

IS FAITH IN CHRIST A SINFUL ACT?

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The Arminian doctrine of prevenient grace long has been a source of dispute among evangelical theologians, and its apparent limited scriptural support sometimes has been a fountain of embarrassment for those who affirm it. In this essay, I hope to offer a brief defense of this doctrine in its traditional form, but even more to propose a couple of alternatives to its customary rendering. One of these alternatives is, as the title suggests, to claim that the act of faith is not a morally pure act, but one that nevertheless is accepted by God as a means toward salvation. The conventional Arminian/Wesleyan doctrine of prevenient grace assumes two important dogmas of the Augustinian/Calvinistic tradition, namely the doctrines of depravity and of human inability to perform genuine righteousness. Before discussing prevenient grace, let us briefly examine these teachings and their relationship to the traditional Arminian doctrine.

The doctrine of depravity claims that humans have a corrupted nature, one which makes them prone to commit sin and unwilling fully to submit to God in love. Often this evil propensity is thought somehow to be passed down to each human from our earliest ancestors. Closely tied to this teaching is the doctrine of inability. This doctrine asserts that, in some sense, human beings are unable to perform any genuinely righteous act before God. Consequently, without divine grace, humans are unable to restore themselves to fellowship with God and so stand condemned before the divine judgment.

Augustine of Hippo expressed each of these teachings. He insisted that originally, Adam and Eve were free to do either good or evil.¹ But they transgressed God's command and as a result received a corrupted, sinful, nature. In this condition, the two could no longer choose good, but only evil. They were free, but only free to choose between various evil actions.² In turn, the human race inherited from them this sinful

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nature, which includes the inability to do what is right.³ John Calvin followed Augustine on these points. He proclaimed that the deity created Adam and Eve with free will. Sorrowfully, however, in an act of rebellion, the two freely sinned against God and, therefore, became corrupted in nature. Because of this, they could no longer do good or even desire to do good. In turn, their sinful nature was transferred from them to their descendants, so that now each human is born with a corrupted nature and with the inability to desire good or to do it.⁴ Indeed, Calvin insisted that humans are totally evil, that only damnable things come from us in our sinful state. Calvin admitted that throughout the ages unbelievers have done noble deeds, but he insisted that such noble actions result from an unseen divine restraint upon such persons. Allegedly, the deity operates grace upon them, not sufficient to save them, but only enough to hold back the full flood of their evil nature.⁵ The only "freedom" that corrupted humans have is the capacity to choose between evil options. Consequently, the whole human race stands condemned by God.

In light of these commitments to the doctrines of depravity and to human inability, both Augustine and Calvin endorsed the notion of unconditional divine predestination unto salvation. Augustine taught that because humans are inwardly sinful and, therefore, unwilling and unable to do good, salvation is solely the act of God. The deity has provided a means for forgiveness of sin through the work of Christ. This forgiveness may be appropriated by humans through faith in Christ.⁶ However, both the desire to exercise faith and the performance of such faith result from a divine action upon the human soul. Faith is not an action self-determined by the believer. It is "the gift of God."⁷ And so, God alone decides who is saved. He empowers some to desire and to perform faith. Others he does not so empower and, consequently, they do not exercise faith and are not saved.⁸ Augustine rejected the idea that God's choice to save is based on divine foreknowledge of the future righteous actions or faith of persons. Instead, such future meritorious actions and faith can only be grounded in the divine decision to save those persons.⁹ In light of this, Augustine distinguishes two divine calls to salvation. One calling is to all people but is not accepted by all. Another calling is to a select group and always is accepted. This latter call is offered to those who are "predestined . . . to conform to the image of His Son."¹⁰ The other call is to all people, even those who will not believe.

