

An introductory essay to John Owen's Classic work:

"The Death of Death in the Death of Christ"
by J. I. Packer

We commend it to our readers, along with Owen's other works.

The Death of Death in the Death of Christ is a polemical work, designed to show, among other things, that the doctrine of universal redemption is unscriptural and destructive of the gospel. There are many, therefore, to whom it is not likely to be of interest. Those who see no need for doctrinal exactness and have no time for theological debates which show up divisions between so-called Evangelicals may well regret its reappearance. Some may find the very sound of Owen's thesis so shocking that they will refuse to read his book at all; so passionate a thing is prejudice, and so proud are we of our theological shibboleths. But it is hoped that this reprint will find itself readers of a different spirit. There are signs today of a new upsurge of interest in the theology of the Bible; a new readiness to test traditions, to search the Scriptures and to think through the faith. It is to those who share this readiness that Owen's treatise is offered, in the belief that it will help us in one of the most urgent tasks facing Evangelical Christendom today--the recovery of the gospel.

This last remark may cause some raising of the eyebrows, but it seems to be warranted by the facts. There is no doubt that Evangelicalism today is in a state of perplexity and unsettlement. In such matters as the practice of evangelism, the teaching of holiness, the building up of the local church life, the pastor's dealing with souls and the exercise of discipline, there is evidence of widespread dissatisfaction with things as they are and of equally widespread uncertainty as to the road ahead. This is a complex phenomenon, to which many factors have contributed; but, if we go to the root of the matter, we shall find that these perplexities are all ultimately due to our having lost our grip on the biblical gospel. Without realising it, we have during the past century bartered that gospel for a substitute product which, though it looks similar enough in points of detail, is as a whole a decidedly different thing. Hence our troubles; for the substitute product does not answer the ends for which the authentic gospel has in past days proved itself so mighty. The new gospel conspicuously fails to produce deep reverence, deep repentance, deep humility, a spirit of worship, a concern for the church. Why? We would suggest that the reason lies in its own character and content. It fails to make men God-centered in their thoughts and God-fearing in their hearts because this is not primarily what it is trying to do. One way of stating the difference between it and the old gospel is to say that it is too exclusively concerned to be "helpful" to man--to bring peace, comfort, happiness, satisfaction--and too little concerned to glorify God. The old gospel was "helpful," too--more so, indeed, than is the new--but (so to speak) incidentally, for its first concern was always to give glory to God. It was always and essentially a proclamation of Divine sovereignty in mercy and judgment, a summons to bow down and worship the mighty Lord on whom man depends for all good, both in nature and in grace. Its centre of reference was unambiguously God.

But in the new gospel the centre of reference is man. This is just to say that the old gospel was religious in a way that the new gospel is not. Whereas the chief aim of the old was to teach men to worship God, the concern of the new seems limited to making them feel better. The subject of the old gospel was God and His ways with men; the subject of the new is man and the help God gives him. There is a world of difference. The whole perspective and emphasis of gospel preaching has changed. From this change of interest has sprung a change of content, for the new gospel has in effect reformulated the biblical message in the supposed interests of 'helpfulness.' Accordingly, the themes of man's natural inability to believe, of God's free election being the ultimate cause of salvation, and of Christ dying specifically for His sheep, are not preached. These doctrines, it would be said, are not "helpful"; they would drive sinners to despair, by suggesting to them that it is not in their own power to be saved through Christ. (The possibility that such despair might be salutary is not considered; it is taken for granted that it cannot be, because it is so shattering to our self-esteem.) However this may be (and we shall say more about it later), the result of these omissions is that part of the biblical gospel is now preached as if it were the whole of that gospel; and a half-truth masquerading as the whole truth becomes a complete untruth. Thus, we appeal to men as if they all had the ability to receive Christ at any time; we speak of His redeeming work as if He had done no more by dying than make it possible for us to save ourselves by believing; we speak of God's love as if it were no more than a general willingness to receive any who will turn and trust; and we depict the Father and the Son, not as sovereignty active in drawing sinners to themselves, but as waiting in quiet impotence "at the door of our hearts" for us to let them in. It is undeniable that this is how we preach; perhaps this is what we really believe. But it needs to be said with emphasis that this set of twisted half-truths is something other than the biblical gospel.

