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**Divine Grace, the Human Will,  
and the Nature of Salvation**

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**Introduction**

The interaction of divine grace and the human will in the process of salvation has been a thorny and divisive issue in the history of Christian thought. While some theologians affirm the view that we are saved by God’s grace alone without any effort on our parts, others insist that the human will also plays a role in the process—the role of receiving or accepting God’s offer of salvation. This divergence is informed not only by differences in the interpretation of key biblical texts or by particular theological convictions on the issue, but by certain philosophical assumptions as well. Before we can say whether (or not) the human will plays any role in Christian salvation, we need to first understand the human will itself: Is it free or not? If it is, what does it mean to say that the human will is free, particularly in relation to God and the idea of being saved? Given these (and other) philosophical implications, some Christian philosophers and/or philosophical theologians have attempted to address this issue on both sides of the divide.

The problem, as articulated by William J. Abraham, is this: “Salvation is ascribed to God’s grace, hence God receives the praise and glory.”<sup>1</sup> However, “If we are free, then salvation is *impossible* without our agreeing to it. Hence, human beings do have a role, however minimal, in salvation. There is, therefore, a place for human beings to receive credit and glory for their salvation. Thus grace and freedom are incompatible; one or the other must be sacrificed if there is to be consistency.”<sup>2</sup> To restate the point, if humans have no role *whatsoever* in their salvation, then God takes *all* the glory, but if humans have some role in their salvation, then they take *some* of the credit. Therefore, it seems as though if we choose to uphold God’s glory in Christian salvation, we end up undermining the integrity of the human will. If on the other hand we attempt to present a non-robotic human will in the process of Christian salvation, it seems as if God’s full glory is diminished. As will be seen later in this essay, William Abraham offers a solution that allows humans to play some role in the process without, at the same time, taking the glory for their salvation. However, in the light of both biblical and philosophical reasoning, does this solution work?

In this essay, I first present and assess the solution offered by William J. Abraham, that the human will plays a role in Christian salvation in such a way that excludes the taking of glory on our part. At the end though, I disagree with his understanding of the salvation process and his construal of human freedom, thereby finding his solution wanting. Next, I propose a theological discourse hinged on both biblical and philosophical reasoning as a more robust approach to engaging the issue. I develop and defend the claim that the human will, as a part of the human person, is wholly affected by the Fall and is as such the object of salvation; this means that the human will lacks the ability to play any role in its own salvation without having first been saved by the operations of divine grace. I therefore conclude that divine grace is both necessary and sufficient for Christian salvation. In the final section, I relate this argument to the nature of Christian salvation

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<sup>1</sup> William J. Abraham, “Grace and Freedom,” in *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, by William J. Abraham (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1985: 142-151), 142. Emphasis added.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

and show that because this salvation is transformative, it is therefore (contra I. Howard Marshall<sup>3</sup>) irreversible and/or irrevocable.

#### **A. Relation of Divine Grace and the Human Will**

As noted above, William J. Abraham shows that there is an apparent tension between the role of divine grace and that of the human will in Christian salvation. He claims that John Calvin (and indeed, the Calvinist tradition) tries to resolve this tension in major steps:

1. Salvation is by divine grace alone and not dependent on the choice of the human will.
2. Yet, the human will freely (in the sense of desiring or wanting something) resists God.

Abraham notes that (1) excludes the human will from even deciding whether to receive or reject God's offer of salvation, thereby giving God complete credit for Christian salvation. However, this does not deny the fact that the human will is free to choose what it wants or desires as (2) indicates, thus making the unbeliever blameworthy and deserving of eternal punishment. The idea then is that the human will on its own cannot choose God but will always resist him. Abraham thinks that this position is attractive to many people because of its seeming internal coherence, its strong theocentricity, its explanatory power, and the comfort it gives.

However, he queries this view for its denial of *genuine* human freedom (i.e., the ability to do otherwise). He argues that, "if there is no human freedom, how can God be considered just for condemning the reprobate for what he, God, has ordained should take place?"<sup>4</sup> Clearly, the idea of human freedom advanced by Abraham differs quite sharply from its Calvinist construal. According to Abraham, the Calvinist construal "of freedom consists in agents doing what they want to do or choose to do."<sup>5</sup> On this account of human freedom, God is "causally efficient in the same sense as hypnotists and drugs are,"<sup>6</sup> that is, by producing "within us certain beliefs, wishes, wants, and so on,

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<sup>3</sup> The choice of I. Howard Marshall is informed by the theme of this Volume of *Testamentum Imperium*: His Salvation Endures: Response to I. Howard Marshall's *Kept by the Power of God*.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

which cause us to perform certain acts.”<sup>7</sup> Abraham’s conception of freedom, however, is more radical than this and claims that, “Freedom is not just a matter of doing what you want to, it is also a matter of being able to do otherwise.”<sup>8</sup> Without the ability to do otherwise, Abraham insists, a human action is not free and as such, cannot be a genuine human action.