Calvin essentially duplicated Augustine's reasoning at these points. According to Calvin, God did not want all humankind to remain in their sinful condition. Subsequently, the deity chose to save some through the atoning work of Jesus Christ. The benefits of this work are received by faith; but faith is not an autonomous human act. Rather, God must give saving faith to persons so that they might believe in Christ.¹¹ Those to whom God gives faith most certainly believe and are saved. Those to whom God does not give faith cannot believe and are doomed to eternal punishment. The choice of who is saved and who is damned is solely God's. Calvin explicitly rejects the notion that God might predestine by foreseeing the faith or good works of various individuals. Rather, faith occurs only because God gives it, and foreknowledge is grounded in the divine decree that certain events will happen.¹² Like Augustine, Calvin recognized two types of divine call—a general call to all people and an effective call only to those whom God has chosen to save.¹³

James Arminius, and later John Wesley, rejected key elements of this

Augustinian/Calvinistic consensus. In particular, they spurned that tradition's denial of human libertarian freedom. For Arminius and Wesley, such a denial makes it impossible to affirm human responsibility for sin or to justify God's condemnation of human behavior.¹⁴ Dismissing the infra- and supra-lapsarianism of his day, which asserted that God unconditionally decrees who will and will not be saved, Arminius insisted that God's decree unto salvation is conditional; it is conditioned by the free choice that humans make for or against Christ. Arminius writes:

1. The first absolute decree of God concerning the salvation of man, is that by which he decreed to appoint his Son, Jesus Christ, for a Mediator, Redeemer, Savior, Priest and King, who might destroy sin by his own death, might by obedience obtain the salvation which had been lost, and might communicate it by his own virtue.
2. The second precise and absolute decree of God, is that in which he decreed to receive into favor those who repent and believe, and, in Christ for his sake and through Him, to effect the salvation of such penitents and believers as persevered to the end; but to leave in sin, and under wrath, all impenitent persons and unbelievers, and to damn them as aliens from Christ.¹⁵

Wesley essentially agreed with Arminius' interpretation of the divine decrees.¹⁶

While Arminius and Wesley both denounced the Augustinian/Calvinistic affirmation of unconditional divine predestination, they each basically agreed with that tradition's understanding of depravity and of the human inability to please God. Arminius writes:

. . . in his lapsed and sinful state, man is not capable, of and by himself, either to think, to will, or to do that which is really good; but it is necessary for him to be regenerated and renewed in his intellect, affections or will, and in all his powers, by God in Christ through the Holy Spirit, that he may be qualified rightly to understand, esteem, consider, will, and perform whatever is truly good.¹⁷

Wesley concurs, noting through a string of biblical quotes that

. . . there is in every man a "carnal mind, which is enmity against God, which is not, cannot be subject to" his "law;" and which so infects the whole soul, that "there dwelleth in" him, "in his flesh," in his natural state, "no good thing;" but "every imagination of the thoughts of his heart is evil," only evil, and that "continually."¹⁸

Nevertheless, even though they affirmed the doctrines of depravity and of human inability, Arminius and Wesley each denounced the notions of a limited call and of irresistible grace, the respective ideas that God only calls a few people to salvation and that those whom he calls cannot resist, but must exercise faith in Christ and be saved. Instead, these men taught that God calls all to salvation, that all who receive this offer positively can respond to it, but that many freely reject it.

Arminius explicitly denied that his views implied salvation by works. Rather, he insisted

that salvation is by grace, but not by irresistible grace. He notes:

I ascribe to grace the commencement, the continuance and the consummation of all good, and to such an extent do I carry its influence, that a man, though already regenerate, can neither conceive, will, nor do any good at all, nor resist any evil temptation without this preventing and exciting, this following and co-operating grace. From this statement it will clearly appear, that I by no means do injustice to grace, by attributing, as it is reported of me, too much to man's free-will. For the whole controversy reduces itself to the solution of this question, "is the grace of God a certain irresistible force?" That is, the controversy does not relate to those actions or operations which may be ascribed to grace (for I acknowledge and inculcate as many of these actions or operations as any man ever did), but it relates solely to the mode of operation, whether it be irresistible or not. With respect to which, I believe, according to scriptures, that many persons resist the Holy Spirit and reject the grace that is offered.¹⁹

Arminius distinguished between two forms of divine grace. These are preventing grace and subsequent or cooperating grace. The former is a grace offered to all humans so that they freely may choose for or against Christ and, thus, for or against salvation. Without this grace, no one could choose Christ or be saved.²⁰ The latter is a grace which follows after one's initial faith in Christ. It is a

perpetual assistance and continued aid of the Holy Spirit, according to which he acts upon and excites to good the man who has been already renewed, by infusing into him salutary cogitations, and by inspiring him with good desires, that he may thus actually will whatever is good; and according to which God may then will and work together with man, that man may perform whatever he wills.²¹

