

The Order of Faith and Election in John's Gospel: You Do Not Believe Because You Are Not My Sheep

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I. Introduction and Theological Background

A. A Troubling Message

When I was a student in seminary in the late 1980s, I vividly recall a chapel message delivered by John Piper, a noted Calvinist scholar and pastor, in which he made skillful and compelling use of John 8:47, 10:26 and related passages from John's Gospel to argue for the Calvinist Reformed view of unconditional, particular election. At the time, I had no way in my own mind to refute his arguments. I had only recently at that point in my life made the transition from Calvinism to Arminianism, so Piper's message left me troubled, to say the least. However, there was so much independent evidence for Arminianism that I simply buried the Johannine puzzle in my mind until a later date. Subsequent exposure to Arminian attempts to address Jesus' expressions of divine initiative in the Gospel of John, such as that by Shank, seemed inadequate (see Section C below), and the fundamental questions originally stirred by Piper's address remained.

I suspect that there may be other Arminians out there who, like me, have struggled with the question of how to resolve certain of Jesus' statements in the Gospel of John to Arminian thought. It is my hope that in this present essay they may find a reasonable, hermeneutically-responsible answer to that question. This essay is intended to serve as a companion to my earlier essay on "Election in Romans Chapter Nine" and a planned future essay on "Election in Ephesians Chapter One," these representing two other scripture passages that have often been held to provide particularly compelling support for Calvinist Reformed doctrine.

B. *The Calvinist Reformed View of Election and Salvation in Relation to John's Gospel*

As just alluded to above, the Gospel of John is widely perceived as containing some of the strongest support to be found in Scripture for the Calvinist Reformed doctrine of unconditional, particular election to salvation and the related doctrines of effectual calling and irresistible grace. This is so because John's Gospel contains a number of passages that strongly emphasize divine agency in the process of individual salvation, including several passages (e.g., 8:47, 10:26) suggesting that an individual's faith in Christ for salvation *follows from*--rather than precedes--certain conditions (e.g., "belonging" to God as his child; being one of Christ's "sheep"). Calvinists have often identified these prior conditions with the Calvinist Reformed notion of a pretemporal, unconditional, particular election to salvation.

By "unconditional, particular election to salvation" I refer to the Calvinist Reformed teaching that God has, "according to the most free good pleasure of His will, out of mere grace, chosen in Christ to salvation a certain number of specific men" (Canons of Dort, I.7). These elect ones are "particularly and unchangeably designed, and their number so certain and definite that it cannot be either increased or diminished" (Westminster Confession of Faith, III.4). In the Calvinist Reformed view, this divine election is not based on "any determining factor arising from the will of man" (John Murray, "The Plan of Salvation," in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977, p. 127) and it specifically "does not in any way depend on the foreseen faith or good works of man . . . but exclusively on the sovereign good pleasure of God" (Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology: New Edition*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996, p. 115).

The terms "effectual calling" and "irresistible grace" refer to the Calvinist Reformed teaching that "by the regenerating work of his Spirit, God the Father *irresistibly* summons . . . the elect sinner into fellowship with, and into the kingdom of, his Son Jesus Christ. His call is rendered *effectual* by the quickening work of the Spirit of God the Father and God the Son in the hearts of the elect." (Walter Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, 1998, p. 718, emphasis added). At the point of regeneration and effectual calling, it is important to understand that, in the Calvinist Reformed view, the recipient of regeneration is "altogether passive therein, until, being quickened and renewed by the Holy Spirit, he is thereby enabled to answer this [effectual] call, and to embrace the grace offered and conveyed in it." (Westminster Confession of Faith, X/ii). Until such an effectual call is

extended and regeneration occurs, the elect sinner is entirely unwilling and unable to make any positive volitional movements toward God, including movements toward faith (cf. the doctrines of total depravity and total inability). It should be emphasized that this effectual calling and regeneration are said to be extended exclusively to the elect (cf. Reymond's comment above).

As mentioned above, Calvinists find ample apparent support for the above doctrines in the Gospel of John. Though Calvinists point to various elements of the book in support of their doctrine (the other most important of which I will address in Part III of this essay), the most compelling evidence for Calvinist Reformed teaching in the Gospel of John comes from a series of statements by Jesus to the effect that all of those who come to faith in Christ do so because they have *been enabled to by God the Father* and, even more compellingly, because they in some sense *already belonged to God prior to their exercising faith in Christ*.

John 6:37

“All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away.”

John 6:44-45

*“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day.”*⁴⁵ It is written in the Prophets: *“They will all be taught by God.” Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me.”*

John 6:65

“He went on to say, ‘This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him.’”

John 8:43-44, 47

“Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say.⁴⁴ You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desire. . . .⁴⁷ He who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God.”

John 10:26-29

“. . . but you do not believe because you are not my sheep.”²⁷ My sheep listen to my

voice; I know them, and they follow me.²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.²⁹ My Father, *who has given them to me*, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand."

John 17:1-2, 6, 9, 24

"Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you.² For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to *all those you have given him*. . . .⁶ I have revealed you to *those whom you gave me* out of the world. *They were yours; you gave them to me* and they have obeyed your word. . . .⁹ I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for *those you have given me, for they are yours*. . . .²⁴ Father, I want *those you have given me* to be with me where I am."

Keeping in mind that Jesus elsewhere in John's Gospel equates "coming" to him to "believing" in him (6:35; note the parallel structure within this verse), it is clear from the above passages that there are strict conditions on who will actually come to Christ in faith. These conditions can be readily interpreted as providing support for the Calvinist contention that it is only the elect (equated by Calvinists to the set of Christ's "sheep," who "belong" to the Father and are "given," "drawn," and "enabled" to come to Christ) who receive God's irresistible and effectual grace by which saving faith is engendered in them.

Of these statements by Jesus placing restrictions on who may come to him in faith, the two that offer perhaps the strongest apparent support for Calvinism are those in 8:47b, "The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God," and 10:26, "but you do not believe because you are not my sheep." In his essay "Divine Election in the Gospel of John," Robert Yarbrough summarizes the significance of these statements for the Calvinist Reformed view of election (in *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace*, ed. by Thomas Schreiner & Bruce Ware, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995, 2000, pp. 47-62):

[*in reference to 8:47*] "From a standpoint that stresses the autonomy of human will this logic is backward; Jesus should have said: The reason you do not belong to God is that you do not hear and believe. But Jesus furthers the motif, by now well established in John's Gospel, that human response to God owes its ultimate origin to God's elective grace. . . ."

[in reference to 10:26] “Notice that Jesus does not say, “You are not my sheep because you do not believe.” That is no doubt true, but it is not what Jesus says. He speaks instead at a level deeper than the surface one of apparent cause and effect, where visible human faith in Christ results in ostensible membership in the body of Christ. Jesus deals with the issue of why certain listeners fail to believe in the first place, not with why they are not his sheep. The answer: They fail to believe because they are not members of his flock.”

The conclusion that Yarbrough draws from these verses and the other passages he surveys in John’s Gospel is straightforward: “divine election grounds and gives rise to saving faith, not vice versa” (ibid., p. 60; cf. D. A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension*, Atlanta: John Knox, 1981, pp. 181-182, 190).

C. *The Arminian Response*

In contrast to the Calvinist Reformed interpretation of election and salvation in John’s Gospel sketched above, those who follow within the tradition championed by the Dutch Reformer Jacob Arminius argue that divine election is conditioned on the free exercise of faith on the part of the believer. As one might expect, the passages from John’s Gospel quoted above have presented a formidable challenge to Arminian theology. In order to properly evaluate the significance of this challenge, it is important that we first divide the condition-statements found in these passages into two main categories.

First, there are the *necessary* conditions of being “enabled” to come to Christ and being “drawn” to him by the Father (6:44, 65). Necessary conditions are signaled in the passages above by the grammatical structure “*No one can . . . unless . . .*” (Greek *oudeis dunatai . . . ean me*). Such conditions indicate what must *necessarily* occur before the result in question can obtain (the result here being a person’s coming to faith in Christ). By their very nature, necessary conditions (in contrast to sufficient conditions--see below) do not logically entail that every person who meets the conditions will experience the result made possible by those conditions. That is, to say that no one can come to faith in Christ without having been drawn or enabled by the Father does not itself entail that every person so drawn/enabled comes to Christ, but instead only that all those who do come to Christ will necessarily have experienced the drawing/enabling.

