

ISSUES IN ELECTION

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Introduction

The election, or predestination, of human beings to salvation is a doctrine that has divided God's people for over five hundred years. Two defining camps have existed, taking their names from the Reformers whose teachings are the basis for the positions that define each camp, Arminius and Calvin. There are serious issues at stake, among others, the way the gospel is presented, the working relationship between God and man, and, especially, the view we hold of God and who He is. In spite of this there has been no definitive resolution of the issues involved but rather the acceptance of an impasse with all (there are really a number of alternate views on these things) sides going about their business with usually admirable acceptance of one another. I submit, with a growing realization of the difficulties involved, that this is no way to run "the household of God, . . . the pillar and support of the truth"(1 Tim 3:15 NASB). Unity of heart and spirit, as well as, that of the church's body of truth, "the faith" (Eph 4:13 NASB), must be sought after and pursued. At stake is the picture of Christ the church projects to the world and the watching angels (Eph 3:10) and the fuller unity our Lord must have had in mind for His people in the pastoral prayer of John 17. With little progress in the last five hundred years, perhaps some new approaches are called for, with love.

This paper will be concerned with some preliminary considerations of the more important core issues of depravity, faith and regeneration, with a few thoughts about the effect of all this on the real day-by-day concerns about personal growth and achieving the character of Christ, sanctification.

Approach

The theological method to be used in approaching these issues will be that of developing a biblical perspective, by the Spirit, then examining secondary sources and finally returning to refine the biblical model. In an effort to be objective in the pursuit of truth, this method will be consciously biblical in its focus. In an effort to be balanced, it will be led and directed by the Spirit, although surely limited by this writer's personal spiritual progress.

One other element in the approach to be taken will be a pursuit of simplicity. By this is meant keeping to singleness of purpose and focus. This is not to deny the need for depth nor the multi-faceted nature of wisdom, nor is it to be naïve, ignoring reality and the difficult issues of the real world. It does mean to seek humility and not require complication as validation of a position or of oneself. In mind is the Lord's praise to the Father that He had hidden spiritual insight and reality from those "wise in their own eyes" and had given it to "babes" (Luke 10:21 NASB). This is how the truth is found, on God's terms.

One final approach to these issues will be to try and find some different terms to hold the concepts we are dealing with. As we have said above, it has been five hundred years and words have changed. Also, words have come to carry some baggage that is not helpful and the issues need redefinition. An example is the term *election*, itself. The modern mind generally thinks differently about this word, complicating, somewhat, an already difficult subject. Perhaps *choice* would be better. In a few instances some suggestions of more helpful terminology will be made.

Depravity

Introduction. This is, perhaps, the key issue of the subject of election. R. C. Sproul says, "How we view our fallen condition . . . greatly influences how we understand the biblical

doctrine of election.”¹ The main reason this is the key issue is how it relates to the issue of faith. If the human being is corrupt to the extent that nothing he does is good or can result in good, then, faith, which is the condition of salvation and the obtaining of eternal life, must be supplied by God for the human to be saved. If some capacity is left for man to do something that is not wrong or to not do something that is wrong, then a door is left open that might allow human faith to be a means of receiving the gift of God. It is because man is considered completely corrupt and incapable of doing anything that is not wrong that “regeneration is a logical necessity for faith to occur.”² So the mechanism or order of salvation begins here, with a clear understanding of depravity or human sinfulness.

Biblical data. First, what does God say in the Bible, as best as it can be determined? Jesus says, “unless you believe that I am *He*, you will die in your sins” (John 8:24 NASB). John 14:6, as well, states clearly that Jesus Christ is the only hope for a cure to man’s sin. He “knew what was in man,” yet, He came “to give His life a ransom for many” so that “if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed” (John 2:25; Matt 20:28; John 8:36 NASB). As great as was the sacrifice needed to set man free from his sin, so great must have been the sin he needed to be set free from. As great as the cure, so great must be the disease.