Abraham also notes that the recognition of genuine human action in the process of salvation neither negates the ascription of salvation to God, nor does it entail crediting humans with salvation. For him, God should be understood as the cause of salvation in a narrow sense, that is, as the most significant cause of salvation. This narrow causal explanation of a state of affairs only accounts for its most significant cause and differs from a full causal explanation, which takes into account all of the factors involved to make a certain action possible. For example, while the action of an arsonist narrowly explains a fire that burnt down a house, the presence of oxygen in the air and other factors add up to provide a full explanation for the fire. In the same way, says Abraham, “What we need to see is that language ascribing salvation to God is indeed causal language, but it should be interpreted in the narrow sense. When believers say that it is God alone who saves, they are simply picking out the most crucial agent at work in the process of salvation. This does not rule [out] the activity of other agents, nor does it preclude genuine human freedom.”<sup>9</sup>

Abraham concludes by pointing out that (contra Paul Helm) the phenomenology of Christian salvation when properly analyzed the way he has shown, “morally excludes any taking of credit or pride” on the part of the free-acting human agent.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, we need not exaggerate the role of divine grace as to make it irresistible or minimize the role of human freedom thus eliminating genuine human action in order to ascribe all glory to God in Christian salvation. It must be noted that Abraham’s analysis of Christian salvation solves the seeming problem of inconsistency and, at the same time, preserves both human and divine involvement in the salvation process. However, it appears that in his efforts to avoid exaggerating the role of divine grace and/or

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 151.

minimize the role of the human will, he (inadvertently or perhaps inevitably) softened the fallen nature of the human will and failed to make any distinction between its state before and after salvation. This will be our focus in the section that follows.

However, it is important to note briefly the methodological problem in Abraham's treatment of this issue. Abraham, like most analytic philosophical theologians, employs a purely philosophical approach to theological discourse and, as such lacks an adequate use of Scripture to support his claims. This is typical of most analytic philosophical theology, thus raising the question as to whether it is indeed theology qua theology. John Webster has pointed out that, among other things, one of the key factors for determining the theological status of any discourse is its principles of theological knowledge. As such, for any theology to be considered truly theological, it must meet certain criteria that comprise the nature of theology. These include, "an account of theology's object, its cognitive principles, its ends, and the virtues of its practitioners."<sup>11</sup> This cognitive principle of theology is grounded in God's knowledge of himself and of all things relative to him, which he [God] has communicated a certain share to humanity in the Scriptures.<sup>12</sup> Theological reasoning therefore should be understood as biblical reasoning (i.e., exegetical and dogmatic). "It is an activity of the created intellect, judged, reconciled, redeemed and sanctified through the works of the Son and the Spirit."<sup>13</sup> In this sense, Christian analytic philosophical theology needs to analyze theological concepts and claims in the light of biblical assertions and ecclesial considerations. What follows then is an attempt to address the seeming tension between divine grace and the human will in Christian salvation with such an approach.

## **B. Necessity and Sufficiency of Divine Grace for Christian Salvation**

The Apostle Paul categorically states, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift

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<sup>11</sup> John Webster, "What Makes Theology Theological?" *Journal of Analytic Theology* 3 (May 2015): 17-28; 17.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>13</sup> John Webster, *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2012), 115.

of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.”<sup>14</sup> This much is agreeable to both sides of the debate, that Christian salvation is by grace alone thereby excluding human boasting. As such, divine grace is necessary for Christian salvation. The question however is whether the human will also plays a role in the process of Christian salvation. If it does, what role would that be and at what point in the salvation process does it occur? Is divine grace both necessary and sufficient for salvation? If so, what role is left for the human will? If not, someone may wonder what then stops a rock or a robot from being saved since the sinner does not have to do anything? In other words, is divine grace both necessary and sufficient for Christian salvation, or (given the human will), is it only necessary but not sufficient? In this section, I will argue as follows:

1. The human will is dead for purposes of Christian salvation.
2. As such, Christian salvation can only be instantiated by an act of divine grace.
3. The human will is only necessary in the process of Christian salvation as the object of salvation.
4. Divine grace is both necessary and sufficient for instantiating Christian salvation in a human person.

To begin with, it would seem that divine grace is only necessary for salvation but not sufficient since if it is both necessary and sufficient, then even a rock or a robot can be saved. A rock has no will of its will and can be moved however and wherever the mover (divine or human) wants to move it. To say that divine grace is both necessary and sufficient for salvation construes grace as the divine mover that saves the sinner from death to life. This understanding of divine grace seems to dispense with the human will in Christian salvation, thereby suggesting that the human person is only an object to be acted upon (akin to a rock) rather than an acting subject him/herself. Rather than such a grim picture, some would insist on a commonsensical understanding of the human person as a free-acting subject who, by an act of the will, chooses to either receive or reject God’s offer of salvation.