Second, we find in the above passages from John's Gospel the *sufficient* conditions of being "given" to Jesus by the Father, having "listened to" and "learned from" the Father, "belonging" to God (i.e., being his child, cf. the contrast to the children of the devil in 8:44), and being one of Jesus' "sheep" (6:37, 45; 8:47; 10:26, 29; 17:6, 9, 24). Sufficient conditions are generally signaled by phrases such as "*Everyone who . . .*" (6:45; Greek *pas ho . . .*) or "*All that . . . will . . .*" (6:37; Greek *pan ho . . .*), indicating that every person without exception who meets the relevant conditions will experience the result entailed by those conditions. This is clearly the case in regard to those whom the Father "gives" to Jesus and who have "listened to" and "learned from" the Father, all of whom are explicitly said to come to faith in Christ (6:37, 45). It also seems to be implied of the two conditions we might characterize as *identity* conditions, namely, that of "belonging" to or being a child of the Father, as well as being a "sheep" of Christ. Note that in 8:42 Jesus says, "If God were your Father, you would love me," and in 8:47, "He who belongs to God hears what God says." Both of these statements suggest that *all* of those who belong in God's family will love Jesus and hear (i.e., in this context, *believe*) what God says regarding Jesus. Similarly, in 10:27 Jesus says, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me." Again, this statement implies that *all* of those identified as Jesus' sheep will listen to and follow him when he enters the sheepfold. These conditions of "belonging" to God's family and being a "sheep" of Jesus, then, appear to fall within the category of sufficient conditions determining those who will come to faith in Christ.

What, then, of the Arminian response to these two types of condition-statements presented in the Gospel of John? Generally speaking, the existence of divinely-initiated *necessary* conditions on coming to faith in Christ have posed less of a challenge to Arminian thought than have the *sufficient* conditions found in John's Gospel. In regard to the former, Arminians have traditionally explained the necessity of the Father's drawing and enabling by appealing to the notion of *prevenient grace* (lit., preceding, or anticipatory grace), which may for present purposes be characterized as the grace of God extended to a person *prior to* salvation (i.e., prior to the divine dispensing of *saving grace*, by which a person is justified and regenerated). Prevenient grace serves both to *draw* a person to faith and repentance and to *enable* that person to exercise such faith and repentance, by which he may then be saved. Without the aid of prevenient grace, Arminians have traditionally argued, it is impossible for the natural, unregenerate man to exercise an authentic faith decision toward God. In this way, Arminians can account for

Jesus' statements in John 6:44 and 6:65 (see also 15:5) without denying the authenticity of human free will in choosing to exercise or not exercise faith and repentance. That is, Arminians argue that not all who are drawn/enabled by the Father to exercise faith and repentance do in fact ultimately choose to do so (i.e., prevenient grace is resistible), though it is equally true that without such drawing/enabling no person would of himself have the desire or ability to come to Christ in faith. Arminians are able to adopt this position precisely because the drawing and enabling of the Father are presented in the Gospel of John as necessary, not sufficient, conditions for coming to faith in Christ.

In contrast, the sufficient conditions for coming to faith that are presented in John's Gospel have, quite frankly, proven intractable for Arminians. This may not be something that most Arminians would like to admit, of course, but it seems to me to be a fair estimation of the current situation in Arminian theology. This is not to say that there have been no attempts by Arminians to deal with the relevant statements by Jesus in John's Gospel. However, the attempts of which I am aware, despite their many other important contributions to the subject, seem to me to reach unsatisfying conclusions when it comes to dealing with the sufficiency conditions placed by Jesus on who will come to faith in him.

Grant Osborne ("Soteriology in the Gospel of John," in *The Grace of God and the Will of Man*, ed. by Clark Pinnock, Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1989, pp. 243-260), for example, recognizes the emphasis on divine sovereignty in passages such as John 10:26, but attempts to balance this out and arrive at an essentially Arminian interpretation of John's writing merely by appealing to the many passages in John's Gospel that imply a pivotal role for the exercise of human free will (e.g., verses such as 5:24 that emphasize the universal offer of salvation). Osborne concludes that neither emphasis, that of divine sovereignty or of human freedom, is absolute in the Gospel of John, but that "the text again and again sets sovereignty and faith-decision together in theological unity without attempting to resolve the dilemma. It assumes the balance without defining it for the reader" (p. 256). In critiquing Osborne's essay, Yarbrough rightly comments, however, that

"from a purely logical point of view, divine election and human free will cannot stand on exactly the same level, as Osborne claims they do, unless we are content to find either antinomy (apparent but not necessarily real contradiction) or material discrepancy (contradiction both apparent and real) at the center of John's Gospel.

But Osborne opts for neither of these two positions. Thus, while he does maintain that divine election and human choice have equal formal status, the latter is ultimately determinative for the former. Osborne’s practical recourse to the primacy of human will demonstrates the logical difficulty of his formal claim and undercuts the viability of his overall argument.” (Robert Yarbrough, “Divine Election in the Gospel of John,” in *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace*, ed. by Thomas Schreiner & Bruce Ware, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995, 2000, p. 58)

Like Osborne, Robert Shank also attempts to defend the Arminian position by balancing out the seemingly pro-Calvinist statements of Jesus in John 8:47 and 10:26 with separate pro-Arminian statements in John’s Gospel. Thus, when addressing Jesus’ statement in 8:47 (i.e., that the Jews did not hear God’s words because they did not belong to God), rather than attempt an exegesis of the critical passage in question, Shank merely shifts the reader’s attention to possible qualifying information found earlier in the chapter: “But Jesus regarded their perdition as yet contingent: ‘if you believe not that I am he, you shall die in your sins’ (vs. 24)” (*Elect in the Son*, Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1970, 1989, p. 179). Similarly, in regard to Jesus’ claim in 10:26 that the Jews did not believe because they were not his sheep, Shank attempts to counter the obvious Calvinist import of Jesus’ statement by directing the reader’s attention elsewhere, this time to a separate statement of Jesus found later in chapter ten: “That their unbelief did not derive from some eternal, irrevocable decree of God is evident from the fact that to the same men Jesus appealed, ‘believe [my] works, that you may know and believe that the Father is in me, and I in him’ (vs. 38)” (ibid., p. 179).

Though I agree with Shank that John 8:24, 10:38, and other verses like them provide important support for the Arminian view that salvation is contingent on the free exercise of human faith, Shank’s appeal to these verses does not in itself help us to resolve the apparent tension between these passages and the passages to which Calvinists commonly appeal (e.g., 8:47; 10:26). It is not enough merely to attempt to offset the force of one set of troubling verses by drawing attention to a separate set of more agreeable ones. If it were indeed to come down to the question of which set of verses contains the stronger evidence, Calvinists might appear on the face of it to have a stronger case for their position given the tight logic in verses such as 8:47 and 10:26 entailing a decisive divine-initiative in salvation. As Yarbrough and other Calvinists have pointed out, the relation between “belonging” to God and coming to faith is clear-cut in these verses: the

former stands logically prior to the latter, not vice versa. “Belonging” to the Father is a sufficient condition for “coming” in faith to the Son.

Moreover, Calvinists can readily respond to Shank’s (and Osborne’s) appeal to verses indicating a central role for the human faith-decision in salvation by arguing that faith as a condition for salvation is itself a product of the divine initiative. As Piper notes, “it is true that we are included or excluded in salvation on the condition of faith. But that does not account for how one person comes to faith and not another” (John Piper, “Are There Two Wills in God?” in *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace*, ed. by Thomas Schreiner & Bruce Ware, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995, 2000, footnote 28, p. 122). Calvinists argue that only the elect come to faith in Christ because it is only to them that God provides his irresistible grace to engender such faith. Shank’s and Osborne’s responses to John 8:47 and 10:26 do not adequately reconcile the full range of data in John’s Gospel in such a way as to provide a viable alternative to this Calvinist interpretation of events.

D. Plan of the Present Essay

In this essay I will offer a more direct and (I hope) satisfying analysis of the sufficient conditions on coming to faith that are presented by Jesus in the Gospel of John. This analysis will yield conclusions that are fully supportive of an Arminian understanding of the divine-human interaction in salvation, while at the same time recognizing the logical relations entailed in Jesus’ statement of the various sufficient conditions for faith (e.g., that “belonging” to God is logically prior to the exercise of faith in Christ, not vice versa). It is my belief that previous analyses—both Calvinist and Arminian—of Jesus’ statements in the Gospel of John have failed to give adequate attention to the Jewish context in which these statements were uttered, and, consequently, have mistakenly forced Jesus’ words to fit later, inappropriate theological categories.

The crux of my argument will be that the set of individuals who are said by Jesus to “belong” to God as Christ’s “sheep,” to “listen to the Father and learn from him,” and to be “given” by the Father to the Son, refers not to a pretemporally determined set of elect persons as conceived of in the Calvinist Reformed view, but instead primarily to the faithful sons of Abraham who were God’s children under the covenant as it was revealed in the Old Testament, and who were already prepared by their voluntary faith and repentance to embrace the promised Messiah at the time of his long-awaited appearance

to the nation of Israel. These included the ones whom God had nurtured to repentance under the ministry of John the Baptist, who was appointed to “prepare the way for the Lord” (Isaiah 40:3; Matthew 3:3). In a secondary sense, the set of those who “belong” to the Father also includes God-fearing Gentiles (e.g., Cornelius, Acts 10:2), those who have been receptive to God’s prevenient grace leading them to repentance and whom the Father now leads to faith in the Son (John 10:16; 11:52).