Sin is a constant presence in both the Old and New Testaments, in narrative and in didactic and in prophetic sections alike. Every genre and every book and every pericope contains it. A look at the narrative sections in the Bible alone would convince the reasonable person of the pervasiveness and universality of sin. It seems mankind is more likely to sin than not, even to the point of compulsion as a matter, not even of habit, but of nature. Besides this there are the

¹ R. C. Sproul, *Willing to Believe* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 204.

² *Ibid.*, 194.

propositional portions of Scripture that teach us the same thing, such as the first three chapters of Romans, given over to this very subject and ending with “there is none righteous, not even one” (Rom 3:10 NASB). As to the extent of human sinfulness, descriptions include “the practice of *every kind* of impurity with greediness,” “indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind” and “we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another” (Eph 4:19; 2:3; Titus 3:3 NASB). The depth or extent of human depravity finds a further description in Titus 1:16 (NASB), “detestable and disobedient and worthless for any good deed,” predicate adjectives that equate sin, not only with acts or attitudes, but with the people who do these things, being “sons of disobedience” and “*by nature* children of wrath” (Eph 2:2-3). Furthermore, Jesus said, “Apart from me you can do *nothing*” and in Titus “to those who are defiled and unbelieving, *nothing* is pure” (John 15:5; Titus 1:15 NASB), so that we see the extent of sin is complete.

There is no escaping the universality and completeness of sin. Yet, some limits are observed by experience so that individuals are “not as sinful as possible,” nor do they engage in “every possible form of sin.”³ So it might be said that man is not *omni-sinful*, he is not as sinful as he might be. To remove the spirit of self-abasement or asceticism it is preferable to use *completely sinful* to *total depravity*. This would be a more accurate contemporary description.

Calvinist and Arminian views. The views of the two main camps, Calvinism and Arminianism, on the depravity of man are identical in scope but appear to be different in extent. All Christians, indeed, agree that the scope of sin is universal, that “all have sinned” and that “there is none who does good, there is not even one” (Rom 3:12b-c NASB). At first glance, both camps also seem to agree that the extent of sin is complete. James Arminius says, “It will be evident, that nothing can be spoken more truly concerning man in this state (man under sin), than

that he is altogether dead in sin.”⁴ From Calvin, we hear, of man, “such is the depravity of his nature, that he cannot move and act except in the direction of evil.”⁵ Depravity, the scope and extent of the sinfulness of man, is apparently agreed to be universal and total (hence, the common term *total depravity*).

Calvinists conclude from this that a complete work of God is necessary to remedy the situation and render man capable of salvation faith. Calvin himself says, “One must first be reborn . . . a mind is not born again merely by having some portion of it reformed. It must be totally renewed . . . but we have nothing of the Spirit except through regeneration.”⁶ Arminius was moved to alter the formula, a little, apparently to preserve the complete free will of man and, therefore, protect the justice of God from being damaged. He offered a “prevenient” work of God (prevenient grace), to render man capable of salvation faith, a work that precedes that of regeneration, the work of God in salvation that generates all good.⁷ Arminius uses Augustine as support for this.⁸ There is still no real difference from the Calvinist position that salvation faith comes from God.

However, though prevenient grace makes a human capable of salvation faith, it does not guarantee salvation since Arminius reserves for him the right to refuse God’s offer of eternal life. Even though he is able to receive salvation he may resist and become personally liable for his own damnation. The prevenient grace is “sufficient (enough to make salvation possible)” but

³ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 645.

⁴ James Arminius, “On the Free Will of Man and Its Powers,” *The Works of James Arminius: The London Edition*, trans. James and William Nichols (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 2:193-4. 3 vols

⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 1:254. 2 vols.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:249.

