

Review Essay on Whosoever Will

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I am always interested to see what non-Calvinists make of the “doctrines of grace,” which I have found compelling. For that reason, I was glad to give *Whosoever Will* a closer reading, especially since I have such admiration for its contributors.¹ I have to say the book proved to be a strong cup of tea, and I have felt compelled to brew some strong tea of my own in what follows. But, to quote Jerry Vines, “I’ve never felt that disagreeing was attacking.”

The introduction by David Allen and Steve Lemke is interesting, irenic . . . and confusing. It is not clear what a newcomer to the issues would make of it. One quotation suggests that the Arminians agreed with the Calvinists on the depravity of man. But why did folks at Dordrecht feel obliged to put a T in TULIP? Then there are offsetting quotations suggesting that none of us in the SBC are Calvinists . . . and that we all are. We even have one suggesting that Calvin was not a Calvinist. We are told the contributors are “interested in dialogue,” but there were no wrong-kind-of-Calvinists at the conference. We read of their allegiance to the *Baptist Faith and Message* 2000, but then of their willingness to “embrace both poles of this issue.”² We are told we cannot call them Semi-Pelagians, but not what we can call them, unless it is “simply Baptist.” This seems less than conciliatory, pitting the “Baptists” against the “Calvinists.”

It seems to be an effort at triangulation, putting zero-pointers on one wing, five-pointers on the other, and then two-to-four pointers “in the mainstream.” But this is a tricky approach. For one thing, streams have a way of meandering, and you would hate to let your doctrine just go with the flow. But, more than this, “centrism” is a shaky hermeneutical principle. During the Conservative Resurgence, “Mainstream” Baptists tried to position themselves as the wise “infallibilists” between the deluded “inerrantists” and “liberals.” For them, it was enough that the Bible could lead to salvation, and all the fuss over floating ax heads was nugatory and scholastic. Of course, the inerrantist “extremists” were right, as are the “extremists” who say that hell means eternal torment for the lost. And it will not do to affirm annihilationism simply because it splits the difference between universalism and endless perdition.³

¹*Whosoever Will: A Biblical-Theological Critique of Five-Point Calvinism*, ed. David L. Allen and Steve W. Lemke (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010).

²Including the “zero-pointers” who reject the BF&M’s claim that the believer is secure?

³As I wrote in an Indiana Baptist column of the time, everybody loves to stake out the middle. That is why cities and states call themselves “Heart of Dixie” (Alabama), “The Keystone” (Pennsylvania), and “Gateway to the West” (St. Louis), “Crossroads of America” (Indianapolis), “The Hub” (Boston), “The Biggest Little City in the World” (Reno), “The Middle of Everywhere” (Rolla, Missouri), “Where City and Country Flow Together” (Elk River, Minnesota), and “Where Yee-Ha Meets Olé” (Eagle Pass, Texas). But that’s no way to pick a home. Of course, this is not to suggest that the right reading is always

So if “Calvinist” is the scary word for one group, what is the scary word for the other? We are told we cannot use Arminian or Semi-Pelagian. So the Calvinists are left to suffer alone in terminological awkwardness.

In chapter one, Jerry Vines begins the collection by walking through John 3:16, word by word, applying portions of the verse to the controversy over Calvinism, focusing particularly on “world,” “whosoever,” and “believeth.” He also touches on such verses as 2 Pet 3:9 and 1 Tim 2:4. Vines argues that the world God loves includes every single individual, but he might have given some attention to Prov 6:19, which says God hates “a lying witness who gives false testimony, and one who stirs up trouble among brothers,” or to Rom 9:13, which says God hated Esau. And to his rhetorical question, “If God does not love all the people of the world, why did God create them?” one might continue in Romans 9, where it says he created Pharaoh and other clay to demonstrate his power over them. Of course, there are responses (such as the one saying that “hate” means “love less”), but the listener to this sermon needs to hear at least one rejoinder.

When he comes to “believe,” he says, “It would be unreasonable to command someone to do something impossible for them to do. It would be like commanding an armless man to embrace you.” But what about Matt 5:45, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect”? Is perfection within our reach?⁴ As I read the sermon and other essays in this volume, I was reminded of Samuel Johnson’s 18th century report on James Boswell’s refutation of the philosopher and bishop, George Berkeley, who said that matter was a fiction, and that physical objects were simply collections of sense experiences held together by God. Boswell kicked a stone and declared that he had thus embarrassed Berkeley’s theory. But Berkeley did not deny that there were stones and kickings of stones, any more than Calvinists deny that “whosoever believes” means “whosoever believes.” It is a conditional statement, an if-then proposition, the fulfillment of which is quite another question.

In chapter two, Paige Patterson gives a good overview of the doctrine of total depravity, including a brief discussion of the Federal Theory and Natural Headship. He exhibits his usual flair for the arresting illustration, including the man walking in the wrong direction, who, nevertheless stops briefly for an act of chivalry. Nevertheless, his enlistment of a Spurgeon quotation to counter the notion that regeneration precedes faith is puzzling. Sure enough, Spurgeon says that preaching faith to a regenerate man is like “waiting till the man is cured and then bringing him the medicine.” But this seems to serve a false dichotomy. Are we supposed to think that preaching faith is either useless to the unregenerate or superfluous to those who are born again? Why cannot the preaching of faith be the occasion for God’s regenerating work in the lost, and a blessing to those already saved?