In Part II of this essay I will explore the evidence for this above understanding of the sufficient conditions for faith in Christ presented in John’s Gospel, evidence that I believe to be extensive and compelling. I will begin in Section A of Part II with some preliminary considerations of the passages in question from their immediate context in John’s Gospel, then move on in Section B to an examination of the Old Testament context that underlies the key concepts used by Jesus in framing the sufficient conditions for coming to faith in him. In Section C, I will consider how the transition between the Old and New Testaments must figure into a proper interpretation of Jesus’ words. Next, in Section D, I will reconsider in more detail the characteristics presented in John’s Gospel of those who come to faith in Christ, identifying these characteristics with the human response to the divine dispensing of prevenient grace. In Section E, I will reexamine the question of what it means to be “given” by the Father to the Son (as in 6:37), drawing from this discussion an important theological insight into the nature of prevenient grace. Finally, in Section F, I will address the relevance of these findings for God’s relationship to the Gentiles, before summarizing my arguments in Section G.

In the last major part of this essay, Part III, I will briefly consider some of the other most important passages in John’s Gospel that have been argued by Calvinists to support the Calvinist Reformed view of election and salvation. I will conclude that in no case is this purported evidence for the Calvinist view compelling. Finally, in Part IV, I will briefly summarize and conclude the entire essay.

II. Who May Come to Faith in Christ?

A. The Sufficient Conditions in John’s Gospel: Preliminary Observations

Let us begin by reconsidering the sufficient conditions for coming to faith that are presented by Jesus in the Gospel of John. The sufficient conditions for coming to faith in

Christ presented in John's Gospel occur in four main passages, 6:25-70, 8:12-59, 9:40-10:21, and 17:1-26. Each of the first three of these passages describes a confrontation (or series of confrontations) between Jesus and the Jews, many of whom were resistant to his teaching (cf. 6:26, 36, 41-42, 52, 66; 8:13, 33, 37, 40, 45, 48-49, 52, 59; 9:40; 10:20). Such interchanges between Jesus and the Jews make up the backbone of the first twelve chapters of John's Gospel that precede the Upper Room Discourse (containing the fourth passage in question, 17:1-26, the High Priestly Prayer of Jesus) and the events of Jesus' passion. The main question recurring throughout the book, especially in the first twelve chapters, concerns Jesus' identity. Who is he? Is he the Christ--the Messiah--or someone else? Jesus' persistent refrain throughout is that he is, in fact, the promised Messiah who has "come from" or been "sent by" the Father in heaven (1:9, 14; 3:2, 13, 17, 19, 31, 34; 4:25-26, 34; 5:23-24, 36, 38, 43; 6:29, 32-33, 44, 46, 51, 57, 62; 7:16, 18, 28-29, 33; 8:14, 16, 18, 23, 26, 29, 38, 42; 9:4; 10:36; 11:27, 42; 12:44-46, 49; 13:3, 20; 15:21; 16:5, 28, 30; 17:8, 18, 21, 23, 25; 20:21). Jesus' claim is set in contrast to the doubts about him expressed by many in Israel, especially by the religious leaders. Indeed, many of the common people seemed to have looked to the leaders for guidance in this matter, wondering aloud whether the leaders had concluded that Jesus was the Christ (7:25-26). Most of the leaders, however, were insistent in their desire to not give any appearance of having accepted Jesus' claims (7:47-49; 9:27-29; 19:15; cf. also 9:16).

It is in the context of these dialogues with the Jews that Jesus presented the sufficient and necessary conditions for coming to faith in him as way of explaining the contrast between those who did accept and follow him as the Messiah and those who refused to do so. Consider first Jesus' words to the Jews that "He who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God" (8:47). As discussed above, this is one of the critical verses in which Jesus states a sufficient condition for having faith in him, namely, "belonging" to God. As such, Jesus' statement here parallels his words in 10:26 that "you do not believe because you are not my sheep." Each of these verses presents an *identity* condition on who may come to faith in Jesus, namely, those who are God's *children* (i.e., "belong to God") and those who are Christ's *sheep*. In each case, only those who match the given identity participate in the end result, namely, "hear[ing] what God says" (8:47) or "believing" (10:26). The strong parallelism between these two verses suggests that the word "hear(s)" in 8:47 is meant to equate to "believing" in 10:26. That is, "hear(s)" does not refer simply to their perceiving or understanding Jesus' words, but to hearing in the sense of receiving and *believing* his words.

However, even this does not go far enough, for the context of 8:47 informs us that the Jews whom Jesus claimed in this passage could not “hear” him had in fact already “put their faith in him” and “believed him” (8:30-31). We must conclude that their “faith” and “belief” were in some sense deficient and did not equate to their having truly “heard” Jesus. This paradox clears up as we follow the passage farther: When Jesus challenged these same Jews to demonstrate the validity of their faith by “holding” to his teaching and thus prove that they were really his disciples (vs. 31), with the result that they would “know the truth” and be set free (vs. 32), they began to resist Jesus’ authority and insisted that they had always been free children of Abraham (vs. 33) and, ultimately, children of God (vs. 41). At this point Jesus disputed their claim, arguing that their latent desire to kill him showed they had “no room for [his] word” (vs. 37) and “belong[ed] to [their] father, the devil” (vs. 44). Consequently, they were “unable to hear” what Jesus said (vs. 43). Clearly, Jesus was suggesting in this passage that to “hear” his words is to do more than merely exercise faith at a cognitive level as these Jews had apparently done. Instead, to “hear” him is to embrace him with the deeper, loyal faith of a disciple, to commit oneself to truly follow Christ in obedience and self-renunciation (cf. Matthew 16:24-25).

Returning to the original point above, the gist of Jesus’ statements in 8:47 and 10:26 is that such loyal faith in Christ (the “hearing” described in 10:26) is impossible for those who do not *already* “belong” to God, who are not *already* God’s children rather than children of the devil, and who are not *already* Christ’s sheep. The satisfaction of these identity conditions comes before and is logically prior to faith in Christ, not vice versa.

Moreover, notice that Jesus explicitly associates these identity conditions with another of the sufficient conditions for coming to faith in Christ mentioned earlier, namely, being “given” by the Father to the Son (6:37; 10:29; 17:1-2, 6, 9, 24). In 17:6 Jesus says, “They were yours; you gave them to me,” and in 17:9, “I pray . . . for those you have given me, for they are yours.” Similarly, Jesus says that his sheep have been “given” to him by the Father (10:29a). These various parallels strongly suggest that those who belong to the Father are the same set as those considered to be Christ’s sheep, all of whom are given by the Father to the Son and who therefore come to Christ in faith (6:37).

The question that naturally arises from these observations is “What does it mean, then, in the context of these verses, to be a child of God, to belong to the Father, and to be one of Christ’s sheep?” We normally use such terms to refer to Christian believers (and such

usage is widely attested in the New Testament; e.g., John 1:12, Romans 8:14f; Galatians 3:26), yet Jesus clearly uses these terms in the passages considered above to refer to a status that *precedes* faith in Christ, for as he says in 8:37 and 10:26, it is absence of this status that precludes the emergence of faith in Christ, not vice versa.

Calvinists, as noted earlier, interpret these terms “belonging” to God and being one of Christ’s “sheep” as referring to the elect (understood as an unconditionally chosen, definite group of specific individuals) prior to (and following) their regeneration, effectual calling, and coming to faith. I believe that there is an alternative interpretation, however, that makes better sense in light of the context in which Jesus made these statements: The ones to whom Jesus referred as “belonging” to God and being his “sheep” are the those among his Jewish audience who were voluntarily living in right covenant relationship with God under the terms revealed in the Old Testament, and who were thus already prepared to receive the promised Messiah when he appeared to the nation of Israel. In order to make the case for this interpretation, it will be necessary to back up and first consider the broader historical context for Jesus’ remarks. For this we must turn to the Old Testament.

