

## *Chapter 11*

### **WHO IS ABLE TO BELIEVE?**

*Thesis 14: God's saving grace is universally sufficient so that, on at least one occasion in all people's lives, they are enabled to respond to God's self-revelation with a faith response that is acceptable to God as a means of justification. Only those whom God effectively persuades (i.e. recipients of efficacious grace) will believe. Nevertheless, the universally sufficient grace vindicates God's judgment of unbelievers, and it removes from the doctrine of original sin a burden which it could not otherwise sustain, given the biblical witness concerning the grounds of final judgment.*

We have seen that God makes himself known to everyone in a number of ways and that he only holds people accountable for the revelation which they receive from God. We have also seen that the sort of faith which pleases God varies according to the sort of revelation which God has given to people. But, this faith is itself God's gift to those whom God is drawing to himself. In the beginning of this part of the book, however, we saw that everyone comes into the world guilty before God and completely unable to please him. Is it possible, then, that some of the people who are condemned to the eternal wrath of God for not responding to God's self-revelation by faith, were *unable to believe* because of the spiritual inability which resulted from their solidarity with Adam? At this point in my proposal, I will put forward an idea which has not been characteristic of Reformed theology, but which I believe deserves a careful hearing. I will argue that *God's saving grace is universally sufficient so that, on at least one occasion in*

*all people's lives, they are enabled to respond to God's self-revelation with a faith response that is acceptable to God as a means of justification.*

### **The Necessity of Illumination by the Holy Spirit**

Revelation is essential to sinners who need to be reconciled to God. But, precisely because of our sinfulness, revelation does not have saving effects without illumination, that is, “a divine operation in the mind and heart of a recipient of grace that confirms to that recipient the reality of a supernatural truth or person.”<sup>1</sup> This was what enabled Peter to recognize that Jesus was the Christ (Mt 16:17). It showed Paul the truth and reality of the gospel (Gal 1:12). Paul later told the Ephesians that he would ask God to give them “a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you [and] what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints” (Eph 1:17-18). Without this illumination, people do not understand and respond to the gospel (1 Cor 2:14; 2 Cor 4:4) but, when it is present, it results in saving faith; it gives “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor 4:6). Without this divine inner work, the objective existence of divine revelation does not result in knowledge of God on the part of those who receive the revelation. I have taken care to demonstrate that everyone receives divine revelation which is sufficient for salvation, if they respond to it in faith. But, how significant is that fact if many of the people who receive the revelation lack the *ability* to give the required response?

### **The Traditional Reformed Position on Human Inability and God's Enabling Grace**

Traditionally, Calvinistic theology has taught these two points: (1) everyone is pervasively depraved, so that they are unable to do any spiritual good, and (2) God remedies that spiritual disability and enables the

elect to believe, in such a way that all of them freely do so (this is dubbed “efficacious grace”). Calvinists have asserted that the fall was totally spiritually debilitating. It left all of Adam’s descendants guilty before God by virtue of their solidarity with Adam in his original disobedience (Rom 5:12-21). It also made them subject to death and placed them in bondage to sin and Satan. Their natures have been so seriously depraved that they can do nothing which pleases God. Being in a state of rebellion, their wills are bound. They sin willingly but they are unable not to sin, and specifically are not able to repent of their sin and trust in God for salvation. Unless the Spirit of God intervenes and frees sinful human wills, people will not (and in a sense, can not) believe.<sup>2</sup> They are, nevertheless, culpable for this unbelief because their inability is self-incurred, in their union with Adam. As Louis Berkhof puts it: “We should not forget that the inability under consideration is self-imposed, has a moral origin, and is not due to any limitation which God has put upon man’s being. Man is unable as a result of the perverted choice made in Adam.”<sup>3</sup>

### **A Problem in the Traditional Reformed Understanding**

The concept of “self-incurred inability in Adam” is a difficult one for individualistic westerners to comprehend, and even more difficult to accept. The legitimacy of such an arrangement should be more evident, however, if we consider that it is on a similarly constituted ground of union with Christ, the righteous one, that God is able to be just while justifying sinners (Rom 3:25). God graciously frees the wills of those whom he intends to save, so that they entrust themselves to his mercy, willingly and joyfully, and are saved. This is generally identified as the “effectual calling” of God which is made effectual by the Spirit’s regenerating work, in the narrow sense in which regeneration precedes and enables the human response.

To many Christians who do not accept Calvinist theology, it seems patently unjust that those who are not given the ability to believe are condemned for not doing so. Even if we grant that people continue to pervert themselves by wilful sin, the fact that this sinfulness derives from original sin makes many Christians feel that God is being unjust. Although I have found the Calvinist reading of Scripture very helpful and generally very plausible, I have not been completely satisfied with the classic Calvinistic responses to this charge of injustice. The particular concept which I commend to your consideration now, is the fruit of my attempt to deal with my dissatisfaction with the classical answer..

I grant the propriety of a self-incurred inability in Adam, through a divinely established solidarity of the race with Adam. It was God's prerogative to constitute humankind in that kind of relationship.

Nevertheless, I find it striking that "Scripture universally relates man's ultimate judgment to his own moral 'works,' which fall short of God's standards, and not in the first instance to his union with Adam (e.g. Mt 7:21-27; 13:41; 25:31-46; Lk 3:9; Rom 2:5-10; Rev 20:11-14)."<sup>4</sup> But, here is a difficulty: if human responsibility is consistently attributed to actual or personal rather than to original sin, it is peculiar that the inability which made that sin unavoidable should remain located in the Adamic fall.

Likewise, the biblical expressions of God's hatred (Hos 9:15; Jer 12:8; Ps 5:5; 11:5) and anger (Ex 32:10-11; Judg 2:14; Jer 10:24; Ps 30:5; 106:40; Rom 2:5; 9:22) toward his people because of their sin are focused on the wicked and rebellious deeds which they were doing at the time. The *strength* of this divine disapproval is difficult to understand if these people were absolutely incapable of repentance and faith.

I am not the first Calvinist to have been troubled on this point. "In 1977, the Christian Reformed Church received a formal complaint against its creedal teaching on reprobation" because the *Canons of Dort* were understood as teaching that some people are "consigned to everlasting damnation before they ever came into being."<sup>5</sup> The complaint was submitted to a 3 year study to elucidate the teaching of the *Canons*. Neal

Punt sums up what the official elucidation states: “‘God consigns someone to destruction [hell] only on the basis of what that person does; and whatever evil action that person performs.’ ‘God condemns to destruction [hell] only those who do, in fact, exhibit unbelief.’ All non-elect persons are ‘the agents of unbelief’ [An agent is one who himself acts.]. ‘The condition of the non-elect [headed for hell] results from their unbelief.’ ‘The basis for that condemnation [being sent to hell] is to be found solely in the persistent unbelief and sin of those so condemned.’”<sup>6</sup>

I came to my own proposal before learning of the CRC discussion, but I am encouraged by their conclusions. They have taken into account the critical point I made earlier about the criteria by which each of us is judged in the final divine tribunal. Neal Punt has grasped that point too. Like me, he grants that everyone is worthy of eternal death due to the sin of Adam, but he notes that “nowhere in all of Scripture do we read—or is it implied, nor is it to be inferred—that anyone ever suffers eternal death by reason of their sin in Adam, *apart from* individual, willful, final unbelief and sin on the part of the person so rejected.”<sup>7</sup>

As a Calvinist, I do not question God’s right to show grace and to have mercy on whomever he wishes and to judicially harden whomever he wishes (Rom 9:18). On the other hand, I do feel the force of the common sense of injustice that those who are *unable* to believe should be condemned for not doing so.<sup>8</sup> Even though it was God’s prerogative to establish humanity in solidarity with Adam, Scripture does not teach that the inability which everyone incurred in Adam is the cause or ground of their eternal condemnation for unbelief. Since salvation is of grace, it is, by definition, not deserved by anyone and so God has a sovereign right to choose those whom he will save. But, I am uncomfortable with the grounds for the condemnation of those who are left in their sin, as these have been stated traditionally in Calvinist theologies. I have also found it rather difficult to understand some passages of Scripture which describe

God's distress at the unbelief of those who reject him. A case in point is the pain of Jesus at the rejection by most of the inhabitants of Jerusalem: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and *you were not willing!*" (Mt 23:37, emphasis supplied). "Why?," I have wondered, is Jesus so disturbed, when he knows that only those whom the Father draws will come to him (Jn 6:44) and that all of them will do so? (Jn 6:37).