In this sense, a person may resist the working of divine grace within her, thereby using her free will to say no to God. It is in this

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<sup>14</sup> Eph 2:8, 9 (NIV).

sense that Christian salvation can be said to involve genuine human action. This is why, as seen above, Abraham contends with traditional Calvinism claiming that there is no genuine human action in its construal of Christian salvation. Clark Pinnock affirms this position as well by pointing out that “an action forever predetermined to be what it will be, however necessitated, whether by external factors or internal motives, did not deserve to be called a ‘free’ action.”<sup>15</sup> It therefore follows that the human will is also necessary for salvation along with divine grace. In other words, while divine grace is necessary, it is not sufficient in and of itself to bring about Christian salvation without the active involvement of the human will.

This view is quite understandable and indeed attractive given its simplicity. It is more straightforward to say that humans play some role in the process of our own salvation and to deny this is to make a clearly counter-intuitive claim. In fact, the implications of this denial for other important issues such as theodicy and moral responsibility can be quite disturbing, even scandalous.<sup>16</sup> Not to be distracted by those concerns however, it does seem quite straightforward to say that humans, as free-acting agents, decide on their own to either receive or reject God’s offer of salvation. Nevertheless, one may ask whether it is possible for divine grace to be both necessary and sufficient for Christian salvation without at the same time dispensing with the human will in the process. I think that this question can be answered in the affirmative and in what follows, I attempt to show why.

To begin with, we should attempt to clarify what after all makes salvation necessary. Why do humans need to be saved and, one may add, saved from what? Understanding the nature of this need for salvation in humans is crucial to any explication of the nature and process of Christian salvation. The necessity of Christian salvation is hinged on humanity’s fall into sin. Sin, as it were, has wholly corrupted the human nature, bringing about a certain derailment and disorder in our beliefs, desires, and will. This is what the Calvinist tradition identifies as total depravity, that is, the idea that every aspect of the

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<sup>15</sup> Clark H. Pinnock, “From Augustine to Arminius: A Pilgrimage in Theology,” in *The Grace of God and the Will of Man* edited by Clark H. Pinnock (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1989), 18.

<sup>16</sup> It may be argued that if humans are without free will they cannot be blameworthy or praiseworthy (as the case may be) with respect to their actions. This then goes to show that God would have to be blamed for the presence of evil in the world. For an account of the free will defense of theodicy, see Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (1974).

human nature is affected wholly by the fall. The implication is that the human will should not be construed as a freestanding faculty, as William Abraham's notion of "genuine human action" in salvation seems to suggest. The human will should be understood as a part of the human person and, as such, part of the sinful human nature. In this sense, every decision and action taken by this fallen human will is inherently corrupt and intrinsically inadequate for Christian salvation. In recounting the view of the Reformers on this matter, Oliver Crisp articulates this claim as follows, "Human beings are constitutionally incapable of pleasing God and of achieving their salvation independent of divine grace because of this moral corruption. Consequently, all human actions are tainted, even if they are free actions."<sup>17</sup> In fact, given this corruption, the human will is naturally resistant and even hostile toward God and his offer of salvation.<sup>18</sup> To state the point more simply, (3) is true.

There are, however, those who disagree with this understanding of human depravity and offer an alternative outlook. For example, Clark Pinnock writes,

Surely, 'total' depravity biblically would be the point beyond which it is not possible to go in realizing the full possibilities of sinfulness and not the actual condition of all sinners at the present time.... Scripture appeals to people as those who are able and responsible to answer to God (however as we explain it) and not as those incapable of doing so, as Calvinian logic would suggest. The gospel addresses them as free and responsible agents, and I must suppose it does so because that is what they are."<sup>19</sup>

Clearly here, Pinnock, just like Abraham is forced to downplay the severity of our depravity to accommodate the claim that we have the ability to receive or resist God's offer of salvation. The concern again is to ensure that genuine human action and blame-worthiness are

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<sup>17</sup> Oliver Crisp, *Saving Calvinism: Expanding the Reformed Tradition* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2016), 69.

<sup>18</sup> Eph 4:16-18 and Rom 8:7 paint this picture to us of the sinful mind as dead, darkened, without sensitivity to spiritual things, and steeped in an ever-increasing sensual indulgence. Kyle Wells also affirms this claim in his well researched work when he said, "On Paul's reading, in contrast to most Jews, Scripture confirms the horrific reality that human agents are utterly incompetent. Bereft of eyes that see, ears that hear, or understanding hearts, they lack the faculties to respond to God effectively. Given this situation, resolution could not be on account of any acceptable human act. Rather, for Paul, human emancipation must be born out of God's unconditioned saving intervention as expressed in the Christ event." Kyle B. Wells, *Grace and Agency in Paul and Second Temple Judaism: Interpreting the Transformation of the Heart* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2015), 294.

