

*There is everywhere in the Bible an artless appeal to the will of man to believe in Christ, to come to him and be saved. Calvinists do not deny this and do not ignore the freedom and responsibility of men and women for their salvation.*

**“Free Will”**

**Revelation 22:6-21**

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This is the third and last time we will read and consider the epilogue of the Book of Revelation. We have considered so far its emphasis on the imminence of Christ’s return – “Behold I am coming soon!” three times in these few verses – and its emphatic assertion of the judgment according to works – “I will give to everyone according to what he has done!” Now we read it again to consider its equally emphatic emphasis on the man’s free will: “Whoever wishes let him take the free gift...” From the beginning of the epilogue to the end as from the beginning of the book to the end an appeal is being made all the time to the will of man. He is being summoned, he is being urged to believe and to obey.

I made comments on the text through v. 16 the last two Lord’s Day mornings. I won’t repeat those this morning.

**Text Comment**

- v.17 There are four invitations here. It is possible to take the first two as addressed to Christ, asking for his return as soon as possible to reward his faithful people, and the last two as addressed to the world to come and partake of Christ’s salvation. In verses 7, 12, and 20 the Lord says he is coming soon. Here that assertion would then be made the basis for the church’s appeal that he do so, that he come as quickly as he can. However, it seems best to take all four as addressed to the world. The first two then together remind us that the testimony of the church, empowered by the Holy Spirit, constitutes the instrument of the world’s salvation. [Mounce, 395] It will soon be too late, as we read in verses 10 and 11, but it is not yet too late to turn, to come and be saved. “Come, take the water of life while there is still time.”
- v.18 The warning against adding or taking away from the prophecy is not a warning addressed to scribes who would copy the text of Revelation but, as John says, to the hearers of the prophecy. They are not to distort its message because they are offended by it in some way or because it makes their lives more difficult. There are other such warnings in the Bible – indeed the form of this one seems to be based on Deuteronomy 4:2 – and, therefore, this warning amounts to a claim that Revelation belongs to Holy Scripture as much as any of the books of the Old Testament. In Deuteronomy the similar injunction is a warning against the inroads of false teaching. That, you remember, was likewise a concern in the seven letters in chapters 2 and 3.
- v.19 Say what you will, use “hell” as an expletive as you will, joke about it as one does in our modern world, but the prospect of damnation, of being shut out of heaven – so real in

Revelation as in the entire Bible – is a prospect so solemn, so terrible, that all other considerations pale in comparison to it. And the surest way of guaranteeing that horrific outcome for yourself or for your children is blithely to ignore the plain-speaking of the Word of God.

As before in the book, we have a warning addressed to Christians not to lose their place in the company of the saved by compromise with the world, for that will always be the reason why people distort or deny the Word of God.

- v.20 The longing for the Lord’s return stands at the heart of the Christian faith and has from the beginning. We know that this sentence “Come, O Lord” – in Aramaic *marana tha* – became a universal expression in the Greek church in the first century—a kind of secret password by which Christians would identify one another and as part of their worship on the Lord’s Day—because Paul includes that phrase in its Aramaic form in his letter to a Greek speaking church in 1 Cor. 16:22.
- v.21 The last sentence does not end with “God’s people” but with “all.” “The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all.” Scribes apparently tried to fix what they thought was an improper ending, perhaps because it suggested universal salvation, with a variety of additions: “all of you,” “all of us,” or “all the saints.” It is best to stick with the shorter reading: “with all.”

Further, the concluding “Amen” actually is quite weakly supported in the manuscripts of the Greek New Testament and is also not likely to have been part of John’s original. Some of you may have noticed that I have recently taken to omitting the “Amen” at the end of the benediction at the conclusion of our services of worship here. I was recently reminded that biblical benedictions do not typically conclude with an “Amen” as they are declarations of the Lord’s blessing not prayers for it. You can confirm this for yourself in Numbers 6 or at the end of First or Second Corinthians. *Ecclesia reformata sed semper reformanda!* If we just keep at this, we are going to get it right eventually!

