

Closet Calvinists
How Arminians Presuppose the Doctrines of Grace
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I. Is Arminianism damnable heresy?

I love the doctrines of grace and don't shy away from the label "Calvinist." I believe in the sovereignty of God. I'm convinced Scripture teaches that God is completely sovereign not only in salvation (effectually calling and granting faith to those whom He chooses), but also in every detail of the outworking of Providence. "Whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified" (Rom. 8:30). And He makes "all things work together for good to those who love God, [i.e.,] to those who are the called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28). Quite simply, He "works all things according to the counsel of His will" (Eph. 1:11).

That's what people commonly mean when they speak of "Calvinism." When I accept that label, I am not pledging allegiance to the man John Calvin. I am not affirming everything he taught, and I'm not condoning everything he did. I'm convinced that Calvin was a godly man and one of the finest biblical expositors and theological minds ever, but he wasn't *always* right. As a matter of fact, my own convictions are baptistic, so I am by no means one of Calvin's devoted followers. In other words, when I accept the label "Calvinist," it's only for convenience's sake. I'm not saying "I am of Calvin" in the Corinthian sense.

Furthermore, I'm not one of those who wears Calvinism like a big chip on his shoulder, daring people to fight with me about it about it. It's true that I can get feisty about certain points of doctrine—especially when someone attacks a principle that goes to the heart of the gospel, like substitutionary atonement, or original sin, or justification by faith and the principle of imputed righteousness. When one of those principles is challenged, I'm ready to fight. (And I also don't mind beating up on whatever happens to be the latest evangelical fad.)

But *Calvinism* isn't one of those issues I get worked up and angry about. I'll discuss it with you, but if you are spoiling for a fight about it, you are likely to find me hard to provoke. I spent too many years as an Arminian myself to pretend that the truth on these issues is easy and obvious.

Now, don't get the wrong idea. I *do* think the truth of God's sovereignty is clear and ultimately inescapable in Scripture. But it *is* a difficult truth to come to grips with, so I am sympathetic with those who struggle with it. I'm Calvinistic enough to believe that God has ordained (at least for the time being) that some of my brethren should hold Arminian opinions.

Over the years I have probably written at least twice as much material trying to tone down angry hyper-Calvinists as I have arguing with Arminians. That's not because I think hyper-Calvinism is a more serious error than Arminianism. As a matter of fact, I would say the two errors are strikingly similar. But I don't hear very many voices of caution being raised against the dangers of hyper-Calvinism, and there are armies of Calvinists out there already challenging the Arminians, so I've tried to speak out as much as possible against the tendencies of the hypes.

That's why I'm probably a whole lot less militant than you might expect when it comes to attacking the errors of Arminianism. Besides, I have gotten much further answering Arminian objections with patient teaching and dispassionate, reasonable, biblical instruction—instead of angry arguments and instant anathemas.

Why not take a more passive, lenient, brotherly, approach to *all* theological disagreements? Because I firmly believe there are some theological errors that *do* deserve a firm and decisive anathema. That's Paul's point in Galatians 1:8–9; and it's the same point the apostle John makes in 2 John, verses 7–11. When someone is teaching an error that fatally corrupts the truth of the gospel, “let him be anathema.”

But let me be plain here: *Simple Arminianism doesn't fall in that category. It's not fair to pin the label of rank heresy on Arminianism, the way some of my more zealous Calvinist brethren seem prone to do.* I'm talking about historic, evangelical Arminianism, of the classic and Wesleyan varieties—*Arminianism*, not Pelagianism, or open theism, or whatever heresy Clark Pinnock has invented this week—but true evangelical Arminianism. Arminianism is certainly wrong; and I would argue that it's inconsistent with itself. But in my judgment, standard, garden-variety Arminianism is not so fatally wrong that we need to consign our Arminian brethren to the eternal flames or even automatically refuse them fellowship in our pastors' fraternals.

If you think I'm beginning to sound like an apologist for Arminianism, I'm definitely not that. I *do* think Arminianism is a profound error. Its tendencies *can* be truly sinister, and when it is allowed to go to seed, it *does* lead people into rank heresy. But what I'm saying here is that mere Arminianism *itself* isn't damnable heresy. It's just grossly inconsistent with the core gospel doctrines that Arminians themselves believe and affirm.

But as long as I'm *sounding* like a defender of Arminianism, let also me say this: There are plenty of ignorant and inconsistent Calvinists out there, too. With the rise of the Internet, it's easier than ever for self-taught lay-people to engage in theological dialogue and debate through Internet forums. I think that's mostly good, and I encourage it. But the Internet makes it easy for like-minded but ignorant people to clump together and endlessly reinforce one another's ignorance. And I fear that happens a lot.

Hyper-Calvinists seem especially susceptible to that tendency, and there are nests of them here and there—especially on the Internet. And more and more frequently these

days I encounter people, who have been influenced by extremism on the Internet, touting hyper-Calvinist ideas and insisting that if someone is an Arminian, that person is not really a Christian at all. They equate Arminianism with sheer works-salvation. They suggest that Arminianism implicitly denies the atonement. Or they insist that the God worshiped by Arminians is a totally different God from the God of Scripture.

