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FREEDOM OF THE WILL AND EFFECTUAL CALLING





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Tom Nettles

Introduction

Are Explanations Irrelevant?

How do human free agency and responsibility relate to divine effectuality? This question sets up one of the most challenging discussions in theological literature. In Baptist thought today, particularly among Southern Baptists, the issues of divine decrees and libertarian free will are drawing forth some of the most energetic and rigorous statements of belief for many a decade. From my perspective, this seems to be an even more hotly contested issue than the polemics over inerrancy that began in the late 1950's and early 1960's over *The Message of Genesis* by Ralph Elliott and culminated in the Conservative Resurgence in 1979 and following. This controversy has some calling for a revocation of the *Abstract of Principles*, the founding confession of faith of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and one of the governing documents of Southeastern Seminary.

Its ramifications, however, go far beyond the alteration of documents. Libertarian free-will challenges the very foundations of biblical doctrine and alters the very nature of reality—both natural and moral. It depends on the idea that effects arise without any necessary connection to a cause. The idea of contra-causal freedom means that an effect can arise with no connection to a cause, and even worse, contrary to all precedents that have the character of a cause. Millions of things arise every day, perhaps every moment, that are contrary to their cause. Seeking an explanation for the existence of the world in a cause adequate in power, intelligence, beauty, and goodness to give rise to it becomes a useless endeavor; the world just happened without an adequate cause or contrary to any existent causes. We could just as acceptably conclude that there is no God, or the God that exists

has attributes directly in opposition to what we would expect from the effect we know as the universe. The whole discipline of apologetics falls to the ground. It would be useless to seek for evidence that would convince a person that Christianity is true for there is no necessary connection between evidence to explain the effect of Christianity and its actual existence. It could have arisen apart from any cause or in opposition to any precedents that might have the character of a cause. Presuppositional apologetics would be useless in its dependence on one's perception of the logical outcome of world views—there are no logical outcomes for internal cause and effect relationships in the world of thought cannot be expected to follow any form but are mere fantasia.

Contra-causality means that “moral” choices are not moral but mere accidents. They have no necessary connection to character, according to Jesus the determining factor in good and evil actions. To the degree that character determines the choice, the choice is not free and therefore not of moral substance. God's perfect holiness as the foundation of all his will renders his choices non-praiseworthy, nothing for which gratitude and worship should be his due, for his choices were determined by his character and thus not truly free and responsible choices. Similar effects arise from contra-causal freedom as the basis for morality in considering the incarnation, the necessary perfection of heaven, the absolute certainty of condemnation for Satan, the exhaustive foreknowledge of God, the immutability of God, the certainty of intratrinitarian harmony as the foundation for all holiness and love.

This issue of the *Founders Journal* treats chapters IX and X of the *Second London Confession*, “Of Free Will” and “Of Effectual Calling.” These subjects and the articles published here on them form an important aspect of the discussion of this issue. Three young pastors contribute articles on these chapters and another provides a book review of David Allen's imposing book *The Extent of the Atonement*. That is not unrelated to the subject of the confessional articles for it partakes of the theological connections of cause and effect. Exactly what causes are set forth as Christ dies a substitutionary, propitiatory, redemptive, reconciling, ransom-paying death? Does it terminate on an effect adequate to the cause—if indeed it even exists as a cause?

Our authors are Reagan Marsh, giving exposition to the article on free will, Eric Smith, discussing the grace of effectual calling, Obbie Todd, examining how the doctrines of salvation relate to the issue of infant death, and Jeff Johnson, giving a close review of David Allen's book. Reagan is pastor of Rocky Face Baptist Church in Rocky Face, Georgia. Eric is pastor of Sharon Baptist Church in Savannah, Tennessee. Obbie is

Associate Pastor of Students at Zoar Baptist church in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Jeff Johnson is pastor of Grace Bible Church in Conway, Arkansas. What a blessing to have men of these gifts and earnestness willing to give serious engagement to such important issues!

—Tom J. Nettles



Reagan Marsh

Of Free Will

Second London Confession:

Chapter IX

The *Second London Confession* [2LC] affirms free will plainly. “God hath indued the Will of Man, with that natural liberty, and power of acting upon choice; that it is neither forced, not by any necessity of nature determined to do good or evil.” This view is affirmed by the *First London Confession* (ch. IV), *Abstract of Principles* (art. IV), *Philadelphia Confession* (ch. IX), and *New Hampshire Confession* (ch. IV and IX). What, however, is the nature of the free operation of the human will, in the fallen state? Is it libertarian, operating just as easily in accord with or contrary to the mind’s disposition or inclination? Is it compromised, likely to follow the moral inclination but with some lingering powers of contrary choice? Is it wounded in man’s fall, but still sufficiently whole to choose Christ savingly? Or is there more to the story?

2LC 9.1: Freedom is genuine.

Free will, at its essence, is the mind choosing. The Baptist pastor and theologian, Nehemiah Coxe (probably coeditor of 2LC) wrote in 1677, “Liberty consists in a rational spontaneity: he acts freely...under no coercion...[and] doth what the last and practical judgment of his own understanding dictates to him.”¹ In 1754, Edwards agrees: “The faculty of the *Will*, is that power, or principle of mind, by which it is capable of *choosing*: an act of the *Will* is the same as an act of *choosing* or *choice*;” further in his discussion, Edwards uses language remarkably like that of Coxe, “in some sense, *the Will always*

follows the last dictate of the understanding."² Even so, Samuel Jones of the Philadelphia Baptist Association wrote, "Liberty consists in freedom to follow the desire."³ In other words, human choices, like God's, are both free and determined. The agent making the choice, exercising the will, is perfectly free in so doing while the choice itself is caused, determined, by the comparative strength of desires, propensities, inclinations that inform the understanding in any given case. We confess, therefore, that every choice is determined and at the same time compatible with the free agency of the chooser.

Scripture births this conviction: Jesus was "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8), and thus "delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23). But His death came by men's hands, of their choosing. As Jesus descended the Mount of Transfiguration, His disciples asked about Elijah. Jesus referred to the recent execution of John the Baptist in His answer: "But I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands" (Matthew 17:12b). Jesus placed the executioners of John the Baptist and His eventual killers in the same framework with his use of pronouns, observing that they did "whatever they pleased." They were not forced or somehow secretly predisposed contrary to the nature of the will to kill Jesus; rather, as this paragraph states, they employed their "natural liberty, and power of acting upon choice." As in every choice of all persons, they chose "according to inclination,"⁴ that is, "whatever they pleased."

Scripture also gives its boundaries: the creature's liberty, subject to the Creator's providence, "is not coerced"⁵ toward good or evil. The will certainly must be influenced with good and sound reasons; otherwise, in Joshua 30, why does God set before Israel life and death, reminding them of the promises of His covenant (v. 19b), and His providences toward them (v. 20)? Such influences are necessary and the groundwork for eventual choices; they fall short, however, of moving the will if the proposition finds no resonance with the heart. Indeed, the very nature of temptation is that men do what they want, given the opportunities before them (James 1:14). J. P. Boyce summarized the moral reality, "The right would only be chosen so long as the motive to do so should be the prevailing one."⁶ Susceptibility to influence, the giving of arguments and reasons for such-and-such an action, is absolutely consistent with the nature of volition, but contradicts libertarian conceptions. Freedom is real, but is always expressed in terms of the way external influences and proposed motives fit with the predispositions of soul. If, however, true freedom is the power of contrary choice, that is, contrary to prevailing motives and dispositions, then it makes no sense to incite the will with reasons for action, for the choice will be valid only if made contrary to a determining reason.

2LC 9.2: Freedom in the Garden (instability)

In the beginning, man existed in a state of innocence before God. He possessed freedom to live unto God, and moral ability to please God. Ecclesiastes 7:29a bears witness: “God made man *upright*” (Heb. *yashar*, “straight”), an assessment of Adam’s standing and soul. He was neither influenced by indwelling sin, nor enslaved to its siren call. Boston writes, “His will was in all things agreeable with the will of God (Ephesians 4:24). There was no corruption in his will, no inclination to evil; for that is sin, properly and truly...an inclination to evil is really a fountain of sin, and therefore inconsistent with that rectitude and uprightness which the text expressly says he was endued with at his creation. The will of man was then directed and naturally inclined to God and goodness, though mutable.”⁷

Adam not only obeyed God, he delighted in it. Part of the New Covenant’s glory is the law of God is written on the hearts of God’s people (Jeremiah 31:33; Hebrews 10:16). Before the Fall, Adam lived in an essentially pre-glorified state. He knew no inclination or temptation to sin, but to righteousness, and the joys of obeying and communing with God: “his affections were orderly, pure, and holy.”⁸ Boyce describes Adam’s pre-Fall perfection as “not merely in an innocent sinlessness, which left him without taint or tendency to sin, but in original righteousness, which comprised a love of holiness and natural choice of good rather than of evil.”⁹

In that context, God gave Adam the covenant of works, with this condition: “in the day that you eat of it, you shall surely die” (Genesis 2:16f). The covenant of works and Edenic freedom of the will go hand-in-hand; each illumines the other. Hence the Philadelphia Baptist Association asserts, that there is no difficulty perceiving the free agency of man in the “state of innocence” with the exception of the immutable operation of the divine decree. The decree, however, does not interfere with free agency any more in this situation than it does in any of God’s decrees, most potently the crucifixion of Christ. Though God’s “determinate counsel” delivered up Christ to His Jewish enemies, they “acted freely according to the natural course of their wicked inclinations.”¹⁰

Adam and Eve willingly transgressed God’s commandment in remarkably similar fashion to how Paul experienced his own vulnerability to temptation in Romans 7: the commandment became to them the means by which death came, in that its prohibition (which was “holy, righteous, and good” in itself, Romans 7:12) was seized by the tempter, not their inward corruption, to move them to an action that Satan made to appear desirable by subtle argument. As Romans 7:8 says, “...sin seiz[ed] an opportunity through the commandment;” but in this case Satan seized an opportunity by the commandment.

Dagg, defending the covenantal nature of Gen 2.16f, denominates the covenant of works “a law, with a penalty affixed.”¹¹ In an important sense, then, we find here the first law, to lead us to the first gospel (Genesis 3:15).

So man was created with both ability and desire to glorify and obey God rightly, “but they have sought out many schemes” (Ecclesiastes 7:29b). “Our first parents, being left to the freedom of their own will, fell from the estate wherein they were created by sinning against God.”¹² They chose to “transgress the covenant” (Hosea 6:7). Ames locates “the principal cause” of this choice as “man himself, in his abuse of free will.”¹³ Flavel employs identical nomenclature, finding Ecclesiastes 7:29 a demonstration that God did “not...inclin[e] him”¹⁴ to its abuse. Rather, as Boyce explains, “the plain teaching of Scripture is that man was not created in perfect equilibrium, but with a holy nature, the whole tendency of which was naturally towards the good and the holy. In thus fitting him for his trial, God is seen, by special endowment, to have given him most graciously all the powers possible to fit him for a wise choice in any instance in which he should be left to act according to his good pleasure.”¹⁵

Note here an important theme arising from Ecclesiastes 7:29: Adam’s temptation and sin were subject to God’s providence. God could have prevented Satan from entering Eden, or approaching Eve; He could have intervened, or prompted Adam to silence the serpent. But in His wisdom (and in a biblical-theological showcase of Christ’s federal faithfulness, Matthew 4/Romans 5), God permitted Adam’s choice. Ames remarks: “That righteousness and grace was not taken from him before he sinned, although strengthening and confirming grace by which the act of sinning might have been hindered and the act of obedience effected was not given him – and that by the certain, wise, and just counsel of God. God therefore was in no way the cause of his fall; neither did he lay upon man the necessity of sinning. Man of his own accord freely fell from God.”¹⁶

Mutability and impermanence thus framed Edenic freedom; and “the fall brought mankind into an estate of sin and misery.”¹⁷ Human mutability exposes both God’s eternity and man’s creatureliness – as Waldron sums up, “free will is not utter unpredictability”¹⁸ – and highlights the sinner’s need of God acting to save and sustain where man is powerless. “Sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men.” (Romans 5:12). Eden’s freedom brought us all into sin’s bondage and ruin.¹⁹

2LC 9.3: Freedom in our guilt (inability)

By the Fall, men have “wholly lost all ability of Will, to any spiritual good accompanying salvation.” Man now exists in a lapsed state, defined by spiritual inability. We might reckon the will now as spiritually disabled. We are not only weak (Romans 5:6) as the direct consequence of our sins (v. 8), but rendered incapable of doing that which pleases God: man now “cannot originate the love of God in his heart.”²⁰

Paul expounds Romans 5, drawing a marked contrast between the regenerate and unregenerate man in Romans 8. A lost man’s mind is “set...on the things of the flesh” (v. 5)—fundamentally disordering God’s design for people – which “is death” (v. 6). His mind proves his fundamental disposition is disobedient, “hostile to God” (v. 8). Hence positing the will’s freedom as merely weakened by the Fall, but still viable and capable of choosing what is good, distorts Scripture’s witness (cf. John 6:29). Depraved affections constitute the internal motivations of fallen unredeemed man and thus determine his choices.