### **Two Alternative Proposals Which Utilize Divine/Human Synergism**

My own proposal may be most easily understood if I compare it with two other ways in which theologians have understood God's gracious enablement of sinners, so that they might believe. As you hone your own position on the question at hand, namely, "Who is able to believe?," this will also provide you with four options to ponder: the traditional Calvinist theory, the Lutheran approach, the Wesleyan approach, and my modified Calvinist proposal which appropriates aspects of the Lutheran and Wesleyan understandings.

#### ***The Lutheran proposal of enabling grace which accompanies the gospel***

Lutheran theologians have generally been unwilling to affirm that God gives efficacious grace only to particular people and that these are the ones whom God elected to salvation unconditionally, that is, not based on anything the people do, such as believing in Jesus. Instead, they propose that the proclamation of the gospel is accompanied by an enabling grace which empowers *all* hearers not to resist the Word of God and hence to respond in faith. Paul Althaus indicates that, in the theology of Martin Luther, God's word "is never merely an external word, spoken by human lips and heard with human ears. On the contrary, at

the same time that this word is spoken, God speaks his truth in our hearts so that men receive it not only externally but also internally and believe it. This is the work of the Spirit.”<sup>9</sup> As the Formula of Concord stated the situation, “With this Word is present the Holy Spirit, who opens the hearts of men, in order that, as Lydia did (Acts 16:14), they may diligently attend, and thus may be converted by the sole grace and power of the Holy Spirit, whose work, and whose work alone, the conversion of man is.”<sup>10</sup>

Helmut Thielicke points out that, in the Lutheran understanding, “the work of the Spirit is not an element that is added to God’s words and deeds.”<sup>11</sup> It is “a Word that contains the Spirit, i.e., a Word in which God himself is present. To refuse this Word is . . . hardening, *non* salvation.”<sup>12</sup> It is in this way that the baptism of infants is understood to be justifying in its effect, although justification is by faith. Infants, given this enablement, are assumed not to resist the Word of God and hence to respond with infant faith and, thereby, to be justified.<sup>13</sup> Althaus notes that, as late as 1521, Luther declared that “children are baptized on the basis of the faith and the confession of the sponsors.”<sup>14</sup> In 1522, however, “in order to preserve the insight that we are saved not through someone else’s faith but through our own,” Luther began to teach infant faith.<sup>15</sup>

The Formula of Concord speaks of a universal mercy of God (Rom 11:32; Ezek 18:23; 33:11; 2 Pet 3:9; 1 Jn 2:2),<sup>16</sup> and states that Matthew 22:14 “is not to be so understood as if God were unwilling that all should be saved, but the cause of damnation of the ungodly is that they either do not hear the Word of God at all, but contumaciously contemn it, stop their ears, and harden their hearts, and in this way foreclose to the Spirit of God his ordinary way, so that he can not accomplish his work in them, or at least when they have heard the Word, make it of no account, and cast it away. Neither God nor his election, but their own wickedness, is to blame if they perish” (2 Pet 2:1f; Lk 2:49,52; Heb 12:25f.).<sup>17</sup> The Saxon Visitation Articles (1592) taught that God “wills that all men should be saved,” and that everyone is

commanded “to hear Christ,” and is promised “by his hearing, the virtue and operation of the Holy Ghost for conversion and salvation.”<sup>18</sup>

*The Wesleyan proposal of enabling grace which universally prevenes*

The influence of Wesleyan theology is far wider than the Methodist Church and extends to many Christians (including many Baptists) who are quite unaware that the soteriology which they affirm derives from the influence of John Wesley. Unlike the early Arminians, Wesley stressed the fact that original sin is not merely a disease (corruption without guilt), but is really and truly sin and makes a person guilty before God. This guilt is imputed to all Adam's descendants, so that even a child born of two perfect Christians would be a sinner.<sup>19</sup> Although the original guilt is cancelled by the justification of all people in Christ (one of the universal benefits of the atonement), Wesley denied that humans, as they are by nature, have any ability whatever to cooperate with the grace of God. They are morally depraved and totally dependent on God's grace for salvation. In Wesley's view, however, no one actually exists in that state of inability. In view of the universal character of redemption, God endows everyone with sufficient enabling grace so that they can turn to God in faith and repentance.

The earliest Arminians held that it was only just that God should enable people to believe, since they could not be held accountable without spiritual ability. (This was also Charles Finney's position.) Wesleyans, however, believed that this was of the free grace of God, through preventing or prevenient grace. Everyone has grace in some measure and they only sin because that grace is not used.<sup>20</sup> People are thus responsible, free agents. In his essay “Predestination Calmly Considered,” in 1773, Wesley argued for a universal call which assumes an ability on the part of hearers to respond in faith. This is the only way that a person could be justly acquitted or condemned.<sup>21</sup> Wesley criticized Calvinist theology in strong

words: “And shall this man, for not doing what he never could do, and for doing what he never could avoid, be sentenced to depart into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels? [cf Matt. 25:42]. ‘Yes, because it is the sovereign will of God.’ Then you have either found a new God, or made one! This is not the God of the Christians. Our God is just in all his ways; he reapeth not where he hath not strewed. He requireth only according to what he hath given; and where he hath given little, little is required.”<sup>22</sup>

Wesley’s concern regarding the justice of God is clear. If people are unable to believe, yet judged responsible to do so, then God is reaping where he has not sown. He is demanding more from people than he has made it possible for them to give. Consequently, the determining factor in an individual’s salvation can not be the grace of God, it must be the human’s graciously enabled but libertarianly free decision. As Clark Pinnock puts it, “God’s grace may be genuinely extended to people, but unless it meets the response of faith . . . it has no saving effect.” God’s grace is thus “non-manipulative and non-coercive.”<sup>23</sup> Thomas Oden identifies this “synergy of grace and freedom” as “the consensual teaching of the believing church,” in the early centuries, as demonstrated by the Third Ecumenical Council.<sup>24</sup> On this model, “those who cooperate with the prevenient grace that is always/already there will find that grace becomes effective. Grace cooperates with human freedom, and God elects those who respond to the evangelical call.”<sup>25</sup>

### **A Brief Critique of Synergism in the Lutheran and Wesleyan Proposals**

Both the Lutheran approach and the Wesleyan approach put sinners in the position of being graciously enabled to respond with faith to God’s offer of salvation. In both cases, this faith is the fruit of grace, but whether or not it occurs is ultimately decided by the person who believes rather than by God. A similarly synergistic proposal had been put forward by Luis de Molina, a 17<sup>th</sup> century Jesuit theologian who offered

an alternative to the Augustinian theology of Thomas Aquinas. Recently, Thomas Flint has argued the benefits of a Molinist explanation of the inter-relation of the human and divine agency for our understanding of predestination.<sup>26</sup> In the Molinist scheme, “efficacious grace is not intrinsically different from sufficient grace: it is merely sufficient grace that ‘works’.”<sup>27</sup> The grace is “only contingently efficacious, and its being efficacious is determined by us, not by God.”<sup>28</sup>