That's really over-the-top rhetoric—totally unnecessary—and rooted in historical ignorance. A couple of years ago, when I started my weblog, I mentioned that tendency in the first entry I posted, which was titled “Quick-and-Dirty Calvinism.” At the end of that post, I said this: My advice to young Calvinists is to learn theology from the historic mainstream Calvinist authors, not from blogs and discussion forums on the Internet. Some of the forums may be helpful because they direct you to more important resources. But if you think of the Internet as a surrogate for seminary, you run a very high risk of becoming unbalanced.

Read mainstream Calvinist authors, however, and you'll have trouble finding even one who regarded Arminianism *per se* as damnable heresy. There's a reason for that: It's because while Arminianism is bafflingly inconsistent, it is not necessarily damnably erroneous. Most Arminians themselves—and I'm still speaking here of the classic and Wesleyan varieties, not Pelagianism masquerading as Arminianism—most Arminians themselves emphatically affirm gospel truth that is actually rooted in Calvinistic presuppositions.

II. Spurgeon: “Calvinism IS the gospel”

There are, these days, quite a few self-styled Calvinists who disagree with my assessment of Arminianism and insist that Arminianism entails an absolute denial of certain fundamental gospel truths. Those wishing to make that argument will invariably quote a famous statement by Spurgeon, taken from the chapter in his autobiography titled “A Defense of Calvinism” in which Spurgeon said this:

I have my own private opinion that there is no such thing as preaching Christ and Him crucified, unless we preach what nowadays is called Calvinism. It is a nickname to call it Calvinism; Calvinism is the gospel, and nothing else. I do not believe we can preach the gospel, if we do not preach justification by faith, without works; nor unless we preach the sovereignty of God in His dispensation of grace; nor unless we exalt the electing, unchangeable, eternal, immutable, conquering love of Jehovah; nor do I think we can preach the gospel, unless we base it upon the special and particular redemption of His elect and chosen people which Christ wrought out upon the cross; nor can I comprehend a gospel which lets saints fall away after they are called, and suffers the children of God to be burned in the fires of damnation after having once believed in Jesus. Such a gospel I abhor.

I absolutely agree with what Spurgeon says there, in the sense that he *meant* it. And the context of that statement explains clearly he meant. He was pointing out that the principle

at the heart of all gospel truth is the same principle that drives Calvinism: “*Salvation is of the Lord.*” Salvation is *God’s* work; it’s not something we do for ourselves. That’s the truth he was defending.

Spurgeon was not saying that we ought to use the five points of Calvinism the way Campus Crusade people use the “Four Spiritual Laws.” He wasn’t saying that if all you ever talk about is the doctrines of election and reprobation, you are faithfully preaching the gospel and the whole counsel of God. Unfortunately, I think that’s what a lot of careless Calvinists *think* Spurgeon meant when he said, “Calvinism *is* the gospel.”

But if you read Spurgeon’s *whole* article on Calvinism, he makes very clear what he meant. In fact, at the beginning of that very same paragraph—as his preface to remarking that “Calvinism is the gospel”—he wrote this:

“Salvation is of the Lord.” [Jonah 2:9.] *That is just an epitome of Calvinism; it is the sum and substance of it.* If anyone should ask me what I mean by a Calvinist, I should reply, “He is one who says, Salvation is of the Lord.” I cannot find in Scripture any other doctrine than this. It is the essence of the Bible. “He only is my rock and my salvation.” Tell me anything contrary to this truth, and it will be a heresy; tell me a heresy, and I shall find its essence here, that it has departed from this great, this fundamental, this rock-truth, “God is my rock and my salvation.”

Did Spurgeon believe Arminianism was in error? *Absolutely.* So do I.

Did he believe it was *damnable* error? *Absolutely not,* and he made that clear, too.

At the peak of the Downgrade Controversy, some of Spurgeon’s critics accused him of being driven by a doctrinaire Calvinist agenda. *It’s not really Modernism that Spurgeon hates,* they said. *It’s anything that departs from his old-fashioned Calvinism. This whole controversy is a furtive campaign against Arminianism. That’s what really has Spurgeon bugged. He thinks modern Christians aren’t Calvinistic enough.*

Spurgeon replied in *The Sword and the Trowel* with a paragraph that said this:

Certain antagonists have tried to represent the Down-Grade controversy as a revival of the old feud between Calvinists and Arminians. It is nothing of the kind. Many evangelical Arminians are as earnestly on our side as men can be. We do not conceal our own Calvinism in the least; but this conflict is for truths which are common to all believers.

In another place, he was even more explicit:

We care far more for the central evangelical truths than we do for Calvinism as a system; but we believe that Calvinism has in it a conservative force which helps to hold men to the vital truth, and therefore we are sorry to see any quitting it who have

once accepted it.