⁷ Sproul, *Willing*, 129.

not always “efficient (effective to actually save).”⁹ This slight distinction is important to Calvinists because they see the reverse side of this option to be human effort entering through the side door. For the Calvinist, the call of God, His offer of grace and eternal life, has to be irresistible in order to really be free. If a human can resist the offer, then he must assent to it for salvation to be effected. This assent is seen to be an act of merit by the person and therefore a “good work,” rendering grace obsolete and making salvation contingent upon something good in man. Calvinists hold that the work of regeneration, or new birth, mentioned earlier, “makes the sinner not only able to will but also willing . . . he wills because God has changed the disposition of his heart.”¹⁰ The resistibility, introduced by Arminius, is seen, as Francis Turretin said, as “the principal hinge of the controversy.”¹¹

What appeared to be agreement about human depravity, is seen to depart at the point of the resistibility or irresistibility of receiving salvation grace, with Calvinists insisting that it is necessary for God to irresistibly regenerate completely first, providing both willing faith and the salvation to follow. Arminians, on the other hand, offer that God provides grace to give man the ability to believe and accept the offer of salvation but the willingness to accept that offer resides solely with the man himself. Arminius has offered man independent will but has kept his faith dependent on God. Man’s will seems to be excepted from depravity by Arminius, while Calvinists hold to total depravity.

Synthesis. The Scriptures present a bleak, even hopeless portrait of the human family, apart from Christ and the grace of God. Even such a good device as the Law, which was given

⁸ Arminius, *Works*, 2:196.

⁹ Sproul, *Willing*, 130.

¹⁰ Sproul, *Willing*, 132.

by God to Moses, caused sin to increase (Rom 5:20) and the result was that sin came to be seen for what it is, “utterly sinful” (Rom 7:13), and the whole world became “accountable to God” (Rom 3:19). While the Scripture speaks of mankind as being “helpless” (Rom 5:6), it is the fact of man’s plight that is emphasized and not his ability or inability. It is the fact that he constantly and habitually, even under the best of circumstances, sins and goes astray that is emphasized. He doesn’t want to do what is right and doesn’t try. It is not that he wants to and is unable. The ability of man to do what is right seems only to be an issue for Christians (Romans chapter seven), and there the ability is clearly absent, apart from Christ, even though the desire is finally present. No, there is nothing good in man that warrants salvation.

Some differences in perspective surface, as the Scriptural perspective and those of the two camps above are considered. The Scripture focuses on the reality of man’s plight and brings to light his captivity and slavery to sin as an actual condition. The Calvinists and Arminians are both concerned not to locate anything meritorious in man, going out of their way to construct their systems so that nothing to do with salvation is found in man, especially faith, also Arminius, after prevenient grace has done its work, allows “assent.” If only someone had thought to include the ability to assent or not to assent in the work of prevenient grace, we might not be where we are today for, I suspect, that would have been acceptable to Calvinists. Were the Reformers too cautious to protect grace (by not allowing man assent or faith) and the justice of God (by giving man the right of refusal)? We have every indication that both sides, especially the originators, were motivated by the right things, seeking the greater glory of God and the defense of His name and purposes. They were, however, like us all, children of their times and

¹¹ Frances Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. 3 vols. (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R, 1992-97), 2:546.

must have been influenced by their contemporary context. So an eye needs to be kept open for balance or holes that could use some refinement.

The Scripture, for all that is evil in man, allows him an active conscience, having “the work of the Law written in their hearts” (Rom 2:15 NASB). Paul, on Mars Hill, also alluded to some sense in which people might “grope for and find” God (Acts 17:27 NASB) and Rom 1:18-32 indicates that non-believers can understand right from wrong and know certain things about God. Man retains certain natural abilities. “The fall did not obliterate man’s natural humanity. Man still has the capacity to think but this capacity has been severely damaged by sin.”¹² It is generally agreed that “natural” faith is one of those abilities still possessed by man.¹³ Could there be something functional in man that might be able to receive the grace of God? Could there be a marriage between Calvinism and Arminianism that would preserve the concerns of both sides, grace and justice? It is understandable, but unfortunate, that the Reformers and those who came after them did not even consider this. Theirs’ was the generation that was fighting for grace and a renewed focus on the working of God, after hundreds of years of human effort. Perhaps, it is we who should dare to consider this.

Faith

Is faith to be included in the picture of complete sinfulness, or total depravity? The doctrine of unconditional election was strongly influenced by the understanding that faith could not originate in man because it was considered that if anything located in man was involved in salvation the principle of grace, *sola gratia*, would be violated. Natural faith and natural free will were both considered possible culprits for this error. Free will will not be considered here for the

¹² Sproul, *Willing*, 109.