Another odd dichotomy surfaces in the discussion of what it means to be “dead in trespasses of sin” in Eph 2:5. Using the case of Adam and Eve, Patterson

the most demanding, restrictive, or disturbing. Jesus told the Sabbath-legalists to “lighten up” in Mark 2 and the Hillel party to “tighten up” regarding divorce and remarriage in Mark 10. You have to take each text on its own grounds.

⁴Actually, John Wesley used Vines’ very logic on this verse to argue that it was. But we typically treat sinless perfection or full maturity as an ideal toward which we must strive, ever falling short. Regarding this command to an “armless man,” I am reminded of our National Guard riot-control training. We were told to “read the riot act” several times before moving in against those creating havoc. Even when we knew that they would ignore the order to disperse, we commanded them to do so just the same. It was a matter of legal accountability, not true expectation. It would build the case against them, just as God’s commands do regarding the reprobate.

argues that “being dead does not assure that someone can do nothing.” After all, “though dead spiritually, they could and did respond to God, preparing for His visit, hiding, talking with Him, and eventually accepting his remedy for their nakedness.” But Calvinists do not think that the spiritually dead are incapable of any action at all, including dealings with God. If that were the case, they would have to put a mighty spin on the spiritually-dead Satan’s negotiations with God in Job 1 and 2 to keep these passages in the canon. What then is Patterson’s account of the emergence of faith in a “dead” man? He draws on Robert Picirilli’s “preregenerating” grace which “enable[s] the yet unregenerate person to understand the truth of the gospel, to desire God, and to exercise saving faith.” But this just seems to kick the can down the road. It still leaves open the question of why Richard Dawkins shuns such grace when Lydia, in Acts 16:14, did not.

In chapter three, Richard Land makes three moves to counter Calvinistic notions of election: He uses John Leland to triangulate, gives a dispensational reading of Romans 9, and argues for the atemporality of God. Each one is problematic. First, the triangulation. He quotes Leland, a champion of religious liberty, as preaching “sovereign grace in the salvation of souls, mixed with a little of what is called Arminianism,” for “these two can be tolerably well reconciled together.” This produces, in Land’s estimation, a “distinctive Baptist soteriology,” which is “neither fully Calvinist nor remotely Arminian.” Well, certainly, there are a lot of Southern Baptists who claim a sort of middle ground. Some call themselves “three pointers” or “four-pointers with an explanation.” Of course, embracing the norm can be tricky business, in that most Southern Baptists are not soul winners today and most were not abolitionists before the Civil War. And it would be perilous to hold a vote in some SBC quarters on the “eternal suffering in hell for those who have never heard the gospel” and even the cult status of Mormonism.

Second, Land draws on a classic response (associated with Boethius, Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas) to the predestination/freedom tension by making God atemporal (outside of time), and not just everlasting. Advocates sometimes picture God on a hill, high above a winding road which represents history, with all present to his view. That way, God’s foreknowledge is no foreknowledge at all, so no one is locked in on certain behavior beforehand. In deep reality, “before” and “after” do not apply to God’s work, or so the argument goes. This is tidy, but not clearly biblical. In his article, Steve Lemke later picks up the same theme, saying, “God is by definition outside space and time,” but this is arguably more a philosophical construct than a teaching of Scripture. Could it be that “timeless action” is “non-sense” in the purest sense of the word, like “square circle”? To deny that God is “outside of time” is not to deny that he is from everlasting to everlasting. It is just to say that time is essentially one-thing-after-another, and that God has been doing one-thing-after-another forever.⁵ But how does he know the future if it is not now present to him? Because he is the lord of the future. After all, “A king’s heart is a water channel in the LORD’s hand: He directs it wherever He chooses” (Prov 21:1).

Third, regarding Romans 9, I am gobsmacked by Land’s claim that it has nothing to do with individual salvation but only (following H. A. Ironside, whom

⁵When, in the first chapter of the Bible, God says, “Let us make man in our image,” he resolves to do something in the future, and then does it; and when, in the last chapter of the Bible, he warns that, if anyone tinkers with his revelation, he will, in the future, bring severe judgment down on his head; and midway in the Bible, he rebukes Job with the word, “Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundations?” (Job 38:4) That is to say, “when in the past I laid the earth’s foundations.”

he quotes) “with privilege here on earth.” I did take Land’s challenge to “read Romans 9–11 carefully” along the lines he suggests, but I do not find my “previous understandings of election . . . challenged and changed.” Rather, I persist in the “theological confusion and mayhem” with which I started. I cannot read Paul’s words on God’s elective mercy as anything less than a general statement of his sovereign action toward individuals, whether Paul, Esau, or Pharaoh, with regard to their destinies, earthly and otherwise. Still, I admire the dispensationalists’ effort to construe these verses according to their perspective. That is what we do with paradigms, whether Dispensational or Calvinistic.

