being taken off the 'Israel tree.' Romans 11 must be dealt with!"

Yes, this is a difficult one. But since it is Paul speaking most certainly this time, it must be read in the light of everything else Paul says. Paul is not divided against himself when he writes these messages to Rome.

One of the guiding principles of the apostle in this chapter is in verse 29: The gifts and calling of God are irrevocable! Backing up then to the "difficulty" that begins in verse 17, where Paul calls Gentile believers, "branches of a wild olive tree," grafted into the original olive tree called "Israel." The punch comes in verse 22, where Paul says that we must continue in His kindness, or we will be cut off from that tree.

The only conclusion possible from such a statement is that if we were indeed given to the Son by the Father (for John cannot be left out of this equation) we *will* "continue in His kindness." By the very nature of the new birth, this perseverance will happen! Why? "The gifts and calling of God are irrevocable."

One other possibility is that Paul is saying, in a different way here, what Scripture says elsewhere, to make our calling and election sure. Take nothing for granted. Keep calling out to God, looking for fruit and other signals that we have been born again. It is possible, is it not, that one could become a "partaker" with the church, and be as those ones we described above who did things that church people do, but had not the saving grace on the inside? Be very sure... Because if you aren't really saved, you will be cut off.

Forgive me if I seem to be defending a theological system at any expense. My desire is to find the truth, and build upon it. Once I have found a clear statement of truth, then something that seems to come against that truth cannot be taken at face value, but must be examined more fully. Here, in one chapter, Paul seems to say two different things. But the one thing he said is said clearly elsewhere, so we build upon that truth, and explain the rest.

That's not satisfying to some, and they should not go with it if their conscience is offended. They should allow the Holy Spirit slowly to teach them one precept at a time.

As I stated earlier, this discussion has been going on for a long time. We won't settle it all now, for we are dealing, as Paul says even further on into Romans 11, with the very mind of God. Let us be persistent in searching but not frustrated in not finding it all. And once you think you finally understand His mind, read Romans 11:34 again: "Who has known the mind of the Lord?"

Indeed.