



SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD IN MAN'S SALVATION

The Doctrinal Statement of Grace Church of DuPage reads, in part, as follows:

“We teach that salvation is wholly of God by grace on the basis of the redemption of Jesus Christ, the merit of His shed blood, and not on the basis of human merit or works. Salvation, therefore, is totally of God, who, before the foundation of the world foreordained some men to eternal life, leaving the rest in their sin, to their just condemnation.”

Although the position that “it is God alone who saves” has been a very unpopular view down through the ages of church history, it nonetheless has been the view dogmatically held to by those who over the centuries have been considered the titans of classical Christian scholarship, evangelism and church reform. Men such as Aurelius Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, John Wycliffe, Martin Luther, John Calvin, George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards and Charles Haddon Spurgeon, to mention a few. And as we shall see, the words of Christ and the writings of Paul speak only too clearly to this issue, as well. However, this Position Paper must limit itself to an overview only, as this is a topic on which millions of words have been both written and spoken over the centuries.

Any position that Grace Church holds to must be securely anchored in Scripture. As stated in our Church Constitution, we are “to do everything humanly possible to discover the true meaning of the Written Text, but when that meaning is discovered, that meaning stands in judgment of us, never do we stand in judgment of it.” For this reason, the greatest part of our defense will be taken directly from God’s Word.

The bottom line question is this: “Does the ‘final decision’ for man’s salvation rest solely with God, or is man genuinely a free agent and the final decision rests upon the exercise of his own free will?” Our overview begins with the teaching of Christ, speaking directly to this issue, as found in John 6:37, 39, 40, 44 and 65:

“All that the Father gives Me shall come to Me; and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out....And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him, may have eternal life; and I Myself will raise him up on the last day....No one can come to Me, unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day....And He was saying, ‘For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me, unless it has been granted him from the Father.’”

Later on in the ministry of Christ, as found in John 15:16, He says again to His disciples:

“You did not choose Me, but I chose you, and appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain; that whatever you ask of the Father in My name, He may give to you.”

And again in His High Priestly prayer just before His crucifixion, as recorded in John 17:2, 6, 8 and 9:

“Even as Thou gavest Him authority over all mankind, that *to all whom Thou hast given Him, He may give eternal life. ...I manifested Thy name to the men whom Thou gavest Me out of the world; Thine they were, and Thou gavest them to Me, and they have kept Thy word. ...for the words which Thou gavest Me I have given to them; and they received them, and truly understood that I came forth from Thee, and they believed that Thou didst send Me. I ask on their behalf; I do not ask on behalf of the world, but of those whom Thou hast give Me; for they are Thine.*”

After the resurrection of Christ and the establishment of the early churches, Paul, under the direction and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, found it necessary to speak more directly to the same issue. In Ephesians 1:4-12, we find Paul’s explanation *when* the Father determined *who* would be His:

“Just as *He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world*, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. *In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will*, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, *according to the riches of His grace, which He lavished upon us*. In all wisdom and insight *He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him* with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things upon the earth. *In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will*, to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ should be to the praise of His glory. In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation—having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, *with a view to the redemption of God’s own possession*, to the praise of His glory.”

And again in Romans 9:11-24, we see God’s sovereign decisions both challenged by man and defended by Paul:

“*For though the twins were not yet born, and had not done anything good or bad, in order that God’s purpose according to His choice might stand, not because of works, but because of Him who calls, it was said to her, ‘THE OLDER WILL SERVE THE YOUNGER.’ Just as it is written, ‘JACOB I LOVED, BUT ESAU I HATED.’ What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be! For He says to Moses, ‘I WILL HAVE MERCY ON WHOM I HAVE MERCY, AND I WILL HAVE COMPASSION ON WHOM I HAVE COMPASSION.’ So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, ‘FOR THIS VERY PURPOSE I RAISED YOU UP, TO DEMONSTRATE MY POWER IN YOU, AND THAT MY NAME MIGHT BE PROCLAIMED THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE EARTH.’ So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.*”

Of course, this kind of hard nosed position caused as many problems back then as it does today. Emotionally it is a hard concept to accept and for this reason, from a human

point of view, not reasonable. Isaiah came to grips with this same problem in Isaiah 55:8-9, where God responds to Isaiah with these words:

*“For My thoughts are not your thoughts,
Neither are your ways My ways,’ declares the LORD.
‘For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
So are My ways higher than your ways,
And my thoughts than your thoughts.”*

So Paul finds it necessary, through the direction of the Holy Spirit, to continue his discourse to the Romans and responds likewise to their criticism of how God deals in the affairs of men in the following manner:

“You will say to me then, ‘Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?’ On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, ‘Why did you make me like this,’ will it? Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use, and another for common use? What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? And He did so in order that He might make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory, even us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles.”

But Paul appears to have saved the real bombshell for the end of his argument. Here he makes his final, bold, controversial statement as we see written in Romans 11:5-7:

“In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God’s gracious choice. But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace. What then? That which Israel is seeking for, it has not obtained, but those who were chosen obtained it, and the rest were hardened.”

“Those who were chosen obtained it, and the rest were hardened.” That is a tough statement that flies in the face of our human sense of fairness. As the leadership of Grace Church, we do not believe for one moment that we have special insight into the mind of God. We know that Scripture teaches that God is absolute love, absolutely just, but also, first and foremost, perfect and holy. How God weaves these absolutes together in the exercise of His perfect will, including this issue, only God knows. There are some things that are not for us to know. We are told to simply trust God who is “the *author* and *perfecter* of faith” (Hebrews 12:2).