So he had a bone to pick with people who once affirmed the doctrines of grace and had now abandoned Calvinism in favor of new ideas that smacked of Socinianism. But he regarded *evangelical* Arminians as his true brethren and fellow-soldiers—as long as they affirmed the doctrine of justification by faith, the principle of *sola fide*, the absolute authority of Scripture, the penal aspect of Christ’s atonement, and other essential gospel truths.

Speaking of Arminians in particular, he said:

Those who hold the eternal verities of salvation, and yet do not see all that we believe and embrace, are by no means the objects of our opposition: our warfare is with men who are giving up the atoning sacrifice, denying the inspiration of Holy Scripture, and casting slurs upon justification by faith. The present struggle is not a debate upon the question of Calvinism or Arminianism, but of the truth of God versus the inventions of men. All who believe the gospel should unite against that “modern thought” which is its deadly enemy.

So Spurgeon did not regard Arminians as hell-bound heretics. He regarded them as brethren. Did he think they were in error? Yes. Were they guilty of gross inconsistency in their own theology? He would have answered emphatically, *yes*. Was their main error significant? Spurgeon did not shrink from referring to it as “heresy”—meaning unorthodox doctrine, heterodoxy, serious error. But he was very careful to make clear that he did not regard Arminianism *per se* as *damnable* heresy or utter apostasy from essential Christianity. Virtually all mainstream Calvinists from the time of the Synod of Dort until now would agree with him on every count.

For example, Gordon Clark, one of the highest of high Calvinists, said this with regard to whether Arminians are authentic Christians or not:

An Arminian may be a truly regenerate Christian; in fact, if he is truly an Arminian and not a Pelagian who happens to belong to an Arminian church, he must be a saved man. But he is not usually, and cannot consistently be *assured* of his salvation. The places in which his creed differs from our Confession confuse the mind, dilute the Gospel, and impair its proclamation.

Which is to say that Arminianism is inherently inconsistent. Arminians technically affirm the fundamental, essential truths of the gospel. Then they try to build on top of that a theology that is totally inconsistent with the solid foundation they have affirmed.

I agree with that assessment of Arminianism. It’s an attempt to reconcile the sovereignty of God with human responsibility—and the Arminian method of reconciling those two truths involves a view of human free will that is inherently inconsistent with certain gospel truths every Arminian actually affirms.

III. Book recommendations

Before we go further, let me recommend a handful of books. The first book I want to recommend is a new book by Roger Olson, who is himself an Arminian, and he has written a defense of Arminianism titled *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities*. You might be surprised to hear me recommend this book because I published a review of it on my weblog a few months ago, and the review wasn't altogether positive. The review was written by my friend Gary Johnson, who is pastor of The Church of the Redeemer in Mesa, Arizona. Gary's mentor, by the way, was S. Lewis Johnson. And even though we are all three named Johnson, none of us are related. (Though I would be very happy to be related to either S. Lewis Johnson or Gary Johnson.) Anyway, Gary's review was in several parts, and he titled it "Calvinists in the Hands of an Angry Arminian." So it wasn't a completely positive review, and I agree with practically all of Gary's complaints about the book.

But I have to say that Olson's book is the best book in defense of Arminianism I've ever read. Some readers might be aware that I didn't have a very high opinion of Dave Hunt's anti-Calvinistic screed. When I reviewed Hunt's book in a Shepherds' Conference seminar a few years ago, someone told me the only reason I hated the book was because I'm a Calvinist and Hunt stepped on my toes.

And I said, "No, it's just a really bad book, written by a guy who has no clue what he is talking about."

My friend challenged that: "Name one well-written book, written after 1950, either defending Arminianism or attacking Calvinism, written by someone who *does* know what he is talking about."

I admit it; I was stumped. But now Roger Olson has bailed me out. If anyone ever asks me that question again, I can point to Olson's book. It's a good defense of Arminianism, and although I disagree with virtually all his conclusions, he pretty much knows what he is talking about, and he explains the differences between Arminianism, Pelagianism, and semi-pelagianism pretty well.

If you read that book, you'll need to read at least three or four good Calvinist books to get the taste out of your mouth. So I'll recommend three. Two are standard works that I routinely recommend every year. The first is a massive syllabus, written by Curt Daniel, called *The History and Theology of Calvinism*. These are notes Dr. Daniel wrote when he taught this material, and the tapes of his teaching are downloadable for free from the Internet. Dr. Daniel is currently working on developing that material in book form, to be published by P&R. My guess is you'll have to wait two to three years for that, so buy the syllabus; download the sound files; and if you are too cheap to buy a bound copy of the syllabus, my friend Bob Hill at Moody Press recently put the entire work online (in Microsoft Word format) for free download.

The other standard work you *must* have is the book by David Steele, Curtis Thomas, Lance Quinn, titled *The Five Points of Calvinism* (also by P&R). It is an encyclopedic collection of key Scripture references and some wonderful essays explaining and defending Calvinism from the Bible.