The Bible is against us when we preach in this way; and the fact that such preaching has become almost standard practice among us only shows how urgent it is that we should review this matter. To recover the old, authentic, biblical gospel, and to bring our preaching and practice back into line with it, is perhaps our most pressing present need. And it is at this point that Owen's treatise on redemption can give us help. II. "But wait a minute," says someone, "it's all very well to talk like this about the gospel; but surely what Owen is doing is defending limited atonement--one of the five points of Calvinism? When you speak of recovering the gospel, don't you mean you just want us all to become Calvinists?" These questions are worth considering, for they will no doubt occur to many. At the same time, however, they are questions that reflect a great deal of prejudice and ignorance. "Defending limited atonement"--as if this was all that a Reformed theologian expounding the heart of the gospel could ever really want to do! "You just want us all to become Calvinists"--as if reformed theologians had no interest beyond recruiting for their party, and as if becoming a Calvinist was the last stage of theological depravity, and had nothing to do with the gospel at all. Before we answer these prejudices directly, we must try to remove the prejudices which underlie them by making clear what Calvinism really is; and therefore we would ask the reader to take note of the following facts, historical and theological, about Calvinism in general and the "five points" in particular.

First, it should be observed that the "five points of Calvinism," so-called, are simply the Calvinistic answer to a five-point manifesto (the Remonstrance) put out by certain "Belgic semi-Pelagians" in the early seventeenth century. The theology it contained (known to history as Arminianism) stemmed from two philosophical principles: first, that divine sovereignty is not compatible with human freedom, nor therefore with human responsibility; second, that ability limits obligation. (The charge of semi-Pelagianism was thus fully justified.) From these principles, the Arminians drew two deductions: first, that since the Bible regards faith as a free and responsible human act, it cannot be caused by God, but is exercised independently of Him; second, that since the Bible regards faith as obligatory on the part of all who hear the gospel, ability to believe must be universal.

Hence, they maintained, Scripture must be interpreted as teaching the following positions:

- (1) man is never so completely corrupted by sin that he cannot savingly believe the gospel when it is put before him, nor
- (2) is he ever so completely controlled by God that he cannot reject it.
- (3) God's election of those who shall be saved is prompted by His foreseeing that they will of their own accord believe.
- (4) Christ's death did not ensure the salvation of anyone, for it did not secure the gift of faith to anyone (there is no such gift); what it did was rather to create a possibility of salvation for everyone if they believe.
- (5) It rests with believers to keep themselves in a state of grace by keeping up their faith; those who fail here fall away and are lost.

Thus, Arminianism made man's salvation depend ultimately on man himself, saving faith being viewed throughout as man's own work and, because his own, not God's in him.

The Synod of Dort was convened in 1618 to pronounce on this theology, and the "five points of Calvinism" represent its counter-affirmations. They stem from a very different principle--the biblical principle that "salvation is of the Lord";² and they may be summarized thus:

- (1) Fallen man in his natural state lacks all power to believe the gospel, just as he lacks all power to believe the law, despite all external inducements that may be extended to him.
- (2) God's election is a free, sovereign, unconditional choice of sinners, as sinners, to be redeemed by Christ, given faith and brought to glory.
- (3) The redeeming work of Christ had as its end and goal the salvation of the elect.

(4) The work of the Holy Spirit in bringing men to faith never fails to achieve its object.

(5) Believers are kept in faith and grace by the unconquerable power of God till they come to glory.

These five points are conveniently denoted by the mnemonic TULIP:

Total depravity

Unconditional election

Limited atonement

Irresistible grace

Preservation of the saints.

Now, here are two coherent interpretations of the biblical gospel, which stand in evident opposition to each other. The difference between them is not primarily one of emphasis, but of content. One proclaims a God who saves; the other speaks of a God who enables man to save himself. One view presents the three great acts of the Holy Trinity for the recovering of lost mankind--election by the Father, redemption by the Son, calling by the Spirit--as directed towards the same persons, and as securing their salvation infallibly. The other view gives each act a different reference (the objects of redemption being all mankind, of calling, those who hear the gospel, and of election, those hearers who respond), and denies that any man's salvation is secured by any of them.