From the Calvinist perspective, the effect of the synergism in Luther, Wesley and Molina’s approaches is seriously problematic precisely because it makes the decisive factor in a person’s salvation that person’s own decision. It seems to us that if salvation is realized through *cooperation* between God and the person saved, the absolute graciousness of salvation is compromised. Since the difference between those who are saved and those who are not lies within the action of the believer, it seems that these believers have cause for self-congratulation and that God’s glory in salvation has been compromised (Eph 2:8-9). Thus, Ardel Caneday and Thomas Schreiner complain that “if we are ultimately responsible for our faith, then we can brag about our decision to believe.”<sup>29</sup>

From numerous conversations with Arminians or Wesleyans, I know that this perception is difficult for them to understand. It is argued that believers can not boast since they simply accepted a free gift. I acknowledge the significance of grace in most synergistic theologies. But, the fact remains that the critical difference between those who believe and those who do not is found in the believers, rather than in God’s gracious work. Since God enables all equally, the outcome is decided by the people who must respond to God’s initiative. I fail to see why believers should not be commended for having responded to grace. However small their contribution has been, it was the decisive factor. With Kevin Vanhoozer, therefore, I seek a conception of the grace of salvation in God’s effectual calling that does not reduce God “to a mere physical cause on the one hand, or to an ineffectual influence on the other.”<sup>30</sup>

## **My Modified Calvinistic Proposal of Universally Sufficient Enabling Grace**

My quandary should now be obvious. I am not completely satisfied with the traditional Calvinist theory, but I can not solve my problem by adopting either the Lutheran or the Wesleyan approach because of the synergism entailed. Consequently, I propose an approach to the issue which conforms to the Calvinist understanding of *efficacious* grace but I add to it a *sufficient* grace. Efficacious grace is given only to the elect and, by definition, it is what saves sinners who are spiritually disabled by the sinfulness of their hearts or natures. Sufficient grace, on the other hand, is universal. Since everyone is, in some sense, made able to believe, God is just in judging them for not doing so. I have found this approach helpful and I hope others will also find it useful.

I propose, then, that *it may be that God gives everyone sufficient grace to enable them to believe in him, but that he only draws and persuades effectively the elect*. Not only does everyone receive revelation sufficient to lead to salvation if responded to with faith, but at least once in everyone's life that divine revelation is accompanied by a divine enabling which makes a faith response possible, *in the sense that people are justly condemned for failing to believe when God is made known to them on that occasion*.

With Lutherans, I affirm that this is an *accompanying* grace rather than the *prevenient* grace which Wesleyans propose. With Wesleyans, however, I assert that the enabling grace is *universal*. But, I differ from the Lutherans by denying that this divine enabling grace *always* accompanies the proclamation of truth concerning God, particularly the truth of the gospel. As Vanhoozer notes, "Reformed theologians deny that the preached word works *ex opere operato*. To stipulate that God must always be salvifically at work wherever there is preaching is effectively to deny the freedom of God."<sup>31</sup> The Spirit of God blows

wherever he pleases (Jn 3:8), in grace that is ineffectual to salvation as well as in the enabling or regenerative grace that effects salvation. The proclamation of God's Word accomplishes God's purposes but those purposes are not the same for each individual and on every occasion. In the nice turn of phrase suggested by Kevin Vanhoozer, the proclamation of the gospel becomes effective because "the Spirit 'advenes' on truth to make it efficacious." The Spirit comes to the word which is being proclaimed and empowers it by his advent.<sup>32</sup>

With the Calvinist tradition, therefore, I affirm that salvation occurs only when and because God works effectively in the inner being (heart and mind) of a person. The contingency thus lies with God, rather than the human agent, preserving the sovereignty and pure graciousness of saving grace. The Word of God becomes an effective saving Word only when the Spirit of God empowers it, drawing to God those who are called by God's voice (Jn 6:44-45), which is being heard with the ears or seen with the eyes but also received with the heart that God opens, as happened with Lydia, in Philippi (Acts 16:14). As the Reformed tradition has regularly asserted, the call that effects salvation is a work of both Word and Spirit, or in the terminology of contemporary philosophy of language, it is by both illocution and perlocution.<sup>33</sup> I believe, however, that a model incorporating universal *sufficient* accompanying grace, while maintaining the particularity and divine sovereignty of *efficacious* grace, addresses some of the problems I have identified in the usual Calvinist proposals, which lack the former component.

The general idea at work in my construct has a precedent of sorts in the tradition of Reformed orthodoxy. Seventeenth-century Reformed theologian, Francis Turretin, appealed to a distinction between sufficient and efficient grace, in order to demonstrate that Adam was properly held responsible for his first sin, even though the fall had been decreed by God. Turretin wrote:

Although man fell, still he had the ability to stand if he wished. Otherwise God would have placed him in an impossible condition. Hence a twofold help or assistance is commonly distinguished: help without which (*auxilium sine qua non*) or the power of not sinning (by which he had strength sufficient to stand if he wished); and the help by which (*auxilium quo*) or efficacious grace (which gave not only the ability if he wished, but to will what he could). The former was after the manner of a habit and faculty in man; the latter, however, after the manner of an action or efficacious motion to good. The former was necessary to his ability to persevere, but the latter to his actual perseverance. The former help was never absent from Adam, not even in the very moment in which he sinned; but the latter, God withheld from him freely as he was not bound to give it. Notwithstanding, neither can man be excused (because he sinned voluntarily and was impelled by no force) nor God be accused (because as a most free dispenser of his own goods, he was bound to the bestowal of that grace by no law, as will hereafter be more fully shown).<sup>34</sup>

Turretin expressed precisely what I am now recommending, but I propose that we apply it more broadly than to Adam's original situation, seeing it as descriptive of everyone's situation.

### **Response to a Potentially Serious Objection to My Proposal**

I am aware that the concept which I have put forward elicits a serious objection, so, let me try to address that concern. Henri Blocher identifies the possible problem by way of commentary on Turretin's proposal. Blocher notes that "the first help meant mere possibility for him, a possibility which never comes to fruition if the second help is not added!"<sup>35</sup> But, Blocher is not impressed with the concept, and he cites Pascal's complaint against the Jesuits (in his *Lettres provinciales*), "that the chief characteristic of what they called 'sufficient grace' was that it was not sufficient."<sup>36</sup>

Much the same objection has been expressed to me concerning my own proposal of universal sufficient grace, by evangelical Arminians. Of course, the reason why the enabling grace is “not sufficient,” is different in my account than it was in the theory of the Jesuits whom Pascal criticized, or in the Lutheran and Wesleyan models which I reviewed. In those synergist models, the grace does not suffice for salvation without the additional cooperative work of the people who receive it. In my monergist model, the grace suffices for salvation only when further divine grace is supplied, to make the enablement efficacious. Nevertheless, I too have been asked how I can call a grace “sufficient,” when it is never, in any instance, sufficient to bring a person to salvation. I have wondered whether it might be better to call the universal grace of which I am speaking an “enabling grace,” in distinction from “efficacious grace.” At this point, however, I suggest that we maintain the term “sufficient,” because there is an important sense in which this grace is, indeed, “sufficient,” even though it does not suffice for salvation. Its “sufficiency” lies particularly in its being enough to justify God’s condemnation. Through this enablement by the Spirit, which everyone is given at least once in their lifetime, they *could* respond to the revelation which the enabling grace accompanies, if they *would* do so. I hope that my proposal and its merit will become even more clear as I explain some of the benefits which I believe to follow from this concept.

Calvinist theologians with a knowledge of the history of their tradition might be tempted to dismiss my proposal as a restatement of Amyraldianism. I grant that Amyraut, Richard Baxter and others were sensitive to some of the difficulties in Calvinism which I identified above. But, my proposal for addressing those difficulties is different. Amyraut’s “hypothetical universalism” treated the issue of God’s intention in the atonement, which we examined in chapter 5. My own interest here is not in the extent or intent of the atonement but in the grace which flows from it in the Spirit’s work of enablement.