And then one of my favorite books—hard to find for a long time but recently published in a quality edition by Audobon Press, *The Great Invitation*, by Errol Hulse, subtitled “Examining the use of the altar call in evangelism.” The book deals with the question of altar calls, as the subtitle suggests, but it’s greatest value, I think, is that this is a classic example of the kind of warm-hearted, evangelistic, classic Calvinism that I appreciate, and it’s a great antidote to the ugly Calvinism I spoke about that you find in Internet forums. Erroll Hulse is a greatly-respected British Reformed Baptist leader, and this is one of my all-time favorite books.

IV. One more recommendation, and an explanation of why this issue is important to me

Here’s a recommendation for your iPod: If you are someone who is resistant to Calvinism, or if you don’t feel you fully understand enough about it, and you want a single, simple overview of the substance and the history of Calvinism, I gave a message to our college students almost two years ago titled “The Story of Calvinism,” where I did my best to cover all that ground in one shot. It’s on the Internet with the rest of my sermons, and you can download it for free. The web address is swordandtrowel.org, and look for the title “The Story of Calvinism.”

In that message, I explained that I have not always been a Calvinist. I grew up in a family that had been Wesleyan Methodists for generations—and even after I became a Christian, it was several years before I finally came to the point where I could affirm the biblical doctrine of election without trying to explain it away.

One of the things that first got me thinking seriously about the sovereignty of God was an incident in a college Sunday-School class, in a Southern Baptist Church, in Durant, Oklahoma, where I had a Sunday-School teacher who hated Calvinism with a passion and wasted no opportunity to make an argument against the sovereignty of God. And his continual emphasis on the subject got me thinking about it a lot.

Then one Sunday, while this guy was taking prayer requests, a girl in the class raised her hand and asked, “Should we really be praying for our lost relatives? It seems like it’s a wasted effort to pray to God for their salvation if He can’t do any more than He has already done to save them.”

I vividly remember the look on the face of this Sunday-School teacher. This was clearly a question that had never occurred to him. So he thought about it for a moment, and you could see the wheels in his head turning while he tried to think of a good reason to pray

for the salvation of the lost. And finally, he said, “Well, yeah, I guess you’re right.” From that Sunday on, he never accepted any more prayer requests for people’s lost loved ones.

That just didn’t seem quite right to me. I had just done a Bible study in Romans 10:1, where Paul says, “Brethren, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved.” Not only that, I began to wonder why we should pray about anything in the realm of human relationships if God never intrudes on the sanctity of human free will. You know: Why should I pray for God to move my English teacher to look favorably on my work when she grades my paper if she is ultimately sovereign over her own heart? Those were questions I couldn’t answer, and I really struggled with questions like that.

But the more I studied the Bible, the more it seemed to challenge my ideas about free will and the sovereignty of God. One by one, over a period of more than 10 years, the doctrines of election, and God’s sovereignty, and the total depravity of sinners became more and more clear to me from Scripture.

Every time one of my arguments against Calvinist doctrines would fall and I would embrace some doctrine that I was desperately trying to argue against, it never felt like I was undergoing any major paradigm shift. It was more like I was resolving a nagging conflict in my mind. Because I kept discovering that the major ideas underlying the doctrines of grace were truths that I had always affirmed: God is sovereign, Christ died for me, God loved me before I loved Him, He sought me and drew me and initiated my reconciliation while I was still His enemy. Those were truths I believed even when I was a rank Arminian. Embracing Calvinism was natural—and inevitable—because all I was doing was ridding my mind of wrong ideas and faulty assumptions about human free will and other notions like that, which are not even taught in the Bible. It was so that I could wholeheartedly affirm what I really believed anyway.

V. Why this issue is really a lot simpler than most people think

In my Arminian days, I affirmed an awful lot of truth about the sovereignty of God. I would have affirmed with no reservation whatsoever that God is God; that He does all His good pleasure; that no one can make Him do otherwise; that He is in control and in charge no matter how much noise evildoers try to make; and not only is He in charge, He is working all things out for my good and His glory. As a matter of fact, my confidence in the promise of Romans 8:28 was what motivated my prayer life.

That’s Calvinism. If you believe those things, you have affirmed the heart of Calvinism, even if you call yourself an Arminian. Those are the basic truths of Calvinism, and if you already believe those things, you are functioning with Calvinist presuppositions.

In fact, the truths of Calvinism so much permeate the heart of the gospel message, that even if you think you are a committed and consistent Arminianism, if you truly affirm *the gospel*, you have already conceded the principle points of Calvinism anyway.

I want to turn to the Scriptures and illustrate for you from a typical passage of Scripture why I think that's true. Then we'll focus on one very short text of Scripture that illustrates perfectly the point I am making.

Let's hone in on a truth Arminians hold in especially high regard, and rightfully so: *the love of God*. I've chosen a short verse, and a familiar one, to make this as simple as possible—1 John 4:19. This is one of those memory verses AWANA kids love because it's easy to get credit for memorizing a whole verse, and it's just eight words in English: 1 John 4:19: "We love Him because He first loved us."

I remember very well the first time I noticed this verse. I was a fairly new Christian at the time, and I was surprised to find this truth in the Bible.

I was appallingly ignorant of the Bible when I was a brand-new Christian. I grew up going to liberal churches where the Bible was hardly mentioned unless the Sunday-School teacher wanted to disagree with something the Bible said.