¹³ Robert A. Pyne, “Faith, Repentance, and Water Baptism” (unpublished class notes in 404 Sotierology, Dallas Theological Seminary, Spring 2001), 85, 87.

main reason that, although it was a favorite philosophical topic for the Reformers, it will have to be admitted that the Bible is almost devoid of the terms, in relation to man, though it might be contended that the subject itself is dealt with in other language. That is granted but it seems safer and more appropriate to discuss free will in the conceptual language God chose to use. It is often expressed in the language of faith or believing and so would be subsumed in this topic anyway. We will discuss faith. A definition will be considered, as well as an evaluation of meritorious nature.

Definition. Before we can determine anything about the merits or source of faith a definition is in order. This is not as easy as it may sound for such a fundamental characteristic of the Christian life. It is suspected that if more of us understood faith, more of us would exercise it and the difference in our lives would be substantial.

Faith is usually regarded as an act or something that is done. “Acts of faith” are commonly referred to by many Christians. R. C. Sproul says, “All Christians agree that faith is something we do.”¹⁴ While the emphasis in his context is on the we, the point is still given that faith is “done.” This is a fairly universal popular and academic concept, indeed it is one this author operated under for many years and is still difficult to shake. However, we will notice that in Scripture, faith is regarded as a condition or state of the heart or inner man.

The classic biblical definition is found in Heb 11:1, “Now faith is the assurance of *things* hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (NASB). The definition is composed of three parts, “assurance,” “conviction,” and the objects. But first the term “faith,” ΠΙΣΤΙΣ, itself.

¹⁴ Sproul, *Willing*, 25.

There is no classical or secular background to help contextualize ΠΙΣΤΙΣ, at least not in the sense we use it with God.¹⁵ The Greek did not use it for his religion or the gods, preferring νομιζω, to think.¹⁶ It was usually used in the sense of fidelity or faithfulness, the sense of loyalty to promises or people.¹⁷ This was added to in the Hellenistic period by being used of legal documents of guarantee or security.¹⁸ The Old Testament has the sense, the passive sense, faithfulness rather than faith, as C. G. Moule says.¹⁹ God shows Himself to be faithful to His promises and man is expected to show faithfulness to God and the covenants by obedience. All of a sudden, the word ΠΙΣΤΙΣ, or its verbal counterpart, so uncommon in Greek culture, explodes in the New Testament, being used almost five hundred times. There are three main senses listed in BAGD for the word, only one of which concerns us here. “Trust, confidence, faith” give the definition of this condition, sometimes qualified but normally used by itself as a human trait.

“Assurance,” ὑΠΟΣΤΑΣΙΣ, is the first word used in the NASB to define faith. This is a complicated word for us, looking back through the centuries. Originally meaning the reality concealed behind appearance, it was used philosophically, medically/scientifically, and in generally more practical ways. Philosophically, it referred to what became actual of invisible reality, medically/scientifically it referred to “what settles,” as in sediment in a liquid, and, generally, to a plan or purpose. Hellenistic usage in the papyri took a broader general sense, being used of legal deeds and collections of the proofs of ownership, evolving to refer to the land

¹⁵ H. Phillip Hook, “A Biblical Definition of Saving Faith,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 121 (Ap-Jn 1964): 134; TDNT VI, 110.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ TDNT vol VI, 113.

¹⁸ TDNT vol VI, 111.

¹⁹ Handley C. G. Moule, *Faith: Its Nature and Its Work* (London: Cassell and Co., 1909), 26.

and property itself, much later than New Testament times. During the Hellenistic/New Testament period the word retained its philosophical meaning in Philo and Josephus. The original sense can be traced through this history, though, being the background reality or basis for whatever the application might have been. This gives the probable sense in Heb 11:1 to be “substance” or the more contemporary, “reality” or “basis.”