In chapter four, David Allen quickly offers a set of fine-grained definitions including such notions as “intrinsic and extrinsic sufficiency,” and leads us through some historical takes on the doctrine, including disputes among Calvinists. His favorite target is John Owen, who built on the “double payment” argument to offer a “Treble Choice” argument. Not surprisingly, the theological gradations employed to advance and counter Owenish thinking are impressive. But one has to ask whether the parties are flirting with the fallacy of misplaced precision, by which, for instance, one might try to compute IQ to the 10th decimal point because he can. The problem is that the subject, at least in human understanding, does not admit of such precision. It is the same sort of problem you see in disputes over eschatology, where this nation, institution, coalition, or person is identified confidently as the anti-Christ.⁶

I think the big point is lost in the scuffle over details, namely that Christ knew what his death was and was not accomplishing ultimately—the salvation of only a minority of mankind—and he assented to this. There was no “I hope this works out and someone picks up on it,” or “That settles it; nobody could refuse this gift.” As he hung on the cross, he was neither an “open theist” nor a universalist. To my mind, that is why this doctrine is important; it rules out real heresies. If both the “Calminian” and the Calvinist are happy with this Christ-knew-exactly-what-he-was-accomplishing version, then we may have an idle dispute over whether the atonement is limited or universal—a distinction without a difference, as we like to say in philosophy. But I fear I fantasize.⁷ Allen, along with others in this collection, also makes much of the “all” and “world” texts, and that is fair. But so is the reminder that terms have a “universe of discourse.”⁸ Furthermore, we need to watch out for the fallacy of division.⁹

⁶I have shared Allen’s frustration with some of the Calvinists’ reasoning on this doctrine. I remember in particular one argument to the effect that Christ would not have wasted a single drop of blood on one whom he knew to be eternally hostile to his offer. It was as if there were some sort of corpuscular economy, where cells, whether white or red, were somehow placed in an isomorphic relationship with sins or people. I remember thinking that my sins alone would require all Christ’s blood for atonement, and that regardless of the quantity of blood spilled, Christ’s decisive death was not defined in terms of liquid volume.

⁷Speaking of “Calminians” (a term Allen draws from James Leo Garrett, my esteemed theology professor at Southwestern), I think they have a problem with consistency. They seem to think that the five points of Calvinism are independent, like items on a buffet line. But they connect with each other: In my understanding, they derive from theological anthropology, from the total depravity of man, from man’s inability to muster the wherewithal to accept Christ as Savior and Lord. If man is really that flawed, then it takes a special act of God to save him, an act not performed on all, but only on the elect, those decided upon from the very beginning. This was no mystery to Jesus as he died sacrificially on the cross. And the Lord is following through decisively with every soul he has chosen to redeem, bringing certain hearts to life, where none deserves it.

⁸Paul’s assertion that “all scripture is God-breathed” did not include Mithrian or Persian “scripture.”

⁹For instance, “My grandfather gave his life on Guadalcanal to protect America” does not

In his “practical considerations” section, Allen exhibits a pretty low view of Calvinist ministers, suggesting that they are a sneaky bunch of agenda-driven, evangelism killers, who use code words to mask the fact that they cannot look individuals in the eye and assure them, “Christ died for your sins.” Actually, he is right about some of this. I have met some guys who thrilled more at the thought of surrounding themselves with five-point elders than of winning souls, just as I have met pastors who obsess over the Masons, “homophobia,” board appointment, “social justice,” achieving the Kurt Cobain look, being “Dr. Somebody,” leading Holy Land tours, and landing a bigger church. But I have also known a host of salt-of-the-earth Calvinists who are putting it on the line for the gospel, and not making fuss about their Calvinism. And they are everywhere.¹⁰ I do not mean to push a Don’t Ask/Don’t Tell posture on Calvinists. They should say what they believe, and many are doing just that, to the annoyance of many. But the counsel cuts both ways. If a young preacher finds John Bunyan, John Piper, and John MacArthur (to name three ministers faulted in this volume) woefully wrongheaded on central gospel issues, he should not hesitate to say so if a member of the pulpit committee expresses appreciation for their ministry. Otherwise, his silence may be a form of treachery in service of an anti-Calvinist agenda.

In chapter five, Steve Lemke gives “A Biblical and Theological Critique of Irresistible Grace.” I very much agree with Lemke that Covenant theology and its fondness for infant baptism is an unfortunate legacy of Geneva, and that Baptist or baptistic churches trying to accommodate these Reformed sensitivities are making a big mistake. I do not think this is a trivial matter. Infant baptism gives the false impression that something spiritually significant has happened to the child. Consequently, the sprinkled one can grow into adulthood with a false sense of comfort. To suppose that the ceremony gives some babies an advantage over their “unwashed” counterparts in unchurched homes is odd to say the least. So yes, let us be Baptists unapologetically and not try to attract the pan-evangelicals who settle among the Anabaptists and paedobaptists with equal comfort. Beyond this agreement, I find much with which to differ with Lemke. Part of my problem connects with my favorite joke: When a man was asked if he believed in infant baptism, he replied, “Believe in it!? Man, I’ve seen it!” So when Lemke considers whether God’s saving grace is irresistible, he exclaims, “Man, I’ve seen it resisted again and again!” Well, yes, but that is not the point. Or maybe it is better to say, “That’s precisely the point, but you’re not noticing it.” I should explain: Resisting God’s grace is the default position for lost men.¹¹ So it takes a miracle to crack that “natural” shell, a miracle God performs just as effectively as the one he performed on stormy Galilee or at the tomb of Lazarus. Are we taken “kicking and screaming” into the Kingdom? Well, Paul was fairly frothing at the mouth against Christians when

necessarily mean “My grandfather gave his life on Guadalcanal to protect the top New Jersey mob boss, who was an American.”