So I remember taking a Bible literacy exam when I entered Moody Bible Institute, still a fairly new believer, and I hate to think what kind of score I made on that exam. I'm sure it was appallingly low. The amount I knew about the Bible was embarrassingly meager. I knew, of course, that Moses got the Ten Amendments on Mount Cyanide, but the only one I could name was "Thou shalt not admit adultery."

But we still sang some of the old hymns, and one of the ones that was familiar to me was, "Oh, How I Love Jesus!" And I was always intrigued by the closing line of that song: "Oh, how I love Jesus, because He first loved me." So I was familiar with the words, but I was really surprised to find that this is what the Bible says: "We love him, because he first loved us."

For some reason, from my earliest childhood, hearing the chorus of that song, that had always struck me as a pretty lousy reason for loving Jesus. Of course, in my unregenerate state, I had almost no understanding whatsoever of the love of Christ for me. I knew that He loved me and I was *supposed* to love Him, because we sang about it and all. But loving Him just because he loved me first didn't seem like a particularly noble or admirable reason for loving Him. In fact, it always sounded a little bit childish, because it was the very same reason I always gave my mother when she asked me why I hit my brother: *Because he hit me first!*

I understood that reciprocity is not a good motive for determining how we act toward other people. "You love me, and I'll love you in return" is as morally bankrupt as saying, "You hit me, and I'll hit you back." Love is supposed to be unconditional, isn't it? So "because He first loved me" never sounded like quite an adequate motive for loving Jesus.

So I was really surprised after I became a Christian and started reading the Bible, when I

found that these words are taken directly from Scripture: “We love him, because he first loved us.”

But what I didn’t understand then, but I understand now, is that this verse isn’t speaking merely about the *motive* for our love. It is a profound statement about the grace of God that sovereignly secures our love and transforms us from God-hating enemies into adopted sons and daughters whose hearts naturally overflow with the purest kind of love—not only love for God, but also love for one another.

Incidentally, there’s a minor textual issue in this verse that I ought to mention. In the King James and New King James versions, this verse is translated just the way I have read it: “We love him, because he first loved us.” That’s because the Greek texts from which the King James Version was translated include the object *him*.

It doesn’t ultimately matter which reading you prefer, because both things are actually true, and our capacity for loving *God* is dependent on our ability to *have* true love. If we couldn’t love at all, we certainly couldn’t love God. So either way, the meaning of this verse *includes* the truth that “We love *him*, because he first loved us.”

VI. We love Him because He first loved us

Notice: this profound text is a clear statement about the sovereign power of God’s love. It is a lesson about the sovereignty of God’s saving purpose. It is a celebration of the glory of sovereign love.

The verse, despite its brevity, also turns out to be incredibly rich with meaning. Look at it closely and you’ll see at least five great doctrinal lessons this verse teaches us.

First, the text teaches us about:

1. The Perverseness of Our Fallen State

In other words, it underscores for us how bad our sin is, and how deeply infected we are with sinful tendencies.

Think with me for a moment about the implications of that phrase at the end: “He first loved us.” In other words, there was a time when we *didn’t* love Him. That is the very essence of depravity, isn’t it?—a failure to love God as we ought. Nothing is more utterly and totally depraved than a heart devoid of love for God. Romans 8:7 says, “The carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God.”

That describes a hopeless state of utter inability to love God, to obey His commands, or to please Him. That is the state of all whose hearts have not been renewed by Christ.

This is a particularly poignant expression coming from the apostle John—who in his gospel refers to himself repeatedly as “that disciple whom Jesus loved.” Notice: in John’s own mind, Jesus’ love for him completely defined who he was.

Why was this such a prominent feature in John’s thinking? I think he gives us a clue right here in our verse. The reason he was so preoccupied with the love of Christ for him is that he knew that love was utterly undeserved. He was keenly aware of his own sinfulness. As amazed as John was with the love of Christ for him, he must have been equally amazed at the thought that his own heart had once been devoid of any love for One who was so lovely. How can the human heart be so cold to One who is so worthy of our love? Anyone who truly appreciates the glory of Christ’s love, as John did, will be appalled and horrified at the realization that our own hearts do not love Him as we ought to. The knowledge of how perfectly He loves us produces such a sense of utter unworthiness, doesn’t it?

You can see this vividly, even at the end of John’s life, when he sees a vision of the risen Christ in Revelation 1, and he writes in Revelation 1:17, “And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead.” He was literally frightened into a coma, because this vision of the glorified Christ smote him with such an overpowering sense of his own sinfulness. And in an almost involuntary response, he collapsed on his face in a dead swoon out of fear. And there he lay until Jesus “laid his right hand upon [him,] saying...Fear not.”

That same overpowering consciousness of sin and shame is implied in the words of our verse, “We love him, because he first loved us.” We are so utterly and totally depraved that if God Himself did not love us with a redeeming love, we would never have loved Him at all. If that does not fill you with a consciousness of your own sin—if it doesn’t shock you with a stark realization of the impenetrable hardness of the fallen human heart—then you need to meditate on it a little longer.