“Conviction” (NASB), ἐλεγχος, is the next word in Heb 11:1 used to define faith. Ἐλεγχος was a legal term that underwent little change in usage since the classical period. It was used of an examination to disprove or refute something or of the evidence collected from such a scrutiny or cross-examination. more so the latter, the evidence itself, possibly the outcome of an examination, into the Hellenistic period. “Evidence” is the sense in defining faith, “evidence of things not being seen.” Faith, then, is the “reality being hoped for, the evidence of things not being seen.”

Our two terms are parallel to one another and so provide some commentary on each other and are predicate nominatives to faith, equated to it more as synonyms than a true definition. Also to be noted is that they do not describe an action but, without the article, are qualitative, indicating the essence or state of faith.

Equally as important are the objects, things “hoped for” and “not seen” (NASB). These are things as yet unrealized or future, which is the emphasis of Hebrews chapter eleven. Faith is not about things “which are seen but things which are not seen” (2 Cor 4:18 NASB). Merit is about what is actualized or, “in the hand.” But faith is the human sense that perceives and grounds or gives connection to things that are only potential, enabling a human being to utilize these things or encircle them into his or her experience. So while faith exists, its objects do not but can be treated as though they do, enabling the human to function in a world with all

kinds of invisible and potential realities he must cope with. In this way faith has many every day applications, such as giving us the capacity to deal with gravity, wind and cars that we count on to function a certain way. When something fails, as an automobile may, we are all familiar with the ensuing uncertainty and havoc that can play into schedules that have been set based on what we believed in, or counted on. Another aspect here is that when something is seen or actualized, it no longer falls into the realm of faith (Rom 8:24). Again, merit has to do with an actual achievement. Faith does not operate in that realm.

Some more general definitions of faith are helpful and equally as accurate as the above. Avery Dulles commends a translation of “trust” to be as accurate as “faith” for *πιστις*,²⁰ agreeing with Grudem.²¹ William Angell, in a Baptist journal, refers to faith as “the grounding of the self in the ground which constituted it, the receiving of the . . . favor of God.”²² Finally, J. I. Packer says, “it should be thought of as a receiving, as a trusting, as a means of taking.”²³ To illustrate the dependent, supplicant nature of faith, he gives a few lines of a popular hymn, one of which is, “In my hand no price I bring, Simply to Thy cross I cling.” This writer agrees with this spirit adding a one word synonym, rest.

In conclusion it can be seen that there are a number of good ways to refer to faith. It is certainly rest and trust and receiving and has aspects that can be looked at in categories that help to apply it. It is the human characteristic that deals with unseen realities, which are not verifiable with the other senses, by which they, though unactualized, are given reality and proof (evidence).

²⁰ Avery Dulles, *The Assurance of Things Hoped For* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 13.

²¹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 711.

²² William Angell, “The Baptist Understanding of How Grace is Received,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 28 no. 2 (Sp 1986): 23.

²³ J. I. Packer, “The Way of Salvation” pt 2 “What is Faith,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 129 (O-D 1972): 297.

Meritorious nature. Whether faith comes from God through regeneration by the Holy Spirit, as the Reformed tradition believes, or whether it is within the capacity of man, an obvious factor in the equation we are looking at is the fact that salvation/justification is based on faith. If faith is meritorious, then the salvation of man is based on merit, a clear contradiction of Scripture. It, again, doesn't matter where the faith comes from, if it is from God, it would amount to infused faith, given to obtain salvation for man, similar to infused righteousness of the Roman Church, and salvation would be based on something meritorious in man. If faith is from man, then, of course, salvation would again be based on something meritorious in man, if faith is meritorious.

The discussion of a definition of faith, above, has given us the sense that faith is a receiving, a resting, a condition that is the opposite of work. It is accepting the work of another in place of our helplessness and inability. I used to think of faith itself in terms of what resulted from it, in terms of work, obedience and the like. I'm beginning to learn from hard experience that faith itself, the prerequisite to true and effective work, is deciding not to work but to accept the working of God through the Holy Spirit in my place. It says, "to the one who does not work, but believes . . ." (Rom 4:5 NASB). This is consistent with the biblical definition that faith is "the reality," "the evidence" of what exists unseen, not an effort or work to obtain or create it. The Scripture is clear that faith and works are opposed to one another, contrasting them throughout the New Testament, especially in Paul. "Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith. ²⁸For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law" (Rom 3:27-28 NASB). So it is not by works but by faith, two opposites, clearly contrasted.