¹⁰I remember when I agreed to speak on preaching at the Founders’ Conference in 1995. A denominational agency officer took me out for lunch and asked if I was getting flack for this, especially since a high-profile pastor had been hammering Calvinism in recent days. I said I had not, and then he volunteered that he was a five-pointer. I was surprised and asked him how that had happened. Well, it turned out he had served as youth director for a five-pointer who served on the faculty at Southwestern, and later became a dean. Seeing my surprise, he added that one of the most celebrated Bible professors at Southwestern was also a five-pointer. And all three were strong in the conservative resurgence, encompassing Calminians and Calvinists alike.

¹¹As the Abstract of Principles (serving both SBTS and SEBTS) says, we “inherit a nature corrupt and wholly opposed to God and His law.”

God confronted him graciously on the road to Damascus, but the frothing goes away as God does his work.

As he should, Lemke brings what he takes to be troublesome Scripture to the fore. For instance, he uses Jesus' words concerning Jerusalem ("How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, yet you were not willing!") to show the Lord's deference to human will. But this might not be so much a wistful soliloquy as a public indictment of their perditionousness, in which he takes no joy. Then he uses the rich man's difficulty in accessing heaven (as though he were a camel negotiating a needle's eye) to tweak the Calvinist, arguing that the wills of rich and poor alike "would be changed immediately and invincibly upon hearing God's effectual call." But the parable tracks with the "no atheists in foxholes" principle, that when you are sleek, well-entertained, and comfortable, you are less likely to fall on your knees than someone in desperate straits. And, as the passage teaches, God has no problem in driving a rich person to his or her knees.

When Lemke uses 1 John 5:1 ("Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God") as proof that belief precedes regeneration, I want to come back saying, "Whoever breathes air with his lungs has been born" does not prove that breathing air with your lungs causes you to be born. When he suggests that "irresistible grace" makes the "proclamation of the gospel an unnecessary add-on after people have already been saved," he equates regeneration-with-no-faith-content with salvation. But regeneration enables faith; it does not replace it. And what is Lemke thinking when he suggests that a man "spiritually dead with a depraved will" lacks the will "to go to church on Sunday or for many Sundays"? People go to church for a thousand reasons not grounded in regeneration—to please the family, palliate loneliness, hear great music, satisfy their curiosity, etc.

Lemke makes much of the "well-meant offer," which works only with the speaker's conviction that the salvation of every person is an open question in the eyes of God—or something like that. He refuses to countenance the "God of hard Calvinism," who seems to be "disingenuous, cynically making a pseudo-offer of salvation to persons whom He has not given the means to accept." But God can, with perfect honor, direct something he knows will fall outside the hearer's capabilities.¹²

Being a philosopher, Lemke is familiar with the Principle of Sufficient Reason, that is to say, "Things just do not happen." So it is fair to press the question, "Why do so many fail to take advantage of their 'assisting grace' to accept Christ?" We give special help as parents; some of our kids pick up biking or tennis quicker than others. Some are eager to visit the art gallery, others indifferent, but you take them

¹²Let me offer another illustration: My junior year in high school, I played trumpet in the Arkansas All-State Band. Our director, Joe Barry Mullins, from Northeast Louisiana University, was an intimidating but wonderful taskmaster. We practiced hour after hour in the ballroom of Little Rock's old Marion Hotel. Then, as the concert approached, we moved next door to the stage of Robinson Auditorium for a dry run. Not long after we had started on a piece, he waved us to a stop and said he wanted to go out into the auditorium to hear it there. Telling us to go ahead and play the piece on our own, he started us off, laid down his baton, and walked down into the darkened hall. We managed for a short while, but then the wheels came off. We lost the beat as some paused here and others there, as tempos varied, and entrances became ragged. Just as we realized it was a total mess, he came back on stage and explained that he did that show us how important it was to watch him carefully at all times. We got it. Now, was his instruction to us "well-meant," even though he knew we could not manage what he told us to do, namely to complete the piece on our own? Indeed, it was very well meant—to demonstrate our incompetency without him. Directions can serve a variety of good purposes, some of them obscure to the hearer. This is important to bear in mind as we read Isa 55:1-11, which compares God's Word to the rain, which we know can do many things—germinate seeds, wash out gullies, inspire poets, slow traffic, and drive graduation ceremonies inside.

all just the same, spending extra time to contextualize and analyze a painting for the indifferent in hopes they will catch the spirit. Why does not God do that, spending more time with the lost young Hitler than with the lost young Billy Graham, who seemed to have had plenty of enablement when Modcai Ham was preaching in his North Carolina neck of the woods?