I hope you can see how this verse clearly and forcefully underscores the very essence of human depravity. There is nothing more desperately wicked than a heart that fails to love God. There is nothing more blind and irrational and sinful than not loving Someone so worthy of our love. We should need no motive to love Him other than the sheer glory His perfect being. And yet, we would not love Him at all if He had not first loved us!

Remember, this is the first and great commandment (Matt. 22:37): “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.” The whole of God’s law is summarized and epitomized in that one simple rule. To break that commandment is to fail in every single point of the law. There is nothing more completely and totally wicked.

And yet, our verse reminds us that we are so hopelessly and thoroughly wicked that not one of us could ever truly love God unless God Himself enabled us to do so. That is the doctrine of total depravity in a nutshell. It means that we are totally unable to save ourselves. We have a debilitating moral inability that makes our love for Him an utter

impossibility until He intervenes to give us the ability to love Him.

We cannot by sheer force of will set our hearts to love Him, because as fallen creatures we are so in love with our own sin and rebellion that our desires are twisted. Our affections are warped and hopelessly corrupted. And we are powerless to change ourselves. “Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil” (Jer. 13:23). “The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint” (Isa. 1:5). “The [unregenerate] heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked”—who can possibly understand it (Jer. 17:9)?

Our hearts are poisoned by sin, and that is why we do not and cannot love God on our own. That is precisely what we mean when we talk about total depravity. It’s not that we are as evil as we could possibly be, but that evil has infected us totally—in every part of our soul—so that we are incapable of righteous desires and holy motives and loving affections toward God. Some theologians prefer the expression *total inability*, rather than *total depravity*. But the truth is the same—and I hope you can see how it is implied in this text. Arminians, if they are true Arminians, and not full-blown Pelagians, actually affirm that truth.

So that is the first doctrine taught by this verse: *the perverseness of our fallen state*. Here’s a second one:

2. The Priority of God’s Electing Choice

He loved us first. That is exactly what this verse says. It is also the whole gist of what the doctrine of election teaches. God’s love for us precedes any movement toward God on our part. Even Arminians affirm that much of the doctrine of election. God loved us first.

The apostle John is actually echoing something Jesus once said to him. That last night prior to the crucifixion, when the disciples were alone together with Jesus, after they ate the Passover meal together in the Upper Room, Jesus said to them (John 15:16), “Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you.”

Now, John and the other apostles might have protested, “But that’s not true, Lord; we did choose You.” After all, they had left all to follow Him. Peter said so explicitly in Mark 10:28: “Lo, we have left all, and have followed thee.” They had made a conscious, deliberate choice to abandon their former lives, their loved ones, their livelihoods, and all they had—in order to follow Christ. They had indeed *chosen* to devote their lives to following Him. And in the case of John and his brother James, giving up their livelihood meant giving up the family fishing business, which by all appearances was a lucrative business for them.

John himself had met Jesus while John was under the discipleship of John the Baptist. As soon as he and Andrew understood that John the Baptist was pointing to Jesus as the promised Messiah, they left John the Baptist in order to follow Jesus. In a very real sense,

they *did* choose Jesus. So what did Jesus mean when he said, “Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you”?

He meant simply that whether they realized it or not, He had chosen them *first*. His choice was the *decisive* one. They would never have chosen Him at all had He not first chosen them. *They loved Him because He first loved them.*

Even if you are a devoted Arminian, you implicitly affirm this truth. You acknowledge it every time you thank him for saving you. You know in your heart that you cannot take personal credit for your love toward God. You did not love Him first; we love him because He first loved us. You and I are no better than the unbelieving people who still hate and reject Him. The only reason we love Him while they remain at enmity with God is that God’s loving grace has worked a miracle in our hearts to enable us to return His love.

First Corinthians 4:7 asks, “Who maketh thee to differ from another? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive? now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it?” Do not think for a moment that you can take credit for your love toward Christ. If you love Him at all, it is only because He first loved you. That is the very essence of the doctrine of election.

“We love him, because he first loved us.” In other words, God took the initiative in salvation. One of the points Roger Olson makes in that book I referred to is that historic, knowledgeable Arminians *do* affirm that truth. God is both the Author and the Finisher of our faith. He started the process. His love for us not only came before any love we have for Him; but *His* love is what secured our love Him. That’s exactly what this text says.

VII. A second look at one of the shortest verses in the Bible

We’re looking at five doctrinal implications of a very short verse, 1 John 4:19: “We love Him, because He first loved us.”

We’ve reached point three. This verse not only highlights *the perverseness of our fallen state*; and teaches us about *the priority of God’s electing choice*; but, third, it shows us—

3. The Particularity of His Saving Work

What do I mean by that? Look at the verse again: “We love him, because he first loved us.” Those words express John’s conviction that God has done something *special* for us. “*We* love him...” but not *everyone* loves Him. God has done something on our behalf and in our hearts that He does not do for everyone. He has demonstrated a *particular* love for us.