In other words, a lost man does what lost men love. He “walks according to the flesh” (v. 4) as his life’s pattern. He chooses “death,” not “life and peace” (v.6). He pursues this course because he loves his sin, and he cannot do or be otherwise. Paul dramatically concludes the dead sinner’s portrait, summarizing his utter inability to love, serve, obey, believe, or choose God: “the mind that is set on the flesh...does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot” (v. 7). Edwards explains well, “sinful men are full of sin; principles and acts of sin... They are totally corrupt, in every part, in all their faculties; in all the principles of their nature, their understandings, and wills; and in all their dispositions and affections.”²¹ As one’s words reveal one’s heart (Matthew 12:34), so one’s life reveals one’s master.

Such a state of spiritual disinterest embodies 2LC’s assertion that men are “altogether averse from that good” (9.3), namely, salvation and its fruits. It pleases God to believe on Christ unto salvation, but “those who are in the flesh cannot please God” (v. 8)—that is, they can neither come to Christ for salvation, nor bear spiritual fruit of any eternal value. Behold the nature of spiritual deadness (Ephesians 2:1–3): the sinner is a walking corpse who follows his master (v. 2), doing his bidding (v. 3).

Fallen man possesses an incapacitated, incarcerated freedom, and inability is the other side of the coin. Inability means being “unable to will anything spiritually good.”²² Boettner illustrates: “As the bird with a broken wing is ‘free’ to fly but not able, so the natural man is free to come to God, but not able. How can he repent of his sin when he loves it? This is the inability of the will under which man labors.... He cannot come because he will not.”²³

Even the historic Sandy Creek stream of Baptist thought affirms as much. Referencing Adam’s fall, their *Principles* first affirms classical federal imputation of Adamic sin “to his posterity,” then declares “that man, of his own free will and ability, is impotent to regain the state in which he was primarily [first] placed.”²⁴ As Waldron writes, “Human freedom is not ultimate”²⁵ —it is subject to God’s sovereignty.

So, just because a man can make good choices, doesn’t mean he can make spiritually good choices. In John 8:34, Jesus emphasizes that “everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.” Most unregenerate men do not physically commit murder, rob banks, pursue adulterous relationships, or molest children, and each choice to abstain from these practices is surely morally good. But the heart of the issue is that these choices do not spring from love to God’s glory, desire to please him, or faith in Jesus Christ, and “whatever does not proceed from faith is sin” (Romans 14:23b). They are good choices, which ought to be appraised as moral and admirable – but they are not *spiritually* good, for they do not come from a heart changed by grace, relying upon the Holy Spirit, and seeking to glorify and please God (1 Corinthians 10:31; 2 Corinthians 5:9)—a helpful distinction between civil (i.e., moral) vs. spiritual righteousness.²⁶

“No one does good, not even one” (Romans 3:12), for “no one seeks for God” (Romans 3:11). To be spiritually-minded—that is, to “set the mind on the Spirit” —is alone “life and peace” (Romans 8:6). One’s pattern of life unveils the heart’s standing before God, regardless what desire or duty may be felt. Thus one’s practice provides the best vantage point to observe spiritual inability’s reality. However upright and respectable one’s actions, whatever does not proceed from a vital union and living faith in Jesus Christ constitutes active rebellion against God (cf. Isaiah 64:6).

Herein shines God’s glory in saving sinners. Spiritual inability renders it necessary that God draw men to salvation in Christ. “A natural man...is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto” (2LC 9.3). Coxe writes, “Although man in his lapsed estate, hath such a principle of enmity to God reigning in him, that he cannot, until converted by effectual Grace, choose that which is right in the sight of God, yet doth he freely put forth a positive act of his will in refusing mercy rendered on Gospel terms.”²⁷ Witness there the heart-context to which Jesus replies: “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him (John 6.44)...no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father” (John 6.65). Both man’s drawing by God, and his coming to God, are from the hand of God: “for apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15.5).

According to the Bible, then, only God's sovereign grace brings wills enslaved to sin to saving faith in Jesus Christ. No assistance benefits one dead in his sins; no appeals to his freedom induce him to choose Christ; no exegetical arguments convince him; no prevenient grace short of effectuality assists him; no spiritual practices prepare him for what God alone can do (cf. Romans 6:18). Only God the Spirit graciously applying Christ's blood to his soul will make him alive, and then he will come gladly and willingly: "Your people will offer themselves freely on the day of your power" (Psalm 110:3). Thus Spurgeon preached, "I have often heard of free will, but I have never seen it! I have met with will, and plenty of it; but it has either been led captive by sin, or held in the blessed bonds of Grace."²⁸

2LC 9.5: Freedom in glory (immutability)

Two key NT passages present five characteristics, illuminating human liberty in the glorified state.

Ephesians 4:13 lays out the first four characteristics. First, glorified saints will be marked by a common confession of faith:²⁹ "until we all attain to the unity of the faith." Here is no majority-vote, lowest-common-denominator settlement, but a distinct, specific agreement Scripture says we will reach, and identifies as "*the unity*" (Gk. *ten enoteta*). When seeing "in a mirror dimly" gives way to "face to face" (1 Cor 13:12a), we will rightly, willingly confess "one faith" (Ephesians 4:5).

Second, it will be a blood-stained, dearly-bought unity, based on clearly seeing Christ's reign in heavenly session: "until we all attain to the unity...of the knowledge of the Son of God." Paul describes this glorified, common knowledge of Christ, saying, "Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known" (1 Corinthians 13:12b). Christians will truly confess "one Lord" (Ephesians 4:5), willingly proclaiming "that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:11), "because we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3.2).

Third, when everyone knows Christ rightly (Heb 8.11), the glorified saints will practice careful obedience to him: "until we all attain...to mature manhood." The true doctrine of God, grasped experientially in Christ's presence, will issue in the perfection of maturity—the culmination of orthodoxy leading to orthopraxy. Sin will no longer tempt or torment us. Obedience will be the Church Triumphant's delight: "Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple" (Revelation 7:15). Renewed wills, made immutably so, will love holiness because they love the thrice-holy God.

Fourth, the glorified state will bring complete spiritual maturity: “until we all attain...to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” Happy, habitual holiness will mark the glorified saints. We will not only be made free to glorify God fully—we will want nothing else, forever.

Hebrews 12:23 gives the fifth characteristic: the covenant of grace is fulfilled, for “the spirits of the righteous [are] made perfect.” In coming to Jesus, we will behold the One who “loved us and gave himself up for us...to present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish” (Ephesians 5:2,27). “We shall be made truly free, then, when God fashions us, that is, forms and creates us anew, not as men—for he has done that already—but as good men, which his grace is now doing, that we may be a new creation in Christ Jesus...”³⁰ The promises made in the kingdom of grace will be realized in the kingdom of glory, for “we shall be like him” (1 John 3:2).

Conclusion and Application

The 2LC concludes that “the Will of man is made perfectly, and immutably free to good alone, in the state of glory only.” Scripture makes plain that there is no libertarian free will; the notion is mythical, violating biblical testimony and confessional witness. Neither is there merely a weakened will; rather, sin has left it “so wounded, that it cannot, without [God’s] preventing and regenerating grace, put forth one spiritual and saving act, Ephesians 2:8–10.”³¹ Until the state of glory, free will is functionally what Luther termed “a lost liberty.”³²

We close with four brief applications.

First, give yourself to pursuing holiness. In Christ, believers can. “Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, as he is pure” (1 John 3:3). “Make it [y]our aim to be pleasing to him” (2 Corinthians 5:9).

Second, give yourself to “looking unto Jesus” (Hebrews 12:2). In Christ, believers can, because you have His earnest, the seal of His promise, dwelling in you (1 John 3:2f) in the person of God the Holy Spirit. Fix your eyes on Christ as the one whom your soul loves, as God your exceeding joy (Psalm 43:4).

Third, give yourself to resting in God’s purposes for your life. “What we will be has not yet appeared” (1 John 3:2). We do know, however, by God’s gracious revelation, that we will have our heart’s delight, for “We know that when he appears we shall be like him, because

we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). The God who makes such promises for your eternity may be trusted with your every day.

Fourth, give yourself to speaking of the great love of God toward sinners in Jesus Christ. As 1 John 3:1–2 indicates, our eventual conformity to Christ arises from the exceeding great love that the Father has “given unto us,” a love that establishes the hope of the great promise, “when he appears.” (v. 2). Let us point men to our loving Saviour in the gospel message, and trust His blessing upon the means of grace, unto the good of souls and the glory of His name.

The freedom of the will, under the sovereignty of God, is still a mystery. We are compatibilists, after all (Jn 1.12f)! But the Philadelphia Baptist Association’s conclusion in their 1783 circular letter is very helpful: “three things are certain: 1st, The decrees and providence of God: 2nd, That he is neither the author nor approver of sin: yet 3rd, That man is a free agent. And if there be any difficulty in perceiving the agreement between the first and the last, yet not near so great as to reject all three, or either of them. It is not necessary that we should know everything. There are mysteries in nature as well as in providence and grace. We should beware of picking the lock...of which the key is not in our keeping.”³³

NOTES:

¹ Coxe, 64.2.

² Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, 1:4, 6.

³ Samuel Jones, *Minutes of The Philadelphia Baptist Association From A.D. 1707 to A.D. 1807 &c.* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1851), 196. Accessed at <http://baptisthistoryhomepage.com/1783.ci.phila.html>. Jones wrote an exposition of this article giving exposition of Chapter IX of the confession faith for the 1783 meeting of the association.

⁴ John Gerstner (and Don Kistler, ed.) *A Primer on Free Will*, in his *Primitive Theology: The Collected Primers of John H. Gerstner (1914–1996)*. (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Ministries, 2003), 257. Cf. Augustine’s helpful distinction between freedom and ability: Pre-Fall: freedom with ability, *posse non peccare* (possible not to sin); Post-Fall: freedom to sin, not do good, *non posse non peccare* (not possible not to sin); Glorified: freedom to do good, not sin, *non posse peccare* (not possible to sin).

⁵ Williamson, G.I. *The Westminster Confession of Faith for Study Classes* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1964), p. 85.

⁶ James Petigru Boyce, *Abstract of Systematic Theology* (Cape Coral: Founders Press, 2006), 231.