When Lemke says that Calvinism raises questions about the character of God, he sounds a little like the indignant Job in Job 10 and like Paul's imaginary critic in Romans 1: "It isn't fair!" Or, to put it in Lemke's words, "God has much to answer for in the problem of evil." He presses the same point with a fireman analogy: What would we think of one who could rescue all the children in a burning orphanage but does not? The answer is simple: "He would be charged with depraved indifference."¹³ God's response in Romans 9 and Job 38 is truly surprising. He does not say, "I see your point. Sorry. Let me try to explain myself so that you can once again count me decent." His basic answer is, "Excuse me? Who exactly do you think you are to question my 'high-handed' ways? Is that any way for potter's clay to speak to the potter?"¹⁴ I wish I could assuage Lemke's anxiety over a God who "changes wills without permission." Perhaps he can see that, like determined suicide jumpers on a high ledge or bridge, we need to be grabbed and not just cajoled by God. We can thank him later when we come to our senses.

In chapter six, Ken Keathley takes up the matter of the P in TULIP, the only point strongly affirmed in the *Baptist Faith and Message*. I was looking forward to his discussion of how "once saved, always saved" was compatible with libertarian freedom, for it is remarkable that none of the millions of true Christians, either on earth or in heaven, has ever opted out of the Kingdom. Sure, people leave the church, but, as we heard in seminary, "The Faith that Fizzles before the Finale was False from the First." But we are talking about the real thing—saving faith. Of course, this is no problem for the Calvinist, since the believer has moved from bondage/death in sin to freedom/life in Christ. He is a new creature, with a new nature, which is "unable" not to care about Christ's work and will. But it is more problematic for the Calvinian, who has waxed long, eloquent, and even vociferous regarding the inviolability of man's libertarian will. Is he willing to say that man surrenders that will when he converts? If not, then how is it that a defector has never surfaced in heaven? But Keathley chooses to speak more about assurance than security, more about confidence than perseverance. In this, I think he mixes psychology, epistemology, and ontology, saying, "Christ is the foundation of assurance; good works merely support and confirm." Yes, indeed, Christ's saving work is the ground of the reality of our security; but our knowledge of our secure status, and the assurance it generates, does connect with good works.

He makes no mention of James (where we are taught that faith without

¹³Of course, the proper analogy more nearly asks whether, just weeks after 9/11, a soldier must rush into an explosive-weakened cave in Tora Bora to rescue Bin Laden and all his Al-Qaeda henchmen before they are hit by falling rock. The fact that God rescued some of us terrorists at the cost of great suffering to himself should put things in a different light.

¹⁴Then, in response to another Lemke challenge, we can say that God is, indeed, ultimately responsible for "evil" in the sense that there would be nothing at all if he had not created the world and continued to sustain it. As G. K. Chesterton explained, there would be no atheists if God did not exist. It is the same sort of thing they teach in the military, that the commander is responsible for everything that happens and does not happen in his unit; he can delegate authority, but he cannot delegate away his responsibility. Do Calvinians think there are things spinning beyond God's control? If so, do they find comfort in Rabbi Kushner's book *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*, which solved the problem of evil by denying God's omnipotence?

works is useless) or 1 John, which sets a high bar for assurance. Regarding the latter, those of us who went out witnessing with Evangelism Explosion or Continuing Witness Training quoted 1 John 5:13 after the first diagnostic question, the one about “knowing for certain” that you had “eternal life” and knew you “were going to heaven” when you died. Well and good; we can know that we have eternal life. But what are these things he has written? And there’s the rub. Going back through the epistle, one encounters 1 John 2:1 (“This is how we are sure that we have come to know Him: by keeping His commands”); 2:6 (“This is how we know we are in Him: the one who says he remains in Him should walk just as He walked.”); 3:14 (“We know that we have passed from death to life because we love our brothers”); 3:18-19 (“Little children, we must not love in word or speech, but in deed and truth; that is how we will know we are of the truth, and will convince our hearts in His presence.”); 3:24 (“And the way we know that He remains in us is from the Spirit He has given us.”); 5:2 (“This is how we know that we love God’s children when we love God and obey His commands”). And so on it goes—external testimony, internal testimony. And it is pretty scary, since we are all painfully aware of our shortfalls. It would have been good to see Keathley wrangle with such verses, but he insists on saying, “Assurance of salvation must be based on Jesus Christ and His work for us—nothing more and nothing less.” Well, yes, but based in what sense? Based metaphysically or based doxastically? John is speaking of the latter, and it is not clear why Keathley is reluctant to do this too.¹⁵

Keathley does spend some profitable time on the apostasy passage in Hebrews, giving special attention to Tom Schreiner and Ardel Caneday’s “means of salvation” reading. Against those who deny perseverance/preservation of the saints by God’s warning against “falling away,” Schreiner and Caneday argue that God uses the warnings to help keep his children on track. Drawing on Bill Craig, Keathley suggests a problem here, namely that the regenerate do not need threats to stay regenerate. But I think it would be fair to at least read the warnings as a “means of sanctification.”¹⁶ Those of us trained in EE and CWT learned to write our testimonies along the lines Paul exhibited in Acts 26: My life before salvation; what happened at the point of salvation; my life since salvation. As I constructed my own testimony, I recalled both the joy I had on the day of my decision and my changed behavior in Sunday School the following Sunday. Both contribute to my assurance that the transaction occurred. Since then, I have been “working out my own salvation with