At each level of grace, human free will is active. Like Arminius, Wesley also insisted that grace is necessary for salvation. Humans cannot turn to God without divine aid. However, God has given to all humans a prevenient grace that allows them freely to choose Christ or remain in sin. This grace is required for salvation, but it is not irresistible.²²

The close tie between the traditional Arminian doctrine of prevenient grace and the doctrines of human depravity and inability leaves the contemporary Arminian with two fundamental options in defending the core elements of the Arminian model of salvation. One option is to accept, with Arminius and Wesley, the notion that humans utterly are corrupted by sin and unable positively to respond to Christ without some direct divine spiritual aid. A second option is to reevaluate the alleged impact of the sinful nature upon humans, questioning whether such a nature makes it impossible for humans to respond in faith to Christ. We will consider each alternative in turn. We begin with a defense of the traditional Arminian/Wesleyan understanding of prevenient grace.

A DEFENSE OF TRADITIONAL ARMINIAN PREVENIENT GRACE

As we have just noted, the conventional Calvinist and Arminian models agree that humans are corrupted to such a degree that they are unable to desire or actually to turn to Christ in faith. For each theory, a special act of divine inner influence must enable the sinner to exercise faith. Where these models diverge is in the matter of the human's ability to resist such inner divine empowering. Augustine and Calvin insisted that God's gracious influence is irresistible, that faith in Christ is directly given to the individual by God, and that salvation certainly follows from that divinely given faith. Sorrowfully, faith is not given to all persons, but only to a few—to those predestined to salvation by God. Contrary to these tenets, Arminius and Wesley contended that God's grace can be (and often is) resisted by humans. Those who accept this gracious aid are able to exercise faith and are saved. Those who reject this influence do not believe and, subsequently, reject salvation. Further (and here the notion of prevenient grace especially emerges), Arminius and Wesley maintain that the divine inner spiritual influence is made available to all persons, not just to a select few. The result is that all persons are given a genuine opportunity to respond positively to Christ (or at least, each person genuinely could respond if given the opportunity). In other words, God universally offers a spiritual influence that neutralizes the disabling effect of the sinful nature to a degree sufficient for each sinner potentially to desire and to exercise faith in Christ. In her freedom, with the aid of God's gracious spiritual empowerment, the individual is free either to accept or to reject Christ.

Calvinists often charge that such a doctrine of prevenient grace simply is not affirmed in the Bible. And the Arminian must admit that the scriptures do not explicitly teach "the doctrine of prevenient grace." In its developed form, this teaching is the result of systematic theological reflection upon diverse claims found in the Bible. It is interesting to point out, however, that a similar charge might be leveled at Calvinism. The Bible does not explicitly teach that God's call to salvation is irresistible, nor that humans are totally depraved. While certain Biblical passages may hint at these assertions, none explicitly affirms them in the detail outlined by later theologians. These doctrines also are the result of later systematic theological reflection. In light of this, the Arminian might argue that while the doctrine of prevenient grace is not explicitly affirmed in scripture, it is implied at key points. And here a positive case materializes for the doctrine of prevenient grace as formulated by Arminius and Wesley.

Several scriptural considerations lend support to affirming this traditional Arminian doctrine. First, the Bible indicates that God is gracious, merciful, and loving and that he desires that all persons come to salvation. But if this is the case, it hardly makes sense to claim that God, in fact, refuses to grant to humans the grace necessary for them to choose salvation.²³ Consider the following passages:

Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. (John 1:29)

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

For God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all. (Romans 11:32)

For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, the testimony to which was borne at the proper time. (1 Timothy 2: 5-6)

But we see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for every one. (Hebrews 2:9)

The Lord is not slow about his promise as some count slowness, but is forbearing toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. (2 Peter 3:9)²⁴

Obviously, these verses do not directly teach prevenient grace. But they do proclaim that God is gracious, that his grace has been extended to the whole world (all persons) through Christ, and that he is unwilling that any should perish. Surely these texts at least suggest a pervasive grace that works toward achieving God's desire to bring all sinners to him.