⁷ Thomas Boston, *Human Nature in its Fourfold State* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2002), 41.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁹ Boyce, *Abstract*, 230.

¹⁰ Jones, *Minutes of The Philadelphia Baptist Association*, 196, 197.

¹¹ John L. Dagg, *Manual of Theology: First Part: A Treatise on Christian Doctrine* (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1981), 145.

¹² Benjamin Keach, *The Baptist Catechism*, Q. 17. Accessed at <http://www.reformedreader.org/ccc/keachcat.htm>

¹³ William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), 114.11.

¹⁴ Flavel, John. *An Exposition of the Assembly's Catechism*, in *The Works of John Flavel* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1968), Vol. XI, pp. 167–8 (Q. & A. 2–3).

¹⁵ Boyce, *Abstract*, 230.

¹⁶ William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), 114.

¹⁷ Keach, *The Baptist Catechism*, Q. 17.

¹⁸ Samuel Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*, fifth corrected edition. (Welwyn Garden City: EP Books, 2016), 166.

¹⁹ For more discussion on this issue see *Founders Journal* (Winter 2017), "The Sinning of a Pure Heart."

²⁰ Lorraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1932), 62.

²¹ Jonathan Edwards, "The Justice of God in the Damnation of Sinners," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1996), 1: 670 (2).

²² Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*, 167.

²³ Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, 62.

²⁴ *Principles of Faith of the Sandy Creek Association*, III. Accessed at <http://www.reformedreader.org/ccc/sandycreekconfession.htm>

²⁵ Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*, 166.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 170.

²⁷ Nehemiah Coxe, *Vindiciae Veritatis* (London, 1677), 64.5.

²⁸ Charles Haddon Spurgeon. "Our Change of Masters" (Sermon #1482, delivered July 6, 1879). Accessed at www.ccel.org/ccel/spurgeon/sermons25.xli.html. (Cf. Augustine, *The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Love*, CIV).

²⁹ A sound biblical argument for symbolics.

³⁰ St. Augustine (Henry Paolucci, ed., with Adolph von Harnack). *The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Love* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 1995), XXXI (p. 38).

³¹ John Flavel, *An Exposition of the Assembly's Catechism, in The Works of John Flavel* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1968), Vol. XI, pp. 167–8 (Q. & A. 4).

³² Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. J. I. Packer and O.R. Johnston (Baker Academic: Grand Rapids, 2012), 146.

³³ Jones, *Minutes of The Philadelphia Baptist Association*, 196.

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Eric Smith

Of Effectual Calling

Second London Confession:

Chapter X

Anne Marie Grimball could not have been happier chasing the frivolous lifestyle of a typical Southern belle in colonial Charleston, South Carolina. Among her many “flattering prospects,” the young woman counted an “amiable and tender husband, the gay circle—diversions—visits—congratulations, etc.” Grimball described herself as “thoughtless and gay” in her pursuit of pleasure, enjoying all that America’s most hedonistic city had to offer. At times, though, Anne admitted that sobering thoughts of her mortality disrupted her happiness, and she found herself “terrified at the idea of death.” Unable to stifle these concerns, Grimball began attending the Charleston Baptist Church, pastored at that time by Oliver Hart. A Pennsylvania native, Hart had been reared on the sturdy Reformed doctrines of the Philadelphia Baptist Confession, and had been converted under the revival preaching of George Whitefield in the early 1740s. His arrival in Charleston at the close of 1749 had revitalized the South’s oldest Baptist church. Under Hart’s preaching, Anne “heard the gospel in its purity” week after week. Yet it seemed to do little good. She recalled later how “neither the threats of the law nor the sweet gospel sound made any impression on my hard and rocky heart.”

But beneath the surface, Anne was undergoing a quiet change. Charleston’s “gay scene,” once so invigorating, slowly lost all its appeal. Amid the trappings of her happy life, Anne realized that “something was missing—and that something I could not find. My mind was

not at rest.” Then, in a series of tragic events, Anne buried multiple children in the span of a few years. She now found herself identifying with the psalmist, who compared man’s life to a blade of grass—“in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers.” (Psalm 90:6) She wrote of this time, “my convictions became more powerful—my situation more alarming, I thought no one was exercised as I was—I could not make my case known—I plainly saw that I must perish, dying as I was.” She still attended meetings at the Baptist church, but found no peace for her storm-tossed soul. “Satan, the grand enemy of souls, beset me with blasphemous thoughts—frightened me from duty—I feared to hear a sermon, lest it should rise up in judgment against me. Tell my unhappy case to anyone, I durst not,” she remembered. Even the happy stories of conversion she heard others tell heightened her unrest: “I loved to hear the people of God tell their experience; [but] feared they should ask me any questions.”

But one day, the dark clouds of fear and unbelief suddenly parted, and Anne saw clearly that Jesus Christ had loved her and gave Himself for her. She believed and was baptized. As she looked back on these events, Anne realized that a living Savior had been leading her, calling her, at every step:

After many struggles with my frail and corrupted nature, many conflicts with a hard head of unbelief, our condescending Lord made me willing to follow him into the watery grave. I was baptized by Mr. Hart, May 5, 1770 (in my 29th year). Thus the Lord in his abundant mercy led me on from step to step as I could bear with afflictions—with comforts and mercies—with crosses and losses—until I was made willing to trust him, alone, for the whole of my salvation.¹

Anne Grimball’s diary dramatically describes the experience of what Oliver Hart and the Baptists of a previous generation termed the “effectual call.” Addressed in Articles IX and X of the *Second London Confession* (hereafter 2LC), the effectual call refers to the event in which “God converts a sinner, and translates him into the state of grace.”² As its name implies, the “call” involves a personal summons, the sudden awareness that one is being addressed by God, like Abraham in the darkness of Ur, or Samuel lying in the house of Eli the priest, or Simon Peter on the shores of Galilee. The call is “effectual” because it invariably accomplishes its purpose: the recipient of God’s call will certainly respond to the divine Speaker with faith, repentance, and obedience. The effectual call is thus closely associated with other important New Testament concepts related to salvation, including regeneration, new birth, and conversion.³ Oliver Hart neatly packaged all these ideas together when he spoke simply of the “saving change” God produced in His people in the hour of their salvation.

The doctrine of the effectual call was of paramount significance for 18th Century Baptists like Hart and Grimball, as well as for their fellow evangelicals. The “saving change” was a source of unending wonder and delight for the Congregationalist Jonathan Edwards, who preached about the “Divine and Supernatural Light Immediately Imparted to the Soul by the Spirit of God.” The Methodist Charles Wesley sang for joy about the effectual call in his famous hymn, “And Can it Be?”:

Long my imprisoned soul did lay
Fast bound in sin and nature's night
Thine eyes diffused a quick'ning ray
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light
My chains fell off, my heart was free!
I rose, went forth, and followed thee!

And ordinary evangelical women like Anne Grimball, Sarah Osborne, and Hannah Heaton filled page after page of their diaries with personal accounts of receiving the call. These believers remind us that the effectual call is more than an abstract doctrine: it should move us to humble gratitude and joyful praise.

The Foundation of the Effectual Call

While the “saving change” occurs in a single moment of time, but early Baptists traced its origins back before the world began, to the eternal purposes of the Holy Trinity. There, in Oliver Hart’s words, God “foresaw Adam would fall... and that the whole human race would be involved in guilt, and must inevitably perish.” In response to this impending tragedy, the members of the Godhead “formed a council” to “lay the plan” of man’s salvation. In this plan, each Person of the Trinity would take a vital part. The Father fashioned the plan of redemption in His own heart, purposing to rescue “a select number of the fallen race” from the misery of sin, and adopt them as His own dear children. Yet the Father’s plan would require an unthinkable sacrifice of love: He must send forth His beloved Son to secure salvation for the elect through His perfect life, death and resurrection on their behalf. Yet the Son did not shrink from the perilous mission; He entered into agreement with His Father to undertake everything necessary to save His people from their sin. The Father, in turn, pledged to send the Holy Spirit to the elect at the appointed moment of conversion, making them willing and able to receive the benefits of Christ’s saving work through faith.⁴ The early Baptists believed this divine agreement framed the whole biblical narrative, but found it most clearly revealed in Jesus’ discourses

in John's Gospel and in the writings of the apostle Paul. They called it the "covenant of grace."⁵ The effectual call represented the final step in the Trinitarian conspiracy of redeeming love.

So who is responsible for the call? In one light, eighteenth-century Baptist John Gano was right to affirm that all three persons of the Godhead are involved in the effectual call. Yet the New Testament authors seem to focus on the Father as the author of the call.⁶ Thus, Jesus declares in John 6:44, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." Paul refers in 1 Thessalonians 2:12: to "God, who calls you to his own kingdom and glory," and asserts in 1 Corinthians 1:9 that "God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ". Peter famously speaks of God as the one who "called you out of darkness and into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9). The effectual call flows from the Father's everlasting love; it is His loving voice we hear calling us to salvation, for "those whom he predestined, he also called" (Romans 8:30). Yet the Father issues His call through the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. It is the omnipotent Spirit of God who invades the life of the individual sinner at the Father's "appointed and accepted time," to apply the redemptive work of the Son to the heart.⁷ So perhaps it would be accurate to say that God the Father calls us, into fellowship with His Son, through the agency of the Holy Spirit. The effectual call is a Trinitarian act.

For our Baptist forbears, rooting the effectual call in God's eternal purpose established that the call came by "God's free and special grace alone, not from anything foreseen in men, nor from any power or agency in the creature."⁸ Here, the 2LC echoes the apostle Paul, who praised the God "who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ before the ages began" (2 Timothy 1:8–9). As we begin to grasp something of the eternal grace that lay behind the call we received at Vacation Bible School, on our knees in a jail cell, or at a tent revival, we too will be moved to praise. We will also be moved to a deep and genuine humility before God and neighbor (including those Christian neighbors who have never heard of the effectual call, or do not view it as we do). After all, when Paul wants to humble the swaggering Corinthian church, he urges them to "consider your calling, brothers." The truth is, "not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God" (1 Corinthians 1:26–29). The effectual call is a call to humility, a call to wonder, love, and praise.

The Necessity of the Effectual Call

Baptist founders believed that an effectual call was absolutely necessary for salvation because of man's radical sinfulness. The Bible teaches that man is "in a state of sin and death," so alienated from God that he cannot and will not come to God on his own.⁹ In the comprehensive description of the 2LC, fallen man has a "heart of stone," unable to respond to God's overtures of love (Ezekiel 36:26); he has a will "in bondage under sin," enslaved to corrupt desires (John 8:36); and he has an understanding so darkened that he cannot understand the things of God (Romans 1:21; 1 Corinthians 2:14). We manifest our sinfulness in a variety of ways, some through reckless, law-breaking immorality, others through smug, law-keeping morality. But what fallen man will never do is stretch out empty hands of faith to the crucified and risen Jesus.

Accordingly, both Old and New Testaments show fallen men and women stubbornly resisting God's call. As in the case of Anne Grimbald, neither the sternest warnings of coming judgment nor the most tender appeals of grace seem to make the slightest impression. It was this habitual rejection of his love that provoked the Lord to complain through Jeremiah, "I spoke to them, but they did not listen; I called to them, but they did not answer" (Jeremiah 35:17). The same self-destructing hard-heartedness moved Jesus to weep over Jerusalem, for "How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you would not!" (Matthew 23:36–37). But how does such resistance square with God's "effectual call"?