B. B. Warfield attests to the unmeritorious nature of faith when he says, “It is, accordingly, solely from its *object* that faith derives its value (emphasis original).”²⁴ Man, indeed, exercises faith in any number of things to enable him to live everyday life.²⁵ It is only when faith is placed in the Lord Jesus Christ that it finds its true object and has lasting value. We find help, as well, from J. I. Packer on the question of meritorious faith, “. . . theologically, it is not a work. . . . it should not itself be thought of, I repeat, as a work, . . .”²⁶ Grudem adds, “In this way, faith is the exact opposite of trusting in ourselves, and therefore it is the attitude that perfectly fits salvation that depends *not at all on our own merit* but entirely on God’s free gift of grace (emphasis mine).”²⁷ Each of these men would go on to say that faith is a gift of God to man in the same way as and along with salvation itself. In the context of election, all of them would refer to faith as meritorious by refusing to allow it as the basis of election, because that would attribute merit to man and make salvation contingent upon something moral or good or meritorious in him. Yet, in the separate context of justification and salvation, faith is clearly defended as non-meritorious. It is not certain how to reconcile this incongruity. Grudem gives these two perspectives clearly in his systematic theology.²⁸ On the question of merit, we also have Rudolf Bultmann and Artur Weiser, in *Faith*, from Kittel’s *Theological Word Book of the New Testament*, saying that faith is “the opposite of every ‘work,’ every achievement, because the act of faith consists simply in the denying of all that a man does to establish his existence.”²⁹

²⁴ B. B. Warfield, *Biblical Doctrines* (New York: Oxford, 1929), 502, quoted in Grounds, *Faith*, 124.

²⁵ Moule has a good section on this with a number of helpful examples, *Faith*, 6ff.

²⁶ Packer, “Faith,” 296.

²⁷ Grudem, *Theology*, 730.

²⁸ Grudem, *Theology*, 678 for faith as meritorious and 730, for faith as non-meritorious.

²⁹ Rudolf Bultmann and Artur Weiser, *Faith: Bible Key Words from Gerhard Kittel’s Theologisches Worterbuch Zum Neuen Testament* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1961), 92.

Much more than the testimony of esteemed commentators, though, is the testimony of the Holy Scriptures to which we must return. Jesus' testimony of "great faith" is in reference to the more humble, those more aware of their unworthiness (the centurion and the Syro-Phoenician woman). Philip Yancey has noticed, as well, that "faith appears where least expected and falters where it should be thriving."³⁰ This does not speak well for faith being something that brings merit or worth to an individual. It seems, instead, to recognize lack of worth. Finally, we must notice perhaps the strongest biblical testimony about the question of meritorious faith. In Rom 4:4-5 we read,

"For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. ³For what does the Scripture say? "ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS." ⁴Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. ⁵But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness."

Not only the testimony that Abraham has nothing to boast about because of his faith (though he might if justified by works), but we, also, see "does not work, but believes" as the contrast that distinguishes faith from works. To close, a look at verse 16 of Romans four declares the reason God has chosen salvation to be based on faith, "in order that *it may be* in accordance with grace." Grudem uses this verse, as well, as support for non-meritorious faith.³¹ Since it is by faith it can be called a free gift, the grace of God, all to His glory and a testimony to His goodness and greatness.

Conclusion. So we must conclude, contrary to both Calvinist and Arminian positions, that faith is non-meritorious and acceptable as a basis for election, the same as God has seen faith to be the basis for justification and the free gift of eternal life. Faith is a resting from effort and

³⁰ Philip Yancey, "What Surprised Jesus," *Christianity Today* 38 (S 12. 1994): 88.