Now what are we to do with the “whosoever will may come” of v. 17? That is how it famously reads in the King James Version. The NIV has “whoever wishes” and the ESV “whoever desires” but the KJV’s “whosoever will” is even better. It all amounts to the same thing: a summons to anyone *who will* to take Christ’s free offer of salvation.

Now, it would not occur to many Christians to think there is a question here. What is the problem? But for a church full of Calvinists, there is both a question and a problem. And it is, in my view, a question often poorly answered and a problem poorly solved by Calvinists.

The problem is of course imported to this text from elsewhere in the Bible and arises from the Scripture’s unmistakable teaching that man, in his sinful nature, *will not, will never* desire or wish or will to come to Christ for salvation. He is and he remains by nature an inveterate enemy of Jesus Christ. What is more, the Bible also teaches that without a prior working of the Spirit of God, without the new birth which is a miraculous work of sovereign grace and divine power, without the drawing of the Holy Spirit, a man or woman, boy or girl, will never see the light,

never understand the gospel, and never embrace it or *want* to embrace it for himself or herself. “Dead in sin” is how the Apostle Paul describes the unbeliever. Dead men don’t “come to take the water or life” whether or not they are invited.

This fact of man dead, lifeless, and helpless in sin is fundamental to our understanding of salvation as a matter of God’s grace and mercy joined with God’s power. It is also fundamental to our understanding of Christ’s achievement on the cross. There, the Bible teaches us, he “saved his people from their sins” and, as we read earlier in Revelation,

“with [his] blood [he] purchased men for God from every tribe, and language, and people, and nation.”

Christ’s saving work was definite and decisive, not merely potentially effective. It *saved* people; it did not merely create a situation in which they might be saved if they wish to be. To place such an emphasis on the human will as a decisive instrument of man’s salvation is to diminish the glory of Christ as the Savior of the world which the Bible never permits us to do. Man does not believe *in order to be saved* but believes *because he has been chosen by God and redeemed by Christ and reborn by the Holy Spirit*. That is our theology and we are confident it is the only fair reading of a host of texts. It was Jesus who said that no one comes to him unless the Father in heaven draws him. It was Jesus who said that the Pharisees did not believe because they were not his sheep. He didn’t say that they weren’t his sheep because they didn’t believe; he said that they didn’t believe because they weren’t his sheep! He said that all that the Father gave to him would come to him and he would raise them up at the last day. And Luke, accounting for the multitudes who believed in Paul’s gospel message as he preached it from place, says simply: “All who were appointed to eternal life, believed.”

The act of the human will coming to Christ, then, is *the consequence* of God’s grace, it is *the effect* of Christ’s redemption, it is the *inevitable outcome* of the recreation of a human soul by the Spirit of God. It is *not* the cause or the reason of anyone being saved! We are saved because of what God does for us in Christ and what the Holy Spirit does in us because Christ on the cross has redeemed us from sin and death. We are not saved *because* we choose to be. We choose because we have been chosen, redeemed, and renewed.

That is our theology and we are sticking to it because it is the plain teaching of Holy Scripture. And we love this theology because in it God is glorified and Christ is magnified in our salvation and we are left confessing, as we know we should and must, and confessing from the heart and with all our hearts that “salvation is of the Lord.” It is not partly from him or even mostly from him. It is altogether from him: in its design, its accomplishment, and its application to individual human lives it is entirely the work and the achievement and the free gift of God. In this understanding of salvation the salvation of a sinner is the consequence of a great and mighty love that lives in the center of reality. This is the fundamental assertion of Calvinism. It’s denial of man’s ability, to any degree, to claim a place for himself in any way in the city of God, is a sentinel placed around the gracious election of God, the cross of Jesus Christ, and the sovereign working of the Holy Spirit. It is a denial the entire purpose of which is the assertion of the glory of God wholly and entirely in the salvation of sinners.