B. *Old Testament Background*

When we look at the Old Testament, we find an overwhelmingly clear answer to the question, “Who belongs to God?” *The nation of Israel*. There are multitudinous references in the Old Testament to the Jewish people as being God’s own people, his chosen ones who belong to him. The following list is representative but not necessarily exhaustive: Exodus 3:7, 10; 5:1; 6:7; 7:4, 16; 8:1, 20-23; 9:1, 13, 17; 10:3-4; 18:1; 22:25; 32:14; Leviticus 25:55; 26:12; Deuteronomy 14:1-2; 26:18-19; 29:13; 32:9; Ruth 1:6; 1 Samuel 2:29; 9:16-17; 12:22; 13:14; 15:1; 2 Samuel 3:18; 5:2, 12; 7:7-8, 10-11; 1 Kings 6:13; 8:16; 56, 59, 66, 14:17; 16:2; 2 Kings 20:5; 1 Chronicles 11:2; 14:2; 17:6-7, 9-10; 22:18; 23:25; 2 Chronicles 1:11; 2:11; 6:5-6; 7:10, 13-14; 31:8, 10; 35:3; 36:15-16, 23; Ezra 1:3; Psalm 50:4, 7; 53:6; 78:20, 62, 71; 81:8, 11, 13; 85:2, 6, 8; 105:24-25, 43; 106:40; 111:6, 9; 116:14, 18; 125:2; 135:12, 14; 136:16; 148:14; Isaiah 1:3; 3:12, 14-15; 5:13, 25; 10:2, 24; 11:11, 16; 14:32; 28:5; 30:26; 40:1; 43:1, 20-22; 44:5; 47:6; 49:13; 51:4, 16, 22; 52:4-6, 9, 14; 58:1; 63:8, 11, 14, 18; 65:9-10, 19, 22; Jeremiah 2:11, 13, 31-32; 4:11, 22; 5:26, 31; 6:14, 27; 7:12, 23; 8:7, 11; 9:7; 11:4; 12:14, 16; 15:7; 18:15; 23:2, 13, 22, 27, 32; 24:7; 30:3, 22; 31:1, 14, 33; 32:38; 33:24; 50:6; 51:45; Ezekiel 13:9-10; 14:8-9, 11; 25:14; 33:31; 34:30; 36:8, 12, 28; 37:12-13, 18, 23, 27; 38:14, 16;

39:7; 44:23; 45:8-9; Hosea 4:6, 8, 12; 6:11; 11:7; Joel 2:17-18, 26-27; 3:2-3, 16; Amos 7:8, 15; 8:2; 9:10, 14; Obadiah 13; Micah 2:8-9; 6:2-5; Zephaniah 2:8-9.

Similarly, in various places throughout the Old Testament the Jewish people are called God's *children*. Again, the following list is only representative: Exodus 4:22-23; Deuteronomy 1:31; 8:5; 14:1-2; 32:19-20; Isaiah 1:2-4; 45:11; 63:8, 16; 64:8; Jeremiah 31:9, 20; Hosea 1:10; 11:1, 10; Malachi 1:6 (cf. Romans 9:4).

Thus, when God led the Jews out of Egypt, his word to Pharaoh was, "Let *my people* go" (Exodus 5:1). When God gave the Law to Moses, he proclaimed that "the Israelites *belong to me* as servants. They are my servants, whom I brought out of Egypt" (Leviticus 25:55). God promised the Israelites, "I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be *my people*" (Leviticus 26:12). Likewise, Moses exhorted the Israelites, "You are *the children of the Lord your God*" (Deuteronomy 14:1). And in Isaiah's prophecy, the prophet speaks for the Jewish people as they cry out to God in repentance: "Yet, O LORD, *you are our Father*. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not be angry beyond measure, O LORD; do not remember our sins forever. Oh, look upon us, we pray, for *we are all your people*" (Isaiah 64:8-9).

Moreover, in numerous places in the Old Testament the nation of Israel is compared to a flock of sheep (1 Kings 22:17; 2 Chronicles 18:16), shepherded by the leaders God has placed over them (Numbers 27:17; 2 Samuel 5:2; 1 Chronicles 11:2; Psalm 78:71-72; 2 Samuel 7:7; 1 Chronicles 17:6) or by God himself (Psalm 23; 28:9; 74:1-2; 78:52; 79:13; 80:1; 95:7; 100:3; Isaiah 40:11; Jeremiah 3:15; 23:1-6; Ezekiel 34:2; Micah 7:14; Zechariah 10:3). Thus, Israel can say to God, "we [are] your people, *the sheep of your pasture*" (Psalm 79:13). God is called the "*Shepherd of Israel*" who "lead[s] Joseph like a flock" (Psalm 80:1). Often the Jews are compared to a flock that has been ravaged by enemies, scattered among the nations (an allusion to captivity, both physical and spiritual), and needing God's protection and care. These enemies may be either from within (whether corrupt leaders or the people themselves in rebellion, as in Ezekiel 34, Isaiah 56:10-12, and Jeremiah 3; 10:21; 23:1-3; 50:6; Zechariah 10:2-3), or from without (as the nations who laid Israel waste; Psalm 74; 79 (see vs.13); cf. Isaiah 3:12-15 for similar ideas in regard to God's "people"). God repeatedly promised to gather again his scattered flock, his people, referring not only to a physical restoration of the nation from captivity, but also to a spiritual restoration under the coming Messiah, who would be a new David who comes to shepherd God's people (Isaiah 11:10-12; Jeremiah 3:14-19;

23:1-6; 31:10; 32:38; Ezekiel 11:18-21; 34:2; 37:21-28; Micah 2:12; Zechariah 8:7-8).

In the Old Testament, then, it is the Jewish people, the nation of Israel, who are considered God's people, God's flock. Now the question is, can this observation help us to better understand Jesus' intended meaning when he asserted that those who "belong" to God as God's children, and who are Christ's "sheep," will come to him in faith? On first consideration, it would seem not, especially when we note that the Israelites were sometimes called God's people even in their most rebellious moments (e.g., Psalm 106:40; Isaiah 1:2-4; 5:25; 58:1-2; Jeremiah 2:11-13; 4:22; Ezekiel 33:31). It makes little sense to say that Jesus meant that all of the Jews, even those in the midst of rebellion, would come to him in faith. Indeed, Jesus issued the statements in question (e.g., John 8:47; 10:26) to explain just the opposite result, the fact that many of the Jews were rejecting him as the Messiah and refused to accept his teaching (John 5:40).

There is another, more restrictive sense given to God's "people" and "flock" in the Old Testament, however, that makes perfect sense when applied to Jesus' statements in the Gospel of John. (I will explain in the next section how this fit can be made; in this section I will simply introduce the restrictive sense of the terms in question and establish its occurrence in the Old Testament.) The notion I have in mind is that God's "people" ("children," "flock") are those *who are in right covenant relationship with him*. They are the faithful, the obedient, the repentant, who have responded to God's revealed truth and kept the terms of the covenant. We see this sense implied in those passages that contrast God's people to the wicked (e.g., Psalm 125; Isaiah 57:14-21; 65:9-12; Ezekiel 11:19-21; 14:7-8, 11) and in those passages that characterize God's people as godly ones who fear him (e.g., Psalm 103:13, 148:14, 149:4-5, 65:10; Jeremiah 24:7; 31:33; Ezekiel 36:28; 37:21-28; Zechariah 13:9). It is this more restrictive sense of what it means to be God's "people" that surfaces in Hosea 1:9, when God proclaimed to the wicked Israelites of Hosea's day, "You are *not* my people, and I am *not* your God." Similarly, in reference to the "utterly unfaithful" houses of Israel and Judah, God declared in Jeremiah 5:10-11 that "these people do *not* belong to the Lord." We see this sense of the term, too, whenever the Jews' identity as God's people is explicitly tied to their willingness to be obedient to the covenant, as in Jeremiah 7:23: "*Obey me*, and I will be your God *and you will be my people*" (also Jeremiah 11:2-5; Leviticus 26:3-12). In a similar way, in Exodus 19:5-6, God said to the Israelites:

"Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will

be *my treasured possession*. Although the whole earth is mine, ⁶you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:5-6)

Notice that their status as God’s “treasured possession” and as a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation” is contingent upon their obedience and willingness to “keep [God’s] covenant.” That this special status of being God’s “treasured possession” is equivalent to being his “people” is confirmed by Deuteronomy 26:18-19, in which the two terms are juxtaposed:

“The LORD has declared this day that you are *his people, his treasured possession* as he promised, and that you are to keep all his commands. ¹⁹ He has declared that he will set you in praise, fame and honor high above all the nations he has made and that you will be a people holy to the LORD your God, as he promised” (Deuteronomy 26:18-19; cf. 7:6 and 14:2).

Again in Malachi 3:16-18 we see that only those Israelites who were faithful to the covenant were considered as belonging to God in this narrower sense. In response to God’s rebukes of Israel over the nation’s widespread sin, we are told,

“Then those who feared the LORD talked with each other, and the LORD listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the LORD and honored his name. ¹⁷ *‘They will be mine,’* says the LORD Almighty, *‘in the day when I make up my treasured possession.* I will spare them, just as in compassion a man spares *his son* who serves him. ¹⁸ And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not” (Malachi 3:16-18)

In this passage it is only the “righteous” Israelites, those who “serve[d] God” and who “feared the Lord and honored his name,” who were considered to belong to God as his “treasured possession.” These are contrasted to the “wicked” Israelites who did not respond in repentance to God’s rebuke through Malachi.