Baptists and other Reformed Christians have historically answered this question by distinguishing between a "general call" and an "effectual call," or an "external call" and an "internal call." Citing biblical texts like the Lord's parable of the four soils, or His declaration in Matthew 22:14 that "many are called, but few chosen," they recognized a general call going out to all sinners that did not terminate in the new birth. After all, Christ commanded His disciples to liberally sow the seed of the good news on all kinds of soil, knowing that in many cases it would yield no lasting fruit (Mark 4:1–20). But why does a general call exist? We cannot know all of God's reasons, of course, but one reason is surely to underscore the absolute necessity of God's prevailing grace in salvation. When gracious gospel invitations provoke hostility, ridicule, boredom, or a merely superficial acceptance, we see more clearly than ever the helplessness of man's plight. If man is to be saved, God must provide absolutely everything. To borrow the language of Isaiah 55, God must not only provide the feast that will satisfy us through the costly death of his Son; and he must not only provide the warm and generous invitation to come eat and drink our fill; but we are so foolish and stubborn that he must even provide the ability and desire to come to the table,

that he may lavish us with his eternal kindness in Christ (Philippians 2:13–14; Ephesians 2:7). But who could imagine a sovereign and holy God so humble, so patient, so gracious? The God of the Bible shatters all our categories in the miracle of the effectual call.

The Miracle of the Call

Paul captures the essential difference between the general call and the effectual call when he reminds the Thessalonians of their own conversion. He urges them to remember how “our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit with full conviction” (1 Thessalonians 1:5). Until the moment of God’s “appointed and accepted time,” the gospel call is “only in word.” We may hold those words in contempt, or those words may be a matter of mild curiosity, or we may even assent to those words in a very superficial way. But the call is only words. Like a high school boy daydreaming in class while the teacher drones away, we are vaguely aware that someone is speaking in the background, but the words are of no consequence to us. But most of us know what it is like to be suddenly jarred from our preoccupation when that droning voice suddenly speaks our personal name: “Mr. Smith, what is the answer?” For those who were more studious than I was, I can assure you that the experience is most unsettling. One moment, you are blending into the crowd, tuning out the speaker, happily pursuing your own line of thought. Then, without warning, a personal, non-ignorable address calls you to account! You feel utterly exposed by the call of your name. There is some analogy here with the effectual call. Like the Thessalonians, those who are being effectually called by God find that they are no longer dealing with words on a page, or words from a preacher. Something—or Someone—is now coming to them, calling to them, searching for them, with power and conviction that cannot be ignored.

That initial sense of being called is often highly uncomfortable—it involves a new and devastating awareness of who we are as sinners under the searching gaze of a holy God. At one point during his call, Peter fell on his face and begged Jesus to leave him: “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!” (Luke 5:8) And yet, this new sorrow over our sin is a very good sign that something wonderful is happening. In the words of the 2LC, God is calling us “out of that state of sin and death in which they are by nature, to grace and salvation by Jesus Christ.” Though we cannot realize at the moment, a new creation is dawning. The Spirit of God is wielding the same power He used to raise Christ Jesus from the dead, to effect a comprehensive inner change in us: “enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God (Acts 26:18; Ephesians 1:17, 18); taking away their heart of stone, and giving to them a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26); renewing their

wills, and by His almighty power determining them to that which is good, and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ (Deuteronomy 30:6; Ezekiel 36:27; Ephesians 1:19).”¹⁰ The call has done its work when we realize that the One who has exposed us in our sin is now laying his hand on us and saying, “Do not be afraid” (Luke 5:10). This Jesus refuses to depart from us; in fact, He promises that He will never leave us nor forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). We will spend the rest of our lives learning and relearning all this, but we grasp enough at the moment of the effectual call that we are finally “enabled to answer this call, and to embrace the grace offered and conveyed in it.”¹¹

What role do we play in all this? The 2LC specifies that we are “wholly passive”—we contribute nothing. “Dead in trespasses and sins,” we are in the same position at the moment of the call as Ezekiel’s valley of dry bones, or as the corpse of Lazarus when Christ called him from the grave. As in these cases, the effectual call itself carries within it the power to respond. Yet the sinner’s passivity does not mean gospel ministers have nothing to say to those not yet called. Faithful preachers concerned to uphold God’s sovereign grace need not send their listeners home in fatalistic despair, wondering if God may one day choose them. This is because God does not typically “zap” individuals with his call at random; He has appointed means, namely “His Word and Spirit,” along with His providence.¹² As Zacchaeus climbed the sycamore tree to catch a view of Jesus, we place ourselves in the Lord’s path by making use of his appointed means: attending the preaching of the gospel, reading the Scriptures, engaging believers in conversation about salvation. Yes, we should tell our listeners that they cannot call themselves to salvation. We should urge them to act on the slightest stirring to “seek the Lord while He may be found.” Of course, as in the case of Zacchaeus, the Bible assures us that if any sinner finds himself or herself so inclined to seek out the call of Christ, it is because the great Seeker has already begun drawing the heart toward Himself (Luke 19:1–10).

The framers of the 2LC tread carefully when discussing the divine and human will in the effectual call. They knew that what passes between the Lord and our souls in this holy moment involves a mysterious interplay between the divine and human will. So while it has been common among the Reformed to the effectual call as an instance of “irresistible grace,” I share Princeton theologian A. A. Hodge’s reticence about the phrase. In one light, God’s grace in our salvation is blessedly irresistible, and must be if we are to be saved. Yet this phrase can imply “the idea of a mechanical and coercive influence upon an unwilling subject.”¹³ But while the subjects of grace have been fiercely unwilling to come to God up to the moment of conversion, the miracle of the effectual call is that the Lord *makes them willing*. Older evangelicals like Oliver Hart loved to turn to Psalm 110:3 to describe the moment of the new birth: “Thy people shall be made willing in the day of thy power

(Hart preached this text more than a dozen times in the years 1773–1794, more than any other passage in that same period).” For Hart, the psalmist’s image perfectly captured the miracle of the call, as God’s former enemies willingly threw down their arms and presented themselves as loyal subjects to King Jesus, in a manifestation of the power of God’s Spirit. So it is entirely appropriate to ask our listeners: “Are you willing to come to Jesus? If you are, it is because the Lord has long since been at work in your life, to make you willing. So come to him.” It is for good reason that the 2LC employed the language of sacred romance in the Song of Solomon in describing the call: “Draw me after you; let us run. The King has brought me into his chambers” (Song 1:4). Some aspects of our salvation are better suited for adoration than analysis.

Remembering this mysterious element of the effectual call can guard us from developing false expectations about what a true conversion “must” look like. Well-meaning Christians have often created problems for themselves and for others by assuming that a “true conversion” must follow a certain pattern, whether that included a long season of despair and “terrors of the law,” a trip down to the altar at the end of a worship service, or an instant and dramatic change of lifestyle. The truth is, the Bible speaks of a personal God who calls different men and women in a variety of ways. A brief glance at Paul’s visit to Philippi in Acts 16 shows that Jesus Christ is not a paint-by-numbers Savior. A Jewish businesswoman receives her effectual call at a quiet Sabbath Bible study, when the Lord “opened her heart;” a demon-possessed slave girl experiences a violent deliverance from the powers of darkness; a Philippian jailer must have his world collapse around him before he cries out in despair, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” The call is the same in each case, yet the circumstances are all so different, perfectly suited for each individual by the God who loved them before the world began. As helpful systematic theological categories are, God is not a mechanical “system.” He is a personal God dealing with individual men and women created in his image. He calls some dramatically, like the apostle Paul; others he calls more subtly, like Timothy growing up in the care of a godly mother and grandmother. The effectual call is personal: it involves a living Savior drawing the hearts of men and women, boys and girls, with cords of kindness and bands of love (Hosea 11:4).

Conclusion

Only in retrospect could Anne Grimball look back and understand what had transpired in her life through those tumultuous years leading to her conversion. She could not have realized at the time that she was being called; nor could she have imagined all that her calling would entail when she responded to it. Least of all could she have expected that in

a few years, she would be married to Oliver Hart, the pastor who baptized her, both having lost their first spouses to death. God's call is always like that: you never know where it may lead you; you are just trusting the one who has called your name to get you safely home.

So for the authors of the 2LC, the effectual call constituted the glorious beginning of the Christian life, but it is only the beginning. It is a happy summons to follow Jesus Christ on a pathway of holiness that ultimately leads to heaven and perfect communion with the Triune God who set his love on us so long ago. The 2LC stresses that the walking out of this calling will not always be easy. While God has indeed renewed our natures so that we now "will and work for his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:14), powerful remnants of indwelling sin still reside in us. Because of these "remaining corruptions," even new creations like us do "not perfectly, nor only, will, that which is good, but does also will that which is evil."¹⁴ We still resist the loving voice of the Father. Thus the effectual call is also a call to spiritual conflict, waging war in the power of the Spirit against the desires of the flesh, until we are safely home. A full discussion of these dynamics of sanctification must await the exposition of the later articles of the 2LC. Let it only be said in closing that he who called us is faithful; he has promised to complete the good work he began in us (1 Thessalonians 5:24; Romans 8:30; Philippians 1:6). So the called have nothing to fear.

NOTES:

¹ Anne Hart, *Narrative of Anne Maria Sealy Grimbball Hart, born 1741, South Carolina*, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

² 2LC IX.4; Colossians 1:13. This article will consider the following sections of the 2LC :

IX.4. When God converts a sinner, and translates him into the state of grace, He frees him from his natural bondage under sin, (Colossians 1:13; John 8:36) and by His grace alone enables him freely to will and to do that which is spiritually good (Philippians 2:13); yet so as that by reason of his remaining corruptions, he does not perfectly, nor only will, that which is good, but does also will that which is evil (Romans 7:15,18,19,21, 23).

X.1. Those whom God hath predestinated unto life, He is pleased in His appointed, and accepted time, effectually to call (Romans 8:30, 11:7; Ephesians 1:10, 11; 2 Thessalonians 2:13, 14), by His Word and Spirit, out of that state of sin and death in which they are by nature, to grace and salvation by Jesus Christ; (Ephesians 2:1–6); enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God (Acts 26:18; Ephesians 1:17, 18); taking away their heart of stone, and giving to them a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26); renewing their wills, and by His almighty power determining them to that which is good, and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ (Deuteronomy 30:6; Ezekiel 36:27; Ephesians 1:19); yet so as they come most freely, being made willing by His grace (Psalm 110:3; Cant 1:4).

X.2. This effectual call is of God's free and special grace alone, not from anything at all foreseen in man, nor from any power or agency in the creature (2 Timothy 1:9; Ephesians 2:8); being wholly passive therein, being dead in sins and trespasses, until being quickened and renewed by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:14; Ephesians 2:5; John 5:25); he is thereby enabled to answer this call, and to embrace the grace offered and conveyed in it, and that by no less power than that which raised up Christ from the dead (Ephesians 1:19, 20).

³ Some Baptist theologians, like John Gill, have distinguished between the effectual call and regeneration in the *ordo salutis*: "effectual calling may be distinguished from regeneration, taken more strictly, for the first infusion and implantation of grace in the heart..." (John Gill, *Complete Body of Practical and Doctrinal Divinity* [Philadelphia: Graves, 1810], 377.) Others treat these as two perspectives on the same essential reality. The 2LC addresses both under the heading of "Effectual Calling." In this vein, nineteenth-century Baptist John L. Dagg wrote: "The internal grace, which renders the outward call effectual, is the grace of regeneration. Hence regeneration, considered as the work of the Holy Spirit, is the same as effectual calling; considered as the change of the sinner's heart, it is the effect of this calling. The calling is effectual, because it produces regeneration in the subject on whom it operates." John L. Dagg, *Manual of Theology* (Harrisonburg, VA: Gano Books, 1982), 332–33; cf. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 700.

⁴ 2LC V.1–2.