The apostle John was always keenly aware of this fact. He gloried in the knowledge that Jesus’ love for him was a special love. That is the implication of his favorite

self-description: “that disciple whom Jesus loved” (John 21:7). John used that phrase again and again because he delighted in the knowledge that Christ loved him in particular. God had redeemed him in particular. He was not merely the beneficiary of a general goodwill that God has for all creation; he was convinced that Christ’s love for him was personal and special. Jesus loved him in particular.

You know what? Every born-again Arminian will say that, too: *He loves me in particular*. He loves me with a special love. I’m not merely a dog, licking up the crumbs of God’s general love for all mankind. I am one of the children He has seated at His table. He has a special love for me. Every believing Arminian could refer to himself, as the apostle John did, as “that guy whom Jesus loves.”

By the way, I do believe with all my heart that God has a general love for everyone in the human race. “His tender mercies are over all his works” (Psalm 145:9). Acts 17:25: “He giveth to all life, and breath, and all things”—and those are tokens of a genuine goodwill and lovingkindness that extend to everyone who was ever born. God even loves His enemies (Matt. 5:45), so “he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.”

Yet God’s love for the elect is a *particular* love. He loves them with the love of a Father for His own children. He loves them each uniquely. He loves them in a special way. His love for them is the highest and most sacred kind of love known to man. No greater love can possibly be extended to any creature. And that great love is manifest in a particular way. It is a sacrificial kind of love that will stop at nothing to preserve its object. “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.” Christ’s love moved Him to give His life for his friends.

Look back a few verses at verses 9–10: “In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” The proof of His electing love—and the thing that lovingly guarantees the salvation of His people—is the atoning work of Christ.

God gave Christ to die for them in order to be a propitiation for their sins. That simply means He satisfied *justice* on their behalf. He satisfied *the wrath of God* on their behalf. He bore their guilt. He died in their place and in their stead, so that they wouldn’t have to suffer the penalty for their own sins. He bore the wrath of God on their behalf. He paid in full the penalty of their sins. He was their substitute. He died for them *in particular*.

So let’s talk about “limited atonement.” Some of you are thinking, *There’s a doctrine no Arminian presupposes*. Actually, I think anyone who believes the atonement was substitutionary presupposes a Calvinistic doctrine of the atonement. And historic, evangelical Arminians do believe in substitutionary atonement. Christ suffered in my place and in my stead. He wasn’t such a substitute for Judas’s punishment, because if what Jesus said about Judas is true, Judas is in hell this very moment, bearing the wrath

of God for himself.

I don't like the expression "limited atonement," because it suggests that the atonement is limited in its sufficiency.

Let me clear this up for you: No true Calvinist believes that. If you had the idea that Calvinism places some limit on the *value* or *sufficiency* of the atonement, forget that idea. Any Calvinist who denies that Christ's death was sufficient to atone for the sins of the whole world is a bad Calvinist. Christ's sacrifice was *infinite* in its sufficiency, "abundantly sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world." (In fact, that phrase, "abundantly sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world," is quoted directly from the canons of the Synod of Dordt, which is the original manifesto of Calvinism.) The death of Christ is infinitely sufficient and that one sacrifice *could* have atoned for the sins of the whole world, if that had been God's design.

But *was* that God's design? Or was the central and supreme object of His death the salvation of those whom God had loved with a special love from before the foundation of the world? I believe those questions are definitively settled forever by 1 Timothy 4:10: "We trust in the living God, who is the Saviour of all men, *especially* of those that believe." In the design of God, the atoning work of Christ has a *special* significance for the elect, because it was the means by which He secured and guaranteed their salvation forever. "The good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep" (John 10:11). And even Arminians affirm the basic gist of that truth—Christ's atonement is efficacious only for those who actually believe.

Notice: When John writes, "We love him, because he first loved us," he is addressing those who were the particular objects of Christ's redemptive work. Look once again at verse 9: "In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him." This was the object of God in the death of His Son: "that we might live through him." He undertook this saving work for us in particular, because we are special objects of His eternal love.

There's more. Here's a fourth doctrine we find taught in this verse:

4. The Power of His Loving Deliverance

Look at our verse again: "We love Him because he first loved us." John is saying that God's love for us is *the cause*—the effectual cause—of our love for Him. Once again, he is not saying merely that God's love is a *motive* or an *incentive* for our love. Rather, John's point is that God's love is the actual *productive cause* of our love.

Remember that it is impossible for an unregenerate person to love God. The heart of fallen flesh is by definition an enemy of God. It has no power to change itself, any more than a leopard can change its spots. It is the *nature* of a sinner to love sin, and nothing is more contrary to a sinful heart than love for God. So it is morally impossible for the

sinner to love God.

“Who then can be saved?” Do you remember Jesus’ answer to that question? “With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26). He does the impossible. His own love for us is such that He purchases us and pursues us and persuades us lovingly to love Him. And in order to make that love possible, he even graciously gives us new hearts that are capable of loving. That’s the promise He makes to His people in Ezekiel 36:

²⁵ Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you.

²⁶ A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh.

²⁷ And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them.

