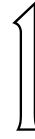


There is a great danger, when once we have adhered to one particular school of thought or adopted one particular system of theology, of reading the Bible in the light of that school or system and finding its distinctive features in what we read. . . . The remedy for this is to bear resolutely in mind that our systems of doctrine must be based on biblical exegesis, not imposed upon it.

-F. F. Bruce



## INTRODUCTION

### What Is the Gospel?

The goal of this book is to “get the gospel right.” The word ‘gospel’ means ‘good news,’ so it is crucial to make sure that the message really is ‘good news’ for those who respond to it. It is the good news that the Lord Jesus and His Apostles proclaimed to a lost world of sinners—Jew and Gentile. The essence of the gospel is the person and work of the Lord Jesus and how the benefits of His life, death, and resurrection are realized in the lives of individuals. Most evangelical Christians agree about the person and work of Christ: that He was God incarnate in human flesh to provide eternal life to a spiritually dead humanity through His death and resurrection. However, many who accept this statement might not agree with each other as to how a sinner can be saved. Indeed, there has been a serious polarization among Evangelicals in regard to salvation truth.

*It is the thesis of this book that the gospel is that any sinner can be saved by grace only through explicit repentant faith in the finished work of Christ alone.* This means that the gospel is a valid offer for every last human being, available by God’s unmerited favor, apart from human performance either before or after conversion. Christ is the only way of salvation, that is, no one can be saved apart from explicit trust in the merits of His saving death and resurrection. Although the new birth and right standing with God are given instantaneously upon the exercise of saving faith, there is a process by which unbelievers come to trust in Christ for salvation. Also, it is the privilege of every true believer to have assurance of ultimate salvation.

It is clear that many mainline Protestants would no longer agree with Evangelicals about even the deity and passion of Christ. This book will only briefly deal with those issues. Traditional Catholics and Eastern Orthodox

might agree with Evangelicals about His deity and passion, but they would not accept our teaching about how people can be saved. This was the crucial issue of the Protestant Reformation. However, within a century after the Reformation a sharp division developed among Protestants. Martin Luther and John Calvin had followed Augustine in a deterministic approach to salvation, with doctrines of unconditional election (absolute predestination) and irresistible grace. It is widely recognized that Calvin's successor in Geneva, Theodor Beza, developed a more extreme form of Calvin's doctrine by adding the notion of limited atonement—that Christ died only for the elect.

A century after the Reformation a reaction against this extreme Genevan Calvinism developed around Amsterdam pastor and theologian, Jacob Arminius (1560-1609). After Arminius' untimely death, some of his followers, called Remonstrants, pressed his denial of Calvinism in five points. At the Synod of Dort (1618-19) the Arminians were banished from the Netherlands Reformed churches by the extreme Calvinists, who set out their doctrine in five opposing points, the famous acronym, TULIP. Most Protestants, except Lutherans and the Anabaptist-Mennonite\* heritage, can trace their lineage back to either the Calvinism or Arminianism.

It is the burden of this book to show that both Calvinists and Arminians have got it half right and half wrong, with the truth being in the middle. Diligent inductive study of the whole Bible, without traditional or philosophical preconceptions, confirms the above definition of the gospel message. A middle or mediate view is also confirmed by the views of the early church fathers\* and a score of evangelical movements which reacted to the determinism of the Reformers. It is also harmonious with the Great Commission of the Lord Jesus to His church. British scholar, I. Howard Marshall expressed this goal so aptly: "The full Arminian position is as much open to error as is extreme Calvinism. My aim is to reach beyond the Calvinist-Arminian controversy to a position which is biblical, and which therefore accepts whatever is true in both Calvinism and Arminianism."<sup>1</sup>

## What Are the Various Views?

**Moderate Calvinism.** The essence of Calvin's theology, which he got from Augustine a millennium earlier, is in the doctrines of unconditional election and irresistible grace. According to this view, God predestined some individuals to be elected to salvation based upon His own hidden reasons. God then sovereignly gives the new birth and faith only to those elect individuals. Christ died for all mankind, without exception or discrimination, but only the elect will respond to the gospel and be saved. This view is commonly referred to as four-point Calvinism.

**Extreme or HyperCalvinism.** Calvin's successors extended the implications of Calvin's views to become the five-points of the Synod of Dort and the Westminster Confession. The acronym **TULIP** stands for these

points. **T** is for **Total Depravity**, which means that mankind is so depraved that sinners can do nothing to please God, including repentance or faith. Spiritual death means total inability to respond to God, so God must give faith to the sinner. **U** is for **Unconditional Election** or predestination. **L** is for **Limited Atonement**, that Christ died only for the elect and not for the “non-elect.” (Some prefer the term, “particular redemption.”) **I** is for **Irresistible Grace**, which means that the elect are sovereignly given regeneration to enable them to believe. **P** is for **Perseverance of the saints**, which means that the truly elect prove their election by perseverance in faith and obedience to the end. Section III deals with issues raised by extreme Calvinism.