A second biblical support for the doctrine of prevenient grace is that throughout scripture God admonishes persons to exercise faith in him and in Christ (2 Chronicles 20:20, Isaiah 43:10, John 6:29, 14:1, Acts 16:31, etc.), and encourages them to repent of sin (1 Kings 8:47, Matthew 3:2, Mark 1:15, Luke 13:3, 5, Acts 3:19, 2:38, etc.). In turn, often failure to exercise faith and to repent of sin directly is condemned by God (John 3:18). Here, it makes little sense to suppose that God calls persons to repentance and asks them to believe, then condemns them for failing to do so, all the while knowing that they cannot repent or believe without his aid and in turn refusing to grant them such assistance.²⁵

A third justification for the doctrine of prevenient grace is that some scriptures insinuate that God's enlightening and convicting power is active in all persons, and is drawing all to Christ. John 1:9 speaks of the Logos which "gives light to every man," suggesting that some measure of knowledge of God is available to all humans through the enlightening power of Christ. Romans 2:14-15 asserts that through conscience Gentiles often show that the requirements of God's law are "written on their hearts. . . ." Sometimes this awareness condemns their actions; sometimes it defends them. Presumably the source of this knowledge is God, and through it persons are aware that some of their actions are good and others evil. John 16:7-11 speaks of the role of the Holy Spirit in convicting "the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment," intimating that God's inner spiritual testimony is made to all persons. In turn, in John 12:32, Jesus proclaims that when he is lifted up (on the cross) he will "draw all men to" himself, possibly implying that the human heart will be drawn/dragged to Christ by the powerful picture of grace that Calvary manifests. None of these passages explicitly speaks of a divine prevenient grace which overcomes the effects of the sinful nature, but each leaves room for just such an idea. Here we see advocated a universal divine influence upon the hearts of all persons, both convicting of sin and making persons aware of or even drawing them toward the divine righteousness.

In light of these biblical considerations, there is some warrant for affirming the doctrine of prevenient grace as originally formulated by Arminius and Wesley. While the doctrine is not explicitly taught, it fits well with the general tone of these scriptural principles. This

particularly is true if one assumes that in their corrupt state humans cannot exercise faith in Christ without inner divine influence. For if this is the case, and if God is sincere in his willingness to save all and earnest in his call to all persons to repent and believe, then there must be some mechanism by which the deity frees humans sufficiently to enable them to respond positively to his call.

But the Arminian defense of divine grace need not stop here. For it also is possible for one to question whether the Bible teaches that the sinful nature makes it impossible for humans to respond in faith to Christ. To this second defense we now turn.

TWO ALTERNATIVE ARMINIAN DEFENSES OF PREVENIENT GRACE

As we have seen, the traditional Arminian doctrine of prevenient grace assumes that humans are depraved to such a degree that they cannot want or exercise faith in Christ without special divine aid, without an inner spiritual aid that neutralizes the power of the corrupt nature. But if this assumption could be challenged, the need for the doctrine of prevenient grace (understood as a divine empowering of sinners so that they might desire and exercise faith in Christ) largely could be eliminated. This assumption concerning human inability can be challenged in either of two ways. First, one can question whether the sinful nature of humans entails that every concrete action of unregenerate humans is sinful, displeasing to God, deprived of any true good. Second, one can contest whether, even if the sinful nature does entail that every unregenerate human action is sinful, that the act of faith of such persons is not sufficient for God graciously to grant salvation to them. We will consider each of these responses in turn. Before doing so, however, it will be helpful to reexamine the basic content of the Calvinistic (and traditional Arminian) doctrine of human depravity.

The meaning of the doctrine of human depravity is subject to varied interpretations. Calvin understood human sinful nature to mean that, independent of direct inner divine spiritual influence, humans can in no way do good. He insisted that only damnable actions come from the corrupt nature of humans and that "the soul, plunged into this deadly abyss, is not only burdened with vices, but is utterly devoid of all good."²⁶ Calvin admits that by human standards various unbelievers have lived noble lives and have done good things. He also acknowledges that not every person is willing to execute or actually commits every possible sin. However, Calvin rationalizes this state of affairs by asserting that God's grace pervasively restrains the hearts of humans, preventing them from performing many of the evils that they are inclined to do. According to Calvin, such restraining grace does not bring salvation to individuals; it only tempers their evil.²⁷ Indeed, whatever actual good nonbelievers perform only occurs as a result of the special and direct inner action of God's grace in their lives.²⁸ Interestingly, then, Calvin endorses his own form of prevenient grace, but it is a grace that only restrains from some sin and aids in producing non-saving righteous acts. It is not a grace that enables persons to respond in faith to Christ. This latter form of grace requires yet a further activity by God's Spirit upon the human heart, an action administered only to those that God has predestined for salvation.²⁹