The two theologies thus conceive the plan of salvation in quite different terms. One makes salvation depend on the work of God, the other on a work of man; one regards faith as part of God's gift of salvation, the other as man's own contribution to salvation; one gives all the glory of saving believers to God, the other divides the praise between God, Who, so to speak, built the machinery of salvation, and man, who by believing operates it. Plainly, these differences are important, and the permanent value of the "five points," as a summary of Calvinism, is that they make clear the points at which, and the extent to which, these two conceptions are at variance.

However, it would not be correct simply to equate Calvinism with the "five points." Five points of our own will make this clear. In the first place, Calvinism is something much broader than the "five points" indicates. Calvinism is a whole world-view, stemming from a clear vision of God as the whole world's Maker and King. Calvinism is the consistent endeavour to acknowledge the Creator as the Lord, working all things after the counsel of His will. Calvinism is a theocentric way of thinking about all life under the direction and control of God's own Word. Calvinism, in other words, is the theology of the Bible viewed from the perspective of the Bible--the God-centred outlook which sees the Creator as the source, and means, and end, of everything that is, both in nature and in grace. Calvinism is thus theism (belief in God as the ground of all things), religion (dependence on God as the giver of all things), and evangelicalism (trust in God through Christ for all things), all in their purest and most highly developed form. And Calvinism

is a unified philosophy of history which sees the whole diversity of processes and events that take place in God's world as no more, and no less, than the outworking of His great preordained plan for His creatures and His church. The five points assert no more than that God is sovereign in saving the individual, but Calvinism, as such, is concerned with the much broader assertion that He is sovereign everywhere. Then, in the second place, the "five points" present Calvinistic soteriology in a negative and polemical form, whereas Calvinism in itself is essentially expository, pastoral and constructive. It can define its position in terms of scripture without any reference to Arminianism, and it does not need to be forever fighting real or imaginary Arminians in order to keep itself alive. Calvinism has no interest in negatives, as such; when Calvinists fight, they fight for positive Evangelical values. The negative cast of the "five points" is misleading chiefly with regard to the third (limited atonement, or particular redemption), which is often read with stress on the adjective and taken as indicating that Calvinists have a special interest in confining the limits of divine mercy. But in fact the purpose of this phraseology, as we shall see, is to safeguard the central affirmation of the gospel--that Christ is a Redeemer who really does redeem. Similarly, the denials of an election that is conditional and of grace that is resistible, are intended to safeguard the positive truth that it is God Who saves.

The real negations are those of Arminianism, which denies that election, redemption and calling are saving acts of God. Calvinism negates these negations in order to assert the positive content of the gospel, for the positive purpose of strengthening faith and building up the church. Thirdly, the very fact of setting out Calvinistic soteriology in the form of five distinct points (a number due, as we saw, merely to the fact that there were five Arminian points for the Synod of Dort to answer) tends to obscure the organic character of Calvinistic thought on this subject. For the five points, though separately stated, are really inseparable. They hang together; you cannot reject one without rejecting them all, at least in the sense in which the Synod meant them. For to Calvinism there is really only one point to be made in the field of soteriology: the point that God saves sinners. God--the Triune Jehovah, Father, Son and Spirit; three Persons working together in sovereign wisdom, power and love to achieve the salvation of a chosen people, the Father electing, the Son fulfilling the Father's will by redeeming, the Spirit executing the purpose of Father and Son by renewing. Saves--does everything, first to last, that is involved in bringing man from death in sin to life in glory: plans, achieves and communicates redemption, calls and keeps, justifies, sanctifies, glorifies. Sinners--men as God finds them, guilty, vile, helpless, powerless, unable to lift a finger to do God's will or better their spiritual lot. God saves sinners--and the force of this confession may not be weakened by disrupting the unity of the work of the Trinity, or by dividing the achievement of salvation between God and man and making the decisive part man's own, or by soft-pedaling the sinner's inability so as to allow him to share the praise of his salvation with his Saviour. This is the one point of Calvinistic soteriology which the "five points" are concerned to establish and Arminianism in all its forms to deny: namely, that sinners do not save themselves in any sense at all, but that salvation, first and last, whole and entire, past, present and future, is of the Lord, to whom be glory for ever; amen.