This will probably not be an issue for most readers, but those who are interested can visit Appendix 2, where I briefly outline the key differences between Amyraut's proposal and my own.

## **The Benefits of My Proposal**

### *God's Justice*

In a recent Wesleyan soteriology, Thomas Oden speaks well when he asserts that “no human being has been condemned for Adam's sin alone, but in so far as anyone is subject to condemnation and judgment, it is due to one's own freely collusive cooperation with the conditions of sin resulting from the history of sin following Adam. The principle of free moral agency is preserved in and through the doctrine of sufficient grace.”<sup>37</sup> The justice of divine judgment is no longer an issue if all people receive a grace that remediates the effects of sin sufficiently to enable them to believe, if they will. There is thus no question about their not having been able to do so. People who do not believe *could*, if they *would*. I argue that the problem is that, given the rebelliousness which characterizes us, we are still prone not to submit to God and receive his provision for our salvation. Without coercing us, however, God is able to draw us (Jn 6:44), to open our hearts (Acts 13:14), to illumine our minds, so that we will to come. As with the Lutheran accompanying grace and the Wesleyan prevenient grace, this work of God is sufficient but not efficacious. But, along with traditional Calvinism, I posit that the explanation for the faith of those who do believe is not found in themselves but in the effective working of God. The Holy Spirit woos the elect to exercise an ability which all have graciously been given, but which only these people *use* to respond to God's call. Contrary to Oden and other synergists, I contend that the act of saving faith is explained on the basis of efficacious grace, not on the basis of human choice, yet that choice is freely willed by the human agent (not coerced by God).

I hear a somewhat similar proposal in the work of James Oliver Buswell Jr. when he suggests “that the convicting work of the Holy Spirit is to be understood as (1) sufficient and (2) universal.”<sup>38</sup> By “the sufficiency of the convicting work of the Holy Spirit,” he means “to point out that this work, as revealed to us in the Scripture and in Christian experience, is sufficient to justify for our finite minds the fact of the eternal wrath of God against those who reject His grace in Christ.” By “universality,” Buswell means that “the convicting work of the Holy Spirit is absolutely universal to the entire human race in all ages in all areas.”<sup>39</sup>

The demand of justice does not require that people be continuously enabled, with each experience of divine revelation. Scripture speaks of a hardening of the heart that occurs as one resists God’s gracious drawing. Paul speaks of people storing up wrath for the day of God’s righteous judgment by their “hard and impenitent” hearts (Rom 2:5). He tells the Thessalonians about people who “perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved” (2 Thess 2:10). God sends such people a powerful delusion so that they believe the lie (2:11). Here we have indication of the judicial hardening that results when people resist and refuse grace. They become “darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance and hardness of heart,” and the consequent loss of all sensitivity (Eph 4:18-19).

Roger Forster and Paul Marston note that, in the case of Pharaoh, it was only after five warnings and penalties had been ineffective that God did the hardening. “Submission now would have meant prudence, not penitence; and it was against prudence, not penitence, that he was hardened” (Ex 9:12). For Pharaoh, “the last five plagues were not disciplinary, but wholly penal.”<sup>40</sup> They further comment that “it appears, then, that the Lord is never said to debauch Pharaoh’s heart, but only to strengthen it against prudence and to make it dull; that the words used do not express the infusion of evil passion, but the animation of a

resolute courage, and the overclouding of a natural discernment; and, above all, that every one of the three words, to make hard, to make strong, and to make heavy, is employed to express Pharaoh's own treatment of himself, before it is applied to any work of God, as actually taking place already."<sup>41</sup>

Paul describes this process of judicial abandonment in Romans 1:24-27. Furthermore, those who spurn God's grace may put themselves beyond the point where it will be offered again (Heb 6:4-6; 10:26-31). There comes a time when God no longer accompanies the objective revelations of himself with a gracious enabling. The personal responsibility for this self-incurred inability can surely be denied by no one. It is in this vein that we may understand the biblical truth concerning the slavery that grows as one continues to sin (Jn 3:34; 2 Pet 2:19; Rom 6:17). When people choose to believe the lies of Satan rather than the truth of God, in spite of God's gracious enabling, Satan blinds them (2 Cor 4:4) and enslaves them (2 Tim 2:26). Having surrendered themselves into his power by these acts of their own will, they are responsible for this. The reality of death in sin becomes ever more obvious (Eph 2:1-2). It is in this light that I understand the warnings to the Hebrews that they not harden their hearts when the Spirit gives a desire to repent (Heb 3:7-8; 12:17), because the opportunity will not last forever (Heb 3:15).

On the basis of Titus 2:11 ("For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all"), Thomas Oden asserts that "to no one, not even the recalcitrant unfaithful, does God deny grace sufficient for salvation. Prevenient grace precedes each discrete human act."<sup>42</sup> Oden doubts that God ever ceases to give sufficient grace, even to the obdurate.<sup>43</sup> Given the Scriptures I have cited, however, this is too optimistic a statement. Nevertheless, there is much cause for praise when we hear testimony of lives in which this hardening and blinding process had gone on for years in a descending spiral, yet God graciously moves in and frees them from the bondage that they have chosen and gloriously saves them. God owes no one grace, but his grace shines brightest where sin reigns most evidently (Rom 5:20-21).

As I indicated at the outset, I have not avoided the scandal of particularity, but I hope to have ameliorated the sense of injustice. I agree with Thomas Oden that “grace is effective as it elicits willing cooperation and sufficient in so far as it does what is necessary to lead the will to cooperate, even when the deficient will is resistant.”<sup>44</sup> I differ from him, however, in the conviction that when the grace is effective, its efficacy lies in the peculiar working of the Spirit not in (*though not apart from*) the response of the human will.

### ***God’s distress at human rejection***

Through the prophet Ezekiel, the Lord had pled with Israel to repent and turn from their transgressions so that they would not be ruined (Ezek 18:30). God states that he has “no pleasure in the death of anyone,” and urges them, therefore, to “turn and live” (Ezek 18:32; cf 33:11). If God accompanies his appeal to the house of Israel to repent and turn to him with a gracious ability to do so, which grace they spurn, we can discern one sense in which God may say that he has “no pleasure” in their death. Later in Ezekiel, God speaks of his efforts with the Israelites to cleanse them and turn them to himself and of his commitment to judge them according to their ways and doings (24:14). Clearly this was not an efficacious working by God, but it does testify to a work of such sort that it justified the exercise of God’s judgment against them for their deeds.

Through Amos, God repeatedly describes his disciplinary actions against Israel, and demonstrates distress that they “did not return” to him. This was in spite of the fact that he sent famine (Amos 4:6) and drought, which ruined harvests and left the people frantically searching for water (4:7-8). God sent “blight and mildew” on their vineyards and locusts to devour their fig and olive trees, but they did not return (4:9). He

sent plagues upon them as he had done the Egyptians and “killed [their] young men with the sword,” but they “did not return” to him (4:10). He overthrew some of them as he had done Sodom and Gomorrah, but they still did not return (4:11). And so God’s patience is wearing thin and he warns them to prepare to meet their God (4:12).