The same sort of distinction between those Israelites faithful to the covenant and those not faithful can be seen in the Old Testament in regard to the Israelites as God’s “sheep.” Recall that God promised to gather his flock/people again from all the nations to which they had been scattered (Isaiah 11:10-12; Jeremiah 3:14-19; 23:1-6; 31:10; 32:38; Ezekiel

11:18-21; 34:2; 37:21-28; Micah 2:12; Zechariah 8:7-8). A central element of these passages is God's promise to send new shepherds to tend his flock, in particular, the one shepherd-king who would be called by David's name, the Christ. As God said through the prophet in Jeremiah chapter 23:

“I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and will bring them back to their pasture, where they will be fruitful and increase in number. ⁴ *I will place shepherds over them* who will tend them, and they will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing,’ declares the LORD. ⁵ ‘The days are coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘when *I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King* who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. ⁶ In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness.’” (Jeremiah 23:3-6)

Similarly, in Ezekiel chapter 37:

“This is what the Sovereign LORD says: ‘I will take the Israelites out of the nations where they have gone. I will gather them from all around and bring them back into their own land. ²² I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel. There will be *one king over all of them* and they will never again be two nations or be divided into two kingdoms. ²³ They will no longer defile themselves with their idols and vile images or with any of their offenses, for I will save them from all their sinful backsliding, and I will cleanse them. They will be my people, and I will be their God. ²⁴ *My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd.* They will follow my laws and be careful to keep my decrees. ²⁵ . . . and David my servant will be their prince forever. ²⁶ I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant. I will establish them and increase their numbers, and I will put my sanctuary among them forever. ²⁷ My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people.’” (Ezekiel 37:21-27)

Crucially, however, God's actions in this regard are contingent upon Israel's *repentance* and willingness to return to God, as can be seen in Jeremiah chapter three:

“*Return, faithless Israel,*’ declares the LORD, ‘I will frown on you no longer, for

I am merciful,' declares the LORD, 'I will not be angry forever. ¹³ *Only acknowledge your guilt . . .* ¹⁴ *Return, faithless people,*' declares the LORD, 'for I am your husband. I will choose you—one from a town and two from a clan—and bring you to Zion. ¹⁵ *Then I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will lead you with knowledge and understanding. . . .* ¹⁹ I myself said, "How gladly would I *treat you like sons* and give you a desirable land, the most beautiful inheritance of any nation." I thought you would call me "Father" and not turn away from following me. ²⁰ But like a woman unfaithful to her husband, so you have been unfaithful to me, O house of Israel,' declares the LORD. . . . ²² *'Return, faithless people; I will cure you of backsliding.'*" "Yes, we will come to you, for you are the LORD our God." (Jeremiah 3:12-13a, 14-15, 19-20, 22)

God said to the Israelites that he would gather again them to Zion (vs. 14), give them new shepherds (vs. 15), "treat [them] like sons" (vs. 19), and "cure [them] of backsliding" (vs. 22) only *if* they would acknowledge their guilt (vs. 13) and return to him in faithfulness (vss. 12, 14, 22). Their individual participation in these blessings was clearly contingent upon their willingness to repent.¹ The same contingency is seen in Psalm 95:7f, where the Israelites, "the people of [God's] pasture, the flock under his care" (vs. 7) were exhorted not to "harden [their] hearts" or allow their "hearts [to] go astray," because no such disobedient sheep would ever "enter [God's] rest" (vss. 8-11). Translated into the terms used in the several previous passages quoted above, unfaithful sheep of this sort would be unable to participate in the blessing, cleansing, and peace that God desired to bring with the coming of the new shepherds, in particular, the Christ.

C. Transition Between the Old and the New

This brings us to the transition between the Old and the New Testaments. We have seen in the above brief survey of Old Testament passages that God's "people" and "sheep" in Old Testament times were *the Israelites*, and in a yet more restrictive sense *those Israelites who were faithful to the terms of God's covenant with them*. These were the repentant ones who feared God and served him; they would belong to God as his "treasured possession" (Malachi 3:17). They would be the members of God's flock whom God would "cleanse" and "cure of backsliding" under the coming reign of the "one king" and "one shepherd," the one called by David's name (Ezekiel 37:22-24).

It is into this stream of historical anticipation that Jesus stepped as the long-awaited

Messiah, the one who would once again take up the throne of David and rule God's people (Isaiah 9:6-7). As the angel announced to Joseph, Jesus would "save *his people* from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). Likewise, John the Baptist's father, Zechariah, prophesied of Jesus: "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed *his people*. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David" (Luke 1:68-69). Of his own son, Zechariah prophesied, "And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give *his people* the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins" (Luke 1:76-77). Not only Zechariah, but others also understood that Jesus' ministry had this focus on the Jews as God's people, as seen by their reaction to Jesus' miracles: "They were all filled with awe and praised God. 'A great prophet has appeared among us,' they said. 'God has come to help *his people*'" (Luke 7:16). Jesus himself seems to have taken this view as well. Early in his ministry Jesus sent out his disciples to preach to the "*lost sheep of Israel*" the message of the approaching kingdom of God (Matthew 10:6). Similarly, his first response to a Canaanite woman seeking his assistance was that he "was sent *only to the lost sheep of Israel*" (Matthew 15:24). Though this does not entail that Jesus was unconcerned about or had no mission to the Gentiles (see discussion regarding the Gentiles below), it does indicate that Jesus' primary mission at that time was to fulfill God's prior promises to Israel made through the patriarchs and prophets (Luke 1:70-75; cf. Acts 3:26; Romans 1:16, 2:9).

Jesus' identity as the anticipated Shepherd of Israel is further confirmed by the application of Micah's prophecy to the birth of Jesus in Matthew 2:6. In Micah's words,

"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be *ruler over Israel*, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times. . . .⁴ *He will stand and shepherd his flock* in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth.⁵ And he will be their peace." (Micah 5:2-4; cf. Matthew 2:6)

This is the proper context for understanding Jesus' statements in John chapter ten. We make a serious error if we abstract Jesus' words away from the stream of Jewish eschatological expectation in which they were uttered. When Jesus declared that he is the "good shepherd" (10:11) who "enter[s] the sheep pen by the gate" (vss. 1-2) and "calls his own sheep by name and leads them out" (vs. 3), he was declaring that he is the

anticipated Messiah-Shepherd spoken of in the Old Testament who would come to the *sheep pen of Israel* in order to bring cleansing and peace to those sheep (i.e., those Jews) who are repentant and God-fearing (see discussion of Jeremiah chapter three and related passages in Section B above). The sheep who would “listen to his voice,” “know/recognize his voice,” and therefore “follow him” (vss. 4-5, 14) were just those Israelites who were already in right covenant relationship to God and thus belonged to God as his “sheep,” “people,” and “treasured possession” in the restrictive sense discussed in Section B above. They received Jesus as the Messiah-Shepherd (i.e., they “listened,” “knew/recognized,” and “followed” him) precisely because their hearts had already been prepared through repentance and faith in God (according to the terms of the covenant as revealed in the Old Testament). These sheep who belonged to God (and therefore belonged to Christ; cf. John 16:15) stand in contrast to all of the other sheep in the sheep pen of Israel who did *not* belong to God and who therefore were not open to receiving Jesus as the Messiah-Shepherd. (Keep in mind that in the culture of the day more than one flock of sheep could be kept in the same sheep pen. Each shepherd would enter to lead out only his own sheep to pasture. Compare the entry on John 10:3-4 in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, Editors, John F. Walvoord & Roy B. Zuck, Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-1985).

John the Baptist’s ministry was significant in this regard. Note carefully the purpose of John’s ministry as it was expressed by the angel Gabriel to John’s father, Zechariah:

“Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God.”¹⁷ And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” (Luke 1:16-17)

John the Baptist came for this express purpose: to swell the ranks of those within Israel who would be prepared through repentance to accept their Messiah-Shepherd at his appearing. It was in this sense that John’s baptism of repentance (Mark 1:4, Luke 3:3, Acts 19:4) was intended to “make straight the way for the Lord” (John 1:23; cf. Isaiah 40:3; Matthew 3:3; Mark 1:2-3; Luke 3:4-5, 7:27). The ministry of John was intended to bring as many Israelites as possible back into right covenant relationship with God before Christ’s appearing. The way back into this right relationship (prior to the coming of Christ) was through repentance and faith under the terms of the covenant as it was revealed in the Old Testament. Only once they had repented would their hearts be

restored and primed to receive the Christ whom God was about to send into their midst. The results of this preparatory function of John's ministry are reflected in the response to Jesus' teaching described in Luke chapter seven:

“All the people, even the tax collectors, when they heard Jesus' words, acknowledged that God's way was right, *because they had been baptized by John.*³⁰ But the Pharisees and experts in the law rejected God's purpose for themselves, *because they had not been baptized by John.*” (Luke 7:29-30)

John's baptism of repentance prepared the hearts of all who accepted it to recognize the truth of Jesus' teaching, thus enlarging the number of those who would recognize Jesus' voice as the Messiah-Shepherd and be willing to follow him.