<sup>19</sup> Clark H. Pinnock, "From Augustine to Arminius", 22.



upheld. However, as Oliver Crisp points out, the fact that we naturally resist God by virtue of our depravity “does not diminish our moral responsibility, since it was our first parents acting on our behalf that placed us in this position in the first place.”<sup>20</sup> In addition, we cannot say that Adam and Eve acted on their own and for themselves, such that we should not be blamed for their action. We cannot sustain this assertion because “Adam and his progeny are somehow one metaphysical entity, so that what our first parents did has implications for the rest of the race on analogy with infecting an acorn that grows into a misshapen oak tree over time. If Adam is the acorn, then we are later stages in the life of the oak that bear the imprint of his original sin.”<sup>21</sup> That being said, his main point however is this: the mere fact and nature of the gospel address demand that we presume humans to be capable of responding to it. Why speak to the deaf as if they are capable of hearing you when you know that they have no such ability. This will be at best pretentious (if one goes on to behave as if they heard what was said) and at worst mischievous (if one were to blame them for not acting on what was said to them).

However, the objection does not hold for two reasons: first, it denies a straightforward claim in Scripture that sinful human nature is resistant to God as explained above (e.g., see Eph 2:2; Rom 8:7). Second, the mere fact that the Bible addresses us as if we are capable of responding to the gospel message does not prove in itself that we are indeed capable. The nature of the address might simply be a strategy to make us clearly see our complete inability to respond to the address on our own. This is akin to one of the widely known functions of the Law that God gave the Israelites. Although God knew quite well that they lacked the capacity to obey the Commandments, he gave it to them so that we will discover and acknowledge just that fact—their/our inability to keep the commandments.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, the universal address of the gospel does not at all demonstrate that humans have the ability to respond to it on their own. As such, the fact remains that humans lack the ability to respond positively to God on their own. In fact, we

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<sup>20</sup> Crisp, *Saving Calvinism*, 69.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* This is the second way we may explicate how all humans are affected by the Fall as discussed by Crisp. The other is the representative view, which I find to be less helpful in comparison. A representative is not necessarily affected by all the things that affect the ones she represents, but that is not the case in the metaphysical view shown above.

<sup>22</sup> See Galatians 4.

are not only in need of salvation but also in need of help to even desire or want God's salvation. The human will as such cannot, and does not add anything to God's salvation; it cannot even receive this salvation on its own since by nature it can only resist God. The foregoing therefore points us in the direction of divine grace as being the necessary element in Christian salvation.

On this note however, a further objection might be raised with respect to our ability to do otherwise as human agents. The argument here is based on what is commonly known as the principle of alternate possibilities (PAP). PAP holds that where an acting agent does not have available to her a number of options to choose from, her action (and/or inaction) in this instance cannot be understood as free. The person may have done what they desired or wanted to do at that time, but they lacked genuine freedom at the time since their action was limited by prevailing circumstances.<sup>23</sup> Alvin Plantinga helps us articulate this notion of freedom in his Free Will Defense of the problem of evil. He writes, "If a person is free with respect to a given action, then he is free to perform that action and free to refrain from performing it; no antecedent conditions and/or causal laws determine that he will perform that action, or that he won't. It is within his power, at the time in question, to take or perform the action and within his power to refrain from it."<sup>24</sup> With respect to Christian salvation then, we might say that if the sinner is only able to resist God by nature and lacks an intrinsic ability to either accept or reject God's offer of salvation, then the process of Christian salvation would not involve a genuinely free human action. If this were the case, then the human will would be dispensable in the process of salvation, thereby implying that even a thing that does not have a will, say for example a rock, can be saved. In addition, it would seem odd that the sinner who rejects God would still be blamed since she or he does not act freely (in the sense of having alternate possibilities).

These objections however fail to hold as well for a number of reasons. First, it is clear that if the human will is also under the influence and corruption of sin as noted above, then it is hard to see

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<sup>23</sup> Michael McKenna and D. Justin Coates, "Compatibilism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/compatibilism/>>.

<sup>24</sup> Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 29.

how the concept of freedom as the ability to do otherwise applies in Christian salvation. That ability to do otherwise was lost at the Fall—a time when humanity used its freedom to follow Satan’s deception rather than God’s instruction. What ensued was the fallen state in humans, a situation in which the human will actually cannot do otherwise (i.e., yield to God) on its own. One may choose to reject this fact by limiting the effects of the Fall on the human will, but this move is also problematic as will be seen shortly.