⁵ Oliver Hart, *Of Christ the Mediator*, in A.D. Gillette, ed., *Minutes of the Philadelphia Baptist Association, from A.D. 1707 to A.D. 1807* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1851), 182.

⁶ John Gano makes this argument in his 1784 exposition of the effectual call in his circular letter to the Philadelphia Association. See Gillette, *Minutes of the Philadelphia Baptist Association*, 202.

⁷ 2LC X.1.

⁸ 2LC X.2.

⁹ SCL X.1, Eph 2:1–6.

¹⁰ 2LC X.1.

¹¹ 2LC X.2.

¹² 2LC X.2.

¹³ A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (1860; reprint: Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999), 452.

¹⁴ 2LC IX.4; Romans 7:15, 18, 19, 21, 23.

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Obbie Todd

Infant Election

Second London Confession:

Chapter X; Paragraph 3

Though scarcely preached from the Sunday morning pulpit, the subject of infant salvation is an intensely personal and pastoral issue deserving of proper treatment in the Baptist church. It is not so explicit in Scripture as to escape a measure of speculation, yet not so incidental a doctrine as to warrant “secondary” status. Standing at the intersection of enormous theological doctrines such as original sin, soteriology, and even Christology, the fate of dying infants demands pastoral attention for what it means to grieving families and for what it communicates about the God we worship.

The 1689 Baptist Confession and the Westminster Confession of Faith

In the *1689 Baptist Confession*, the issue is taken up in paragraph three of Chapter 10, entitled “Of Effectual Calling.” Matching the *Westminster Confession of Faith* almost verbatim, it reads, “Elect infants dying in infancy are regenerated and saved by Christ through the Spirit; who worketh when, and where, and how he pleases; so also are all elect persons, who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word.”¹ Nearly as important as the substance of the article is its location. Like the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, the *2nd London Confession* addresses infant salvation as an immediate corollary to effectual calling (rather than, for example, to election) due to the concepts of agency and instrumentality germane to both doctrines. Though some modern

rescensions of the Confession omit the word “Elect,” the original framers retained it. The idea of “elect infants” neither asserts nor denies that all infants dying in infancy are saved. Rather it tacitly concludes that at least some infants are redeemed. On one hand, the article is biblically consistent insofar as Scripture presents the doctrine of election (Romans 9–11). On the other hand, the ambiguity relative to the phrase and the difficulty of pointing to a direct affirmation from the Bible on this issue prompted at least one confessionally Reformed Baptist to suggest that perhaps its framers should have said nothing at all. “The Bible is silent on this issue.” Sam Waldron observed. “It would have been much better, therefore, for the Confession simply to say nothing at this point,” he continued, “for that, I am convinced is precisely what the Bible says.” Waldron does go on to suggest some doctrinal ideas from which one might construct a meaningful pastoral theology of what can be a vexing issue.²

Solus Christus

Nevertheless, the third paragraph still contains important theological assertions concerning the nature of infant salvation. For instance, infants dying in infancy are “saved by Christ.” Infant salvation is still salvation, and that exclusively by Jesus Christ the Son of God. There is one Mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus (1 Timothy 2:5). To suggest that any infant is delivered into eternity by any other means than by the finished work of Christ is to deny original guilt and to impugn the Gospel itself. Regardless of how Baptists choose to interpret this third article, the vexing question of infant salvation must begin with the inescapable truth that all infants are conceived in sin, condemned under the just law of God, and in need of redemption (Psalm 51:1, Romans 3:23, 5:12–18). According to Andrew Fuller, founding secretary of the Baptist Missionary Society, “There is no difference between us respecting the number or character of those that shall be finally saved. We agree that whoever returns to God by Jesus Christ shall certainly be saved.”³ Through the disobedience of Adam, their federal head, infants are made sinners (5:19). As James P. Boyce explains, their lack of transgression does not imply innocence:

The Scriptures plainly assume and declare that God righteously punishes all men, not only for what they do, but for what they are. A corrupt nature makes a condition as truly sinful, and guilty, and liable to punishment, as actual transgressions. Consequently, at the very moment of birth, the presence and possession of such a nature shows that even the infant sons of Adam are born under all the penalties which befell their ancestor in the day of his sin. Actual transgression subsequently adds new guilt to guilt already existing, but does not substitute a state of guilt for one of innocence.⁴

Young age does not abrogate God's righteous judgment upon human depravity nor does it immunize infants from the necrotizing effects of sin. Regardless of physical development, sinners are dead in their sin, and this includes both spiritual and physical death (Genesis 2:17, 1 Corinthians 15:22, Ephesians 2:1–3; 2 Timothy 1:9–10). The tragic reality that so many infants die in a fallen world is evidence to sin's pervasive, wrenching power as well as to the need for imputed righteousness and life found only in the last Adam and not in the first (1 Corinthians 15:45, 1 John 5:12). Arguments against infant depravity face perhaps their toughest and most sobering rebuttal in the grave. Sin is a potent killing force endemic to postlapsarian humanity, and through Adam's trespass, death reigns in all men (Romans 5:17). Hence the sixth chapter of the *1689 Confession* states plainly that all sinners are "now conceived in sin, and by nature children of wrath, the servants of sin, the subjects of death, and all other miseries, spiritual, temporal and eternal, unless the Lord Jesus set them free."⁵ Apart from the liberating grace of God in Christ, we are all children of wrath – including children themselves (Ephesians 2:3).

The Necessity of the Rebirth

A reasoned discussion on the fate of dying infants must also account for the means of salvation as set forth in Scripture. For instance, the third article declares that infants dying in infancy are "regenerated... through the Spirit." This stands in contrast with the first article of the chapter which states, "Those whom God hath predestinated unto life, he is pleased in his appointed, and accepted time, effectually to call, by his *Word and Spirit*, out of that state of sin and death in which they are by nature, to grace and salvation by Jesus Christ; enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God." Whereas the first article includes both "Word and Spirit" as the means by which the Father effectively calls His children to Christ, the article detailing infant salvation includes only the latter. The absence of the "external" call of the gospel to infants may appear somewhat obvious at first; however, more significant is the Confession's emphasis upon the indispensable role of the Spirit in calling the sinner.

This "internal" call is nothing less than the voice of God calling out to a corrupt and obstinate heart and unshackling it from the captivity of sin in order that it might freely love Christ, or as the Confession states, "so as they come most freely, being made willing by his grace."⁶ English Particular Baptist John Gill, the first Baptist to write a verse-by-verse commentary on the entire Bible, conceived of God's effectual calling as an "internal call" and "an act of efficacious and irresistible [*sic*] grace."⁷ In infants, as in all sinners, this is a completely sovereign work of God. Unlike the corresponding paragraph in the WCF

which cites Luke 18:15–16, Acts 2:38–39, John 3:3–5, 3:8, Romans 8:9, 1 John 5:12, and Acts 4:12, the 2LC offers John 3:3, 5, 6, 8 as its sole proof text for infant salvation, underscoring both the monergistic work of God in salvation as well as the absolute necessity of the rebirth. Immediately after establishing the critical role of the Spirit, the *1689 Confession* then declares that the Spirit “worketh when, and where, and how he pleases.”⁸ With this heavy emphasis upon God’s sovereign and mysterious work of salvation through the Spirit, Baptists within the 1689 tradition universally affirm the necessity of election and regeneration in the salvation of infants. So inseparable are regeneration and effectual calling that John Dagg, the first Southern Baptist systematic theologian, considered them virtually synonymous.⁹ The *1689 Confession* does so implicitly, lacking a chapter “on regeneration.” Instead, the first two articles “on effectual calling” provide a clear exposition of the doctrine of the new birth, affirming that the effectual call unto Christ is a “taking away their heart of stone, and giving unto them a heart of flesh, renewing their wills, and by his almighty power determining them to that which is good”¹⁰ (Ezekiel. 36:26). Effectual calling, and thus infant salvation, spring from the power of the new covenant.

Infant Salvation and Baptist Ecclesiology

As a Baptist document, the 2LC does not distinguish between the infant children of believers and those of unbelievers. Although God often works His special, redeeming grace in and through particular families, Christ is the mediator of a new covenant wrought by His blood and applied individually through faith (Hebrews 9:15, Galatians 2:16–21). Chapter seven of the 2LC is exclusively dedicated to the nature of this covenant of grace, insisting that the Lord “freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in him, that they may be saved.”¹¹ Any fanciful notions of a “half-way covenant” or paedobaptism have, in the words of 2LC signatory William Kiffin, “no part of the revealed counsel of God.”¹² Credobaptist views in late seventeenth century England not only demanded extraordinary faithfulness to Holy Scripture; they also summoned a tremendous amount of courage both legally and socially. With the restoration of Charles II in 1660 and the Established Church in 1662, Baptists were frequently the objects of ridicule and accusations of child-hating for their alleged dereliction of a church covenant that all but ensured the salvation of infants of believers. Advocating Baptist views on baptism, 2LC signatory Benjamin Keach’s primer *The Child’s Instructor* (1664) was an incredibly dangerous publication that eventually resulted in the harassment of his London congregation, a large fine, and his arrest. Therefore the insistence of the *1689 Confession* upon the sovereign, mysterious, regenerating work of the Holy Spirit in infants, while no different theologically than the WCF, would have appeared much more radical when

combined with a credobaptist ecclesiology that emphasizes the necessity of faith without the notion of a so-called “age of accountability.” Texts such as 2 Samuel 12:23 (“I shall go to him, but he will not return to me.”), often used to support the idea of universal infant salvation, are not cited.¹³ Others such as Luke 1:44 and Jeremiah 1:5 are likewise excluded, most likely due to the fact that neither John the Baptist nor Jeremiah died as infants. Rather these are treated as special instances in which God uniquely called certain individuals in the course of salvation history. In the 2LC, the article addressing infant salvation is framed primarily in terms articulated in the first two paragraphs: Christ, Spirit, election. These provide the doctrinal bedrock for paedo-soteriological beliefs in the Calvinistic Baptist church.

A Diversity of Baptist Views

By no means, however, are these beliefs monolithic. Ironically, the particular clause concerning the sovereignty and freedom of the Spirit (John 3:8) is what simultaneously unites and divides Calvinistic Baptist theologians on the issue of infant salvation. What some view as the freedom of God to elect some infants and not others, others see as the same freedom to elect all infants. This diversity is demonstrated, for example, in the varying interpretations of Luke 18 and the godly example of children. John Dagg, who believed in both the election and non-election of infants, writes, “An objection to the doctrine of natural depravity is founded on the fact, that Jesus referred to little children, as examples for his disciples. This fact, however, will not authorize the inference, that little children are not depraved.”¹⁴ For this reason, regeneration is imperative in the salvation of any sinner. Ye must be born again, as Christ exhorted Nicodemus (John 3:7). However, while almost all theologians in the 1689 tradition have generally agreed with Dagg’s conclusion regarding infant depravity, not all are convinced that Luke 18 is off limits in the debate over infant salvation. Charles Spurgeon, for instance, who was not afraid to address such a topic from the pulpit, also vigorously defended the idea of infant depravity and the need for regenerating grace. He explains, “Some ground the idea of eternal blessedness of the infant upon its *innocence*. We do no such thing; we believe that the infant fell in the first Adam.” Nevertheless, admitting the limits of divine revelation on the subject, he continues, “No doubt, in some mysterious manner the Spirit of God regenerates the infant soul, and it enters into glory made meet to be a partaker of the inheritance of the saints in light.”¹⁵ Citing Anglican John Newton, Spurgeon appeals to Luke 18 in order to advocate the “known character of our Lord Jesus Christ” and to the “very great part of the kingdom of heaven” made up of children. Ultimately grounding the redemption of infants in the sheer

goodness of God, Spurgeon's exegesis is in many ways characteristic of most arguments for the salvation of all infants.