This leads to our fourth remark, which is this: the five-point formula obscures the depth of the difference between Calvinistic and Arminian soteriology. There seems no doubt that it seriously misleads many here. In the formula, the stress falls on the adjectives, and this naturally gives the impression that in regard to the three great saving acts of God the debate concerns the adjectives merely--that both sides agree as to what election, redemption, and the gift of internal grace are, and differ only as to the position of man in relation to them: whether the first is conditional upon faith being foreseen or not; whether the second intends the salvation of every man or not; whether the third always proves invincible or not. But this is a complete misconception. The change of adjective in each case involves changing the meaning of the noun. An election that is conditional, a redemption that is universal, an internal grace that is resistible, is not the same kind of election, redemption, internal grace, as Calvinism asserts. The real issue concerns, not the appropriateness of adjectives, but the definition of nouns. Both sides saw this clearly when the controversy first began, and it is important that we should see it too, for otherwise we cannot discuss the Calvinist-Arminian debate to any purpose at all. It is worth setting out the different definitions side by side.

God's act of election was defined by the Arminians as a resolve to receive to sonship and glory a duly qualified class of people--believers in Christ.³ This becomes a resolve to receive individual persons only in virtue of God's foreseeing the contingent fact that they will of their own accord believe. There is nothing in the decree of election to ensure that the class of believers will ever have any members; God does not determine to make any man believe. But Calvinists define election as a choice of particular undeserving persons to be saved from sin and brought to glory, and to that end to be redeemed by the death of Christ and given faith by the Spirit's effectual calling. Where the Arminian says: 'I owe my election to my faith,' the Calvinist says: 'I owe my faith to my election.' Clearly, these two concepts are very far apart.

Christ's work of redemption was defined by the Arminians as the removing of an obstacle (the unsatisfied claims of justice) which stood in the way of God's offering pardon to sinners, as He desired to do, on condition that they believe. Redemption, according to Arminianism, secured for God a right to make this offer, but did not of itself ensure that anyone would ever accept it; for faith, being a work of man's own, is not a gift that comes to him from Calvary. Christ's death created an opportunity for the exercise of saving faith, but that is all it did. Calvinists, however, define redemption as Christ's actual substitutionary endurance of the penalty of sin in the place of certain specified sinners, through which God was reconciled to them, their liability to punishment was forever destroyed, and a title to eternal life was secured for them. In consequence of this, they now have in God's sight a right to the gift of faith, as the means of entry into the enjoyment of their inheritance. Calvary, in other words, not merely made possible the salvation of those for whom Christ died; it ensured that they would be brought to faith and their salvation made actual. The Cross saves. Where the Arminian will only say: 'I could not have gained my salvation without Calvary,' the Calvinist will say: 'Christ gained my salvation for me at Calvary.' The former makes the Cross the sine qua non of

salvation, the latter sees it as the actual procuring cause of salvation, and traces the source of every spiritual blessing, faith included, back to the great transaction between God and His Son carried through on Calvary's hill. Clearly, these two concepts of redemption are quite at variance.

The Spirit's gift of internal grace was defined by the Arminians as 'moral suasion,' the bare bestowal of an understanding of God's truth. This, they granted--indeed, insisted--does not of itself ensure that anyone will ever make the response of faith. But Calvinists define this gift as not merely an enlightening, but also a regenerating work of God in men, '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; and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ; yet so as they come most freely, being made willing by his grace.'

4 Grace proves irresistible just because it destroys the disposition to resist. Where the Arminian, therefore, will be content to say: 'I decided for Christ,' 'I made up my mind to be a Christian,' the Calvinist will wish to speak of his conversion in more theological fashion, to make plain whose work it really was:

'Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray;
I woke; the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off; my heart was free;
I rose, went forth, and followed thee.'