Second, to say that the human will does not have the ability to do otherwise in Christian salvation is not to say that the human will is dispensable. Instead, it seems plausible to say that divine grace is necessary for effecting salvation while the human will is necessary for salvation to be effected. In this sense, as Reformed thought holds, divine grace acts upon the human heart and enables the human will to yield to God in the process of salvation.<sup>25</sup> Without such divine aid, the fallen human person lacks both the disposition and the capacity to desire, seek after, and/or receive God’s offer of salvation. The human will therefore is necessary for Christian salvation, but not in the sense of freely (i.e., without any external influence including divine aid) receiving God’s offer of salvation. The human will is necessary only as the object or target of salvation by divine grace. But this raises another problem.

It would seem though that this claim construes the human will as a mere object rather than the operation of a human subject. As such, it seems to make no distinction between a rock and a person so that on this construal of Christian salvation, even a rock can be saved. While this concern may be apparent, it is not a real problem. A rock by nature does not need saving since it would have to become a non-rock for it to experience salvation. The human person however does not need to become non-human to be saved. Steven Longman captures this point as follows,

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<sup>25</sup> This is what makes the *ordo salutis* (order of salvation) a critical aspect of soteriological discourse, especially the place of regeneration and/or effectual calling. For a recent defense of the Reformed view of the order of salvation, see: John V. Fesko, “Romans 8.29-30 and the Question of the *Ordo Salutis*,” *Journal of Reformed Theology* 8 (2014): 35-60. Furthermore, on the point at which regeneration takes place, I find Jonathan Hoggund’s proposed definition of effectual calling quite helpful. He writes, “*Effectual calling* is the means by which God gives his people *new life* (new birth or regeneration). This new life refers to a reordering of a person’s affections, so that the person whom God calls now sees Christ and his gospel as excellent.” Jonathan Hoggund, *Called by Triune Grace: Divine Rhetoric and the Effectual Calling* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2016), 6.

A rock cannot know and love God without ceasing to be a rock—it cannot even be ‘helped’ to know and love because it lacks any such faculties that might so be helped. By contrast, while a human person cannot know and love God in direct vision and embrace without supernatural aid, with such aid the person may partake in intrinsically supernatural divine friendship.<sup>26</sup>

The Prophet Ezekiel used this metaphor of a stone or rock to describe the fallen nature’s hard-heartedness as manifested in the people of Israel. Their rebellious deviation from God’s instructions was due to the rocky nature of their hearts—a state of affairs they were in no position to change. Therefore, Ezekiel echoed God’s promise to save his people by replacing their hearts of stone with the heart of flesh (a truly human heart).<sup>27</sup> In this sense then, the human person is saved from a fallen nature or a corrupt humanity into a true humanity that was fully exemplified in and by the God-man Jesus Christ. Christian salvation thus gives the human will a more or fully human character, as it were. This goes to show that it is reasonable to affirm (5).

The point, I think, is very important given the fact that opponents of the Reformed view tend to think that it has no place for the human will in Christian salvation, or that it has no place for genuine human action, as William Abraham seems to suggest. (5) does seem to confirm this concern. As such, the point needs further clarification, more so as it seems to generate a logical confusion. If the human will is necessary for salvation, is divine grace still sufficient? It seems odd to say that both divine grace and the human will are necessary for salvation while still insisting that divine grace is both necessary and sufficient. To say that divine grace is necessary and sufficient seems to entail that the human will is no longer necessary. However, this seeming confusion goes away once we clarify the sense of necessity being employed. Alvin Plantinga notes that much traditional philosophy distinguishes between two kinds of necessities. “We may attribute necessary truth to a proposition; but we may also ascribe to some object—the number 9, let us say—the *necessary* or *essential possession* of such a property as that of *being composite*.”<sup>28</sup> It is in this second sense of necessity that we think of the fallen human will as necessarily lacking the ability to

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<sup>26</sup> Steven A. Long, *Natura Pura: On the Recovery of Nature in the Doctrine of Grace* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 35.

<sup>27</sup> See for example, Ezekiel 11:19; 36:26.

<sup>28</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 9. Emphasis in original.

stop resisting God on its own. As a faculty of the fallen human heart that Ezekiel spoke about, it is essentially stony or rocky in relation to God. Therefore, the human will is necessary *with respect to Christian salvation* not because it is allegedly free (i.e., having the freedom to do otherwise), but simply because it is an aspect of the human nature, which in its totality needs saving. From the foregoing, we may therefore find (6) to be quite true.

