

2 Peter No. 8, “Was Peter a Calvinist?”

2 Peter 2:1-3; 17-22

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This evening I am reading just two sections of this chapter, in fact, the paragraphs that begin and end the chapter. We spoke of Peter’s relentless condemnation of these false teachers last time. Tonight, we begin to take up some of the details of his argument.

Text Comment

v.21 There are many “proofs” of the reality of hell in the Bible, both direct statements in large numbers and statements that presuppose its reality. This statement in v. 21 is one of the latter. Quite obviously this would not be true – that is, that their last state will be worse than their first; it would not be true that it would be better for them to have not known the way of righteousness – unless in fact there was a severe penalty for their betrayal of that knowledge. It is this sort of statement in the Bible, of which there are a great many, that has led many of the so-called “annihilationists” – a viewpoint that is making a comeback in our time – to argue that in fact there will be punishment of the wicked *before* they are annihilated and cease to exist. Their future, in other words, unfolds in two stages: punishment then annihilation or extinction. The problem with that teaching is that it puts still further distance between annihilationism – the doctrine that the wicked will simply cease to exist; that their punishment is not conscious but consists in the extinction of their conscious selves – and the teaching of the Bible. Annihilationism has terrific problems with biblical teaching on its face, but if you make it a two-step process – punishment then extinction – the problems only increase, since the Bible never says anything remotely like this: that the wicked will first be punished and then their existence extinguished. I think it is entirely fair to expect that if that were the Bible’s teaching about the consequences of unbelief, fundamental as divine judgment is to the meaning of life, we would find that scenario clearly described somewhere.

You don’t have to be a Christian very long before it becomes clear to you that each school of Christian thought or doctrine has its texts and that those texts pose a problem for the other school of thought or doctrine. Take any teaching of the Bible about which there is such divided opinion and you will find this true: each side bases its conviction on one set of biblical texts and has to work to explain why the other set does not overturn their system. This has always been true and remains true today. It is true, as well, in regard to teaching that the entire believing Church has rightly condemned and rejected. As has often been said, every heresy has its texts. The Arians had theirs, those texts that might seem to suggest either that the Son of God was not eternal or that he was not equal with the Father. The Christian legalist or ritualist has his or her texts. So do those who deny the existence of hell. And on and on it goes.

You may be interested to know, for example, that there has been for a long time, perhaps throughout the entirety of Christian history, a small group of Christians, in some cases really devout Christians, sometimes described as hyper-preterists (that is, they believe that *everything* described in the Bible as eventually to happen has already happened or lies in the past).

“Preterist” is from the Latin word for past. These folk teach that the Second Coming of Christ has already occurred. You might think this preposterous – most Christians do and for good reason – but the fact is a biblical argument can be made and has been made that the Second Coming of Christ occurred long years ago, in the first century in fact. Crucial to that argument are texts such as these, each a statement of the Lord himself:

“...truly I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.” [Matt. 10:23]

“Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.” [Matt. 16:28]

“Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.”

The things that are referred to there are the things the Lord Jesus had been talking about in his Olivet Discourse in answer to the disciples’ question, “When will the end of the age come?” In 1983 Baker Book House republished a book, originally published in the 1870s: J. Stuart Russell’s *The Parousia: A Study of the New Testament Doctrine of our Lord’s Second Coming*. There was no doubt that Russell was a devout Christian. His friend Charles Spurgeon testified to that. There was no doubt that Russell was an able scholar. Spurgeon even said of Russell’s book – for which he supplied a recommendation, what nowadays we would call a “blurb” – that it

“has so much of truth in it and throws so much new light upon obscure portions of the Scriptures, and is accompanied with so much critical research and close reasoning, that it...may be profitable for all.”

Spurgeon didn’t agree with Russell that the Second Coming had occurred in the first century, but he didn’t laugh at Russell’s argument either, because Russell was making a serious biblical argument.

Well, all of that to say that certain texts in the Bible are used to support a particular theological understanding and other texts must somehow be explained in keeping with that understanding. For example, in the mid-first century the gospel had not been preached to the whole world, but the Lord Jesus had said that the end would not come until it had; until the knowledge of the Lord covered the earth as the waters cover the sea. Well, this is typical. Each theological position has its so-called proof-texts, and each has its problem texts, texts that at first glance don’t seem to fit very easily or neatly into that theological system.