**Classic Arminianism.** Some Christians would go back to the moderate views of Arminius himself. They reject eternal security, although Arminius only had doubts about this doctrine. They reject the other points of Calvinism. Four chapters of this book deal with eternal security.

**Remonstrant Arminianism.** The Remonstrant successors to Arminius not only rejected all five points of Calvinism, but many also denied that Christ’s death was as a substitute for sinners. This denial was an attempt to explain how Christ could die for all sinners without all mankind being saved.

**Wesleyan Arminianism.** Over a century after Arminius, John Wesley (1703-91) restored an “Evangelical Arminianism.” He rejected the extreme views of the Remonstrants by holding to a stronger view of human depravity and God’s sovereignty, which was important to his very fruitful evangelism. However, he began to teach that believers can attain sinless perfection, which became the basis for the subsequent ‘holiness movement.’

**Mediate theology.** The Synod of Orange (AD 529) affirmed Augustine’s emphasis upon grace, but rejected his doctrines of unconditional election and irresistible grace, which could be called a semi-Augustinian view. Over a dozen movements after the Reformation rejected the determinism of the Reformers and sought to find a middle position. Hundreds of theologians, Bible commentators, and church leaders in recent centuries have held to election being conditioned on repentant faith alone, while also affirming the eternal security of the true believer. *Research for this book has confirmed this mediate position as the biblical one.*

## **Biblical Doctrine Is Foundational**

Since God uses true Christians in all of the above movements, why should we be concerned about which one is right? Many Christians have the notion that doctrine divides and is unimportant in the life of the individual or of the church. Nothing could be farther from the truth!

In his first letter to Timothy, the Apostle Paul emphasized repeatedly the importance of sound doctrine and teaching. He showed great concern for the truth of the message which Timothy was to preach and teach and spoke

frequently of the imperative of holding to “**the faith**” as an objective body of essential truth. He encouraged Timothy to stay on in Ephesus to deal with false teachings in the churches there (1 Tim. 1:3-11). In emphasizing God’s desire that all men might be saved, he makes their coming “**to the knowledge of the truth**” synonymous with this (2:3-4). Therefore it is essential that local church leaders be “**able to teach**” (3:2) and must hold “**to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience**” (3:9), since the church of the living God is “**the pillar and support of the truth**” (3:15).

Paul warns that “**in the latter times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons**” (4:1), and that to “**be a good servant of Christ Jesus**” Timothy will not only have to be “**nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine**” but also have to point out this apostasy to the brethren (4:6). Paul exhorts him to “**prescribe and teach**” that “**the living God ... is the Savior of all men, especially of believers**” (4:10-11), and twice reminds him that by giving attention to his teaching he will insure salvation for his hearers (4:13, 16). In the concluding section, Paul shows a great concern that Timothy teach “**doctrine conforming to godliness**” and warns those whose lifestyle is moving them away from “**the faith**” (5:8, 17; 6:2-3, 10, 17). Paul’s letter to Titus emphasizes these same concerns (1:1, 9-14; 2:1, 7, 10).

Based on the preceding, it is no overstatement to say that *biblical doctrine is foundational to the life, witness, and ministry of individual Christians, and to the life of the church*. Yet today, we see little concern for doctrine in most evangelical churches, and music is fast becoming doctrinally vapid. This situation is so serious that it must be called a crisis.

## How Can We Be Sure to Get It Right?

The main emphasis of this book is upon the use of an inductive or bottom-up approach to the Bible, rather than a deductive or top-down approach. It is imperative to have an honest, scientific approach to the Bible, since Christ said that good, fruit-bearing soil are those with an “**honest heart**” (Lk. 8:15). The attitude of our hearts and our perspective must be right, as well as our methodology. An inductive approach must be primary.

***The priority of inductive methodology.*** It should be axiomatic, both in science and theology, that inductive, empirical evidence is far more dependable than deductive reasoning. What do these terms mean? Induction is defined as “the process of reasoning from particular instances to general conclusions.” In logic, it is “reasoning from particular facts or individual cases to a general conclusion.” In science it is parallel to the empirical or scientific method, which involves gathering a large number of data points from many experiments and then drawing a general principle from this. The more data points the scientist has, the more certain the generalization derived from them. On the other hand, deduction is “reasoning from a known principle to an unknown, from the general to the specific,

or from a premise to a logical conclusion;” and “from the general to the particular, or from the universal to the individual.”<sup>2</sup>

Thus, the inductive theologian draws many data points from the careful exegesis\* (interpretation) of many Scriptures and derives a general conclusion from them. The number, clarity, and relevance of those many passages is crucial to the certainty of the theological conclusions drawn. Building a doctrine on one or two passages, or passages which are unclear or not directly related to the issue, raises questions about the dependability of the results. This book gives priority to an inductive, exegetical methodology.