To further show why this is the case, consider these statements, which I take to be mutually exclusive:

1. If someone got saved, it means she was definitely aided by divine grace.

Or,

2. If someone got saved, it means she freely wanted and accepted God's offer of salvation.

Given the assertion in Scripture that it is by grace we are saved, a logical reciprocity obtains between the consequent of (7) and its antecedent (i.e., the truth of the one guarantees the truth of the other). This simply means that it is not possible for one to be aided by divine grace and not be saved, and it is not possible for one to be saved without the aid of divine grace. However, the same cannot be said of (8). The idea of "freely" (without external or internal influence) accepting salvation is impossible since the Holy Spirit enables us to believe the gospel at the time of hearing the message, thereby indicating that there is an external spiritual influence on the sinner leading her to salvation. Furthermore, it seems entirely possible for someone to want to be saved and to seemingly accept this salvation without actually getting saved. Paul illustrates this point with the story of Esau and Jacob noting that God's choice of Jacob over Esau had nothing to do with their desires or efforts since this choice was decided even before their birth.<sup>29</sup>

Therefore, Christian salvation is solely contingent on divine grace and not on the human will. It seems to me that, given everything we have said so far, for Christian salvation to be contingent on the human will, one would have to construe the human will as completely or (at the very least) partially unaffected by the Fall. But this proposition is not only metaphysically implausible, the Scripture, as I see it, does not leave that option open to us. This is why the salvation of the human

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<sup>29</sup> Romans 9:11-16.

person involves the saving of her fallen will from its hostile nature towards God to friendship with him. When this takes place, one wonders whether the human will has the capacity to revert to its fallen state, or has that resistant and rebellious nature of the human will been lost forever? The next and final section of the essay attends to this concern.

### **C. Christian Salvation and the Sustaining Work of Divine Grace**

If it is only with the aid of divine grace that the sinner is saved, what happens after this experience of saving grace? Is the believer now responsible for ensuring that she remains saved before her final glorification? I. Howard Marshall notes that during this window period, “the believer is continually faced by temptations which jeopardize his faith. He is thus in a state of tension as he receives the gift of life from God and at the same time faces forces of temptation which threaten to deprive him of that life.”<sup>30</sup> But does this threat remain just that—a real threat but nothing more—or is there a point at which these forces of temptation actually cause the believer spiritual harm? In this third and final section of the paper, I will argue as follows:

1. Christian salvation effects an ontological change in the human person.
2. Divine grace sustains the human will so that it continually yields to God.
3. Therefore, Christian salvation is irreversible and irrevocable.

Marshall opines that given everything we know from the New Testament, “the possibility of genuine Christians falling into apostasy is not to be explained away.”<sup>31</sup> This conclusion is premised on the fact that, “There are passages which speak prophetically of the love of many growing cold and of men departing from the faith, and there are other passages where men who once believed are said to have fallen into sin and apostasy.”<sup>32</sup> It therefore appears that the believer must ensure that this does not happen. But, since the human will is naturally incapable of yielding to God, is this possible? The answer, I think lies in the transformative nature of Christian salvation.

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<sup>30</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God: A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away* (London: EP Worth, 1969), 2.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

However, in order to have the right understanding of the solution that salvation provides, we need to have an adequate appreciation of the problem it addresses. If the problem of sin is understood as a moral problem only, then the solution, it seems, would simply come from the voluntary replacement of immoral actions with moral ones by the human person. However, Marilyn McCord Adams helpfully points out that there is much more to the problem of sin than its moralistic and voluntarilistic senses:

Many Free-Will-Defenders readily identify the normative principles relevant to sin with moral principles (and so conceive of sin *moralistically*). Agreeing that “moral-ought” implies “can”, they readily conclude that sin is, in the first instance and the primary sense, a matter of wrongful choices by fully competent, incompatibilist free creatures (and so to think of sin *voluntaristically*).

This straightforward strategy for dealing with the concept of sin has the vices of its virtues. For if it renders the concept of sin palatable to secular thinkers, it runs the risk of being religiously inadequate. First of all, the Biblical catalog of sins includes, not only (i) conscious voluntary actions, but also (ii) emotions (e.g., anger) and cognitive states (e.g., belief) not within our (direct) voluntary control, (iii) dispositions, habits, inclinations that resist the normative ordering of self, and (iv) uncleanness or conditions of uncleanness (e.g., the abominations of Leviticus).<sup>33</sup>

From these five senses of sin, particularly (ii) and (iii), one can draw the conclusion that sin in the human person is an ontological problem and not just a moral failure. Human nature was fundamentally ruined at the Fall and it is this fallen state that Christian salvation addresses. The point is, if the Fall affected human nature ontologically, the solution to this problem (i.e., salvation from sin) would have to have the same effect—a transformation at the very core of our being.

This transformation is what I. Howard Marshall alluded to in his explication of salvation. Appropriating the work of K. Lake and H. J. Cadbury, he points out that there are two ways to explicate the concept of salvation. There “is the Hebraic idea of the universal efficacy of repentance and there is also the Hellenistic idea of a miraculous change of nature, sacramentally received.”<sup>34</sup> The first, it seems, comes from that inner sense of remorse for wrongdoing, which leads to a change of mind and actions. This human activity of repentance towards God is

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<sup>33</sup> Marilyn McCord Adams, “Sin as Uncleanness” in *A Reader in Contemporary Philosophical Theology*, ed. Oliver Crisp (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 254-55.