³¹ Grudem, *Theology*, 730.

work, a receiving of input (such as in the “act” of hearing, see Gal 3:2-7 for hearing and faith), it is not an “act” or a “work” but the opposite of these, it is a retraction and ceasing from these. Faith, like hearing and listening, is passive. The entire chapter of Hebrews eleven presents faith as the means of righteous action, but not action itself. This is not a meaningless distinction. It serves to guard us against pride for righteous action by focusing our attention on the passive means rather than the result. Action and work are subsequent to faith, subsequent to receiving the capability and energy for righteous active initiative. In salvation, faith is passive and motionless to God’s input of righteousness (imputed or applied to a passive subject), it does not resist, it does not seek or achieve, it does nothing. There is no merit in nothing. There is no longer the necessity for regeneration or prevenient grace to precede faith, nor is it necessary, though it may still be true, for God to be the source of faith. The non-meritorious nature of faith is not dependent on whether it is from man or God. The Scripture still says, “to him who does not work, but believes.” Faith is always set opposite works.

Further Issues

Source. If the above is true, that faith is passive and non-meritorious, then some of the urgency is removed from the positions of both Calvinists and Arminians on the requirement that faith be sourced in God to avoid a conflict with grace. Their position is that natural faith in man as the basis for imputed righteousness would represent merit in man taking his salvation out of the realm of the free gift.³² They frequently represent this view in the language of the will, which we have previously noted as being extra-biblical. Faith, therefore, must be from God, given along with the gift of salvation in order to actuate it. Some Scripture seems to support this, but not as strongly as it is sometimes presented. The strongest of these is 2 Pet 1:1 but this is

³² J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston, “Historical and Theological Introduction,” in Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (Westwood, N.J.: Revell, 1957), 59.

disallowed by Pyne as referring to “the faith,” the body of Christian truth.³³ Other Scriptures indicate that God, particularly Christ, has to do with containing our faith (1 Tim 1:14; 2 Tim 1:13). This could bear further study and treatment. However, the pertinent point, at this juncture, is to note that these concerns are undermined by the non-meritorious nature of faith.

Regeneration. Closely joined to the discussion of the source of faith, above, is consideration of the timing and nature of regeneration. Does regeneration occur before faith or in response to it? Given that faith is non-meritorious, is assistance to salvation enough or is complete regeneration necessary for man to be drawn to God? Both Reformed and Arminian positions provide for faith being worked in man by God, the Reformed by regeneration, a complete reworking of man’s nature, the Arminian by prevenient grace, a lesser work of grace making man able to believe. To the Arminian, full regeneration is God’s work in man subsequent to faith, which is made possible by prevenient grace. The Reformed position is that, “regeneration is a logical necessity for faith to occur.”³⁴ Their position is that even though natural abilities of man still remain after the fall, including will and faith, that is not enough to effect salvation without complete regeneration. The “necessity” of pre-faith regeneration is called into question by the non-meritorious nature of faith. There is no longer the need to protect grace by making God the necessary source of faith, hence the “necessity” of prior regeneration. The nature of regeneration needs examination, as well. If man is completely born again before faith and, therefore, before justification, who is left to be justified, if the believer has truly become a “new creature” and “the old things passed away” (2 Cor 5:17 NASB)? It seems the person who was under sin and needed justification has been replaced and no longer needs it but

³³ Pyne, 87.

³⁴ Sproul, *Willing*, 194.

has obtained the fruits of salvation already. There may be a philosophical way out of this, but is it a biblical construct? The nature of regeneration also effects the working of sanctification and provision of God for the Christian.