Meanwhile, the mysterious sovereignty of God articulated in paragraph 3 has provided for a noticeable plurality of Baptist views on infant salvation. Benjamin Keach, who upheld the election and non-election of infants, appealed to the same mystery and the same text in order to defend the election of *some* infants, not all:

We have ground to hope our children that Die are as happy as yours, tho' never baptized; and that from Gods word. Hath not Christ said, *Of such are the Kingdom of Heaven*, no doubt God hath comprehended Infants in his eternal election Love that Die, for whom he also gave his Son, and in some secret way doth Sanctifie them, or makes them meet for glory above; and we have as much ground to hope, that God will give Grace to those Children of ours that live, as you have to hope he will give Grace to yours.¹⁶

Whereas Baptist theologians such as Keach, Dagg, and Boyce held that there were indeed non-elect infants, Baptist theologians like Spurgeon, Gill, and John Broadus believed that *all* infants were saved.¹⁷ The latter did so not according to the belief that all infants somehow escaped judgment, but that all infants, dying in infancy, were *elected* by the Father. This distinction is important for the way that Baptists of the 1689 tradition have understood effectual calling and infant salvation. Against the Landmarkists and Arminians of his day, John Dagg insisted, "All who will finally be saved, were chosen to salvation by God the Father, before the foundation of the world, and given to Jesus Christ in the covenant of grace."¹⁸ Before the end of the nineteenth century and the rise of Dispensationalist thought, Calvinistic Baptists were incapable of discussing the salvation of any sinner without a covenantal framework, principally fixed in the covenant of redemption. In this eternal, intra-Trinitarian compact ratified before the foundation of the world, the Father promised to procure a chosen people for His Son. The 2LC calls it an "eternal covenant transaction that was between the Father and the Son about the redemption of the elect"¹⁹ (Psalms 110:4, Ephesians 1:3–11, 2 Timothy 1:9). The salvation of any sinner—including infants—is unthinkable apart from this Trinitarian economy of redemption: the work of Christ on the cross, regeneration by the Spirit in the sinful heart, and the Father's unconditional election. To submit to any other Gospel would be to contend that infants somehow enter into the kingdom of heaven apart from the Father's grace, the Son's headship, and the Spirit's power.

Election and Epistemology

While these three soteriological axioms constitute the lowest common denominator of sorts among Calvinistic Baptist views on infant salvation, there are plenty of questions left unanswered, beginning with issues of election and epistemology. For instance, 3.5 of the 2LC (“Of God’s decree”) states that God “hath chosen in Christ unto everlasting glory, out of his mere free grace and love, without any other thing in the creature as a condition or cause moving him thereunto.”²⁰ Arguments for the election of *all* infants would seem to violate this principle as it appears to make infancy, something found “in the creature,” a condition for salvation. Does young age guarantee exemption from wrath? Moreover, unconditional election is traditionally understood to be God’s free choice of individuals, not of groups or classes. If indeed *all* dying infants were elected unto salvation, this divine decision is made irrespective of anyone or anything outside His absolute sovereign pleasure.

The necessity of divine election then leads to the question of faith: can one be saved apart from faith in Christ? If Charles Spurgeon is indeed correct in his assertion that “faith is the indispensable requisite to salvation,” can infants meet this heavenly requirement?²¹ Scriptural connections so tie the called, regenerated heart to reaching out to Christ in faith that to affirm regeneration in the absence of demonstrable faith is highly difficult to conceive (Hebrews 11:6; James 2:18, 22). Infants, however, lack any natural capacity to manifest the degree of rationality for manifestation of faith. Does that prevent them from knowing Christ in faith? Chapter 10, paragraph 1 of the 2LC (“on effectual calling”) clearly states that the Spirit comes “enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God.”²² But what of those sinners who haven’t the basic cognition to understand?²³

While faith is certainly more than mere intellectual assent, it does entail a measure of human reason. The inability to transgress a law of which one is unaware or to render worship to a God largely unknown might very well prove exculpatory in the divine judgment of a sinful infant (Romans 2:14–15). According to the Apostle Paul, a sinner is “without excuse” when he or she “clearly perceives” God’s eternal power and divine nature, both of which are “plain to them” (Romans 1:19–21). Does this therefore mean that a child incapable of “clearly” perceiving God’s nature is “with excuse”? If 10.2 of the 2LC asserts that believers are “enabled to answer the call, and to embrace the grace offered,” how exactly do infants answer and embrace?²⁴ Can these young sinners be held responsible for their sin? To answer such a question in the negative would assume a theological paradox in which there is corruption of heart without sin, or sin without guilt, or intrinsic rebellion

without condemnation and wrath. The fact that infants are saved “by Christ” certainly proves there is guilt of some kind, albeit a diminished guilt (Luke 12:47–48, James 4:17, 2 Corinthians 5:10–11).

One possible solution to this vexing epistemological question would be simply to rest in the power of a sovereign God capable of working conscious faith in those lacking mental development. As every human being bears the *imago Dei*, he or she also possesses at least some capacity to know and relate to the living God. Furthermore, if God can indeed regenerate an infant, can He not also bestow the gift of faith? The sovereignty of God leaves much to speculate due to the fact that Scripture itself is remarkably silent on this issue. No explicit mention is made to infant faith or infant repentance, begging another question: “Can one be saved apart from real conversion?”, or, perhaps, “Does real conversion always carry with it the opportunity for evidence of such?” How would an infant begin to “deny himself” when he doesn’t know his own name? (Luke 9:23) When Christ warned, “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish,” He made no clear exceptions (Luke 13:5).

With the knowledge that God has shrouded infant salvation in considerable mystery, James P. Boyce nevertheless upheld the necessity of conversion even among dying infants. Echoing Romans 1 theology, Boyce avers, “Between [conversion] and regeneration must intervene in some cases some period of time until the knowledge of God’s existence and nature is given, before the heart turns, or even is turned toward that God. This must be true of all infants and of all persons otherwise incapable of responsibility, as for example idiots.”²⁵ In other words, infant salvation necessarily entails conversion, even after “some period of time.” This is concomitant with the revealed “knowledge of God’s existence and nature.” How this is accomplished with infants is not explained in detail. Utterly important, however, is the idea that every soul saved by God either “turns” to Jesus or “is turned” to Him.²⁶ For Boyce, this conversion also includes the mentally handicapped who seem unable to respond to the general call of the gospel. The 2LC describes these sinners as “persons, who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word.”²⁷ Like dying infants, they are not outside the bounds of God’s loving election and “internal call” to Christ simply because of physical weakness.

The Power of God to Call Sinners

Article three of the chapter “on effectual calling” also includes paragraph four, which examines those who receive the “external call,” but unlike the aforementioned

handicapped and infant sinners, do *not* have their hearts and minds liberated from the bondage of sin. It reads,

Others not elected, although they may be called by the ministry of the Word, and may have some common operations of the Spirit, yet not being effectually drawn by the Father, they neither will nor can truly come to Christ, and therefore cannot be saved: much less can men that receive not the Christian religion be saved; be they never so diligent to frame their lives according to the light of nature and the law of that religion they do profess.²⁸

With respect to the issue of infant salvation, the above paragraph serves to underscore more profoundly the power and saving necessity of the Father's "effectual call" unto Christ. Adult sinners who hear the gospel "neither will nor can" come to Jesus apart from God's irresistible, drawing grace. Therefore the dying infant's lack of an "external" call no more disqualifies them from the grace of God than an adult sinner's exposure to the preaching of God's Word qualifies them for salvation. Jesus Christ is indeed mighty to save. Whether discussing the salvation of infants, toddlers, adolescents, teenagers, or adults, the glory of God's sovereign grace is not diminished with age or context. Infant salvation is nonetheless salvation, and salvation is the Lord's (Psalm 3:8). Furthermore, for the grieving parent, relative, or friend, lasting consolation is found not simply in the work of Christ for the infant sinner, but in the perfection and greatness of the Son of God Himself. Through many trials and tribulations, it is the aim of the pastor to lift the eyes of the troubled sinner so that they too may look to a Father without shadow of turning and declare with Abraham, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" (Genesis 18:25). In this age, the fate of dying infants will in large part remain a mystery. Thankfully for the church, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8). Christians must ultimately trust that God will be God and will always do what is right. While Baptist pastors may not be able to answer infallibly many of the ultimate questions concerning infant salvation, the questions themselves inevitably lead us to many of the precious Trinitarian truths of the Gospel.

NOTES:

¹ *2nd London Confession*, 10.3

² Samuel E. Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith* (Durham, England: Evangelical Press, 1989 [3rd edition 1999]), 150.

³ *The Complete Works of Andrew Fuller*, Vol. 1, 506.

⁴ James P. Boyce, *Abstract of Systematic Theology*, 249–50.

⁵ *2nd London Confession*, 6.3.

⁶ *2nd London Confession*, 10.1.

⁷ John Gill, *A Body of Doctrinal Divinity*, book 6, ch. 12, 541–42.

⁸ *2nd London Confession*, 10.3.

⁹ John L. Dagg, *Manual of Theology*, 333.

¹⁰ *2nd London Confession*, 10.1.

¹¹ *2nd London Confession*, 7.2

¹² Benjamin Coxe, Hanserd Knollys, William Kiffin, et al., *A Declaration concerning the Public Dispute Which Should Have Been...Concerning Infants-Baptism...* (London, 1645).

¹³ The fulcrum of interpretation for this particular text is whether David is referring to Sheol, which is believed to have housed both believers and unbelievers (Luke 16:19–31), or paradise in heaven. If the former, David’s statement does not seem to offer support for those advocating universal infant salvation.

¹⁴ Dagg, *Manual of Theology*, 156.

¹⁵ Spurgeon, “Infant Salvation,” Sermon 411.

¹⁶ Benjamin Keach, *The Ax*, 25.

¹⁷ Broadus concluded, ““No question is here made that those dying in infancy are saved. They are saved through the atonement of Christ and the work of the Spirit, but this must hold true of all alike, without reference to any ceremony, and no matter whether their parents were believers, unbelievers, or heathen” (*Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 1888, p. 404)

¹⁸ Dagg, *Manual of Theology*, 309.

¹⁹ *2nd London Confession*, 7.3

²⁰ *2nd London Confession*, 3.5.

²¹ James Leo Garrett, *Baptist Theology: A Four-Century Study*, 270.

²² *2nd London Confession*, 10.1.

²³ The question of rational “capacity” in infants touches on the issue of the *imago Dei*. It is obviously the belief of this author and the 1689 Confession that *all* infants fully bear the image of God and are worthy of the honor, dignity, and respect due all image-bearing humans.

²⁴ *2nd London Confession*, 10.2

²⁵ Boyce, *Abstract of Systematic Theology*, ch. 23, “Regeneration and Conversion”

²⁶ Boyce seemed to believe this “turning” of some infants and the mentally handicapped would happen postmortem.

²⁷ *2nd London Confession*, 10.3.

²⁸ *2nd London Confession*, 10.4

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Jeff Johnson

Book Review

The Extent of the Atonement

The Extent of the Atonement by David Allen. Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2016.
Reviewed by Jeff Johnson

Should you buy *The Extent of the Atonement* by David L. Allen? Yes! Regardless if you agree or not with his conclusions, you will find the book helpful in understanding the historical development of this complex doctrine. Without a doubt, Allen has provided the church with an excellent resource.

The book is nicely divided into three parts. Part One is the extent of the atonement in church history, which contains four chapters: (1.) early and medieval era, (2.) Reformation era, (3.) post-Reformation era, (4.) modern era. Part Two is the extent of the atonement in the Baptist tradition, which is divided into three chapters: (1.) English Baptists, (2.) North American Baptists, and (3.) Southern Baptists. Part Three is called a Critical Review, and it consists of two chapters. The first chapter in this section is a critical review of the book *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her*, and the last chapter is Allen's personal conclusion on why a universal atonement is important. And as with all good reference books, it has three indices: (1.) subject, (2.) name, and (3.) Scripture.