Later Calvinistic writers offer a deeper analysis of human depravity, often softening the edges of Calvin's conjectures. For example, Louis Berkhof contends that due to the original sin of Adam and Eve, humans are corrupted and totally depraved. This means that

every aspect of human life is plagued by sin, and there is no *spiritual* good in humans. That is, "the unregenerated sinner cannot do any act . . . which fundamentally meets with God's approval and answers to the demands of God's holy law."³⁰ Further, the sinner "cannot change his fundamental preference for sin and self to love for God, nor even make an approach to such a change."³¹ The doctrine of total depravity, however, does not mean that each human is as depraved as she possibly can be, nor that the unregenerate person practices every kind of evil. Further, it does not entail that unregenerate persons have no moral conscience, no innate awareness of God's moral expectations. Further, it does not mean that the unsaved never perform good acts or never act in the interest of others over themselves. For Berkhof, the key depravity of humans is that they can never perform an act whose motive is authentic love for God.³²

While Berkhof's account echoes Calvin's views in numerous ways, it also ameliorates his harsher claims. Berkhof interprets human depravity in terms of the inability to perform acts whose motive is genuine love for God, rather than as an inability to do any good. This allows him to acknowledge the authentic goodness of some unregenerate human acts and to avoid claiming that the only reason unsaved humans do any acts of good is by a direct, non-saving, divine influence upon those persons. As I understand him, Berkhof is claiming that some good flows from human nature, even in its corrupted state, and even without direct divine spiritual aid. The catch is that no such good acts are truly motivated by love for God and, consequently, none leads to salvation in a person's life.

Challenging Total Inability.

At this point, Arminians may offer one of two nontraditional interpretations of human depravity and human faith. The first is to deny that the sinful nature of humans entails that every action of unregenerate individuals is sinful and displeasing to God. Several Bible passages insinuate that this denial is accurate. For example, in Matthew 7:9-11 Jesus asks who of us would give a stone or a snake to a son if the boy were to ask for bread or fish? The answer is obvious. Jesus concludes that even though we are evil, we know how to give good gifts to our children. In other words, Jesus seems to say that even though we are sinners, we are capable of generating some righteous acts. Indeed, such actions on our part are analogous to how the Holy and Heavenly Father responds to our requests! In such situations, perhaps we are (unconsciously) imitators of God (Ephesians 5:1)! Or consider another example: In Romans 2:14-15, the apostle Paul asserts that when humans follow the dictates of conscience, they perform acts that conform to divine law and show that God's law is written on their hearts. Paul here is not declaring that humans are not inwardly sinful. Rather, he seems to be saying that even in our sinful condition we occasionally do good by following the dictates of conscience. Now if these scriptures indicate that sinners sometimes can perform good acts, then it may also mean that on certain occasions the act of faith, even on the part of a sinful person, is a genuinely good act, one that pleases and is accepted by God.

This interpretation does not deny that humans are sinful, that humans have a depraved nature. Instead, it simply declares that even though sin dominates a person's life, upon occasion she is capable of freely enacting genuinely good deeds. Further, this does not mean that any human ever does or even could completely avoid sin. While the fact that

sinful persons can perform some good acts may lead to the theoretical possibility that some individuals could live a morally perfect life, it does not mean that such an occurrence is practically possible. The weight of the sinful nature, of the proneness to sin, may be so great that even if sinful persons occasionally do good things, the prospect of never doing evil, of living a perfect moral life, may be so astronomically slim that it is a virtual or statistical impossibility. Sin remains an inevitability, even if not a logical or causal necessity.³³

Such an understanding of the human condition suggests a nuanced understanding of God's holy expectations. Rather than assuming, as did Calvin (and apparently Arminius and Wesley), that every unregenerate human act is evil and unacceptable to God, one may maintain that even a life full of genuinely good acts is not sufficient to fulfill the divine expectations. For the holiness of God does not merely demand some good works, or even a greater balance of good over evil. Instead, God expects a life of only good deeds with absolutely no sin. Humans stand condemned not because their every act is spiritually evil, but because God demands that none of their acts be evil. Since no human utterly avoids sin, none avoids divine condemnation. All fall short of God's glorious expectations (Romans 3:23).