¹⁵I suppose it is his dismay at the concerns of the Puritans. He mentions the “haunted” John Bunyan, whose spiritual autobiography, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, reveals a “crippling anxiety” over his own election, with “pastorally damaging results.” He also speaks of Scottish Highlanders who were so unsure of their salvation that they abstained from the Lord’s Supper, lest they “eat and drink in an unworthy manner, and thereby incur the judgment of God.” Of course, there can be problems there, a sort of “paralysis by analysis” forgetful of the grace of God, a grace wonderfully pictured in 1 John 1:9. But the typical Southern Baptist church is not blessed with many exhibiting those Highland scruples. Indeed, what pastor does not wish that some of his baptized members might scrutinize their own salvation? And could it be that the “half of the SBC that the FBI can’t find” might be living spiritually-undistinguished lives under the impression that that assurance they felt at the moment of their confession was a sure sign of their redemption, a sort of “burning in their bosom” which confirmed the transaction?

¹⁶One thinks of Bill Cosby’s testimony: “My father established our relationship when I was seven years old. He looked at me and said, “You know, I brought you in this world, and I can take you out. And it don’t make no difference to me, I’ll make another one look just like you.” Except for the “don’t make no difference to me” part, the father’s statement is true: 1. Bill is his progeny; 2. He can kill Bill; 3. He can produce a replacement for Bill. He will not do it, but he could, the same as God the Father could. And the threat is effective; it helped Bill along in his development, just as God puts a helpful fear of himself in his children, though he has no intention of annihilating them or sending them to hell.

fear and trembling,” told by Scripture that “it is God who is working in [me] to will and to act for His good purpose.” Keathley explains, “Good works and the evidences of God’s grace do not provide assurance. They provide warrant to assurance but not assurance itself.” This seems to be a distinction without a difference.

In chapter seven, Kevin Kennedy asks, “Was Calvin a ‘Calvinist?’” Back in the 1980s, Jack Rogers and Donald McKim came out with a book denying that inerrancy was the historical position of the church. They assembled a variety of quotes from leading lights across the centuries, only to be embarrassed not long after by a John Woodbridge book, supplying the evidence for inerrancy that had escaped Rogers and McKim. They had cherry-picked the statements favorable to their thesis, leaving a false impression that biblical inerrancy was a latter-day notion, and a mistaken one at that. Perhaps Kennedy has done a bit of cherry picking himself. Perhaps not. We will have to leave this to the deeply-invested Calvin scholars. But what of the question’s relevance? The really interesting question for me is, “Was Paul a ‘Calvinist’ in the sense we are discussing?” The point is the truth of the matter, not its extra-biblical pedigree. If Calvin sheds light on the right answers to these critical questions, so much the better. But if he missed or twisted something, that is no reflection on the unmissed, untwisted truth.

Malcolm Yarnell’s chapter leaves us with more questions than answers. When he writes that “there is no biblical foundation for the idea of an invisible worldwide gathering of Christians,” one wonders what he makes of the last sentence of Article VI (“The Church”) of the *Baptist Faith and Message*: “The New Testament speaks also of the church as the Body of Christ which includes all of the redeemed of all the ages, believers from every tribe, and tongue, and people, and nation.” When, in the 1980s, I interviewed Hershel Hobbs for an article on his theology, he said this sentence was put in to qualify Landmarkism. Is this Yarnell’s issue? When he rehearses the execution of heretic Servetus in Geneva and Anabaptists Hubmaier and Manz in Zurich, is he claiming that Calvinism is essentially theocratic, and murderously so? Can he supply us any historical context, or was this act as obviously wrong as it would be in 21st century Houston? By this standard of early embarrassments, are Southern Baptists essentially racist since their founders were slaveholders?

When Yarnell disparages those who distinguish between “necessary” doctrines and “nonessential” matters, is he saying that Southern Baptists are wrong to retain amillennial churches while excluding homosexual churches? Would not it have been better for him to say, “Be careful where you draw the lines”? And does he really want to call Presbyterians “antinomian” for baptizing babies? Does not that imply that they are willfully and knowingly transgressive? Why not just say that they are “wrong”? In other words, his treatment of “potential Calvinist impact” seems over the top. Yes, Baptists properly enjoy the fruit of the Anabaptist Radical Reformation, making them distinct from the Magisterial Reformation of the Lutherans, Presbyterians, and Anglicans. But it is also good that Baptists have not succumbed to the legalist, tribalist, primitivist, isolationist, pacifist, and communalist tendencies of the Mennonites and Amish.

Still, with Yarnell, I should say I am not so keen on a plurality of elders, whether at the church, associational, state, or national level. I am glad we had “unruly mobs” of laymen from little churches cram into vans for a drive cross country for a vote or two before they had to hustle back to their day jobs. If we had let the elites decide, the conservative resurgence would have failed.