From a synergist perspective, this language of divine distress is easy to understand. They *could* return to God, because of a prevenient grace, but they did not. But, if we work within the classic form of Reformed monergism, which concludes from Scripture that people can not return without an efficacious work of God’s grace and that they *will* return (gladly and willingly) whenever that grace works within them, the distress of God and his declarations of impending and just judgment are difficult to comprehend. We can make sense of them, however, if we postulate an enabling grace, which I am calling “sufficient” grace. On this postulate, it also becomes easier to understand passages which indicate that there is a sense in which God does take delight in the death of the wicked. When Moses is warning Israel that God will judge them severely if they continue in their unrepentance, he says: “just as the Lord took delight in making you prosperous and numerous, so the Lord will take delight in bringing you to ruin and destruction; you shall be plucked off the land that you are entering to possess” (Deut 28:63). “We are faced with the inescapable biblical fact that in some sense God does not delight in the death of the wicked (Ezek 18), and in some sense he does (Deut 28:63; 2 Sam 2:25).”<sup>45</sup> I find both cases equally difficult to understand unless there is also a sense in which it can be said that these people *could* have done righteous rather than wicked deeds. I locate that sense in the concept of “sufficient accompanying grace.”

The distress of Jesus as he looked down over Jerusalem now becomes more comprehensible. They *could* have come at his call. Nothing kept them from doing so except their own stubbornness. That resistance gave him great pain. We are still left, of course, with mysteries: Why did God not effectively woo them

all? Why did the Father not reveal to all of them, as he had to Peter, that Jesus was the Christ (Mt 16:17)? Paul provides some insight into God's work of grace, hardening part of the nation in pursuit of his wider plan of grace for the Gentiles (Rom 11:25-32), and that only temporarily (Rom 11:25-26). Nevertheless, we echo Paul's sense that God's judgment is "unsearchable" and "his paths beyond tracing out" (Rom 11:33) and we give him glory (Rom 11:36).

*God's "desire" for people to be saved*

It may be that my proposal of God's universal grace offers us additional help in understanding some of the New Testament texts which speak in a language that has a universal ring to it. Roman Catholic theologians often speak of God's "universal salvific will."<sup>46</sup> This is a manner of speaking which is open to Wesleyans and Lutherans but is problematic to Calvinists, if God's "will" is identified with his eternal purpose. On the understanding being proposed here, however, Calvinists could also speak of "universal salvific grace," indicating that God has, indeed, enabled all to believe, although he has not been uniformly persuasive in his gracious calling. There is universal grace which is salvific in its enabling though it does not achieve universal salvation because it is resisted by many. Thus, when Peter asserts that God is "not wanting anyone to perish" (2 Pet 3:9), his "wanting" is easier to understand if he has given everyone grace sufficient to make salvation possible. One of the universal benefits of Christ's death is this grace.

With 1 Timothy 2:4 (cf. 2 Pet 3:9) in mind, Philip Hughes has asked: "How can it be said that God desires all men to be saved, if by a fixed decree many are destined never to be saved and cannot therefore be helped by our prayers?"<sup>47</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan similarly observes that 1 Timothy 2:4 "had always been a conundrum to Augustinian doctrines of predestination and the will of God."<sup>48</sup> Traditionally, Calvinists have responded by (1) describing God's will in this instance as preceptive, that is, in the sense of God's

command that everyone repent and believe; and (2) pointing out that, in the context (cf. verses 1-2), Paul is making reference to “all kinds” of people.<sup>49</sup> Arminian theologians frequently protest the “exceedingly paradoxical notion of two divine wills regarding salvation.”<sup>50</sup> But, Wayne Grudem has very aptly demonstrated that Arminians “*also* must say that God *wills* something more strongly than he wills the salvation of all people, *for in fact all are not saved.*”<sup>51</sup> In their case, this is because God chooses to preserve human free will, whereas Reformed theologians attribute it to God’s purpose to glorify Himself. We may go further, in addressing this passage, however, if we posit that God actually enables everyone to repent and believe.

### ***The free offer of the gospel***

Among Calvinist theologians, there has been a controversy about the genuineness of the external call and the sincerity of making such an offer when not all have been included in God’s intention in the atonement. Those who argue that it is legitimate to offer the blessings of salvation in our gospel preaching, point out that the call to repent and believe is for all people and the promise of salvation can be freely offered on the basis of these conditions.<sup>52</sup> It is also contended that the Holy Spirit does a work of conviction which leaves people justly condemned for their unbelief (Jn 3:18). The blame for not accepting the gospel is clearly placed on sinful people who reject it: They perish “because they refused to love the truth and so be saved” (2 Thess 2:10). This makes best sense, however, if people have rejected the truth when they could have done otherwise, in the sense of God graciously having enabled a positive response, which they stubbornly refuse to give.

In some cases, then, through this work of conviction, God prepares people for ultimate conversion. In others, it serves to increase their culpability. Thomas Oden correctly states that “even where the will is

most recalcitrant, grace is still said to be 'sufficient,' for grace would have sufficed to guide the will had the will not resisted. It is not inconsistent to say that sufficiency from God's side may be met with resistance from the human side."<sup>53</sup>

John Bunyan rightly related the offer of the gospel to a universal sufficiency of the atonement, arguing that "if those that perish in the days of the gospel, shall have, at least, their damnation heightened, because they have neglected and refused to receive the gospel, it must needs be that the gospel was with all faithfulness to be tendered unto them; the which it could not be, unless the death of Christ did extend itself unto them (Jn 3:16; Heb. 2:3); for the offer of the gospel cannot with God's allowance, be offered any further than the death of Jesus Christ doth go."<sup>54</sup> It should be apparent, however, that a merely objective sufficiency of the atonement will still not serve Bunyan's purpose. Given the moral inability of fallen humankind, a gracious enabling must be part of the universal effect of the atonement or neither the gospel call nor the just judgment of those who refuse can be assumed.

Anthony Hoekema warns against both the Arminian (synergist) proposal of sufficient grace and the hyper-Calvinist denial of God's desire for universal salvation. He urges readers to "maintain the Scriptural paradox" even though we cannot reconcile factors within its teaching.<sup>55</sup> My suggestion is that the biblical truths are maintained but the antinomy between God's universal salvific will and his particular election is lessened, if we posit a universal sufficient grace, the efficacy of which lies in further gracious work on God's part.

John Calvin observes that God has said by the prophet Ezekiel: "As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live" (Ezek 33:11; cf. 18:23). But Calvin contends that, "As the prophet is exhorting to penitence, it is no wonder that he

pronounces God willing that all be saved. But the mutual relation between threats and promises shows such forms of speech to be conditional.”<sup>56</sup> Here Calvin cites the Ninevites and the kings of Gerar and Egypt. He goes on,

Since by repentance they averted the punishment promised to them, it is evident that it was not firmly decreed unless they remained obstinate. Yet the denunciation had been precise, as if it were an irrevocable decree. But after terrifying and humbling them with the sense of His wrath, though not to the point of despair, He cheers them with the hope of pardon, that they might feel there was room for remedy. So again with the promises which invite all men to salvation. They do not simply and positively declare what God has decreed in His secret counsel but what He is prepared to do for all who are brought to faith and repentance. But, it is alleged, we thereby ascribe a double will to God, whereas He is not variable and not the least shadow of turning falls upon Him. . . . God requires conversion from us; wherever He finds it, a man is not disappointed of the promised reward of life. Hence God is said to will life, as also repentance. But the latter He wills, because He invites all to it by His word. Now this is not contradictory of His secret counsel, by which He determined to convert none but His elect. He cannot rightly on this account be thought variable, because *as lawgiver He illuminates all with the external doctrine of life*, in this first sense calling all men to life. But in the other sense, He brings to life whom He will, as Father regenerating by the Spirit only His sons.

It is indeed certain that men are not converted to the Lord of their own accord; nor is the gift of conversion common to all. For this is one of the two heads of the covenant, which God promises to make with none but with His children and His elect people.<sup>57</sup> (emphasis supplied)

It is apparent that Calvin considered the universal proclamation of the gospel and the summons to repentance and faith to be our legitimate responsibility. His own argument was that such proclamation is justified because God “illuminates all with the external doctrine of life.” I, in turn, am proposing that this does not suffice for Calvin’s own purpose unless there is an accompanying *inner* calling, at least on one occasion in an individual’s life. Were the latter not so, then people would be finally condemned on the ground of their sin in Adam. It was there that the inability was incurred which makes all subsequent rejection of the gospel inevitable. This puts too much weight upon original sin, and fails to account for the consistent biblical witness that people are ultimately condemned for the deeds done in their life time.