That speaks of God’s regenerating work, whereby He resurrects us to a state of vibrant spiritual life, enlightens our minds to understand His truth, and makes the glories of His love so attractive to us that we find them absolutely irresistible.

In fact, that is exactly the expression we sometimes use to speak of this truth: *irresistible grace*.

Some people misunderstand that term and imagine that there is some type of violent force or coercion involved in God’s drawing us to Christ. But irresistible grace isn’t something that pushes us against our wills toward Christ; it is something that draws us willingly to Him.

It is similar to my love for my wife. I find her irresistible. But she doesn’t force my love for her. She doesn’t employ any constraint other than the sheer attractiveness of her charms to draw me to her. But she is irresistible to me.

God’s saving grace is irresistible to the elect in the very same sense. We speak of it as “effectual grace,” because *always* secures its object. God *always* procures a reciprocal love from those upon whom He has set His redemptive love. As Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:14, “the love of Christ constraineth us.” He died for us, so we cannot henceforth live unto ourselves.

Think about what this means: We cannot take personal credit for loving God. Our love for God is a fruit of the Spirit, according to Galatians 5:22. It is the work of God in us. “We love him, because he first loved us”—our love for Him is the natural fruit of His great love for us. So you see the power of His loving deliverance.

Here's a fifth doctrinal lesson from this simple verse: It also reminds us of—

5. The Perfection of His Redemptive Plan

Just consider the first two words of our verse: “We love.” Again, that speaks of a totally transformed heart. At first, we didn't love. “But after that the kindness and love of God our Saviour toward man appeared, Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost.” That's Titus 3:4–5. It speaks once again of that regenerating work that turns our cold, unloving hearts of stone into hearts that are capable of true love for God.

And inherent in the same lovingkindness that *obtained* our salvation is a guarantee that we will persevere in that love to the very end. We love Him. We're completely free from that sinful enmity that once kept us hostile to Him. And He loves us. He will not permit anything or anyone to snatch us out of His hand.

Notice verses 17–18:

Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment: because as he is, so are we in this world.

There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love.

That love is a fruit of God's own Spirit, and therefore it is a permanent love. It casts out fear; it gives us boldness even in the day of judgment. It will not fade or diminish. Why? “Because as he is, so are we in this world.” This love conforms us to His image, and keeps conforming us to His image, until that goal is perfectly achieved. In other words, the same love that guaranteed our salvation from sin in the first place guarantees our perseverance in the faith.

VIII: To sum up...

We've been taking note of five important truths implied in the eight words of 1 John 4:19 (“We love Him, because He first loved us.”) I alliterated the five implications of that text I highlighted for you, but if you simply give them slightly different names, they spell TULIP:

- The perverseness of our fallen state—that's the doctrine of *Total Depravity*.
- The priority of God's electing choice—that is the doctrine of *Unconditional Election*.
- The particularity of His saving work—that, as we saw, entails the doctrine that is

often called *Limited Atonement*.

- The power of His loving deliverance—that, once more, is the doctrine of *Irresistible Grace*.
- The perfection of his redemptive plan—that is nothing other than the doctrine of *Perseverance*.

You might be one of those people who don't want to be referred to as a Calvinist or an Arminian. But the fact is, if you are a Christian at all, you do already affirm the fundamental principle in every one of those truths. You already know in your heart of hearts that you weren't born again because you were morally superior to your unbelieving neighbors. You were worthy of God's wrath just like them (Eph. 2:1–3). According to Ephesians 2:4–6, it was *God* who quickened you and showed you a special mercy—and that is why you are a believer. You already know that in your heart. You *don't* really believe you summoned faith and came to Christ in your own power and by your own unaided free will. You don't actually believe you are morally superior to people who *don't* believe. You therefore *must* see, somewhere in your soul, that God has given you special grace that He has not necessarily shown everyone.

You also believe God is absolutely sovereign over *all things*. I know you do, because you lean on the promise of Romans 8:28. And that promise would mean nothing if God were not in control of every detail of everything that happens. If He is not in control of all things, how could He work all things together for good?

Furthermore, you pray for the lost, which means in your heart, you believe God is sovereign over their salvation. If you didn't *really* believe He was sovereign in saving sinners, you'd quit praying for the lost and start doing everything you could to buttonhole people into the kingdom by hook or by crook, instead. But you know that would be folly.

And you pray about other things, too, don't you? You pray that God will change this person's heart, or alter the circumstances of that problem. That's pure Calvinism. When we go to God in prayer, we're expressing faith in His sovereignty over the circumstances of our lives.

You even believe God operates sovereignly in the administration of all His providence. You say things like, "If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that" (James 4:15)—because in your heart you believe that God works all things after the counsel of His own will (Eph. 1:11), and nothing happens apart from His will.

Nothing is more biblical than these doctrines that are commonly labeled Calvinism. In a way, it is a shame they have been given an extrabiblical name. Because these truths are the very essence of what Scripture teaches, and the very gist of Calvinism it is nowhere more clearly stated than in the simple words of our verse: "We love him, because he first loved us."