<sup>34</sup> Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God*, 193.

then reciprocated by the divine act of forgiveness in a cycle that is repeated over and again. The second however seeks to address the root of the problem in sinful human nature—our depravity (i.e., corruption and a disordering of the self), thus the incapacity of the human will to yield to God on its own. Marshall however notes, “This distinction between salvation by means of a human attitude of repentance and by means of a divine act of regeneration may be rather loosely expressed, but it serves to remind us that in several parts of the New Testament the idea of salvation as a result of a new birth is expressed.” Just this mention alone suffices for the claim that Christian salvation not only includes repentance followed by the forgiveness, but also accomplishes something even more fundamental and prior to repentance—it heals our corruption, reorders and/or realigns the self to God, and empowers the human will to respond positively to him. In this respect, Wells notes that God “pours out his love into human hearts and implants in them a faithful disposition.”<sup>35</sup> The conclusion therefore is that Christian salvation is an ontological transformation of fallen human nature into a new nature with the capacity to faithfully and continually yield to God’s will. In this sense therefore, this change is not simply a replacement of certain human properties with some others but a change in the human essence or substance—a change that cannot be reversed.<sup>36</sup>

The question that this raises however is whether the redeemed human state is reversible. Marshall also notes this point when he said, “A definite change takes place in the nature of the believer through the work of the Spirit, and the question may be raised whether such a change is irreversible.”<sup>37</sup> In other words, is Christian salvation irrevocable? Is it possible for the believer to fall away from grace and

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<sup>35</sup> Wells, *Grace and Agency*, 293.

<sup>36</sup> Richard Connell makes a helpful distinction between change *per accidens* and change *per se*. The first is a physical change whereby a given substance takes on certain properties artificially (e.g., water becoming ice by changing from its liquid state to a solid state, thus taking on the property of hardness). In contrast, change *per se* is substantial change (e.g., a change instantiated by the chemical reaction between sodium and chlorine to produce an entirely new compound known as salt). This is a change, not just in the properties of the reactants, but also in the reactants themselves, thus bringing about either the complete destruction of certain properties or the production of new ones. In other words, the new compound is not a mere ordered aggregate but a substance in and of itself, since the new properties of the compound in a chemical change do not imply just the emergence of new properties (accidental change) but the coming to be of a new substance (substantial change). Richard J. Connell, *Substance and Modern Science* (Houston: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1988). Similarly, it seems to me that the change occasioned by Christian salvation is a change *per se* rather than a change *per accidens* since it is a change that completely transforms the human nature as explicated above.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*



lose her faith or salvation? Can the saved person decide otherwise with respect to her own salvation (i.e., to no longer want it haven already been saved)? Marshall considers three responses to this question and concludes that they were all inadequate due to certain weaknesses in each. First is the “Mixed-church theory” response (held by many Calvinists), which claims that the church has both true and false believers in it, and those who fall away were not true believers in the first instance. Second is R. Bultmann’s view that true Christians can fall away since salvation is not something that happened once and for all but continues to happen throughout our lives as we hold on to our faith. The third response is that of G. C. Berkouwer, who opines that perseverance is not a mere logical consequence of election, but an outcome of divine grace enabling the believer to completely trust in God for strength to overcome, thus making it impossible for her to fall away.<sup>38</sup> At the end, Marshall thinks that all three views fail to offer a satisfactory solution. He claims that the mixed-church theory position fails to account for all cases of apostasy in scripture and treats the biblical warnings against falling away as apparent but not real. He writes, “The view of Bultmann ascribes altogether too much to the will of man, despite the guarded nature of his affirmations, while the view of Berkouwer ascribes everything ultimately to the irresistible grace of God.”<sup>39</sup>

The solution, according to Marshall, is for the believer to continually trust in God’s grace for the strength to persevere. Perseverance is not automatic and certain for the Christian because the possibility of falling away is real, meaning one can lose his or her salvation. Therefore, we must constantly hold on to God’s abiding grace and trust his power and faithfulness to keep us from falling away. If the believer fails to do this, she will be in danger of falling away because we can separate ourselves from the love of God even though nothing else that is external to us can separate us from it.<sup>40</sup> This way of construing the believer’s perseverance is indeed dynamic and serves as a safeguard against lethargic Christians who continue to live in sin

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<sup>38</sup> For a more nuanced and recent treatment of this question, see the discussions of Michael Horton on Classical Calvinism, Norman Geisler on Moderate Calvinism, Stephen Ashly on Reformed Arminianism, and J. Steven Harper on Wesleyan Arminianism, in J. Matthew Pinson, gen. ed. *Four Views on Eternal Security* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002).

<sup>39</sup> Marshall, 204-05.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

while claiming, at the same time, to be believers who are heaven-bound. However, it seems to me to suffer from a case of conceptual confusion.