### *The sovereign grace of sanctification*

In his exposition of Open Theism, Clark Pinnock identifies what seems to him to be a serious problem with monergistic views of sanctification: “According to theological determinism, . . . whatever state you are in now is the will of God since God’s will covers everything that happens, including states of mind and heart. If one does not desire to grow in holiness, this lack of desire is God’s will too. If God wants someone to desire holiness he will make them want it. . . . We, therefore, cannot be blamed for not wanting a higher level of holiness. If my desire is at a low level, it must be God’s will that it is.”<sup>58</sup>

Ardel Caneday and Thomas Schreiner tell of a man who used precisely such an appeal to divine monergism, to excuse his personal sin. This person “kept having sexual relations outside marriage,” but excused himself by saying: “God in his grace has not given me the desire to obey him. It would be legalistic of me to keep his commands without the desire.”<sup>59</sup> I can understand Pinnock’s sense that something is amiss in a monergistic understanding of sanctification if it necessarily leads to a situation in which God must be held accountable for the sins which Christians commit, since he deliberately withheld from them the sanctifying grace which would have kept them from sin. I find the treatment of sanctification by Reformed theologians to be somewhat ambiguous in regard to the respective roles of God and believers. Anthony Hoekema, for instance, states that “though sanctification is *primarily* God’s work in us, it is not a process in which we remain passive but one in which we must be continually active”<sup>60</sup> (emphasis mine). To speak of sanctification as “*primarily*” God’s work leaves the impression that it is “*secondarily*” ours, and hence that we work together and that God’s work is not determinative, as it is in justification. Of course, we exercise repentance and faith in justification, so we are not passive there either, but a Reformed or monergist theologian would surely not say that justification is *primarily* God’s work.

On the other hand, as Hoekema sums up his treatment of “God and his people in sanctification,” he asks: “Should we say, as some have done,<sup>61</sup> that sanctification is a work of God in which believers cooperate? This way of stating the doctrine, however, wrongly implied that God and we each do part of the work of sanctification. . . . Summing up, we may say that sanctification is a supernatural work of God in which the believer is active. The more active we are in sanctification, the more sure we may be that the energizing power that enables us to be active is the power of God.” Yet, a note of synergism might again be heard in Hoekema’s quotation from J. C. Ryle: “Sanctification . . . is a thing for which every believer is responsible. . . . Whose fault is it if they [believers] are not holy, but their own? On whom can they throw the blame if they are not sanctified, but themselves? God, who has given them grace and a new heart, and a new nature, has deprived them of all excuse if they do not live for his praise.”<sup>62</sup>

In the citation from Ryle, it sounds as though we, not God, set the limits to our growth in holiness. God’s grace has been sufficient for all of us to be perfect, but we do not appropriate it and we are responsible for that. Such an idea has an obvious attraction, for it evades the position which Clark Pinnock found so horrifying. Calvinists know that our *obedience* can only be attributed to God’s grace so that it is no cause for boasting, but there is an understandable reluctance to admit the converse, and to attribute our *disobedience* to God. On the other hand, if we import synergism into our doctrine of sanctification to address this perceived problem, we commit theological suicide as monergists.<sup>63</sup> If we insist that salvation is all of grace, it will not do to argue that our justification is accomplished by monergistic efficacious grace but that our sanctification is achieved through a synergistic cooperation between God and ourselves. If the latter were the case, then final salvation would be brought about through a synergism and all monergist complaints that synergism undermines the absoluteness of God’s grace in salvation would come back to haunt the Calvinists who describe sanctification synergistically.

Salvation, from beginning to end is wrought by God. This includes both the initial faith which God graciously gives us and by means of which we are justified, on account of Christ's atoning work on our behalf, and the ongoing faith by means of which we grow in holiness and are conformed to the image of Christ. We have nothing that we did not receive from God (1 Cor 4:7) and we go forward in holiness by the work of the same Spirit who began that motion in us (Gal 3:1-5). If any part of the long process of salvation which begins with our being regenerated by the Spirit and concludes when we are perfected in Christ in glorified bodies, is a matter of our cooperating with God, then our salvation is a cooperative work. It is thus incoherent to assert that regeneration and justification are God's sovereign work in us (monergism) but that sanctification is a work in which we cooperate (synergism). Arminians or Molinists, being consistently synergistic, posit a synergism from start to finish. At every stage, God's gracious initiative precedes human effort but the human response to that grace determines the outcome. Calvinists and other monergists, who insist that God regenerates and justifies those whom *he* has eternally purposed to save, cannot introduce a *human* determinism into the measure of progress in salvation without undermining entirely the sovereignty of God's saving work, which we are convinced is taught by Scripture. To consistently affirm that salvation is God's gracious work, from start to finish, giving us nothing of which to boast, we need to speak of the human activity in sanctification in completely the same way we do regarding justification. In both cases, there is human activity, but it is an activity that occurs because of God's grace which effects both faith and obedience in us.<sup>64</sup>

We must approach the inclusion of sins committed by believers within the will of God's eternal purpose, just as we do all the evil which occurs within the history of the world by the sovereign will of God. God hates the sin and he does not will to bring it about in any way that would make him accountable for it. Nevertheless, he permits it to occur for reasons of his own which are frequently hidden from us now. Just

as God hardened the hearts of most of Paul's fellow Israelites as part of his saving purpose for all the nations of the world, so he wills that his work of grace among the Gentiles will one day serve to provoke Israel to jealousy and be instrumental in God's saving work among them (Rom 11:31-32). Likewise, his choosing not to effectively prevent a particular Christian from sinning, in some instance, has a purpose in the larger scheme of God both for that individual and for others, which will some day become apparent to us and will prompt us to glorify God's wisdom and grace.

So, it is clear that sanctification can not be the fruit of a synergistic cooperation between God and human beings, yet God can not be held accountable for the sin which believers commit. The best way for us to understand this puzzle, I suggest, is my proposal regarding "sufficient" and "efficient" grace. In regard to justification, it helped us to make some sense of God's justice in condemning sinners who do not believe. Similarly, concerning sanctification, we find in my proposal a construct within which believers are justly held accountable for their continuing acts of sin, even though God has deliberately not yet made them perfect. Helpfully, John Piper suggests that "God has the capacity to look at the world through two lenses. He can look through a narrow lens or through a wide-angle lens. When God looks at a painful or wicked event through his narrow lens, he sees the tragedy or the sin for what it is in itself and he is angered and grieved. 'I do not delight in the death of anyone, says the Lord God' (Ezek 18:32). But when God looks at a painful or wicked event through his wide-angle lens, he sees the tragedy or the sin in relation to everything leading up to it and everything flowing out from it. He sees it in all the connections and effects that form a pattern or mosaic stretching into eternity. This mosaic, with all its (good and evil) parts he does delight in (Ps 115:3)."<sup>65</sup> I suggest that what makes the deeds of sin both tragic and sinful is that they are committed by individuals who are justly held accountable for their acts, and that such is possible only assuming the gracious enablement which I have described as sufficient accompanying grace. Given these

factors, we have some understanding of why “God can both grieve over the unholy speech of his people (Eph 4:29,30) and take pleasure in them daily (Psa 149:4).”<sup>66</sup>

Going back to the statements by Anthony Hoekema and J. C. Ryle, it is evident that the synergistic note in their description of sanctification derives from a legitimate concern to hold believers responsible for their shortcomings. Ryle wants to make sure that we do not blame God because we are not more holy. (One is reminded of Paul’s discussion of anticipated objections to electing grace, in Romans 9.) For the holiness we do achieve, the glory must go to God, but for the ways in which we fall short of God’s demands, we must take the blame. Our disobedience can not be charged to God’s failure to provide us with grace sufficient to enable us to obey.