Many of us are familiar with the competing theological systems known as Calvinism and Arminianism. We are Calvinists here at Faith Presbyterian Church. Presbyterians are historically Calvinist or Reformed, which is another term that means the same thing. To be a Calvinist means that you believe that salvation is God’s gift and God’s doing in every way. *Sola Gratia*, salvation is by God’s grace alone! That is, the difference between the person who is saved and the person who is not *does not lie in the person* but in God himself, in God’s will, in God’s discriminating saving love. That general truth, that salvation is of the Lord, is then worked out in a variety of ways.

As to the condition of human beings in sin, Calvinists teach that human beings are *not simply unwilling* to avail themselves of God's offer of salvation; they are *incapable* of responding in faith. They not only won't, they can't be saved on God's terms if left to themselves. For them to be saved, therefore, God must override their natural incapacity and unwillingness and make them willing. The Lord, as the Bible says, makes them willing in the day of his power. [Psalm 110:3]

In respect to election, the divine choice of a person for salvation, the Calvinist holds that God's election of his people is unconditional, that is, it does not depend upon anything the person himself or herself does *or will ever do*. God himself, for reasons of his own, chooses out of the mass of fallen humanity some people to save and this choice was made before the foundation of the world.

With regard to Christ's atonement, Calvinists, or most of them, teach that Christ came into the world to deliver God's chosen people from sin and death. He did not come to make salvation a mere possibility that people could avail themselves of if they wished; he came to save those the Father had given to him, to give them eternal life. Since he suffered the punishment of sinners on the cross, since he died for *their* sins, by a rigorous necessity those sinners for whom he suffered must have been delivered from the guilt of their sin. His death was definite and effective, and since all are not saved, it follows that Christ did not die with the intention of saving everyone.

And with respect to the way salvation comes to pass in individual lives Calvinists hold that it is the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit that illuminates the human mind and so makes clear to them the truth about their own sin and Christ's death for their sin, that transforms the human heart by replacing the hatred of God with the love of God, and that transforms the human will by bending it to the will of God. Since the gifts and callings of God are irrevocable, that work, once done, cannot and will not be undone.

All of these Calvinist assertions about salvation have their proof-texts, statements of the Bible that say explicitly or say in effect all that Calvinists say about salvation as a work of God's grace and power alone. We are dead in our transgressions and sins; the flesh will not submit to God's law and cannot do so. As many as were ordained to eternal life, believed. It does not depend upon the human will but on God who has mercy. God shows mercy to whom he will, and he hardens whom he will. Unless a man is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God. The Lord opened Lydia's heart to respond to Paul's message. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. You do not believe because you are not my sheep. I give them eternal life and they shall never perish. There is a very large set of texts that buttress this understanding of salvation as a discriminating divine gift and a sovereign divine work. It is precisely the mass of evidence for this understanding of salvation that explains not only why there have always been Calvinists in the Christian church but why the greatest and most influential Christian theologians, virtually all the so-called "doctors" of the Christian church, embraced this understanding of salvation. Think of Augustine, Aquinas, Luther and Calvin, and so on.

But there has always been a counter-position, earnestly defended by theologians, Christian pastors, and people. Their system is named for the Dutch theologian Jacob Arminius. Arminians come in various forms, but to one degree or another they dispute virtually every part of the

Calvinist understanding of salvation. God's election is based *not* on the mystery of his discriminating love but on his foreknowledge of the person's own unfettered and freely made decision to follow Jesus in that person's own space and time. God's choice of them is based on their choice of him first! Man may be severely weakened by his sin, but he is not incapable of choosing life in Christ, indeed Christ bestows that capability on everyone. Christ died to save everyone, but people must choose to believe in him in order to secure for themselves the benefits of Christ's death and resurrection. The new birth is not the cause but the result of a person's faith in Jesus Christ. And at least in the view of many Arminians, once salvation has been obtained, it can be lost.

Arminians likewise have their texts. Whosoever will may come! For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him might not perish but have everlasting life. See, I have set before you life and death...therefore, choose life, that you...may live. What must I do to be saved? Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved. Jesus Christ is the savior of the world. God our Savior desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all... How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has spurned the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant *by which he was sanctified*...? It is verses like these and many others that explain why there have always been and almost certainly will always be Arminians in the Christian church.