The Strengths of the Book

Though this is not the only historical survey of the doctrine of the extent of the atonement, it is the only comprehensive survey of the topic. From Irenaeus (AD 130-202) to David Schrock (b. AD 1980), and with almost every notable theologian in between, Allen has provided us with a valuable catalog of the history of the extent of the atonement. Therefore, I am thankful, first of all, for now having such a resource available for my own study on the subject.

Second, I am thankful that Allen included more than just the most notable theologians. Yes, Calvin, Edwards, and Hodge are given their due attention, but a plethora of other lesser known figures, such as Robert Morrison and Thomas Lamb, are also included in the survey. Getting better acquainted with these men is helpful. This, no doubt, took a lot of time and research, which can now be a benefit to us all.

Third, I am thankful for how Allen represents those with whom he disagrees. As one who holds to a limited atonement view, I never felt like my position was being dragged in the mud. Allen remains respectful throughout the book. I didn't see any straw men lurking around in the pages either; each scholar seemed to be represented fairly and in his own words.

Fourth, I am thankful that Allen did not bifurcate the historical positions into two oversimplified camps—limited atonement and universal atonement. Allen correctly divides limited atonement advocates into two separate camps: those who believe that universal sufficiency is extrinsic, and those who believe that universal sufficiency is only intrinsic. Beza, Owen, and Perkins believed that the atonement, because of the infinite value of Christ's deity, could have been (hypothetically) sufficient for all the world, but only if God had intended it to be sufficient for them. Thus, universal sufficiency is not actually (extrinsically) sufficient for the non-elect. Conversely, many 5-point Calvinists, as Allen notes, argued for more than just hypothetical (intrinsic) sufficiency. For the majority of Calvinists, universal sufficiency is extrinsic; the atonement is *actually* sufficient for the salvation of the non-elect.

For instance, according to the Canons of Dort: "And, whereas many who are called by the gospel do not repent nor believe in Christ, but perish in unbelief, this is not owing to any defect or insufficiency in the sacrifice offered by Christ upon the cross, but is wholly to be imputed to themselves" (2:6). Subsequently, not only does universal (extrinsic) sufficiency

provide a warrant for the universal offer of the gospel, it brings greater judgment on those who reject the gospel. As John Calvin stated:

And indeed, our Lord Jesus was offered to all the world... Our Lord Jesus suffered for all and there is neither great nor small who is not inexcusable today, for we can obtain salvation in Him. Unbelievers who turn away from Him and who deprive themselves of Him by their malice are today doubly culpable. For how will they excuse their ingratitude in not receiving the blessing in which they could share by faith? And let us realize that if we come flocking to our Lord Jesus Christ, we shall not hinder one another and prevent Him being *sufficient* for each of us... Let us not fear to come to Him in great numbers, and each one of us bring his neighbours, seeing that He is sufficient to save us all.¹

Moreover, I am thankful that Allen did not lump all Hypothetical Universalists into the Amyraldian camp. It is easy for some to place the hypothetical universalism of John Preston and John Davenant with the hypothetical universalism of Moise Amyraut, but this would be an oversimplification.

Though Preston, Davenant, and Amyraut believed that the atonement opened the door of salvation for the non-elect, Preston and Davenant believed that God had given the death of Christ a special intention (design) for the elect that made it *inherently* efficacious for them. In other words, Christ died for all, but He did not die *equally* for all. For Preston and Davenant, there is something within the death of Christ itself that makes it *inherently* efficacious only for the elect. The atonement, by its special design, secured its own application for the elect alone.

Conversely, 4-point Calvinists believe there is nothing inherent within the atonement itself that limits its efficacy to the elect. In sum, they deny that the atonement has any objective efficacy at all.

For this reason, the hypothetical universalism of Preston and Davenant remains within the boundaries of the Canons of Dort, while the hypothetical universalism of 4-point Calvinists remains outside of those boundaries.

The Weaknesses of the Book

Along with disagreeing with Allen's view on universal atonement, I see seven noteworthy weaknesses.

Stealing Our Men

One, I believe Allen wrongly considers too many 5-point Calvinists as 4-point Calvinists, most notably Thomas Boston, Jonathan Edwards, Andrew Fuller, and Charles Hodge.² These men, according to Allen, believed in universal atonement.

By way of proof, He spends a lot of time demonstrating that these men believed that the atonement is actually (extrinsically) sufficient for the salvation of all people. This is true of these men. And it is also true, as Allen pointed out, that these men rooted the free offer of the gospel in the universal sufficiency of the death of Christ. Allen provides one quote after another where these men make such statements.

But providing one quote or a thousand quotes that reinforce the idea that the atonement is actually (extrinsically) sufficient for the salvation of all people does not necessarily imply that these men rejected the doctrine of limited atonement. Boston, Fuller, and Hodge not only believed in (actual) universal sufficiency, they also believed in limited efficacy. As with the Canons of Dort, they held to the Lombardian formula—limited efficacy and universal sufficiency.

Thomas Boston held to both sides of the Lombardian formula: “Though Christ died only in the room and stead of his elect, on the cross sustaining their persons only, according to what John 10:15, ‘I lay down my life for the sheep;’ yet the price paid for them being of infinite worth, was sufficient in itself to save the whole world.”³

Jonathan Edwards also held to both sides of the Lombardian formula:

Christ in some sense may be said to die for all, and to redeem all visible Christians, yea, the whole world, by his death; yet there must be something particular in the design of his death, with respect to such as he intended should actually be saved thereby.⁴

For Edwards, what makes the atonement unique for the elect is that it effectually secured their salvation. He believed that Christ came to die for the special purpose of redeeming His people from their sins:

Now can we suppose that Christ came down from heaven and went through all this upon uncertainties, not knowing what purchase he should get, how great or how small? Did he die only upon probabilities, without absolute certainty who, or how many, or whether any should be redeemed by what he did and suffered?⁵

Though Allen is right in saying Charles Hodge believed in the *universal sufficiency* side of the Lombardian formula, Allen fails to stress that Hodge also believed in the *limited efficacy* side of the formula as well: “It follows,” Hodge claimed: “from the nature of the covenant of redemption, as presented in the Bible, that Christ did not die equally for all mankind, but that He gave Himself for his people and for their redemption.”⁶

So, it seems strange to remove these men from the limited atonement camp when their positions are safely within the orthodoxy of the Canons of Dort.

Misses the Main Distinctive of Limited Atonement

The second weakness is based on the first weakness. Allen fails to acknowledge that the main distinctive of particular redemption is the doctrine of *limited efficacy*. Allen, however, claims the opposite. “The question of the universal sufficiency of the atonement,” according to Allen, “is actually *the key issue in the debate over the extent of the atonement*.”⁷ He makes it abundantly clear that he thinks that the debate over the extent of the atonement centers on the extent of the atonement’s sufficiency:

We will see that the debate over the nature of this sufficiency beginning in the early seventeenth century is *the key debate in the extent question*. One often hears statements by Calvinists that “the debate is *not* over the sufficiency of the atonement: all agree the atonement was sufficient to atone for the sins of the whole world.” However, the debate is very much about the nature of the sufficiency of Christ’s death.⁸

Yet, this is where Allen goes wrong. There are many advocates of limited atonement who do not believe in limited sufficiency as exposed by Beza, Owen, and Perkins. Beza, Owen, and Perkins, however, do not represent all limited atonement advocates. In fact, Allen acknowledges, in multiple places, that there is a difference of opinion among limited atonement advocates on the extent of sufficiency. Is the atonement intrinsically (hypothetically) or extrinsically (actually) sufficient for the non-elect? This question is answered differently by those holding to limited atonement. And, Allen is right in pointing out that *intrinsic* (hypothetical) sufficiency, held by Beza, Perkins, and Owen, has been the minority position among 5-point Calvinists.

And if this is the case, then limited atonement is not ultimately about the extent of its sufficiency. What determines if someone believes in limited atonement or not (at least as limited atonement is defined by the Canons of Dort), is determined by whether that person believes in the limited extent of the atonement’s *efficacy* or not.

Limited efficacy is the one thing all advocates of limited atonement have in common. Beza, Perkins, Owen, Boston, Edwards, Fuller, and Hodge (with every other 5-point Calvinist) believed that the atonement secured its own application for the elect and for the elect alone. They may differ on the nature and the extent of sufficiency, but they all whole heartily agree on the nature and the extent of its saving efficacy.

Thus, limited efficacy (not limited sufficiency) is what makes the atonement limited. Allen failed to make, or at least failed to stress, this crucial point.

Oversimplification of the Nature of the Extent of the Atonement

Third, by failing to highlight this important distinction, Allen oversimplifies the nature of *the extent of the atonement*. According to Allen, “There are only two options: (1) for the elect alone (limited atonement) or (2) for all of humanity.”⁹ But for most 5-point Calvinists, this is a false bifurcation.

For Allen, the extent of the atonement only touches the extent of its actual (extrinsic) sufficiency. Yet, the extent of the atonement is more complicated than just determining the extent of the atonement’s sufficiency. There are two sides to the *extent* of the atonement: (1.) the extent of its extrinsic sufficiency, and (2.) the extent of its inherent efficacy.

Allen is mistaken when he limits the *extent* to sufficiency alone. He is wrong when he says: “For *all* who affirm limited atonement, the atonement can only be sufficient for those for whom it is efficient.” This is not true for the majority of 5-point Calvinists who have affirmed that actual (extrinsic) sufficiency extends to all universally.

Consequently, the extent of the atonement includes more than just its sufficiency. For 5-point Calvinists, limited atonement means limited efficacy. Thus, to disprove limited atonement, as it is presented in the Canons of Dort, Allen has to do more than disprove the limited extent of its actual sufficiency. Allen has to do something more difficult, he has to disprove the limited extent of its inherent efficacy. Without making the distinction between the two sides of the extent of the atonement, Allen muddies the waters a bit. And this, I think, is a real weakness in the book.

Lack of Attention Given to Limited Efficacy

Fourth, Allen seems to imply that *limited efficacy* is something that is agreed upon by both Calvinists and Arminians. For Allen, *limited efficacy* simply means “limited at the point of application.”¹¹ When he introduces the Lombardian formula of Peter Lombard, he defines the meaning of *limited efficacy* as “the benefits of the atonement were only applied to the elect (those who believe).”¹² Allen reaffirms that this is his understanding of the Lombardian formula at the end of the book: “Christ died for the sins of all but was only applied to those who believed (the elect).”¹³ In other places he seems to imply limited efficacy is merely to be understood as *limited application*, and *limited application* is something “all Calvinists and non-Calvinists affirm.”¹⁴

Yet, *limited application* is not what Peter Lombard meant by *limited efficacy*. Lombard stated: “[Christ] offered himself on the altar of the cross not to the devil, but to the triune God, and he did so for all with regard to the sufficiency of the price, but only for the elect with regard to its efficacy, because he brought about salvation only for the predestined.”¹⁵ Lombard is speaking about the objective, not the subjective side of the death of Christ. More precisely, Lombard is speaking about what the death of Christ objectively accomplished. According to Lombard, the cross accomplished universal (extrinsic) sufficiency for all, and it “brought about salvation only for the predestined” due to its “efficacy.”

The *efficacy* of the atonement is the atonement’s inherent power to bring about its own application. It is not just the idea of application, it is idea of *self-application*. Redemption was *accomplished* on the cross and it does not need any extra grace or power (that was not already purchased by Christ on the cross) for it to be *applied*. Rather, the grace and power that was secured by the death of Christ effectually procured its own application.