Once again, then, I find it helpful to think in terms of God’s *always* enabling believers to do the right thing. There is a “sufficient enabling grace,” for sanctification, that is “universal” within the community of faith, just as there is a “sufficient enabling grace” for justification, that is universal within the human race. But, God does not give the same measure of faith to all. We *could* all be perfect, in the sense that our imperfection can not be charged to God but is blamed against us. We fail to respond to or “use” the grace that God gives us which is not, in any way, deficient for our perfection. We are guilty of sinful disobedience precisely because there is an important sense in which we *could* have not sinned, given God’s grace to us in that instance. Nevertheless, our actual obedience is only secured when God “effectively” graces us to that end. It is in this sense that Scripture speaks of God’s distributing different measures of faith. Whatever good we do, as followers of Jesus, is because God works in us, and so we have nothing of which to boast. Whatever evil we do, on the other hand (contra Pinnock’s reading of the position of theological determinism), is sin for which we are responsible for having failed to appropriate the enablement of God, which was “sufficient.” None of us is ever tempted or tried beyond our strength.

God provides a way out (1 Cor 10:13). I take this to be a statement concerning the sufficiency of his grace in the midst of our experiences of testing and temptation. If we fail to take that way out, we are to blame. Should we do so, we will give praise to God for his deliverance, recognizing that we did not fall only because we were upheld by the effective grace of God.

Intriguingly, Donald Bloesch has suggested that “Lutherans are often better than Calvinists in affirming the paradox of divine agency in the procuring of salvation and human responsibility for the loss of salvation.”<sup>67</sup> It is precisely that tightrope which I am trying to walk safely in this discussion. When contemplating sanctification, it is important that we recognize the limits of our perspective, both on our own growth in holiness and that of others.<sup>68</sup> We must measure ourselves against Christ, not against one another. If holiness is a measurable quantity, it is certainly not one which *we* can measure with any sort of accuracy. God is at work in each of his children in distinctive ways, both providentially and in saving grace, and no two lives can be compared. This prevents us from ever considering ourselves “more holy” than other people and forbids us to pass judgment on how “holy” or “unholy” another person is. We may, of course, recognize particular acts of sin in others, and we may need to help them respond properly. We may also see good works, the fruit of God’s grace in the lives of other people in whom God’s light shines, and this will cause us to glorify our Father in heaven (Mt 5:16). But, to make an overall assessment of the relative sanctification of people, within any sort of comparative ranking, is completely beyond either our capability or our prerogative. Only God sees human hearts. We will need to keep this in mind, not only when we contemplate the lives of other Christians but also when we encounter people from other religious communities.

## **Summing Up**

I hope that my proposal is now clear and that its benefits are evident. I believe that my suggestion is coherent with the overall Calvinist understanding of God's saving work in the world but that it improves significantly on that tradition in regard to God's justice in condemning unbelievers. Those who are not yet convinced that the concept is biblical (in spite of its eminent usefulness!) may wish to visit Appendix 3 where I offer further Scriptural support for the concept.

This chapter brings us to the end of our analysis of the process by which God gives eternal life to sinners. Everyone comes into the world guilty, in Adam, and spiritually disabled as a consequence of this sinfulness. To redeem a people he had chosen for himself, even before creating them, God sent the Son, who lived a perfect life and gave his sinless life for the restoration of the new race that was chosen in Christ. The saving effect of Christ's redemptive work only becomes effective in the life a person, however, when it is appropriated by faith. The faith which unites people to Christ is itself a fruit of Christ's saving work, distributed to the elect by the Spirit of God. God gives everyone revelation of himself and, at some point in the life of each person, the Spirit of God does an inner work of enablement so that the person could be saved if he responded to God's revelation with the faith appropriate to the revelation received. Thus, *although all human beings begin their lives as guilty sinners, if they fail to believe and remain in their condemnation, it will be because of personal resistance to the Holy Spirit's enabling and the refusal to believe God's truth.* In the final day of judgment, each person will account for the deeds they did during their life time. In the lives of those whom God has chosen in Christ, however, the Spirit of God does an effective work of drawing them to God, so that they do believe and are saved by Christ's righteousness. Because the entire saving work is accomplished by God, both objectively in Christ and subjectively through the Spirit, those who come to faith are aware that God has saved them, without any contribution of their own. All the glory is God's.

Suppose, once more, that you are sharing the gospel with an Asian friend and he wants to know what you can say, from your Christian perspective, about the fate of his ancestors who died without any knowledge of this message which you are insisting will save your friend from eternal condemnation, if he trusts in the Jesus of whom you speak. Earlier, I suggested that you can tell him that his ancestors had sufficient revelation to believe and be saved. They may not have known about Jesus but they were not without knowledge of God and they will be held accountable for their response to God in the ways in which he revealed himself to them. If you are a Calvinist, and if you have had sufficient time to talk, your friend will know that you affirm that only those who are effectively enabled by the Spirit of God will believe in God savingly. So, *he may ask how God can hold his ancestor accountable for not believing*, even when he had sufficient revelation, *if he was spiritually unable* to believe in God through it. I suggest that you tell him that at least once in his ancestor's life (and perhaps many times) God will have accompanied his revelation with an enabling such that the ancestor could have believed if he would do so. The ancestor will only have believed and been saved, if God efficaciously enabled him to do so. But, if not, he still had an ability to believe, an ability of such a kind that God was justly angry that he suppressed the truth in unrighteousness and refused to believe.

We can all be thankful that, though people may suppress God's truth on numerous occasions, even under painful conviction by God's Spirit, God woos an immense number of sinful people until they finally submit, even though it may be at the end of a rebellious life. We may flee God "down the nights and down the days," and "down the arches of the years," and "down the labyrinthine ways" of our own minds until the "hound of heaven" from Francis Thompson's famous poem catches up with us and we discover that it was he whom we were seeking through our many fruitless and unsatisfying quests.<sup>69</sup>

If God gives everyone sufficient revelation to be saved if they respond appropriately, is it still important that we take the gospel to the world? I believe so, and will make my case in the next chapter.

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1. Gerald R. McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn from World Religions?: Jesus, Revelation and Religious Traditions* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), p. 66.
  2. E.g., Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1949), pp. 246-50.
  3. *Ibid.*, p. 250.
  4. Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth: A Handbook of Christian Belief* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1982), p. 106.
  5. Neal Punt, *What's Good About the Good News?: The Plan of Salvation In a New Light* (Chicago: Northland Press, 1988), p. 21.
  6. See *1980 Acts of Synod*, (Christian Reformed Publications), p. 593; cited by Punt, *What's Good?*, p. 22.
  7. *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.
  8. Jonathan Edwards also granted that Arminians were right to be concerned about “the justice of damning men for those things that are necessary” (Jonathan Edwards, “A Careful and Strict Inquiry into the Modern Prevailing Notions of that Freedom of Will, Which is Supposed to Be Essential to Moral Agency, Virtue and Vice, Reward and Punishment, Praise and Blame,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 2 vols. [Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust], p. 1: 65). To deal with this concern, Edwards proposed a distinction between natural and moral inability or necessity. Although it is good to see Edwards’ recognition of the problem, I do not think that he can evade the difficulty that Arminians have identified, by describing the universal human inability as moral, so long as that moral inability is traced back to original sin, which makes the weight of final condemnation rest ultimately on sin in Adam.
  9. Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 36.
  