5 Clearly, these two notions of internal grace are sharply opposed to each other. Now, the Calvinist contends that the Arminian idea of election, redemption and calling as acts of God which do not save cuts at the very heart of their biblical meaning; that to say in the Arminian sense that God elects believers, and Christ died for all men, and the Spirit quickens those who receive the word, is really to say that in the biblical sense God elects nobody, and Christ died for nobody, and the Spirit quickens nobody. The matter at issue in this controversy, therefore, is the meaning to be given to these biblical terms, and to some others which are also soteriologically significant, such as the love of God, the covenant of grace, and the verb 'save' itself, with its synonyms. Arminians gloss them all in terms of the principle that salvation does not directly depend on any decree or act of God, but on man's independent activity in believing.

Calvinists maintain that this principle is itself unscriptural and irreligious, and that such glossing demonstrably perverts the sense of Scripture and undermines the gospel at every

point where it is practised. This, and nothing less than this, is what the Arminian controversy is about. There is a fifth way in which the five-point formula is deficient. Its very form (a series of denials of Arminian assertions) lends colour to the impression that Calvinism is a modification of Arminianism; that Arminianism has a certain primacy in order of nature, and developed Calvinism is an offshoot of it. Even when one shows this to be false as a matter of history, the suspicion remains in many minds that it is a true account of the relation of the two views themselves. For it is widely supposed that Arminianism (which, as we now see, corresponds pretty closely to the new gospel of our own day) is the result of reading the Scriptures in a 'natural,' unbiased, unsophisticated way, and that Calvinism is an unnatural growth, the product less of the texts themselves than of unhallowed logic working on the texts, wresting their plain sense and upsetting their balance by forcing them into a systematic framework which they do not themselves provide. Whatever may have been true of individual Calvinists, as a generalisation about Calvinism nothing could be further from the truth than this. Certainly, Arminianism is 'natural' in one sense, in that it represents a characteristic perversion of biblical teaching by the fallen mind of man, who even in salvation cannot bear to renounce the delusion of being master of his fate and captain of his soul. This perversion appeared before in the Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism of the Patristic period and the later Scholasticism, and has recurred since the seventeenth century both in Roman theology and, among Protestants, in various types of rationalistic liberalism and modern Evangelical teaching; and no doubt it will always be with us.

As long as the fallen human mind is what it is, the Arminian way of thinking will continue to be a natural type of mistake. But it is not natural in any other sense. In fact, it is Calvinism that understands the Scriptures in their natural, one would have thought, inescapable meaning; Calvinism that keeps to what they actually say; Calvinism that insists on taking seriously the biblical assertions that God saves, and that He saves those whom He has chosen to save, and that He saves them by grace without works, so that no man may boast, and that Christ is given to them as a perfect Saviour, and their whole salvation flows to them from the Cross, and that the work of redeeming them was finished on the Cross. It is Calvinism that gives due honor to the Cross. When the Calvinist sings:

'There is a green hill far away,
Without a city wall
Where the dear Lord was crucified,
Who died to save us all;
He died that we might be forgiven,
He died to make us good;
That we might go at last to Heaven,
Saved by His precious blood.'

he means it. He will not gloss the italicised statements by saying that God's saving purpose in the death of His Son was a mere ineffectual wish, depending for its fulfillment on man's willingness to believe, so that for all God could do Christ might have died and none been saved at all. He insists that the Bible sees the Cross as revealing God's power

to save, not His impotence. Christ did not win a hypothetical salvation for hypothetical believers, a mere possibility of salvation for any who might possibly believe, but a real salvation for His own chosen people. His precious blood really does 'save us all;' the intended effects of His self-offering do in fact follow, just because the Cross was what it was. Its saving power does not depend on faith being added to it; its saving power is such that faith flows from it. The Cross secured the full salvation of all for whom Christ died. 'God forbid,' therefore, 'that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.'⁶ Now the real nature of Calvinistic soteriology becomes plain. It is no artificial oddity, nor a product of over-bold logic. Its central confession, that God saves sinners, that Christ redeemed us by His blood, is the witness both of the Bible and of the believing heart. The Calvinist is the Christian who confesses before men in his theology just what he believes in his heart before God when he prays.