D. The Characteristics of the “Prepared” Jews and the Nature of Prevenient Grace

We find further confirmation of the above perspective from the various descriptions within John's Gospel of those who were willing to come to Christ, those people I have identified above as the Jews who were prepared through repentance and faith in God for the arrival of Jesus as the Messiah-Shepherd. For example, Jesus said in 7:17, “*If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own.*” This statement suggests that voluntary submission to the will of God the Father is a condition for recognizing Jesus as the Messiah. This was precisely the state of the God-fearing Jews described in the preceding sections. In a similar way, Jesus' discussion in 9:37-39 suggests that one prerequisite for those who would come to faith in him was that they *recognize their own spiritual blindness and guilt*. Again, this reflects the repentance that was characteristic of the Jews who were prepared for the Messiah.

Several other characteristics of this group can be inferred from various of Jesus' statements made to the contrasting group of unbelieving Jews in John's Gospel. Jesus' words in 5:44 imply that, in contrast to the unbelieving Jews, the faithful ones *sought the praise that comes from God*. Similarly, from Jesus' words in 8:42 we can infer that the God-fearing Jews were prepared to *love Jesus* because he came from God. Finally, from 8:44 we can infer that this same group *wanted to carry out the desire of God their father*, in contrast to the resistant Jews, who wanted to carry out the devil's desire. These various characteristics taken together indicate that the “prepared” Jews were marked by an

attitude of willing repentance, submission, and a desire to do the will of God. In addition, we can infer from the context that these characteristics preceded and motivated the receptive Jews' faith in Jesus as the Messiah-Shepherd.

Perhaps the characteristic of the receptive Jews that is most commonly expressed in John's Gospel, however, is that they were *open and receptive to the truth that God had revealed to them*. John 6:45 sets the tone in this regard, "Everyone who *listens* to the Father and *learns* from him comes to me." Those truly receptive to the Father's instruction recognized Jesus as the Messiah and came to him in faith. But in what way did the Father instruct them? Clearly, one way was through the words of Jesus himself, who repeatedly emphasized that he spoke only the words that the Father had given him to speak (3:34; 7:16; 8:26, 28, 40; 12:49-50; 14:10, 24; 15:15; 17:7-8, 14). Thus, Jesus could say of those whom the Father had given him that "I gave them the words you gave me and *they accepted them*. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me" (17:8; cf. too 8:37, 43, 47).

Jesus indicated another source of the Father's instruction in 5:46-47: "If you believed *Moses*, you would believe me, for he wrote about me.⁴⁷ But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?" God revealed truth through the mouth of Moses in the Old Testament, including truth about the coming Messiah. Jesus' comments in this passage imply that those Jews who in faith accepted the words of Moses and revered God as he was revealed in the Mosaic Law would certainly accept Jesus as the Messiah (unlike the Jewish leaders to whom Jesus was speaking in this passage). In this sense, the statement, "If you believed Moses, you would believe me," directly parallels John 8:47b, paraphrased as, "If you belonged to my Father, you would believe in me." That is, those Jews who truly accepted God's words thereby belonged to God and satisfied the sufficient condition for coming to Christ. Those receptive to God's word through Moses would be receptive to God's word revealed through Jesus.

Similarly, when the Jews addressed by Jesus in chapter eight claimed Abraham as their father, Jesus countered, "If you were Abraham's children . . . then you would do the things Abraham did.⁴⁰ As it is, you are determined to kill me, a man who has *told you the truth* that I heard from God. Abraham did not do such things" (8:39b-40). Jesus' words here imply that those Jews who were truly of the faith of their father Abraham (cf. Romans 4:16) and who were open to "the truth . . . from God" (vs. 40), would recognize the validity of Jesus' testimony and accept him as the Messiah, even as Abraham had

“rejoiced at the thought of seeing [Jesus’] day . . . and was glad” (8:56).

Two other important passages show that openness to God’s revealed truth was a characteristic of those who met the conditions for coming to faith in Christ. The first is John 3:21, in which Jesus stated that he who “comes into the light” (in the context clearly referring to faith in Christ) is the one who “*lives by the truth*” (3:21). Then again in 18:37 Jesus told Pilate that “Everyone *on the side of truth* listens to me.” In these cases, receptivity and loyalty to the truth clearly mark those who will accept Jesus as the Messiah-Shepherd.

This last characteristic in particular (i.e., receptivity to revealed truth) highlights the fact that much of what we are dealing with in these passages can be viewed as the God-fearing Jews’ response to *prevenient grace*. Recall that prevenient grace may be defined as that grace of God extended to a person *prior to* salvation for the purpose of fostering authentically-free repentance and faith, whereby the person in question may then ultimately become a recipient of saving grace. Very often, prevenient grace is comprised of the divine revelation of *truth* to a person, along with the divinely-granted ability to respond in faith to that truth if the person so chooses. Prevenient grace, as Arminians understand it (and as, I believe, the Bible presents it) is resistible; that is, the recipient of prevenient grace has the God-given ability to either freely accept it or freely reject it (“freely” in the sense of authentic, contra-causal freedom; see my essay “Philosophical Reflections on Free Will” for more discussion). If a person accepts the prevenient grace given to him, then God will give more prevenient grace or else saving grace, as appropriate (depending on the nature and extent of the prevenient grace already received). If a person rejects the prevenient grace given to him, he risks not being offered further grace (see the discussion of hardening in “Election in Romans Chapter Nine”). I noted earlier that Arminians tend to identify the “drawing” and “enabling” of John 6:44, 65 with the theological concept of prevenient grace. When God “draws” or “enables” a person to exercise faith in Christ, this drawing/enabling is resistible. This is the very reason that these particular divine actions are presented as *necessary* conditions by the apostle John rather than as *sufficient* conditions for coming to faith in Christ (see earlier discussion).²

The “prepared” Jews discussed in this and preceding sections, then, can be understood as those Jews who had responded favorably to the prevenient grace extended to them by God under the covenant as it was revealed in the Old Testament (for a discussion of the

nature of God's special grace to Israel, see my essay "Election in Romans Chapter Nine"). In this sense they had, in contrast to the rest of the Israelites, of their own free will (not under constraint of any determinative will of God) "listened" to and "learned" from the Father (6:45), and had thereby become recipients of a form of saving grace under the terms of the covenant as it was revealed at that time. Accordingly, they then enjoyed the status of "belonging" to God as his faithful people, children, and sheep (in the restrictive sense explored in Section B above). This included those Jews who had turned back to God in genuine repentance under the ministry of John the Baptist, the one sent to "prepare the way for the Lord" (Matthew 3:3).

E. All Are Given to the Son: The Aim of Prevenient Grace

The above discussion raises an important set of questions. Recall that we established earlier from an examination of Jesus' statements in John's Gospel (see Section A) that those who "belong" to the Father are the same set as those considered to be Christ's "sheep," all of whom are given by the Father to the Son and who therefore come to Christ in faith (6:37). If, as argued in the preceding sections, Christ's "sheep" who "belonged to" God (John 8:47, 10:26) refers specifically to those Israelites who had responded favorably to God's prevenient grace and were thus in right covenant relationship with God at the time of Jesus' appearance to Israel, how should we now interpret Jesus' accompanying sufficient condition that the Father "*gives . . . all*" of these same repentant ones to Jesus (John 6:37; 17:2, 6, 9, 24)? In what sense are they "given"? And why should this be true of "all" of them?