The other common view of these things among Christians, the view known as Arminianism, is, in our view popular not because it faithfully trades in the clear teaching of the Bible but because it represents the natural tendency of the human heart. Even in the matter of his salvation man cannot bear to renounce the delusion of being master of his fate and the captain of his soul. [Packer, *Intro to Death of Death*, 14] And so he imagines that God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – has done him the favor of making salvation a possibility but that it is up to him to turn that possibility into an actuality. In that view, however its advocates may sputter and complain, our salvation, at last, rests finally upon *man's* will, not God's will; *man's* decision, not God's decision. When the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit have done all they will do, no one is yet saved. No, the *man* must now act and his act makes the decisive and final difference. Why then can that man not say that he is in some significant, fundamental and ultimate way his own savior? He did the thing, he made the choice that made the difference when others did not. Calvinists are fond of pointing out that Arminians invariably know better than their theology. They never sing in any of their hymns that *they* made the decisive and finally significant contribution to their salvation; they never sing that salvation is partly God's work but also partly theirs; they never sing the glory of man's will when they are singing of the salvation of sinners. They know better. They praise God alone for their salvation and they pray to God for the salvation of others. Deep in their hearts they know where their salvation comes from and it is not from the exercise of their free will!

At the end of his life, Martin Luther, the great Reformer, said that of all his many writings – and his writings fill many large volumes – there were two he felt deserved a long life after he was gone. One was his small catechism. The other was his treatise entitled *The Bondage of the Will*. It is fairly represented as the great man's *magnum opus*. And what is that book? It is a thorough-going biblical demonstration of the fact that man does not contribute anything to his salvation, that he does not and cannot contribute anything apart from the sin and guilt from which he must be saved. Sinful man's, fallen man's will is bound by sin and he is powerless to do anything to contribute to his salvation. Salvation is, because it must be, the work of God for us and in us from start to finish. God must do all because man can and will do nothing.

That was Luther's theology but it was also Augustine's long before and Paul's long before that. It was Calvin's. It was the theology of all the magisterial Reformers. It was the theology of the English Puritans and the Scottish Presbyterians. It was the theology of the great pioneers of the modern missionary movement. It has been the theology of the Christian church whenever she has been renewed in faith, hope, and love, because it so plainly the teaching of the Bible and because it so plainly gives the glory to God and Christ.

So *that* is the problem we face at Revelation 22:17 and its invitation to all to come and take the free gift of the water of life. The free offer to anyone who will come is perhaps re-emphasized at the very end of the epilogue when we read, as in the original text, "the grace of the Lord Jesus be *with all*." There is a universalizing element here. An appeal to all to come, to choose, to decide for Christ. But we have said that a man in sin cannot choose and will not decide and *never* will come.

So what are we to do with this invitation and this appeal to man to exercise his will? Well, Calvinists are likely to do several things. Unfortunately, some of them are inclined simply to

evade the force of the words of v. 17. John Gill, the influential 18<sup>th</sup> century Baptist pastor and commentator on the Bible is one of the most famous of the class of theologians and preachers known as hyper-Calvinists. A hyper-Calvinist is a Calvinist who does not like to talk about man's free-will, or man's responsibility, or about the gospel being offered freely to all men in hopes that they might believe it and be saved. They do not want to entertain any thought of man exercising his own will in the matter of salvation. When the Bible seems to speak of man's free will or when it seems to be appealing to man to exercise his will the hyper-Calvinist finds a way to interpret the text so that it doesn't. I have Gill's commentary on Revelation and he takes the "whosoever will" of v. 17 to refer to the person who has "a will to God and to spiritual things wrought in him by God." So in John Gill's reading of v. 17 the text actually says, "whoever is being influenced by the Spirit of God to come to Christ, whoever in whom the Holy Spirit is planting holy wishes, that man may (or will) come freely to Christ." In Gill's hand, a text that seems to be an appeal, an imperative, a command addressed to the will of man, becomes instead a description of what a man can and will do who is being drawn to Christ by the Holy Spirit. But this is simply to ignore what the Bible actually *says*. Verse 17 isn't a description of the effect of God's grace upon a man; it is an appeal *to that man* to act, to believe, and to come to Christ.