The good news, the Gospel, however, is that God has provided a means to salvation independent of a person completely fulfilling the moral law. God conditionally has ordained that by the free choice of the sinful person to exercise faith in Jesus Christ, that individual graciously will be granted salvation. She will be declared righteous even though in fact she has not perfectly met the demands of the moral law (Romans 3:21-24). In this case, the act of faith is a good act performed by a sinner. It is not sufficient to meet the holy demands of God, the demand to live a morally perfect life. Nevertheless, because of Christ's atonement and because of God's gracious decree, this good act will be accounted sufficient to receive a salvation that was neither deserved (by living a perfect life) nor attainable through human effort (because all in fact sin and fall short of God's expectations).

Two Calvinistic protests against this perspective may be anticipated. First, some will maintain that this proposal affirms salvation by merit. Augustine insisted that because Pelagius taught that faith is a natural human act, that this implies that salvation is earned by a person's faith. For Augustine, unless faith itself directly is given by God, salvation is not a gift, but something earned. We may question the cogency of Augustine's claims. That faith in Christ is a free human act hardly implies that salvation is somehow earned. It remains the case that the human believer has not lived a perfect moral life and, thus, has not fulfilled God's moral expectations. Subsequently, the believer still deserves divine condemnation. But this condemnation is not forthcoming, because *graciously* God has ordained that those who exercise faith in Christ will be granted remission of sin and will receive spiritual union with Christ—i.e., salvation. Salvation is still by grace because God has accepted the atoning sacrifice of Christ in the place of our living morally perfect lives. Further, it is not even the case that faith itself is an act that the human could perform absent of divine (non-deterministic) influence. The Arminian may contend that without the inner urging of the Holy Spirit, without the inner light of the Logos, perhaps without the hearing of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the sinner could not exercise faith. God's pervasive activity is still required in this model of the human condition.

A second anticipated Calvinistic reply to this model of the human condition is that allegedly it contradicts the Bible's declaration that humans can do no genuine good. Calvin understood the apostle Paul literally to mean that persons can do no good. He got this from Paul's assertion that "there is no one righteous, not even one . . . there is no one who seeks God . . . there is no one who does good, not even one (Romans 3:10-12)." For this reason, Calvin asserted that the good that we see unregenerate persons do is the result of the divine restraining of evil and the divine inducing of good in persons. Berkhof, on the other hand, insinuates that Paul's words here mean that while unregenerate humans can do some good, they can do no *spiritual* good, no act genuinely pleasing to God. But it may be better to understand Paul to mean not that unregenerate humans literally never do good. Instead, he means that whatever good we do is not sufficient or salvific because in fact we also all sin and thus fall short of God's expectations. Humans do in fact keep many of God's laws, either consciously through a knowledge of the law or unconsciously through a tacit awareness of the law written in their consciences. But no one completely keeps that law and, so, all stand condemned. In such an interpretation, Paul's quotes from the Psalms here can be seen as hyperbole, as poetic over-statement designed to emphasize a quite literal truth that no human ever lives up to God's holy and holistic expectations. This seems reasonable in light of Paul's own acknowledgment that through conscience humans sometimes can do works in conformity with God's law.³⁴ At any rate, one possible non-traditional Arminian response to the problem of human depravity is simply to deny that every act of corrupt humans is evil and displeasing to God.

Grace In Spite of Sin.

A second augmented Arminian response would be to assert that even if unregenerate persons cannot enact genuinely good acts, God graciously ordains that some of these acts will be sufficient for receiving the saving benefits of Jesus' atonement. In other words, even if no act of unregenerate humans is truly righteous (because such acts are never motivated by a genuine love for God), this need not mean that such persons cannot freely exercise a faith sufficient to receive the blessings of divine salvation. It could be that the deity has ordained that even an act of faith whose motive is not fully based on love for God nevertheless will be sufficient to receive the benefits of Christ's saving power. Such an act of faith would not be pure; it would still be the act of a sinner. But in God's amazing grace, even such an action would be accredited as righteousness (Romans 4:3).