The answer to these questions touches on the very heart of the relationship between the Father, the Son, and those who "belonged" to God. After Jesus' arrival in Israel, it was necessary that these who had been faithful to the covenant prior to Jesus' presentation to Israel now make the transition into the new era heralded by the arrival of the Messiah-Shepherd. Because these "prepared" Jews had been and continued to be responsive to God's resistible prevenient grace (the "drawing" and "enabling" of God; John 6:44, 65), these same ones could now *all* be led by God to faith in Christ, not because such a calling to faith in Christ is irresistible, but precisely *because the hearts of these "prepared" Jews were already in a receptive state.*³ They had already made the free choice to be "on the side of truth" (18:37) and to yield themselves in repentance and loyalty to God. Consequently, God could, by the inner working of his Holy Spirit in their hearts, direct *all* of these faithful ones who already belonged to him to embrace Jesus, the

Messiah-Shepherd, as the new focal-point of their faith and loyalty. Through the words that Jesus spoke (which were the Father's own words; see above) and the working of the Holy Spirit in their hearts, God assured these receptive Jews that Jesus had indeed been sent from the Father as he claimed, confirming in their hearts Jesus' messianic identity as the true shepherd and directing them to faith in him. These children of God under the Old Covenant put up no final resistance in their hearts when God directed them to the Son in this way, for their hearts were already open to God's revealed truth. They did not need to be determined or compelled to accept him. They came freely to the Son.

It is entirely expected that God would direct them to Jesus in this way, given the nature of the relationship between the Father and the Son as it is presented in John's Gospel. This relationship is one of the major themes (perhaps *the* major theme) of the entire book. It will perhaps be helpful to take a moment and consider the relationship more carefully here. As noted earlier, Jesus repeatedly identified himself as the one who had been "sent" by or had "come" from the Father (1:9, 14; 3:2, 13, 17, 19, 31, 34; 4:25-26, 34; 5:23-24, 36, 38, 43; 6:29, 32-33, 44, 46, 51, 57, 62; 7:16, 18, 28-29, 33; 8:14, 16, 18, 23, 26, 29, 38, 42; 9:4; 10:36; 11:27, 42; 12:44-46, 49; 13:3, 20; 15:21; 16:5, 28, 30; 17:8, 18, 21, 23, 25; 20:21; cf. also 9:16, 29; 19:9). In like manner, Jesus said that when he left this world he would return to the Father (13:1, 3; 14:2, 12, 28; 16:5, 10, 17, 28; 17:11, 13; 20:17). In everything that he did, Jesus wished to make it clear that he was not acting on his own, but instead under the specific direction and approval of the Father (5:24, 37; 6:27; 7:18). Thus, Jesus' works were the Father's works, and Jesus did only what the Father showed him to do (5:17, 19; 8:28-29; 9:4; 10:25, 32, 37-38; 14:10). Similarly, Jesus' words were the Father's words, and Jesus spoke only what the Father told him to speak (3:34; 7:16; 8:26, 28, 40; 12:49-50; 14:10, 24; 15:15; 17:7-8, 14). In all things Jesus was completely dependent upon the Father (5:30; 6:57; 8:28, 42; 17:7), and Jesus always sought to please the Father by doing his will (5:30; 6:38; 8:29, 55; 10:18b; 14:31; 15:10; 18:11). In this way Jesus always worked for the Father's honor (7:18, 8:49).

Jesus' actions in this regard did not spring merely from a functional choice on his part, however (though clearly such a functional choice was involved), but from a deeper ontological unity between him and the Father. John's Gospel opens with a profound statement of this unity (1:1-2), and the oneness of the Father and the Son is a recurring theme throughout the book (8:29; 10:30, 38; 12:44; 14:10-11, 20; 16:32; 17:11, 21-23). Because of this unity, only the Son could be said to have truly seen and known the Father (6:46; 7:29; 8:38, 55; 10:15; 17:25), and only the Son reveals the true nature of the Father

(1:18; 12:45; 14:9; 17:26). Not only does the Son share the Father's name (17:11-12), but the Son can be said to be equal with God and to in fact be God himself (1:1-2, 18; 5:18). The Father both glorifies the Son and is glorified in the Son (8:54; 11:4; 13:31-32; 14:13; 17:22, 24; cf. too 8:50). All that belongs to the Father belongs to the Son, and all that belongs to the Son belongs to the Father (16:15, 17:10). The Father loves the Son, and the Son loves the Father (3:35; 10:17; 14:31; 15:9-10; 17:23-24, 26). The Father and the Son mutually abide in the believer (14:23). In addition, the Father puts all things under the Son's power (13:3), including the power to raise people from the dead (5:21, 26). Similarly, the Father has granted the Son authority over all people (17:2) and has entrusted all judgment to the Son (5:22, 27, 30).

In all of these ways, we see an intimate, mutual relationship between Jesus, the Son, and God, his Father. Crucially, this relationship extends to the way in which people come to know God. Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. *No one comes to the Father except through me*" (14:6). Accordingly, one must honor the Son in order to truly honor the Father (5:23). One's response to Jesus ultimately reflects one's response to God as well, whether this response be to know and accept him, or to hate him (8:19, 13:20, 14:7, 15:23-24, 16:3). The Father, for his part, pledges to love all those who love his Son (14:21, 23; 16:27).

It was precisely this intimate union between the Son and the Father that was being called into question by the Jewish leaders and by many of the Jewish people (see, e.g., 7:25-52). This is especially significant when we recall the historical significance of Jesus' appearance in Israel: Jesus was the promised Messiah-Shepherd come to gather the sheep of Israel and shepherd them in justice, righteousness, and peace. And yet, at his appearing, the very leaders themselves, those who were supposed to have been God's under-shepherds for the people, rejected him as the Messiah (e.g., 7:47-49). This raised an important doubt in the minds of many of the other Jews: Did the leaders' rejection of Jesus indicate that he was, in fact, not sent from God to shepherd the flock of Israel? Perhaps the rejection of Jesus by the Pharisees and priests, whom the common people would normally have considered authoritative in such religious matters, indicated that Jesus did not, after all, possess the intimate relationship with God that he claimed.

Jesus countered these doubts by providing an explanation for the Jewish leaders' unbelief (and the unbelief of many of the common people as well), namely, that they had failed to meet the necessary and/or the sufficient conditions for coming to faith in him (i.e., the

conditions that we have been considering in this essay). These conditions are, in one sense, reciprocal to the principle cited above from John 14:6, for not only is Jesus the only way to the Father, but *the Father is the only way to Jesus*. This is the essence of the various conditions for coming to faith in Christ expressed in John's Gospel. Unless one is drawn and enabled by the Father, one cannot come to Jesus (the necessary conditions), and if one belongs to God as Christ's sheep and has listened to and learned from the Father, then one will certainly be "given" by the Father to Christ (the sufficient conditions). In each case, a person comes to faith in Christ through the agency of the Father, thus reflecting the intimate union of the Father and Son.

It should come as no surprise, then, that *all* of the Jews who belonged to the Father would be "given" by the Father to his Son. The intimate relationship between the Father and the Son mandated that it be so. There was no "third" option available by which the faithful ones under the covenant as it was revealed in the Old Testament might somehow continue in favor with God but fail to accept Jesus as the Messiah-Shepherd of Israel. Once the Son of God appeared, there could be no relationship with the Father without a relationship to his Son as well, because the Father and the Son were one (10:30, 38; 12:44; 14:10-11, 20; 17:11, 21-23) and shared all things in common (16:15, 17:10). If a person truly sought God, then he would accept the Father's witness concerning his Son (5:37; 8:18). One could not be a true follower of God without being a follower of Jesus (cf. Acts 3:23).

One might consider the resistant Jews' attempts to claim Abraham and then God as their father to be an attempt to seek such a "third" way (8:33, 39, 41). They sought to claim a relationship with God without having to accept a relationship with Jesus. Jesus forcefully rejected their attempt to bypass him in this way, arguing that their rejection of him betrayed their claim that they were children of Abraham and of God. The true children of Abraham would, like Abraham, have "rejoiced at the thought of seeing" Jesus' day (8:56), the day of the arrival of the promised Messiah, for Abraham was a man of true faith and the father of all those who are of faith (Romans 4:16-17). The children of God, likewise, would have loved Jesus the same way that God himself loves Jesus (3:35; 8:42; 10:17; 15:9; 17:23-26). The fact that these Jews were unwilling to hold to Jesus' teaching (vs. 31) or love him (vs. 42) showed, then, that they were neither beforehand nor at that time among the children of God (i.e., those who "belonged" to God).

The above observations yield an important theological lesson regarding God's intention

in his dispensing of prevenient grace. Jesus' assertions that *all* of the "prepared" Jews without fail were directed by God to receive Jesus as their awaited Messiah-Shepherd (i.e., they were "given" by the Father to the Son; 6:37; 10:29; 17:2, 6, 9, 24) shows us that the Father has no other final aim in his dispensing of prevenient grace than the aim of leading the faithful to his Son. More succinctly:

*Christ is the Father's sole aim in the dispensing of prevenient grace.*⁴

God had no other alternative for the faithful Jews. Any and all who responded to God's offer of prevenient grace were directed by God to Christ, precisely because the Father and the Son exist in intimate union, and the Son is the culmination and pinnacle of the Father's redemptive plan for humanity (Ephesians 1:9-10). There could be no residue of the faithful who might somehow miss Christ, for God would not allow such an outcome. He actively intervened to lead to Christ all of those receptive ones who belonged to him. There was no "third option."

