



August 14, 2007

Dear Friend,

One of the most rewarding and enjoyable parts of being a pastor and teaching the Bible every week is the interaction I have with people after the sermon is over. I never know what story I'll hear or question I'll be asked.

After preaching a number of years ago, I remember being approached by a former Jehovah's Witness who told me how he had accidentally tuned in to "Grace to You" while driving. When he heard me teaching on the deity of Christ, he instantly switched the radio off in anger. But then he turned it back on so he could mentally debate me as he drove. He ended up being converted right there in his car. You can't get enough of that kind of feedback—especially right after you've poured out your heart in a sermon.

But in my experience, most people who linger to talk with me after a sermon don't have a dramatic story—they have questions. They want clarification about this doctrine or that verse of Scripture, so they seize the opportunity to ask—perhaps hoping they'll get a simple, pithy reply that will suddenly turn on the light. Sometimes it's a question about something from the sermon I've just preached. More often than not, however, it's a question that has nothing to do with anything I have said in my message. Instead, it will be one of those familiar, knotty questions that nags at the mind and seems to have no simple or obvious solution.

I don't mind when people ask such questions. In fact, I have come to expect and welcome them. When people ask those hard questions, it shows that they are thinking, and it encourages me to keep thinking, too.

Virtually all of us struggle with certain universally-puzzling ideas at some time or another in our study of the Bible—questions about eternal security, or assurance of salvation, or the tension between God's sovereignty and human responsibility.

I'll confess something: those common conundrums are the hardest questions to answer in a three-minute conversation. There just aren't any satisfying-yet-short answers for questions like those.

The Bible Teaching of John MacArthur

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Of course, I can—and do—refer people to books, CDs, articles, and websites where they can find more comprehensive help with questions like those. But that’s not really a satisfying answer (not for me, and not for the person who is wrestling with the question).

One way I have dealt with that over the years is by occasionally devoting an evening service to questions and answers, where people can come to an open microphone and ask unscripted and uncoached questions—I answer them as thoroughly as possible on the spot. We’ve done that dozens of times over the years, and I love the spontaneity of those sessions. It’s electric.

Listen to a random selection of questions from any one of those Q&A sessions spanning several decades, and you will notice a common thread that ties most of the questions together. The vast majority of the thorny, persistent, mind-boggling questions that Christians struggle with are directly related to the sovereignty of God, election, predestination, perseverance, and the question of “free will.”

Those, of course, are doctrines associated with Calvinism. Both the label and the doctrines have been highly controversial for nearly five hundred years. As a matter of fact, I normally prefer to avoid using the term Calvinism because it often provokes too much emotion and too many misconceptions to be useful if the goal is real understanding rather than merely vigorous debate.

Besides, my preference has always been to deal with the doctrines of election, free will, predestination, and related ideas from the standpoint of the Bible, rather than all together as a theological system with a man’s name attached to it.

I have no slavish devotion to John Calvin, the man. I do admire his skills as a theologian. Even more important than that, he was (usually) a superb and very careful Bible expositor. He didn’t get everything right, of course. I wouldn’t agree with his views on baptism or Bible prophecy, for example.

As for the major teachings people so often label Calvinism, I usually prefer to speak of them as “the doctrines of grace.” These start with the sinner’s complete inability to free himself from sin’s bondage, and they include divine election, substitutionary atonement, God’s gracious work

in drawing sinners to Himself, and the security of every believer's salvation.

All of those are vital to a sound, biblical understanding of the gospel. But they are admittedly not without difficulty. And in order to sort out our understanding of those truths, we need to look to Scripture—not human tradition, personal feelings, debate forums on the Internet, or even Calvin's own teachings. What does the Bible say? That's my only real concern.

Controversies about Calvinism between evangelical Christians have bubbled to the surface more than usual over the past half-decade or so. *Christianity Today* magazine recently featured an article on the influence of Calvinism among young people. That stirred a whole new series of questions on the issue.

The questions are good ones, and the issues are extremely important. In fact, many of modern Christianity's practices, trends, and problems are rooted in these hotly-debated doctrines.

Not long ago, from a desire to give careful, biblical answers to those questions, I preached an extended series of sermons dealing with each of the five doctrines of grace. It was an important series in the life of our church, and it helped calm many hearts that had wrestled with the issues for several years.

I knew interest in the topic would be high among you and our Grace to You family, and so we want to send you free copies of what I believe are the best and most important sermons from that series. It's an abbreviated, two-part series we call *Hot-Button Questions on Calvinism and the Gospel*. The sermons deal with the major questions about sovereign election and human depravity and inability—two pivotal doctrines that undergird all the other doctrines of grace.

My friend, these sermons offer satisfying, comforting, biblical answers to your most troubling and baffling questions about Calvinist theology. They will give you a confident understanding of what God's Word says and means when it comes to these vital, hard-to-grasp doctrines. To receive your free copy of *Hot-Button Questions on Calvinism and the Gospel* on two CDs or tapes, please fill out and return the accompanying response card today.

You may have heard me say this before, but it's worth repeating. Doctrine matters. What you believe about God, the gospel, the nature of man, and every major truth addressed in Scripture filters down to every area of your life. You and I will never rise above our view of God and our understanding of His Word.

My heartbeat is to teach and exalt God's Word, and thereby help you understand its meaning, help you become more discerning and mature, help you improve your ability to study it on your own and teach it to others, and ignite a hunger that can be satisfied only by truth. Grace to You pursues those goals through our radio and television programs, our website, and all the free print and audio resources we send out. Our first priority is your spiritual health.

But our ability to meet spiritual needs rests with the very people to whom we minister—you and other friends like you. Your gifts translate into men and women being reached with our verse-by-verse Bible teaching. As you fill out the response card to request your free series I offered earlier, please remember that your support—both this month and beyond—makes a real impact on the lives of the people we reach. If you are unable to give, we understand—please don't feel compelled. But if you can and are so led, we'd welcome your help, and we'd put it to good use.

Thank you for whatever form in which your support may come. May the Lord continue to bless our efforts together, as we bring His Word to His people.

Love in the Truth,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John MacArthur', with a large, stylized initial 'J'.

John MacArthur
Pastor-Teacher

P.S. I want to send you a free copy of my new, two-sermon series, *Hot-Button Questions on Calvinism and the Gospel*. Simply fill out and return the enclosed response card to request your copy today.