Sanctification. What God has provided for the sanctification and personal growth of the Christian is affected by questions on the nature of regeneration, above, and is very important to all of us, personally. The principles that form the basis of God's working with man initially, in salvation, continue to apply throughout the course of his journey on earth (Col 2:6). One example is that, not only are we saved by faith, but we live by faith, as well (2 Cor 5:7; Gal 2:20). If faith is meritorious, then we are called to live our daily lives on the basis of a meritorious element that could then be a source of human pride. This applies whether God has infused that faith, as both Calvinists and Arminians would propose, through regeneration and prevenient grace, respectively, or whether human faith (either natural or enhanced by God) is in view. Either way, there is no choice but to acquiesce to the biblical view ("who does not work, but believes" Rom 4:5 NASB) and regard faith as non-meritorious, giving all the glory to God. Our view of the nature of faith is critical, as well, when it comes to operating by faith in this world. If we view it as an act, or as being the same thing as its results, we will obviously be less effective than if we practice being receivers and hearers, allowing the results to flow from faith to the empowerment of God's presence within. Also to be considered is if the Christian life is completely deterministic or if God, in His omnipotence, is interested in our freewill obedience in love. Consider how this effects a practical topic such as liberty and freedom in Christ. Even Luther moderated his view of God's sovereignty when it came to every day affairs.³⁵ The opposite danger for the Arminian position is to give too much to man's choices of faith, making

³⁵ William L. Craig, "Middle Knowledge: A Calvinist-Arminian Rapprochement," in *The Grace of God, The Will of Man* ed. Clark H. Pinnock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 142.

him deterministic and taking from God's glory this way. The Scripture seems to present a compatibilistic view with God's sovereignty, direction and empowerment moving side-by-side with man's faith, receiving these or complying with divine direction. Much more attention needs to be given to the sanctification issues involved in the election debate.

Conclusion

It goes without saying that the surface has only barely been scratched in considering issues in the doctrine of election/choice. Hopefully, we have looked at the two most important issues, depravity, the basis for all consideration about salvation and fundamental to thinking on election, or choice,³⁶ and secondly, the nature of faith, the Reformers greatest concern about God's grace in salvation. Other issues have been touched on briefly but there are more. The issue of efficient versus sufficient grace should be looked at and how the right of refusal or resistance by man impacts the power and sovereignty of God. Limited atonement (or special redemption), that Christ died only for the elect, and the perseverance of those truly born again, eternal security, and the dangerous Arminian tendencies there, are other favorite traditional discussions deserving some thought.

An understanding of depravity, or complete sinfulness, has been surfaced that all evangelicals agree on, with the Reformed seeing Arminian departure at the point of resistible grace. The implied assent here brings the Reformed camp to see role of merit being given to man in his own salvation. It is seen that both camps regard faith to be of merit or credit to man and their positions have avoided the problem by bringing faith to man from God, by regeneration and by prevenient grace. It has been further demonstrated that Scripture regards faith to be non-meritorious, by definition and by its presentation opposite works in salvation. This has been seen

³⁶ Sproul, *Willing*, 204.

to be consistent with its usage in passages dealing with day-by-day sanctification and the means of receiving God's provision continuously. Faith must, therefore, be exempted from an understanding of depravity, or complete sinfulness. Consequently, the fact of unmeritorious faith can be seen to undermine the positions of both camps in this discussion. There are other issues, as well, and much more must be done on these.

What is necessary is a complete reassessment of the entire doctrine, to seek, by God's grace, and with the help of historic considerations, a biblical construct that will present the nature and character of the Lord Jesus Christ in as accurate and balanced a view as possible for our generation. The next generation must be reminded to do the same. The spirit of I. Howard Marshall is commended, "I am not concerned to take sides in the Calvinist-Arminian controversy but rather to interpret Scripture correctly."³⁷ The concerns of both sides are valid and rightly held but historic pressures have forced excesses and holes in logic and biblical reference that can be corrected. The completely free and unmerited imputation of righteousness by faith must be guarded from any compromise. Also the justice of God must be guarded from portrayal as something an average person with normal values cannot recognize as such. The sovereignty and omnipotent power of God must be guarded and seen to be greater for His condescension and restraint in working with man. This writer would add that His love and compassion must be given as great a place as His omnipotence in providing unlimited salvation that remains consistent with His justice. All these good and proper concerns can be held in tension and, by the Holy Spirit, a construct can be developed that will honor and give due glory to the Creator and Savior of all.

³⁷ I. Howard Marshall, "Universal Grace and Atonement in the Pastoral Epistles," *The Grace of God, The Will of Man* ed. Clark H. Pinnock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 52.

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