Now, I mention all of this by way of introduction because most Calvinists spend time in 2 Peter 2 precisely because two of Peter's statements seem to present a problem for their theology of grace and salvation. The first is v. 2 where Peter says that the false teachers are, with their teaching, "denying the Master who bought them." "Bought them" is undoubtedly a reference to the Lord's sacrifice of himself on the cross. Paul will tell the Corinthians, for example: "You were bought with a price; therefore, glorify God with your body." Or think of the Lord's statement in Mark 10:45: "The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and give his life a ransom for many." A ransom is the price paid *to purchase* someone's freedom.

You see the problem. In Calvinist thinking, *if Christ bought you, you will be saved*. Our doctrine is what is called definite or effective atonement; an atonement that guarantees the salvation of those for whom Christ died. "I lay down my life for the sheep and they shall never perish." Jesus himself said that. Then he goes on to tell the Pharisees a few sentences later, "You do not believe, because you are not my sheep." That is, he wasn't laying down his life for them! The payment has been made to buy God's chosen ones out of bondage to sin and death. So there can be no way that those for whom Christ died will be among those who are given over to destruction as Peter says will be the lot of these men in v. 3. So how can these men deny the Master *who bought them*; who paid for their sins with his own blood?

Calvinists have answers for this, of course. Some are more convincing than others. John Gill the 18th century English Baptist argued that "Master" could not be a reference to Jesus Christ precisely because Christ died only for the elect and they cannot be lost. He read his system back into the text and interpreted the text accordingly. But his arguments are contrived, and *nobody* accepts them as cogent today. [cf. Lucas, 88] A better approach and more common is to argue that since the elect cannot lose their salvation and since Christ's death guarantees the salvation of

those for whom he died, these men may have *professed faith* in Christ, but they were never true believers. *They said that Christ had bought them but were denying him nevertheless.* After all, this sort of teaching about pseudo-Christians is found in many places in the Bible. Men may parade themselves as believers, may be taken by others as believers, may even genuinely consider themselves to be believers, but the proof is in the pudding. As John says of some other false teachers, “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us.” [1 John 2:19] That is, the genuineness of anyone’s faith is finally proved only by a life that demonstrates true loyalty to the Lord Jesus. These men may well have claimed that Christ was their savior, that he had bought them, but there was precious little evidence to prove that Christ had anything to do with the lives of these men. In other words, “who bought them” is simply Peter taking them at their own word. That is what they claimed. But their behavior and their teaching were repudiating their claim to have been saved by the death of Jesus Christ. The advantage of this second approach is that it preserves the obvious application of this verse *to us*. We must make our calling and election sure, as Peter tells us in chapter 1. After all, this text, as the Word of God, is addressed to and says something important *to us*. It is not written for the purpose of creating a doctrinal system; it is written to warn God’s people of the danger falsehood poses to our souls!

Still, it has to be admitted that no modern Calvinist would be likely to write the sentence Peter wrote here. We certainly would not say that Christ “bought” such men as these and then, in the same breath, predict their eternal destruction. We would think that confusing and seek to say it in a way that would make clear that while these men may have claimed that Christ bought them, he had in fact done nothing of the kind.

The second text in this chapter that poses a problem for Calvinists is vv. 20-21 which seems to suggest that these men once had righteousness and true knowledge but now have lost it. First, they were defiled, then they became Christians and were defiled no longer, but now they are defiled once again. They learned the way of righteousness only to abandon that way and return to the sinful lives they were living before they knew anything about Jesus Christ. *But that is a result Calvinists maintain is impossible because the gifts and callings of God are irrevocable and because he who began a good work in us will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.* Once again, John Gill, defending his Calvinism, argued that they were only outwardly reformed, they only seemed to be living a righteous life, but they could not have been born again, could not have been made new creatures in Christ because the elect, the redeemed, and the transformed cannot lose what God has given them. Once again, he argued the Calvinist system into the text, not taking the text for itself and dealing with what the words seem to say. For Gill, Peter cannot mean this, he must mean that. But, again, it removes the personal application; the warning, the sting that we are to feel in reading these words.