First, it seems to conflate the idea of spiritual birth with that of spiritual growth or the concepts of conversion/regeneration with that of sanctification. The believer is called to trust in God for spiritual strength to live a life of holiness and righteousness not so that he or she would not lose their salvation. It is a call unto spiritual growth, fruitfulness, and maturity, such that the warning against falling is a falling into sin and not a falling away from grace leading to a loss of salvation. Second, to claim that it is possible to lose one's salvation, I think is to say that the formerly degenerate person who is now regenerate can become degenerate again (thus becoming some sort of a de-regenerate). Furthermore, if he returns to the Lord, then he is regenerated again (i.e., a re-de-regenerate); and since it is possible that he can lose his salvation again, if that happens he might become a de-de-regenerate. This rather odd situation can go on endlessly for as long as this person is alive.

Third, Marshall seems to think that even though God is faithful and able to keep the believer from falling, the believer's "own willfulness and failure to trust [God] can cause him to fall."<sup>41</sup> The idea that the regenerate person can willfully fall away seems to me to be at odds with her new nature. If Christian salvation, as shown above, is a transformation of the human will from a corrupt sinful nature that is inherently hostile towards God to a new nature that yields to him, then one wonders how this regenerate human will would willfully fall away. To do so would be to act contrary to nature. This new human will is God-inclined. It seems therefore that, haven been empowered by divine grace, the human will does not only yield to God at conversion, but continues to yield to God's will all through the individual's lifetime. This continual yielding of the redeemed will is in contradistinction to the state of resistance to God in the natural unsaved human will. This is why the human will perseveres in salvation in spite of the combined adversity of sin, Satan, and the world.

This however does not mean that the truly regenerated Christian will never sin. This cannot be true since sanctification is progressive and differential. For example, in the parable of the Sower, we see that

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 207.

Christian fruitfulness does not look the same for every portion of the good soil (i.e., different believers). Some produce thirty times what was sown, some sixty times, and some others a hundred times (not to be confused with sinless perfection).<sup>42</sup> These different levels of spiritual fruitfulness point to the fact that Christians will be at different stages of the struggle against sin in their faith journeys (Cf. Heb 12:4). Perhaps, the “sixty-fold believer” will have less sinful traits and practices in her life than the “thirty-fold believer,” even though both are not only regenerated but also spiritually productive. The implication is that the presence of sin in the believer’s life is not necessarily a problem that warrants a falling away from grace since its removal is a continuous process of actually being a Christian. If, in the first instance, divine grace was given to the human person because of the presence of sin, it seems quite odd that the presence of sin would now be the reason why this same grace is taken away from them. If anything, this is the time that this person will need more grace in order to overcome the unrelenting advance of sin in her life.<sup>43</sup>

So far, I have shown that God who initiated and effected Christian salvation is not going to end it since he himself willed the sinner’s salvation. The truly regenerate Christian will not want to end it because she now has a redeemed, transformed, and God-inclined will. Finally, Satan and the world operating via sin cannot end it given the presence and continuing operations of divine grace in the life of the believer. This way of construing the eternal nature of Christian salvation avoids both the automatic and static view that construes perseverance as a necessary outcome of election, a view that often leads to unholy living. It also avoids the unstable anthropocentrism of the opposite extreme with its claim that everything depends on us, that is whether we stand or fall away from our salvation.

### **Conclusion**

In this essay, I have attempted to show that given the fallen nature of the human will, divine grace is both necessary and sufficient for Christian salvation. Because the human will is completely weak and/or

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<sup>42</sup> Mark 4:1-20.

<sup>43</sup> For those who think that this claim will make people sin all the more since they will continue to receive grace as a result, the Apostle Paul raises this question: should we continue to sin so that more grace will be given to us? In response, he argues that the question itself is nonsensical since it assumes that the redeemed human will still loves to sin rather than struggles or fights against it. See Romans 6:1-2.

dead for purposes of salvation, it needs the aid of divine grace to desire, seek after, and receive God's offer of salvation. Divine grace therefore acts on the human will in a salvific manner, which means that the human will is only necessary as the object of salvation. Once saved however, redeemed human will is no longer weak but is enabled by the sustaining work of divine grace to remain faithful to God. It is for this reason, rather than just the mere fact of divine election, that the human will perseveres in Christian salvation in spite of the combined adversity of sin, Satan, and the world.

Furthermore, the transformative nature of Christian salvation means that a change occurs and human nature is permanently altered. This alteration entails a crossing over from death to life<sup>44</sup> (a life that will last forever) thus ensuring a new humanity that, above everything else, desires and seeks after God. Because this is a change at the level of the human essence rather than just human behavior or actions, it brings about an irreversible transformation of our human nature through which the sinner becomes a saint. To argue against the claim here that Christian salvation is irreversible, one would have to show (I think) that the change that occurs when one is saved is not a substantial change.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> John 5:24

<sup>45</sup> Zachariah Chine and Esther Atsen read this essay and offered very helpful corrections and suggestions.

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