Here we perhaps expose an ironic aspect of the Augustinian/Calvinistic system—namely, the presumption that the act of faith itself must be morally pure, untainted by sinful motives or self love. In short, in order for God to grant salvation, the act of faith must be *worthy* of God's acceptance; it must *merit* the divine granting of salvation; it cannot be tainted by the sinful nature. For this reason, both Augustine and Calvin declare that God must empower the sinful soul with a genuine/saving faith. But why should we think this? Why should we believe that the act of faith must be morally pure? Does not such an assumption usher in its own peculiar form of works-righteousness? Are not Calvinists tacitly asserting that because God has made the act of faith truly moral, the deity is able to grant salvation? But what if the grace of God is so magnanimous that the deity accepts as sufficient for salvation even the faith of the morally impure sinner! What if the act of faith

is tainted with false motives, and with failure to love God, and yet God accepts it any way? Amazing grace indeed! It seems to me that such a scenario is the more realistic view of human faith. What Christian is willing to claim that his act of faith in Christ was or is utterly pure, motivated by a complete and untainted love for God? Is it not more realistic, and for that matter more scriptural, to believe that God accepts our faith, even though we are sinners and our acts are not pure? It seems to me the answer is, Yes.

The benefit of this second proposed Arminian reinterpretation of the human condition is that it takes seriously the traditional doctrine of human depravity. Humans may well never generate acts that are morally pure, completely satisfying in God's estimate. As Emil Brunner notes, even if an individual in principle could perform every act of the divine law, it need not follow that that person is not a sinner. Sin may well cut deeper than that, so that while individuals may be able to keep the law externally, they never fully keep it internally. They never fully live in covenant with God, nor in love with God.³⁵ Even if this is the case, however, this second Arminian interpretation allows for the faith that exudes from such sinful persons to be sufficient to receive the benefits of Christ's atonement. This is not because such faith deserves these benefits, but because God graciously has willed it to be so.

Again, an anticipated Calvinist response to this second augmented Arminian perspective might be to assert that this view makes faith a human work that merits salvation. At least the Calvinistic system makes faith a *divine* work that (in a qualified sense) merits salvation. But again this is not quite right. In the model I have proposed, faith does not merit salvation at all. Faith does not meet the righteous demands of God's law. It is only because God graciously has willed that Christ's death atones for sin and that faith in Christ will be the condition upon which the benefits of this atonement are received that faith in any way affects salvation. Further, the activity of the Spirit of God upon the individual heart may still be required in order to urge the person toward this (blemished) faith in Christ. Even if the faith itself is not utterly guileless, without a divine nudge, no human response would unfold. Further still, and perhaps most profoundly, in the model of faith proposed here, divine grace accepts an act of faith that itself is not even morally righteous. It is not utterly pure, not motivated by sheer love for God. Nevertheless, in grace, God accepts it anyway! This is not salvation by works. It is grace, through and through.

I conclude that a substantial case can be made for the Arminian doctrine of grace. This is possible either by affirming prevenient grace as traditionally taught by Arminius and Wesley, or by reinterpreting the implications of the doctrine of human depravity. In either case, it seems that a biblical case can be made for the notion that humans are free to accept or reject the gift of salvation offered in Jesus Christ; they are free to exercise faith or not exercise it.

NOTES

1. Augustine, *City of God*, 12. 21; and 13. 3.
2. Augustine, *Against Two Letters of the Pelagians*, 1. 5.
3. Augustine, *City of God*, 13. 3 and *On Forgiveness of Sins and Baptism*, 1. 9.
4. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 1, chapter 15, section 8. Hereafter, 1.15.8. Also, see 2.1.5-8.
5. *Ibid.*, 2.3.1-4.
6. Augustine's soteriology in fact is more complex than this. For like many early Western

Catholic writers, Augustine saw a close connection between not only faith and salvation, but also between participation in the sacraments of the church and salvation. For Augustine, church sacraments are the chief means through which divine grace is received. This especially is true of baptism. And so, a hidden legalism underlies his doctrines of salvation and of the church, a legalism rejected by later Protestant writers both Calvinistic and Arminian. For a discussion of the tension in Augustine's thought, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine, Volume 1: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 302-308.