On the other hand, the deductive theologian starts with certain axiomatic general principles, such as the sovereignty of God or the depravity of man, and reasons logically to specific doctrines derived from them. This is essentially a scholastic approach\* to doctrine common before the Reformation, but unfortunately carried over into Protestant theology.

An illustration from medical science may be helpful. For years the medical consensus was that eggs and nuts in our diet contribute to high blood cholesterol and therefore to heart disease, since they are high in fat and cholesterol. A decade ago an alternative approach caught my attention, since Christ confirmed that fish and eggs are good things to give to children (Lk. 11:11-13). Assuming that the Lord Jesus, the Creator, knew more about diet than doctors today, I included eggs and nuts in my low carbohydrate diet with dramatic results in correcting my blood cholesterol. In 1999 researchers reported a radical reversal of medical advice on eggs and nuts. The direct data now, coming from the medical histories of thousands of nurses, showed that the previous advice was based upon “hypothesis and indirect evidence rather than direct data.”<sup>3</sup> The previous advice was deductive rather than inductive and empirical; it was *a priori* rather than *a posteriori*. And it was dead wrong!

Exegesis of the determining Scripture passages gives the particular facts, which must be the starting point of all theology. Only after the inductive process has been exhausted may the deductive method be used. Deductive reasoning is valid only in confirming and testing the results of induction or in filling in the gaps where the inductive data is missing or incomplete. It must never be given priority over induction.

An example of putting deduction before induction, is found in one writer’s discussion of Hebrews 6:4-6.<sup>4</sup> He argues that this difficult passage must be interpreted in the light of the analogy of Scripture.\* Since many other passages teach the eternal security of the believer, this passage cannot contradict this and must be interpreted in harmony with it. He admits, however, “as one who has always believed in the doctrine of eternal security, I must confess that this passage does indeed conflict with such a view.”<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately he did not give a cogent interpretation harmonious with this view and thus left the problem unresolved. Although the principle of the analogy of Scripture is sound, all of the inductive data should have been ex-

plored more carefully before resorting to deduction (cf. Ch. 13).

***Principles of normative interpretation.*** The Bible must be interpreted in the same way other literature is understood, but always being careful to ask the Holy Spirit, the divine Author, for guidance in understanding. This means that we must take it all literally, unless some recognizable figure of speech, such as metaphor, hyperbole, or simile, is used. Failure to recognize such figures would be ‘crass interpretation.’ Sound interpretation focuses on a few basic principles, which must never be ignored.

One of the most important is *the context of the passage*. This means not only the verses preceding and following the passage under consideration, but also the near paragraphs and flow of thought of the whole book as well. How does this passage fit into the near paragraphs, and how does it fit into the theme of the whole book? It may seem like an old platitude, but “a text out of context is a pretext.” Avoid proof-texting\* like the plague! This is what the cults do. It is also important to see the passage in its historical, sequential context. There is a development of ideas in the Bible, and if the progression is ignored, serious error can result.

Equally important is *the meaning of the words used*. This sometimes will require a careful word study of crucial words in the passage. Reference to a good Greek or Hebrew lexicon\* (dictionary) may be adequate. In some cases all the usages of the word in the Bible should be examined. In a few cases the usage of a Greek word in the secular classical and common (koine) Greek as well as in the Septuagint Old Testament translation must be checked. This will give us a far better idea of the range of meanings from which to choose for the passage at hand. This is important, since the lexicons are not infallible! Here it must be emphasized that *word usage, not derivation, determines word meaning*. The derivation of a word from its root may be totally misleading, even though it is sometimes helpful.

It should be obvious that *the grammar and syntax\* of the sentence* is also exceedingly important. The Greek language of the New Testament has a very precise and discriminating grammar, which is discernible from the many distinct forms of the words. Building upon this is the syntax\* or relationship of the words in the sentence to be studied. Excellent Greek grammar books are constantly becoming available to help in this.

Many readers will plead ignorance of the Greek original: “Isn’t this why we have translations?” Yes, the better modern translations can generally be trusted. In this book the New American Standard Version has normally been used as one of the most literal and dependable. However, there are times when the NAS translators do not give the best rendering, and then the most accurate of other translations will be quoted. On rare occasions, I will supply my own translation, when the above rules of interpretation lead to the conclusion that none of the existing translations are adequate.

Another widely used principle of interpretation is the *‘analogy of Scripture’\** (analogy of faith), which means looking for a parallel passage which

teaches the same thing. This can be very helpful but can also be very misleading, especially if the other passages are not really parallel. This is a deductive method. Some interpreters fall into “parallelomania,” which means, bringing in other passages which are not parallel and therefore irrelevant.