Calvinists of the wiser sort make no effort to explain precisely what happened to these men. The Bible makes perfectly plain that what happened to these men – whatever happened to them – is something we must expect. Indeed, the Bible illustrates this phenomenon many times. Think of Judas or Demas. There will always be people in the church who start and don’t finish. The acid test of a divine work in a human life is whether that person is not only a hearer of the word but a doer of it as well and remains a doer to the end. That is the whole message of the great sermon that is the Epistle to the Hebrews. Jesus made a point of that in his parables. In other

words, only time will tell. From our vantage point it looks as if the seed is bearing fruit, but then the new life is choked by the weeds or withered by the sun. Jesus does say that the plant was living before it died, however we are to understand that. It certainly may appear that someone who was saved has lost his salvation. We cannot deny that. But only know what we can see; we are judging in both respects by appearances. We cannot read the human heart; still less do we know what God was doing in that heart.

But, once again, it is also simple honesty to admit that no modern Calvinist would be likely to write those verses as Peter wrote them. They certainly could easily enough be taken to mean – as multitudes have taken them to mean – that a Christian can lose his or her salvation in the same way that v. 2 could be taken to mean that Christ’s death didn’t make certain anyone’s salvation. If the Holy Spirit is a Calvinist, if Peter was a Calvinist, as we believe him to have been, why did he write these sentences as he did? *Years ago, I came across this from the great Charles Simeon, himself a Calvinist.*

“Of this I am sure, that there is not a decided Calvinist or Arminian in the world who equally approves of the whole of Scripture... who, if he had been in the company of St. Paul whilst he was writing his epistles, would not have recommended him to alter one or other of his expressions.” [Moule, *Charles Simeon*, 79]

The first time I read that I realized how true it was. That should not surprise us. Simeon had uncanny insight and was a genius at putting things memorably. In this case I realized at once that what he had said *was true of me* and it was true of a large number of men I had read on the subject of salvation. We wrapped ourselves around one set of biblical texts and then did our best to keep another set of texts from getting in our way. We even referred to those favorite Arminian texts as “problem texts,” problems that we had to solve to prove that our system was not damaged by them. *But we should never look at biblical texts as problems needing to be solved* or as obstacles needing to be surmounted. They are the Word of God as surely as those we love to quote as Calvinists and, as such, our task is to understand them, believe them, and obey them. Our system is defective if it doesn’t clearly and confidently include all of the Bible’s teaching. *Then I came across this from John Newton, another Calvinist.*

“[Beware of the systematizers...] An attachment to a rigid system is dangerous. Luther once turned out the Epistle of St. James because it disturbed his system.” [*Works*, vol. 1, 102]

And as I thought and read further I discovered that there were many other wise men who had said the same sort of thing, most of them convinced Calvinists. We need to listen carefully to *everything* the Bible says and incorporate that truth, as best we can, into our understanding of things. It will not always, perhaps not usually be possible to achieve a completely satisfying synthesis; it won’t be possible to remove the tension created by differing biblical statements, often in the same book and made by the same writer, sometimes in the same paragraph. But that is alright. If God wants us to live with the tension created by statements and truths not easily reconciled to one another, then it will be best for us to accept this, believe everything, and rest in the confidence that reality is larger than we can grasp, and God has chosen to address our intellectual limitations in this way.

Here is Herman Bavinck the great Dutch Calvinist theologian of the late 19th and early 20th century. In Bavinck you get the full glory of the Reformed faith and, at the same time, a full dose of biblical realism. Listen to this learned wisdom. (I debated with myself whether this was going to be a little too difficult to understand as you hear it read, but I have a great confidence in your intellectual ability, and I think you will appreciate having heard this.)