Of course there is a chronological distinction between redemption accomplished and redemption applied, but for those holding to *limited efficacy*, it is impossible for there to be one without the other. This is because the atonement effects its own application. And if the atonement secures its own application, then the extent of this inherent power (efficacy) has to be limited to only those who will finally be redeemed by this power. Again, limited efficacy, which is inherent within the atonement itself, is the true nature of limited atonement.

Even if Owen was Wrong, It Does Not Disprove Limited Efficacy

Fifth, Allen seems to think by disproving Owen's *trilemma* argument,¹⁶ which is based on a quantitative (*idem*) punishment, that he effectively removes any inherent efficacy within the cross itself.¹⁷

According to Owen, if the saving benefits are only applied to the elect, then only the sins of the elect were applied to Christ on the cross. Thus, Owen concluded that Christ paid for the exact sins (*idem*) of only those in whom His death secured saving faith—the elect. As Owen stated:

It was a full, valuable compensation, made to the justice of God, for all the sins of all those for whom he made satisfaction, by undergoing that same (*idem*) punishment which, by reason of the obligation that was upon them, they themselves were bound to undergo. When I say the same, I mean essentially the same in weight and pressure, though not in all accident of duration and the like.¹⁸

Because Owen believed that the atonement was a quantitative (*idem*) rather than a qualitative (*tantundem*) punishment, he logically concluded that the death of Christ has to be *inherently* efficacious. Or otherwise God would be requiring a double payment for the sins of those who are condemned to hell.

And *if* the cross is *inherently* efficacious, then Owen was right—the atonement secured its own application for only those whose sins were imputed to Christ on the cross. For Owen, therefore, what makes the atonement *inherently* efficacious is the idea that Christ made a quantitative (*idem*) payment for sin, rather than a qualitative (*tantundem*) payment. Of course, this line of reasoning is what caused Owen, and other High Calvinists, to reject (extrinsic) universal sufficiency.

Allen is right in stating that many Moderate Calvinists, such as Boston, Fuller, and Hodge, disagreed with Owen on this particular issue. By holding to an extrinsic and universal sufficiency, they denied that the death of Christ was a quantitative (*idem*) payment for sin. According to Boston, Fuller, and Hodge, the atonement had to be actually sufficient for all since the gospel is a sincere offer to all. And for the atonement actually to be sufficient for all, the atonement has to be a qualitative (*tantundem*), rather than a quantitative (*idem*) payment for sins. As Hodge himself explained:

It is a gross misrepresentation of the Augustinian doctrine to say that it teaches that Christ suffered so much for so many; that He would have suffered more had more been included in

the purpose of salvation. This is not the doctrine of any Church on earth, and never has been. What was sufficient for one was sufficient for all... All that Christ did and suffered would have been necessary had only one human soul been the object of redemption; and nothing different and nothing more would have been required had every child of Adam been saved through his blood.¹⁹

But, even though Boston, Fuller, and Hodge disagreed with Owen, their disagreement does not mean that they denied limited efficacy. In other words, proving that these men (Boston, Fuller, and Hodge) believed in universal (actual) sufficiency does not prove that these men denied that the cross effectually secured its own application.

Hodge, for instance, believed that the limited efficacy of the cross is rooted in the Covenant of Redemption. According to Hodge, Christ in eternity past became the federal head of His chosen people. Or in the words of Hodge:

The Bible teaches, (1.) That a certain portion of the human race was given to Christ. (2.) That they were given to Him before the foundation of the world. (3.) That all thus given to Him will certainly come to Him and be saved. (4.) That this union, so far as it was from eternity, is not a union of nature, nor by faith, nor by indwelling of the Holy Spirit, it was a federal union. (5.) That Christ, therefore, was a federal head and representative of those given to Him.²⁰

“It follows,” Hodge claimed: “from the nature of the covenant of redemption, as presented in the Bible, that Christ did not die equally for all mankind, but that He gave Himself for His people and for their redemption.”²¹ Because of the elect’s federal union with Christ, according to Hodge, “What He did and suffered in their place, or as their representative, they in the eye of the law, did and suffered.”²² “He was therefore the federal head,” according to Hodge, “not of the human race, but of those given to Him by the Father. And therefore, His work, so far as its main design is concerned, was for them alone. Whatever reference it had to others was subordinate and incidental.”²³

Therefore, Christ’s legal representation of His chosen people in the eternal covenant of redemption is the reason the death of Christ is efficacious for only the elect—securing saving faith for them and for them alone. This is because when Christ died, those who were in legal union with Him died with Him. Because Christ and His people were considered one in the eyes of God, their sins (in a qualitative sense) were imputed to Christ as He bore the wrath they deserved on the tree.

Most other 5-point Calvinists believe that the atonement secured its own application by the special intention or design of God. That is, God caused the cross to be inherently efficacious because that is how He designed or intended for the cross to operate.

But, regardless of what causes the cross to secure its own application, disproving Owen's reason for self-efficacy does not disprove the other possible reasons for the atonement's self-application. And, if the cross secured its own application, then the extent of its efficacy must be limited to the elect and to the elect alone.

A Misunderstanding of the Gift of Faith

Sixth, Allen claims that faith was not procured by the death of Christ. In his critique of John Piper's chapter in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her*, Allen states:

Piper cannot demonstrate anywhere from Scripture the notion that faith is something 'purchased' for the elect at the cross. Such language finds no support in the NT. Where Owen and Piper err is in thinking that faith as a gift is equivalent to faith as a purchase. There is no causal link between the death of Christ and subjective faith.²⁴

Yet, those holding to limited atonement do not build the case for limited efficacy on a proof text. Rather, as Calvinists, they understand that saving faith is connected with the new nature. Saving faith is not a gift that comes by itself. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing comes by the Word of God, and this by spiritual illumination that is connected with a saving work within the heart of man. In other words, without the Spirit's saving work within man, there is no saving faith.

And, though the Bible does not directly say faith was procured by the death of Christ, it does teach that the new nature was procured by the death of Christ. For Christ "gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds" (Titus 2:14). And it is said that Christ died that "he might sanctify the people with his own blood" (Hebrews 13:12). These, and other such verses, teach that Christ's death did more than make men savable.

There is a "causal link" between faith and the atonement because there is a "causal link" between the death of Christ and the new nature and a "causal link" between the new nature and saving faith. For the elect, the death of Christ effectually secured and brought about the new nature. And, this is the reason the atonement secured saving faith, and thus the reason the atonement is limited in the extent of its saving efficacy.

Disjoining Intent, Extent, and Application

Seventh, Allen rightly distinguishes between intent and extent, but wrongly denies there is a necessary connection between them. He charges 5-point Calvinists with conflating (1) intent, (2) extent, and (3) application together. “High Calvinists,” according to Allen, “presume that the intent to apply and the extent are and must be coextensive.”²⁵

For instance, in his introduction, Allen claims that Calvinists, such as A. A. Hodge and Louis Berkhof, confused *intent* with *extent*. According to Allen, the question of the *extent* of the atonement is not the same as asking the question of the *intent* or the question of the *application* of the atonement:

It is surprising how often those on both sides of the theological fence don't seem to understand the actual state of the question. For example, A. A. Hodge stated: “The question does truly and only relate to the design of the Father and of the Son in respect to the persons for whose benefit the Atonement was made.” But stating the question in this fashion fails to reckon with the distinction between the intent and extent of the atonement.

Louis Berkhof saw the question to be “Did the Father in sending Christ, and did Christ coming into the world, to make atonement for sin, do this with the design or for the purpose of saving only the elect or all men? That is the question, and that only is the question.” Again, Berkhof fails to distinguish between views on the *intent* of the atonement and the actual issue of its *extent*.²⁶

Even if there were a special *intent* for the elect, according to Allen, what does this have to do with the *extent* of the atonement. Just because God may have had a special *intent* to save the elect, this, argues Allen, does not rule out that the atonement's universal (extrinsic) sufficiency for all. For Allen, *intent* is asking the question of application, while *extent* is asking the question of sufficiency.

Intent = Efficacy/Application

Extent = Sufficiency

So, according to Allen, the question of (1.) *intent* is connected to the question of (3.) *application*, but not connected with the question of (2.) *extent*.

Yet, Hodge and Berkhof were not wrong in connecting *intent* with *extent*. Although Calvinists believe there is a distinction between *intent*, *extent*, and *application*, it is not inconsistent for them to believe that there is a necessary connection between them. For

instance, it is the special (1.) intent (or design) of the atonement that causes it to secure its own application, and the atonement's self-application necessitates that the (2.) *extent* of its efficacy (not sufficiency) is limited to the elect, and the limited *extent* of its efficacy is the reason the atonement is (3.) *applied* to only the elect. So, at least for 5-point Calvinists, it is impossible for there to be one (intent, extent, or application) without the other two.

Conclusion

Allen is extremely helpful in showing the complexities of the extent of the atonement within the Reformed and Baptist traditions. Yet, because he failed to nuance the two dimensions of the extent of the atonement (the *extent* of efficacy and the *extent* of sufficiency), the book is a little misleading. I don't believe he accomplished his objective in disproving limited atonement by building a strong case for universal sufficiency. I agree that Calvin, Edwards, Boston, Fuller, Hodge, and many other Calvinists believed that the death of Christ has sufficiently opened the door of salvation for everyone, and that this universal (extrinsic) sufficiency makes the gospel a sincere and warranted offer to all. Yet, even if Calvin, Edwards, Boston, Fuller, and Hodge were right, this in no way cancels out the limited *intent* and the limited *extent* of the atonement's inherent efficacy. To disprove limited atonement, Allen has to prove that the atonement did not effectually purchase, redeem, and purify a particular people for God. Which I believe Allen failed to do.

Much more could be said about both the strengths and weaknesses of this book. Having such a vast amount of research at my fingertips, I can see myself using it consistently as a handy reference tool. And regardless of whether we agree or disagree with Allen's critical conclusions, I believe we will all agree that he has written a valuable book.

NOTES:

¹ Calvin, *Sermons on Isaiah 53*, T.H.L. Parker (London: Clarke, 1956), 141. Italics added.

² I would argue for John Calvin as well.

³ Thomas Boston, "Christ Saviour of the World" in *The Complete Works of Thomas Boston* (Stoke-on-Trent, UK: Tentmaker, 2002) 6:299.

⁴ Jonathan Edwards, *The Freedom of the Will* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1996), 328–329.

⁵ Jonathan Edwards, in *Works of Jonathan Edwards Online*, 73 vols., ed. H.S. Stout (Jonathan Edwards Center, Yale University, 2008), 13:212.

⁶ Ibid., 547.

⁷ Ibid., 623, italics is his.

⁸ Ibid., 31.

⁹ *The Extent of the Atonement*, xxi.

¹⁰ Ibid., 775. Italics mine.

¹¹ Ibid., 623.

¹² Ibid., 27.

¹³ Ibid., 667.

¹⁴ Ibid., 27.

¹⁵ *The Sentences*, Book 3: *On the Incarnation of the Word*, trans. Giulio Silano (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2008), 86 (3.20.5).

¹⁶ Owen argued that Christ either suffered for (1.) all of the sins of some people, or (2.) all of the sins of all people, or (3.) some of the sins of all people.

¹⁷ See Allen, *The Extent of the Atonement*, 627–629.

¹⁸ *Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, 157–158.

¹⁹ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 2:544–545.

²⁰ Ibid., 2:551.

²¹ Ibid., 2:547.

²² Ibid., 2:551.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ *The Extent of the Atonement*, 758.

²⁵ Ibid., 267.

²⁶ Ibid., xxiii., Italics his.

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