  10. Article II, Affirmative III. Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of the Evangelical Protestant Churches* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1877), pp. 108-9.
  11. Helmut Thielicke, *The Evangelical Faith. Vol. III* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1877), p. 8.
  12. *Ibid.*, III, p. 9.
  13. Larger Catechism IV., p. 494; cited by Adolf Harnack, *History of Dogma* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1899), Vol. VII, p. 251, n. 2. Cf. Edmund Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961), pp. 151-54.
  14. Althaus, *Theology of Luther*, p. 364.
  15. *Ibid.*, pp. 364-65.
  16. Art XI, Affirmative IX., Schaff, *Creeds*, p. 168.
  17. Article XI, Affirmative XI, Schaff, *Creeds*, pp. 168-69.
  18. Article IV, Schaff, *Creeds*, p. 185.

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19. John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, 1777 ed, reprinted (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1966), p. 50.
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  29. Thomas R. Schreiner and Ardel B. Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Assurance* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), p. 318.
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  32. Ibid., p. 122.
  33. Ibid.
  
  34. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1992), IX.7.7; pp. I: 607-08.
  35. Henri Blocher, *Original Sin: Illuminating the Riddle*, *New Studies in Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), pp. 57-58.
  36. Ibid., p. 58.
  37. Oden, *Transforming Power*, p. 45.
  38. J. O. Buswell Jr., *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1963), p. 160.
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  40. Roger Forster and Paul Marston, *God's Strategy in Human History: God's Sovereignty and Man's Responsibility* (First British ed. Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1973; reprint, Crowborough, East Sussex: Highland Books, 1989), p. 172.
  41. Ibid., p. 175.
  42. Oden, *Transforming Power*, p. 48.
  43. Ibid., p. 81.

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44. Oden, *Transforming Power*, p. 81.
45. John Piper, "Are There Two Wills in God?," in *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace*, eds. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), pp. 118-19.
46. Cf. Flint, "Two Accounts," p. 169, fn. 44: "It is not quite *de fide* that God wills all to be saved; see Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, pp. 188-189. Nevertheless, I am aware of no Thomist who would deny God's universal salvific will."
47. Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 173.
48. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300-1700)*, Vol. 4 of *The Christian Tradition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 237.
49. See Robert C. Letham, *The Work of Christ* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), pp. 242-43. Bucer, Calvin and Ursinus all followed Augustine in understanding the text as a reference to "all classes" of people.
50. Clark Pinnock, ed., *Grace Unlimited* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1975), p. 13.
51. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), p. 684.
52. See Letham, *Work of Christ*, p. 239. Anthony Hoekema demonstrates the consistency of the free offer of the gospel with both Scripture and the Reformed confessional standards (*Saved By Grace* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989], pp. 68-77).
53. Oden, *Transforming Power*, p. 114.
54. John Owen, "Reprobation Asserted," in *The Works of John Bunyan*, ed. G. Offor (London, 1855), ii. 348; cited by Alan C. Clifford, *Atonement and Justification: English Evangelical Theology 1640-1790: An Evaluation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 76.
55. Hoekema, *Saved*, p. 73.
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56. John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, trans. J. K. S. Reid (London, 1961), p. 105; cited by Brian G. Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy: Protestant Scholasticism and Humanism in Seventeenth-Century France* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), p. 198.
57. Calvin, *Predestination*, pp. 105-06; cited by Armstrong, *Calvinism*, pp. 198-99. Commenting on this passage, Brian Armstrong points out that Amyraut related God's role as lawgiver to the hypothetical covenant and his role as father to the absolute covenant (Armstrong, *Calvinism*, p. 199).
58. Clark H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness*, The Didsbury Lectures, 2000 (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001), pp. 167-68.
59. Schreiner and Caneday, *The Race*, p. 316.
60. Hoekema, *Saved*, p. 201.
61. Citing Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 534.
62. Hoekema, *Saved*, p. 201; citing J. C. Ryle, *Holiness* (London: James Clarke, 1956), pp. 19-20.

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Similarly, Calvinistic Baptist, Bruce Demarest, writes: “Sanctification is a cooperative venture; the Spirit blesses believers with sanctifying grace, but the latter must faithfully *cooperate* therewith. Faith alone justifies but faith joined with our concerted efforts sanctifies” (*The Cross and Salvation*, The Foundations of Evangelical Theology [Wheaton: Crossway, 1997], p. 425). And, Donald Bloesch speaks about the divine and human factors in sanctification as follows: “None of us can earn our salvation or make ourselves worthy of God’s grace. But we can demonstrate and manifest God’s grace in our daily lives, and if we do so we will be rewarded, not because we have been more open to the moving of the Spirit. Even then we can take no credit, since our openness is irrevocably tied to our election. We do good works because we have been separated by God for a life of service. If we cease to do good works we will be judged for having quenched and grieved the Spirit who lives within us and strives to perfect our union with Christ” (*The Holy Spirit: Works and Gifts* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000], p. 206). On the other hand, Bloesch later writes, more monergistically, that “salvation is *never a cooperative affair* between willing humans and the Spirit of God but always a surprising work of grace that does not merely negate our will but turns our will in a completely new direction so that we can act and believe—yet not to gain salvation but to give evidence that we are indeed recipients of saving grace” (Ibid., p. 251).

R. C. Sproul does not hesitate to use the language of synergism in speaking of the process of sanctification: “As part of the process of sanctification, perseverance is a synergistic work. This means it is a cooperative effort between God and us. We persevere and he preserves” (*Grace Unknown: The Heart of Reformed Theology* [Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997], p. 212). But, it does not appear that he means to say more than that Christians are not passive in their growth in holiness. Using the analogy of a father and child hanging on to one another’s hands, Sproul later says that “when the child loosens his grip on the father’s hand, the father may let him stumble and scrape his knees. Though the child incurs the father’s displeasure in the process, the father will not allow his grip on the child to be loosed entirely, preventing him from falling into an abyss. . . . We can fall from grace, but not absolutely” (Ibid., 213). Here, the monergistic action of God’s preserving his children to the end is clearly described, but the action of the believer is not left out of the process.

63. I am indebted to Ardel Caneday and Thomas Schreiner for fruitful dialogue growing out of their fine book on the doctrines of perseverance and assurance of salvation (*The Race*). I had been surprised by their analogy between justification and sanctification (including perseverance), both of which they portrayed as wrought sovereignly by God’s grace, in a monergistic fashion. My conception of the situation in sanctification, at that time, was analogous to the Wesleyan understanding of justification. God provides believers with sufficient grace not to sin but we choose whether or not we will appropriate it. I had arrived at my synergistic understanding of sanctification because, although I understood Scripture to teach that it is the eternal purpose of God which determined that some people will never believe and be justified, I found it hard to imagine that God eternally purposed that particular believers should be no more holy than they are.

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64. Ardel Caneday has written: “The issue is addressed by Paul again in Colossians 1:28-29 where he says, ‘We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.’ If Paul’s labors as an apostle, on behalf of the sanctifying of others, are completely grounded in a non-synergistic way in God’s grace, then surely his labors to the same end for himself are also non-synergistically grounded in God’s grace alone. For all that he does he does by God’s grace. Therefore, we have no problem at all in affirming that to whatever degree we are sanctified it is wholly accountable to God’s grace working in us. For Paul makes it clear to us that we do not all receive the same measure of grace but that God who gives grace to us gives the effects of his grace, namely varying measures of faith, to different individuals: ‘For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you’ (Romans 12:3)” (an email message of January 20, 2002, which I obtained permission to cite).

65. Piper, “Two Wills,” p. 126.

66. *Ibid.*, p. 127.

67. Bloesch, *Holy Spirit*, p. 330.

68. A point well made to me by Ardel Caneday in an email message of February 2, 2002.

69. Francis Thompson, “The Hound of Heaven,” in *The College Survey of English Literature*, shorter edition, revised, ed. Alexander M. Witherspoon (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1951), pp. 1162-64.