And yet, one may ask, do not the “whosoever” passages in scripture teach the free will of man as well? well, if they do teach that man has the free will to choose God, we have a major dilemma, because as we have repeatedly seen in the Scripture quoted above, “You did not choose me, but I chose you.” Either Scripture contradicts itself, which by definition would undermine the very inspiration of the Bible, or the “whosoever” passages explain the *who*, not the *how*. For obvious reasons we must hold to the latter. Perhaps the following, illustration will help you understand what we mean:

Suppose the statement was made that “whosoever” plays football for the University of Michigan during his college football career runs a high probability of playing in at least one post-season bowl game. Now, experience will tell you that this is a pretty good bet.

However, “whosoever” does not mean anyone who desires to play for Michigan can play, but rather we all know that this must refer to only those whom the coaching staff choose. Therefore, the statement made above can only apply to those chosen by the coaching staff. The “whosoever,” therefore, tells you *who*, not *how*! Although this is not a perfect parallel, the same principle is true in Scripture. When speaking of salvation, the “whosoever” passages tell you *who*, not *how*! The above passages quoting Christ state the *how*. This is exactly what John 1:12-13 speaks to:

“But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name (so far “as many as receive” or “those who believe” may mean *how* which would imply free will, or then again, it may mean *who*. The next verse clearly tells which), who were born not of blood (in other words, you are not saved because Mom and Dad are in Christ), nor of the will of the flesh (there goes free will), nor of the will of man (nor can it be obtained for you by others), but of God.” (There it is, the *qualifier*! The context is clearly *who*, not *how*. To find out *how* we need to go back to the words of Christ and the writings of Paul quoted earlier.)

But now, Paul in his letter to the Ephesian Church, gives the strongest reason why it is impossible for man to save himself by the exercise of his free will. In Ephesians 2:1-5, Paul explains:

“And you (the Christians at Ephesus) were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest. But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us (those in Christ at the church in Ephesus), even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved).”

Mankind, as a result of sin, is spiritually dead and simply stated, is incapable of any spiritual choice that can lead to the salvation of his soul. Paul states again in Romans 3:10-11:

“As it is written,
*‘THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE;
THERE IS NONE WHO UNDERSTANDS,
THERE IS NONE WHO SEEKS FOR GOD.’”*

God saves man because man cannot save himself! Man is totally and completely dead, spiritually, and only by the gracious choice of God before the foundation of the earth, does Christ draw to Himself all that the Father determines to make alive, spiritually.

Only as we begin to understand that God saved us when we were spiritually dead, completely incapable of saving ourselves through the exercise of a spiritual free will that was dead, do we begin to understand the meaning of the word “grace,” God’s unmerited favor on our behalf. Now the words of Colossians 2:13 begin to make more sense:

“And when you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions.”

As we really begin to understand God's grace, His unmerited favor in our life, our pride begins to be replaced with an overwhelming sense of humility and gratitude for what God has done for us. We are forever indebted to an Almighty God who not only called us out when we were spiritually dead, but gave His only Son, Jesus, to die on our behalf.

And as we begin to ponder and come to grips with the magnitude of His love for us as seen in His grace to us, our gratitude for that love should become the greatest motivation for our individual obedience, no matter what the cost.

The primary thing God asks us to do after we have identified with Him publicly in baptism, is to grow in God's Word and evangelize the world! We don't need gimmicks or compromise, we need only to faithfully and obediently proclaim the Gospel and leave the results to God. What a load off our shoulders knowing that another man's destiny is not dependent upon our eloquent words or persuasive arguments. God only holds us responsible for using the opportunities He gives to us, He will do the rest. However, if in disobedience we choose not to use the opportunities He gives to us, another obedient Christian will, taking our reward as well. Nonetheless, the perfect will of God will still be accomplished.

And finally, there is another powerful blessing we come to understand as the wonder of it all begins to sink in. Paul says in Philippians 1:6:

“For I am confident of this very thing, that *He who began a good work in you* will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.”

“He who began a good work in you.” What God begins in the life of His elect He secures for eternity until we come face to face with Christ. What peace and comfort every believer should know first-hand as he realizes that his eternal security rests not upon anything he has done or will do, but completely upon the decree and character of Almighty God, Himself. We should begin to sense a “peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension” as we identify, personally, with what Paul speaks of in Romans 8:38-40:

“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

At Grace Church the doctrine of the absolute sovereignty of God in salvation is foundational. However, if you struggle with this concept, that does not determine your standing before God. Probably, if the truth were known, we were all of the opinion when we first trusted Christ, that our decision was a result of our own free will. Only as we began to examine the Scriptures and became more aware of the depths of our own sin as contrasted with the holiness of God, and the magnitude of God's grace, did we begin to see and enjoy Almighty God both as Sovereign and Savior. It is God who saves, not man's doctrine. Sound doctrine can only lead to a higher quality of life in Christ.

The words of Christ in John 15:16 come back over and over. “You did not choose Me, but I chose you.” It is our deepest conviction that Grace Church be faithful to God's Word and that we *never* attribute to man what belongs solely to God. Although this Position Paper is conceptual at best, one seriously anxious to know God's truth on this matter will find it on almost every page of Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation. May we ever conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the grace He has bestowed upon us.