Other Calvinists, explaining the form of words we encounter in v. 17 and, of course, in many other places in the Bible, are very often likely simply to assert their conviction that men cannot desire and will not wish to come to Christ for salvation unless God gives them the desire and makes them willing. They may also point out that God uses means in saving sinners and that one of those means is the human will. So, while faith in Christ is his gift to those he saves, God has himself determined that this will be the way that a man comes into the experience of salvation: he will desire it, and then he will choose it, and then he will come. Their doing is first God's doing; they must will, they must wish, they must desire, even if they can do this only because God makes them do it. But the willing, the desiring, the choosing is necessary even if it is God's gift and God's work in a man or woman.

I agree, of course, that all of that is true; but I don't think it is an adequate or faithful account of Rev. 22:17. This verse is not about what a man *cannot* do. It is about what a man *should* do, what a man is being *urged* to do, what a man is being *commanded* to do. That verse as plain as day is an appeal, a command to men to come to Christ. Whoever wishes let him take of the free gift of the water of life. Men and women are being urged to exercise their will. They are promised that if they will only come, they will live and live forever. And, of course, as you well know, the Bible speaks in such terms everywhere, on its every page. And all through this epilogue it is the same and all through Book of Revelation it is the same. Do this, don't do that, or else! All is rested on what we do, what we must do. All is rested on what we refuse to do.

Everyone knows, of course, how often and through what large tracts of the Bible's teaching God is said and seen to be dealing with man *according to what he has done or failed to do*. Again and again man's destiny is said to be determined by whether he will trust the Lord or whether he will obey God's law. But there is more. When the Apostle Paul, of all people, the champion of justification by faith, of the election of grace, and of the indefectibility of God's saving love, says that he beats his body and makes it his slave lest having preached to others he himself be disqualified for the prize (1 Cor. 9:27), or when he warns a community of believers as he does here and elsewhere not to receive the grace of God in vain (2 Cor. 6:1), or when he lays himself

under great and solemn obligation to pursue holiness so that “somehow” he might attain to the resurrection of the dead (Phil. 3:11), we are face to face with a spiritual viewpoint that lays terrible emphasis on the personal accountability of human beings for their salvation. Men must *do* in order to be saved! They must choose; they must act!

When time after time the Bible traces spiritual outcomes back to the faithfulness or unfaithfulness of an individual or a people, we can scarcely deny that real contingency is woven into human life and that human actions are real causes. If men make certain choices certain things will come to pass; different choices produce different outcomes. It makes all the difference in the world what a human being *does*, what he *believes*, and what he *desires*. When strong emotions are attributed to the Lord in response to the fidelity or infidelity of people or the wickedness of unbelievers (Gen. 6:6; Eph. 4:30), we are forbidden to treat the Bible’s universal assertion of man’s free will and man’s accountability and man’s responsibility and the real consequence of human choices as a mere artifice, an ingenious way of speaking that does not mean what it appears to mean. No! Everywhere in the Bible God appeals to man’s will and commands him, and urges him, and pleads with him to believe and to obey or else. There is everywhere in the Bible a real “if...then.” If a man will believe, he will be saved. If he will come, Christ will receive him. If he will repent of his sins, they will be forgiven. And if he does not believe, and does not come, and does not repent, he will not be saved and he will have no one to blame but himself.

We will never deny the force with which the Bible insists upon the sovereignty of divine grace and the absolute dependence of sinners upon that grace. No one can read the Bible with an honest mind and deny that salvation is from first to last and in all the links of the chain God’s work and God’s gift. But at the same time we cannot deny either the real responsibility of men and women to respond to the gospel when it is preached or explained to them, to believe in Jesus Christ, and to exercise their will and choose to come to Christ. That too is a truth that lies face up on the pages of Holy Scripture.

Take the Bible together, says the uncannily perceptive John Duncan, the famous Rabbi Duncan of 19<sup>th</sup> century Scottish Presbyterianism, and it very clearly does *not* teach that God works half and man the other half. That is false. What the Bible teaches is that *God works all* and *man does all*. [*Colloquia Peripetica*, 30-30] It is hard to understand this, I fully admit. Indeed, I will go further and say it is impossible to understand this. We cannot incorporate these two mighty truths – the absolute sovereignty of God in salvation and the absolute freedom and accountability of man in salvation – into some simple harmony. We cannot. Our minds are too small. The reality is too great for us.