7. Augustine, *On the Predestination of the Saints*, 3.

8. *Ibid.*, 11.

9. *Ibid.*, 7, 36.

10. *Ibid.*, 32.

11. Calvin, 2.2.10-12, 20-21, 27; 2.3.

12. *Ibid.*, 3.23.7

13. *Ibid.*, 3.21.7.

14. See James Arminius, "A Declaration of the Sentiments of Arminius," in *The Works of James Arminius*, volume 1 (Albany, Oregon: AGES Software, 1997), pp. 191-197.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 213-214.

16. John Wesley, "On Predestination," in *The Complete Works of John Wesley*, vol. 6 (Albany, Oregon: AGES Software, 1997), p. 245.

17. Arminius, "A Declaration of the Sentiments of Arminius," p. 218.

18. Wesley, "On Original Sin," in *The Complete Works of John Wesley*, vol. 6, p. 73.

19. James Arminius, "A Declaration of the Sentiments of Arminius," in *The Works of James Arminius*, Volume 1 (Albany, Oregon: AGES Software, 1997), p. 219.

20. *Ibid.*, "The Apology," p. 315-316.

21. *Ibid.*, "A Declaration of the Sentiments of Arminius," p. 219.

22. Recent interpreters have pointed out that it is not quite accurate to say that Wesley affirms that prevenient grace enables a person to exercise *saving faith*, for he insists that genuine faith is a gift from God. Rather, Wesley contends that prevenient grace allows a persons to become aware of his sinful and helpless condition and, in turn, this awareness or despair allows God to give the gift of faith to the individual. Wesley maintains, however, that this prevenient grace does not irresistibly force one to admit his sinfulness. Rather, the individual freely can refuse to acknowledge his sinful and dire state and, thus, can be left unable to receive the gift of faith from God. And so, even though prevenient grace does not enable the person to freely exercise saving grace, the end result is that human freedom still plays an essential role in the reception of salvation. It allows a person freely to see his sinful condition and need for God, and to (in some sense) turn toward the deity. See Charles Rogers, *The Concept of Prevenient Grace in the Theology of John Wesley* (Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 1967), pp. 215-242. Also see Mark Royster, *John Wesley's Doctrine of Prevenient Grace in Missiological Perspective* (D.Miss. Dissertation, Asbury Theological Seminary, 1989), pp. 90-91.

23. See Vernon Grounds, "God's Universal Salvific Grace," in *Grace Unlimited*, ed. Clark Pinnock (Eugene, Oregon: WIPF and Stock Publishers, 1999), pp. 21-30.

24. Each of these renderings of these passages is from the Revised Standard Version of the Holy Bible.

25. For a similar argument see Henry Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1949), pp. 155-156.

26. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Battles, in the *Library of Christian Classics*, vol. XX, ed. John McNeill (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), Book 2, chapter 3, section 2. Hereafter, 2.3.2. The title of this chapter in the *Institutes* is "Only Damnable Things Come Forth From Man's Corrupt Nature."

27. Ibid, 2.3.3. Calvin writes that "it ought to occur to us that amid this corruption of nature there is some place for God's grace; not such grace as to cleanse it, but to restrain it inwardly. . . ." Further, while God cures the corrupt nature of the elect, those not selected for salvation "he merely restrains by throwing a bridle over them only that they may not break loose, inasmuch as he foresees their control to be expedient to preserve all that is." Ibid.

28. Ibid., 2.3.4.

29. Ibid., 2.3.6-7.

30. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1939), p. 247.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid., 246-247.

33. This understanding of the inevitability versus the necessity of sin is similar to the kinds of statistical inevitabilities found in empirical science. For example, it is impossible to tract with certainly the deterioration of any give single atom, but it quite easily is possible to discern the likely behavior of a collective mass of such atoms, to such a degree that its future behavior as a collection is virtually certain.

34. That the scriptures often use hyperbole can hardly be denied, even by Calvinists. Few Reformed thinkers take Jesus's recommendation literally in Matthew 5:29-30.

35. Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption, Dogmatics: Volume II*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1952), pp. 108-112.