“It is wrong to conceive the decree as if it determined only a person’s end and coerced him or her in that direction regardless of what they did. The decree [by which he means God’s sovereign plan for the life of human beings] is as inconceivably rich as reality itself. . . . It is not a transcendent power randomly intervening now and then from above and impelling things toward their appointed end. On the contrary it is the divinely immanent eternal idea that displays its fullness in the forms of space and time and successively . . . unfolds before our limited vision that which is one in the mind of God. In real life sin and grace, punishment and blessing, and justice and mercy do not occur dualistically side by side as though the reprobate [those God had decided not to save] were visited only with sin and punishment and the elect only with grace and blessing. Believers, after all, still sin daily and stumble in many ways. . . . For that reason, they are still admonished to be zealous to confirm their election (2 Peter 1:10), and among them, too, we sometimes witness a temporary hardening and rejection [which is to say that there are times when it seems that real believers aren’t believers, and we only find out that they are later on upon their repentance]. Conversely, the reprobates also receive many blessings, blessings that do not as such arise from the decree of reprobation [he means God’s decision in eternity past not to save these people] but from the goodness and grace of God.”

And here is Bavinck summarizing all of that. *This is a sentence to write in your Bibles and to remember!* “So, whereas election and reprobation may culminate in a final and total separation, on earth they continually crisscross each other.” [RD, II, 397-398] What is Bavinck saying? He is saying that there is a great deal that we cannot explain or understand about the experience of life with our so severely limited perspective and knowledge. Why does a person who receives the gospel with joy and lives an impressive Christian life for some years, then throw away his faith in Christ and return to the world? What was happening in that person’s heart? Why was he so happy to have found the Lord and then so indifferent or hostile to him years later? Think of the biblical scholar and critic of historic Christianity, Bart Ehrman. Once an evangelical himself, a student at Moody Bible Institute and Wheaton College, now he makes it his calling in life to talk his students at the University of North Carolina out of their Christian faith. We cannot explain this. It happens; it shocks us and dismays us precisely because we think it should not have happened. Either he should never have confessed his faith in Christ and rejoiced in the salvation of God, or, having confessed it and rejoiced in it, he should never have given it up. But this happens not infrequently, as the Bible itself warns us it will. Whence comes the work that transformed that person’s life for some years only to see his faith and Christian commitment crumble and disappear? It was God’s work, however temporary, the Bible says it was. How is it that branches once *in* the vine, are cut off and thrown into the fire? We cannot say. We do not know. We stand before the deep mystery of God’s ways.

True enough, that person was, as subsequent events demonstrated, not elect of God, not born again, not made a new creature in Christ. *The Bible says that too clearly.* But we all thought he was all of those things and with good reason. It appears that Peter himself at one time may have thought these teachers, or at least some of them, were his brothers in Christ and rejoiced over their salvation. But he thought that no longer. Here we encounter the deep mystery of God's ways. I remain a Calvinist because it is clear to me that I can accommodate the Arminian's texts far better than he can accommodate mine. But as a Calvinist I wish to be scrupulously faithful to the Word of God, to its manner of speaking, to its form of words. I don't want 2 Peter 2:2 and 20-21 to be problem texts. I want them to speak their message with all of their terrible power. I want to believe these verses as surely as I believe the multitude of texts upon which is built the doctrine of salvation by grace alone. *They belong to my system and must belong to it as surely as the Calvinist proof-texts.*

However we attempt to reconcile these statements with those that teach that Christ's atonement is universally and irrevocably effective and that God's elect cannot fail to be saved, whatever the ups and downs of his or her life, the fact is from our perspective, little as we know and understand, it is fact of life that people we thought were Christians gave up their faith, that people who began the race stopped running, that people who joyfully sang the praises of the one who loved them and gave himself for them stopped singing that song, sometimes becoming not simply indifferent but actively hostile to the faith he or she once confessed from the heart.

This is what God says to us and says it to warn us not to find ourselves among those who betray the one who bought us; for such a betrayal is a sin that cannot be and will not be pardoned; and warning us that to give up the faith we once confessed, to turn our back on the grace we once received is far worse than never having believed in Christ or never having loved him in the first place. The reason why Peter wrote as he did, why the Holy Spirit writes as he does throughout the Bible is precisely so that we might feel these warnings with all of their terrible power. Such a person who was but is no longer a Christian is not simply making a mistake; he or she is betraying the Lord's cross and God's grace in his or her life. It would be better for that man or woman if he or she had never been born! That is a chilling warning if ever there was one! We must never let our system, our way of thinking, even our way of thinking about the teaching of the Bible blunt that warning. Peter didn't write it for these false teachers; *he wrote it for us.*