And if we try, we will get it wrong and we will find ourselves merely listening to one part of the Bible and not to the other. Here is the great John Newton, the author of *Amazing Grace*, and a firmly convinced Calvinist.

“An attachment to a rigid system is dangerous. Luther once turned out the Epistle of James because it disturbed his system. I shall preach, perhaps very usefully upon two opposite texts, while kept apart: but, if I attempt nicely to reconcile them, it is ten to one if I do not begin to bungle.” [*Works*, I, 102]

Newton is saying that is the mistake John Gill made. He tried to reconcile Rev. 22:17 with the sovereign grace texts and ended up with an interpretation of the verse that had little to nothing to do with what the words actually say. Let God speak to us as he will. If you cannot understand how two things taught in Holy Scripture could be true at one and the same time, admit how small your mind is, and then believe them both.

These are the facts. In the Bible the love of God is proclaimed in the gospel not to men as elect, not to men as redeemed, but to men as sinners needing salvation. And the appeal is made to their will. Choose Christ, receive Christ, come to Christ and be saved. Historically, this is what Christian preachers have always done, including the most Calvinistic among them. There have been, to be sure, a small circle of Calvinist preachers who never or almost never appealed to man's will or urged him to trust in the Savior. They would not say, "Come," as here in Rev. 22, but would say instead, "May the Lord help us to come to him." They did not want to suggest in any way that man had either the ability or the responsibility to come to Christ. They felt it wrong to urge a man to do what he could not do. Only God himself could make a man come and so if we wish such a thing we must speak to God, not to men. [Cf. S.M. Houghton, *My Life and Books*, 30]

But the vast majority of Calvinist preachers, reading their Bibles in a straightforward way, have been great pleaders with men. In their sermons they exhorted men to come to Christ, they urged them to do so, they begged them to come and be saved. As one great Scottish Calvinist preacher put it:

“[The preacher] cannot reconcile the good will [of God] declared to all, with the saving love confined to the elect; but he takes the revealed will of God as it is given to him. He would have others, he would have all, to come in.” [I. Murray, *A Scottish Christian Heritage*, 147]

That is what God himself does, is it not? He too wishes that all men be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. He tells us in his Word that that is what he wants. And so he urges his ambassadors to proclaim his free salvation to the world and to urge men to take the free gift and be saved.

It is said of Martyn Lloyd Jones, perhaps the greatest Calvinist preacher of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that it was generally impossible to tell from his gospel preaching that he believed in the Calvinist doctrines of particular grace, of a divine saving love pitched upon the elect, of an atonement intended only for those the Father gave to the son. And so it has often been. Following the Bible preachers great and small offered eternal life to all who would have it.

This is why Rabbi Duncan once said,

“Intellectually, I dislike the Arminian doctrine far more than the [hyper-Calvinist]... Dr. John Gill's creed is not so repugnant to my intellect as Wesley's, but Wesley comes far nearer in practice.”

He meant that Wesley did what the Bible does: he offered salvation freely to men and urged them to accept it, to come to Christ while there was still the opportunity to do so. In the pulpit it may often be very hard to distinguish the Calvinist evangelist from the Arminian because they are both appealing to the will of men and women and asking them to choose! They have both learned their craft from the Word of God; they are doing what the preachers in the Bible did, and what the Calvinist John Gill, alas, refused to do!

Here the book ends and here the Bible ends. There is eternal life in a world of indescribable joy. It is there for the asking, for the taking. Christ has opened the way to it. What are you waiting for? You wish to be happy? Here is perfect happiness! You wish to be whole. Here is the fullness of life. You wish to live a good life. Here is infinite goodness. What you really wish for, whether you know it or not, is to know God. And here is God offering himself and his love to you and inviting you to know and love him in turn. What must you do to go to this place and to live forever in the New Jerusalem? *You must come*. Wishing for such a future, for such a salvation, you must accept the free gift; take it from God's hand. That is what is meant by *coming* to Christ. It costs you nothing but your entire life; but he who loses his life in this way will get it back in a form far more wonderful than he ever imagined it could be when it was his and not yet God's.

“Come, all you who are thirsty; come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy, and eat!”