**A healthy perspective.** In science, the angle from which we look at the data is important. If a researcher looks at an instrument from other than a 90° angle there will be a parallax error. Approaching the Bible from a skewed angle gets equally false results. Belief in the *total inerrancy\** of Scripture is a crucial starting point. Along with this the *sufficiency\** of Scripture is also most important. If we look to human tradition, reason, or experience as a significant basis, we will probably fall into error.

Many people approach the Bible from the perspective of a denominational tradition. This is a skewed angle from which to study Scripture, since all human traditions come under the condemnation of the Lord Jesus when He warned the Pharisees: “**you invalidated the world of God for the sake of your tradition**” (Mt. 15:6). The Apostle Paul warned the Colossian Christians about the danger of being taken “**captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men,...**” (Col. 2:8). British scholar, F. F. Bruce warned: “There is a great danger, when once we have adhered to one particular school of thought or adopted one particular system of theology, of reading the Bible in the light of that school or system and finding its distinctive features in what we read.”<sup>6</sup> It is spiritually perilous to get emotionally attached to a denominational tradition.

Human experience is another distorting factor. Although the evangelical faith is characterized by a strong emphasis upon our experiencing the truth of God’s word personally, we must never interpret the Bible by our experience. *We must always interpret our experience by the Bible!* Scripture is the plumbline by which all human experience must be measured and evaluated. Otherwise, there cannot be one absolute truth of the word of God, denial of which is the major error of our contemporary culture.

## A Personal Theological Pilgrimage

This book is the result of my personal theological pilgrimage. When I came to salvation as an engineering student, I was active in an Arminian church. I early became convinced of the doctrine of eternal security through inductive study. At seminary I accepted moderate Calvinism and in turn taught it for a score of years. However, dialogue with an extreme Calvinistic colleague and my study and teaching of the life of Christ and the book of Acts forced me to re-examine my Calvinism. A defining moment in my pilgrimage was a question posed to me on a radio call-in program about the relationship of foreknowledge and election. These things helped move me to my present mediate position between Calvinism and Arminianism.

An exploratory paper I presented at the Evangelical Theological Society annual meeting in Toronto in 1981 drew considerable interest. Since 1992 the results of in-depth research on sub-topics have been presented at various ETS meetings, which are the basis of this volume. It has been very exciting to see how all the pieces have come together, and it is astonishing how this mediate position resolves the supposed contradictions and paradoxes, which have plagued our theologies over the ages. But this really should not be surprising, since all Scripture has one Author, the Holy Spirit, and there should be no real contradictions in a biblical theology. In 2002 an academic presentation of this data was published under the title, *Beyond Calvinism and Arminianism: an Inductive, Mediate Theology of Salvation* (0-9624850-4-7). This present book seeks to make this study available to all serious Christians, not just theologians. If a reader wants to go into greater depth in looking into the biblical proofs of this position, the academic version is recommended and a revised edition is projected.

### The Importance of Details

A major flaw in a deductive approach to any subject, whether it be science, medicine, or theology, is the tendency to make sweeping generalizations without adequate attention to the details of the data. Carl Sagan got plenty of undeserved media attention for his sweeping generalizations about evolution in the universe, but when we read the incredible detail from some writers, such as Michael Denton and Michael Behe, we see that evolutionists' sweeping generalizations get demolished by a host of details of fact.<sup>7</sup>

The major advantage of an inductive, empirical approach is that it forces us to pay attention to the details of the data. Indeed, in the preface of Michael Behe's *Darwin's Black Box*, this biochemist alerts his readers to the daunting task they will face in reading his book, because of the incredible multiplicity of details he must discuss in order to do justice to the subject. Many readers will face the same problem in theological studies. *I will be forced to go into great detail of linguistic, grammatical, syntactical, exegetical, and historical material to do justice to the subject.* Bear with it, if you really want to get to the bottom of these issues, even if the details at times get tedious. *There is no other way to get to the whole truth.*

1. I. Howard Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1995), p. 16.

2. *Webster's New American Dictionary*, p. 478; *Webster's New World Dictionary* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1986), pp. 368, 718; *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: G. C. Merriam Co., 1943), p. 262.

3. Walter C. Willett, "Old Beliefs Challenged by New Data," in *Nurses' Health Study Newsletter*, vol. 6 (1999), p. 5.

4. Robert H. Stein, *Difficult Passages in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), pp. 348-55.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 353.

6. F. F. Bruce in Roger T. Forster and V. Paul Marston, *God's Strategy in Human History*, p. vii.

7. Michael Denton, *Evolution: A Theory in Crisis* (Bethesda, MD: Adler & Adler, 1985) and Michael Behe, *Darwin's Black Box* (NY: Free Press, 1996).