R. Alan Streett writes the chapter on the public invitation and Calvinism.

Some Calvinists think they are committed to some sort of cultural package deal in addition to a set of doctrines, and in that package, one often finds disdain for the invitation. I have always found that odd. Did not Peter “issue a call for volunteers” on Pentecost, with amazing response? Does not Isaiah 55 say that every time the word goes out, something gets accomplished? And does not that include every single church service where the Bible is read and preached faithfully? And is not the Calvinist the one most likely to think miracles of conversion could happen even when the circumstances are discouraging? And is not public acknowledgment of momentous spiritual decisions encouraged in Scripture? Yes, invitations can be abused. We can all recount occasions when the preacher was manipulative, such as when he worded the appeal in a way which implied you were backslidden or worse if you did not come forward that very night. (Streett would have strengthened his article by giving examples of how things go awry.)

Though I basically agree with Streett, I have a few reservations. I do not share his enthusiasm for a general policy of baptism on the spot at the end of church, for there are some curious and awkward responders, including, in my own experience, a young boy who “just wanted to be baptized” like his friends, a Mormon missionary who was showboating after we had crossed swords in a home earlier in the week (it was his way of declaring that they were just as Christian as we were), and a vagrant who just wandered down the aisle because he wanted some money. In other words, it helps to put a little space between invitation and follow up. That being said, we hasten to baptize those who profess Christ as Savior and Lord. That is what Philip did with the Ethiopian eunuch. That is what happened to the converts at Pentecost. It is my impression that many churches treat baptism more as a certificate of achievement than as a letter of intent. I think the latter better fits the example in Acts. One can understand an extended trial period, wherein the candidate is catechized and his behavior monitored, but this is not clearly the New Testament pattern.

In chapter ten, Jeremy A. Evans moves against “compatibilism” using some familiar philosophical concepts, including Immanuel Kant’s “ought implies can” and J. L. Austin’s distinction between illocutionary and perlocutionary acts. The former says you are not responsible for things you cannot help. Evans uses the latter to claim you need to mean what you say. Both, however, fail to advance his case. The problem with enlisting Kant is that it misses the point of the old statement from the Pogo comic strip, where the character says, “We’ve met the enemy and he is us” (as opposed to “he is ours”). There is no innocent Pharaoh whom God took on a ride for his purposes; Pharaoh was pleased to be along for the ride, putting the top down and playing the radio at full, pagan volume. Indeed, he was also driving and playing chicken with God’s emissary. His deeds flowed from character. He was not watching in horror as he heard his vocal equipment utter rude words to Moses and Aaron. But this is surely unfair. Did not God harden Pharaoh’s heart to resist Moses? Yes, but what would be the right thing for God to do? Soften Pharaoh’s heart, so that he would give away the store? Well, yes, he could have done that, but you would have the same problem with freedom. Pharaoh would not be praiseworthy on this model since the work of softening was God’s doing. Well, then, why not just leave Pharaoh alone to his own druthers? But where did he get his druthers? Are they *ex nihilo*? Did Pharaoh craft them himself? Or did he enjoy some sort of pure neutrality toward God and his work when he started out? Of course, not. Then in what sense was he free?

The simple answer is that he was free to do what he wanted to do. This is

the counsel of compatibilism. Of course, there is a perfectly good use of “free will,” which distinguishes deliberative human action from sleep-walking, muscular spasm, coercion at the point of a gun, or downward movement in a bridge collapse. But when the person has done what he wants to do because he is the kind of person who wants to do that sort of thing, then he chooses freely. But what of the cry in Romans 7, “I do what I hate to do”? This is like the lament of the person who cannot bear to look at his fat self in the mirror, but who has just ordered a double milk shake. Most would say that he truly wants to be thin, but that he does not want it badly enough; this shows he wants instant gratification more than the long-term satisfaction of fitness and beauty. Evans calls this circular reasoning, that “we always act on the motive we act upon,” or mere stipulation, “that strongest motive governs action.” But I think most would say that real and helpful revelation occurs in these circumstances, in that our behavior can belie our noble professions.

When Evans moves to talk of illocution and perlocution (and I am not sure he has to delve into Austin/Searle “speech act” lingo to argue his point), he invites yet another objection. Once in high school, I was complaining about some stricture or other in my life, and my mother said, “Fine. I want you to tell me whom you’d prefer for a mother. I’ll give her a call and ask if she’ll take you in.” She even suggested a name or two. Her locution (ostensible meaning) was the proposition that she desired me to supply a name. Her illocution (or purpose) was to put my whiny self on the spot. The perlocution (what the utterance accomplished) was my realization that I was a miserable ingrate. I think that makes sense, but Evans wants to say that this sort of thing “splits command from will.” But in my mother’s case, she said she wanted me to give her a name, but she really did not. Nothing wrong with that. She was teaching me a lesson and putting me on notice that she was not going to indulge my griping any more. Still, Evans says that when God tells the non-elect to repent, he “does not intend for His speech to change their moral standing before Him.” That is simply wrong. He heightens their culpability by presenting them a challenge, which they defy. Acts of defiance multiply guilt, just as extra counts of tax evasion multiply one’s difficulties in court.¹⁷

Evans also raises an interesting question about God’s freedom. On the compatibilist model, is he compelled to create the world, and do so precisely as he did? If we say yes, then that somehow “undermines his self-sufficiency.” Well, certainly he did not have to create the world because he was lonely or otherwise pathetic. But if we understand creation as the platform for “salvation history,” whose “telling” flowed freely from his nature, I am not sure I see the dilemma. There is something odd about saying, “Gotcha!” when we claim that God did precisely what he wanted to do, and in the most perfect way.

Reading through Bruce Little’s treatment of the problem of evil in chapter eleven, I am reminded of a statement I have heard time and again in the pastorate: “Well, my God would never (fill the in blank, as with “send people to hell,” “require me to remain single,” “say a woman could not be a pastor,” etc.). The problem is that

¹⁷Speaking of guilt, Evans finds the case of Judas compelling: “How Judas could be responsible for the prior cause, given that he did not exist when the causal loop was being formed, is difficult to see. Judas’s act of betrayal was causally necessitated by circumstances grounded in prior causes, to which he made no contribution at all. Where there is no contribution, there is not moral responsibility.” It is not clear where “original sin” fits into Evans’ scheme, but quite apart from the ancient history of the fall, Judas’ nature produced damnable treachery just as surely as a candle produces heat. You do not have to go back one day past Passover to find grounds for moral responsibility in Judas. This is not a matter of Bad-Judas displacing Good-Judas according to coercive plans long in place. This was Judas-Judas being Judas.

often God has done just that, and the Bible says so. I think that is the problem here. Little is indignant with anyone suggesting God would be responsible for evil in the world, even for good purposes. First, let me say that it is tricky to equate suffering with evil, in that a broken heart and or a broken leg can be the best things that could happen to a man who has callously broken the hearts of others and who will meet the girl of his dreams in the emergency room. Be that as it may, is it not clear that if God could intervene to save a child and he does not, he bears some responsibility? If I am standing on the dock with a life preserver and do not throw it, even though the drowning person is only ten feet away, am I not accountable to some extent? Little tries to obviate this problem by drawing a distinction between reasons and purposes. God's reason for letting her drown might be to let the natural order run its course or to uphold the principle of sowing-and-reaping, whereby a careless chaperone is exposed, but that does not mean he purposed that she would drown, or so Little explains. But that is small comfort to the father. ("Don't be angry at God. He had no purpose for her drowning. He just wanted to let things ride in this case.") If I were a father, I would be more comforted to hear that God intended my daughter's death to bring the family's witness front and center in the community, to spare her death in a house fire a few weeks later, or to force the city to post lifeguards where they have been needed for years.

For this reason, I do not recoil when I read John 9:1-3: "As He was passing by, He saw a man blind from birth. His disciples questioned Him: 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned,' Jesus answered. [This came about] so that God's works might be displayed in him." In the verses that follow, we read that Jesus healed him, displaying the glory of God. So here it is arguably fair to say there was more than a reason for the congenital blindness, whether infection, genetics, or injury in utero; there was also divine purpose in it.

Little presses on to say, "If God allows or ordains evil in order to bring about good, then it would seem that Christians should not be engaged in standing against social injustice (that which the Bible calls evil)." Of course, everyone knows that great suffering can bring great good, as in the shaping of effective warriors in grueling SEAL training, or, to use a biblical example, in the Christian diaspora after the stoning of Stephen. Furthermore, is Little saying that W.W.J.D. is our rule of behavior? Surely, that will not work. For one thing, we would never run for Congress, or marry for that matter; Jesus would not, so we should not. And, on the other hand, do we have the green light to kill couples who fudge on their church offerings because God knocked Ananias and Sapphira dead when they did it? No. God has prerogatives and wisdom and goodness that we cannot touch. We are to do as he says, not as he does when it differs from what he says we should do.

When Little objects to the notion that "sin is made a part of the plan of God," you wonder how he reads Rev 13:8, where it speaks of "the Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world" (NIV) or of the names "not written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slaughtered" (HSCB). If the appearance of sin was extraneous or unforeseen to God as he proceeded with creation, then what was this business about a primordial book with the names of those to be redeemed by the blood of the Lamb written in it?

I wish there had been more give and take in the collection. As it stands, it is more like a pep rally—but an interesting one. I am thankful for these Calvinian brothers, for the workout they give the Calvinists, and for the Great Commission

witness they bear at every hand. I do wish, though, they would go easy on the word “contradiction.” I think these writers throw it around way too easily. I remember a conversation with a Christian college professor, who later ran afoul of the Evangelical Theological Society’s inerrancy statement. He said that Matthew and Luke’s account of the Sermon on the Mount contradicted one another, the former placing it on a hill, the latter on a plain. But it was not a contradiction at all. Jesus could have preached on a level place atop a hill, or he could have preached the same message twice, once on a hill, once on a plain. There were perfectly good ways to reconcile the two accounts, just as there are many ways to ameliorate the problems proclaimed in this volume. I hope I have shown a few.