F. *The Gentiles*

Finally, how do the *Gentiles* fit into all of this? That is, did Jesus' comments have relevance only for the Jews, or do they have relevance for Gentile seekers as well, including Gentiles of our own day?

Though until now in this essay I have focused entirely on Jesus' statements in John's Gospel as they relate to the Jewish people (because it seems clear from the context of his statements that this was Jesus' own focus when making them), it is equally clear that Jesus himself intended a broader, secondary application to the Gentiles. We see this in John 10:16, where after having discussed his coming to the sheep pen of Israel, Jesus added:

"I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd."

Given the Old Testament background to Jesus' remarks (see discussion in Sections B and C above), the "sheep pen" in question was clearly Israel, to whom Jesus came as the promised Messiah-Shepherd to call out the faithful sheep from God's flock. The "other sheep that are not of this sheep pen," then, would seem to refer to Gentiles, outside the

sheep pen of Israel. This view is supported by John's words in the following chapter, where, commenting on Caiaphas' assertion that "it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish" (11:50), the apostle says, "He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation,⁵² and *not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God*, to bring them together and make them one" (11:51-52).⁵ Here, the "scattered children of God" are directly contrasted to the Jewish nation, suggesting as in 10:16 that Gentiles are in view. Significantly, these Gentiles are called the "children of God" in 11:52 and Christ's "sheep" in 10:16, both of which terms we have seen in our preceding discussion to refer to those who meet the sufficient conditions for coming to faith in Christ. In addition, Jesus' statement in 10:16 that these Gentile sheep would also "listen to [his] voice" indicates that they, like the Jewish sheep described in the preceding sections, would surely recognize him as the Messiah-Shepherd and follow him in faith. The clear implication of all this is that there were God-fearing Gentiles who, like the faithful "prepared" Jews, had responded favorably to God's prevenient grace and who, therefore, belonged to God and would be directed to faith in the Son. The Messiah-Shepherd came, then, not only to gather the faithful sheep of Israel, but to gather the faithful among the Gentiles as well and make them all into one flock, one body, loyal to him as the Messiah-Shepherd (cf. Ephesians 2:11-22; 3:6). (Note the parallel focus in both 10:16 and 11:52 on the goal of *unifying* the flock/people of God; cf. 17:20-21. See also Isaiah 56:8, which within its context bears a strong resemblance to John 10:16.)

One might propose a narrow interpretation of John 10:16 to the effect that Jesus meant to refer only to those Gentiles who had formally converted to Judaism. Such Gentiles are mentioned, for example, in Acts 13:16, 26, which records Paul's address to the Jewish synagogue in Pisidian Antioch. "Standing up, Paul motioned with his hand and said: 'Men of Israel and *you Gentiles who worship God*, listen to me! . . .²⁶ Brothers, children of Abraham, *and you God-fearing Gentiles*, it is to us that this message of salvation has been sent.'" The Gentiles to whom Paul referred were present in the synagogue on a normal Sabbath day, and thus were presumably Gentiles who regularly attended and had formally affiliated themselves with the Jewish faith. This assumption is confirmed by verse 43, where we are told that after Paul's address, "When the congregation was dismissed, many of the Jews *and devout converts to Judaism* [i.e., proselytes; cf. NASB] followed Paul and Barnabas, who talked with them and urged them to continue in the grace of God."

However, it is unlikely that Jesus intended in John 10:16 to refer only to Gentile proselytes within Judaism. For one thing, it is hard to see why such converts would be considered “*not of this [Jewish] sheep pen*” (10:16), when the whole point of conversion to Judaism was that one would henceforth be considered a member of the Jewish covenant community (Isaiah 56:3-8). Moreover, later in the same account of Paul and Barnabas’ visit to the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch described above (Acts 13), there is evidence that non-proselyte Gentiles were “prepared” for the gospel message in a way similar to that which we have seen elsewhere was true of “prepared” Jews. On the following Sabbath after Paul and Barnabas’ first presentation to the synagogue, “almost the whole city [obviously including many non-proselyte Gentiles] gathered to hear the word of the Lord” (vs. 44). However, “When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy” and began to oppose Paul and Barnabas (vs. 45). Consider carefully what happened next:

“Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: ‘We had to speak the word of God to you first. *Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles [i.e., the crowd of non-proselyte Gentiles who were not members of the synagogue].*’⁴⁷ For this is what the Lord has commanded us: ‘I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.’”⁴⁸ When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and *all who were appointed for eternal life believed*” (Acts 13:46-48)

Of special interest is Luke’s description of the non-proselyte Gentiles who came to faith in Christ. In verse 48 these are said to have been “appointed for eternal life.” Calvinists have often used this verse to support the doctrine of unconditional particular election to salvation. However, as Robert Shank argues in an excellent discussion of this verse (*Elect in the Son: A Study of the Doctrine of Election*, Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1970, 1989, pp. 183-187), the Greek verb *tetagmenoi* (masculine, plural, nominative, perfect, passive/middle participle of *tasso*, ‘to set in order’) does not specify an agent in this verse, so it is an open question whether it is God or the people themselves (or some combination of both) who caused these Gentiles to be ‘set in order’ or disposed to eternal life. As Shank notes (following several other commentators), the fact that the Jews are said in verse 46 to have rejected the gospel and thereby *not considered* (or ‘judged’) *themselves worthy of eternal life* (a negative parallel to vs. 48b) “strongly mitigates against any assumption of divine agency in verse 48” (Shank, *ibid.*, p. 184). That is, the contrastive parallel between verse 46b and verse 48b suggests that it was the responsive Gentiles

who *set themselves* ‘in order’ [*tetagmenoi*] for eternal life by way of their receptivity to Paul and Barnabas’ words, just as the unbelieving Jews had disposed themselves *against* receiving eternal life because of their resistance to the same message.

Moreover, Shank astutely observes:

“All who assume that *tetagmenoi* in Acts 13:48 implies that those who believed the Gospel at that particular time and place did so as the consequence of an eternal decree of unconditional particular election unwittingly embrace a second assumption, completely absurd: all present in the synagogue who ever were to believe the Gospel did so at once; there could be no further opportunity to consider the Gospel, and no man who failed to believe that moment could ever subsequently believe.” (Shank, *ibid.*, p. 187)

It is clearly better, then, to view those Gentiles who received the gospel with joy in Pisidian Antioch on that day as Gentiles who had set *themselves* in order for receiving eternal life through their own willingness to repent and be receptive to the word of God. In this sense they were similar to the “prepared” Jews whom we have discussed in previous sections of this essay. They had responded favorably to God’s prevenient grace and in this sense were “disposed,” “set in order,” or [a marginal translation] “appointed” for eternal life.

Another example of a Gentile who would qualify as one of Christ’s “sheep,” prepared beforehand for Christ’s arrival through voluntary responsiveness to God’s prevenient grace, is Cornelius in Acts 10. In 10:1-2 Cornelius is described as a Gentile of Caesarea, a “centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment,” who together with his whole family (and at least one of his attendants; see vs. 7) was “devout and God-fearing.” We are told that Cornelius “gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly.” In a vision Cornelius was informed by an angel that his “prayers and gifts to the poor [had] come up as a memorial offering before God” (vs. 4). Clearly, here was a man who had been receptive to God’s prevenient grace toward him and who in consequence stood, in some significant sense, in God’s favor. The apostle Peter himself said as much when he saw Cornelius’ devotion after having come to the latter’s house in obedience to a vision of God. “Then Peter began to speak: ‘I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism³⁵ but *accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right*’” (Acts 10:34-35). God’s “acceptance” of Cornelius appears to have *preceded* Cornelius’

faith in Christ, for this acceptance seems to have been based on the reverence and devotion expressed through Cornelius' prayers and alms, acts that were received as a "memorial offering" to the Lord prior to the time that Cornelius heard the gospel from Peter. In this sense, Cornelius parallels the case of God-fearing Jews who were faithful to the covenant and thus "belonged" to God prior to the coming of Jesus. Like them, Cornelius had been receptive to God's prevenient grace and therefore was primed and ready to recognize Jesus as the Messiah and Savior.

Am I saying that Cornelius would have gone to heaven if he had died prior to Peter's coming? The answer to that question depends, I think, on Cornelius' relation to the covenant as it was revealed to the Jewish people in the Old Testament. It is possible that he was familiar with the covenant and had privately, if not formally and publicly, submitted to the terms of that covenant, namely, repentance and an obedient faith in God and his promises, including God's promise to send the Messiah-Shepherd. In this case his "acceptance" by God may have involved a dispensing of saving grace parallel to that given to faithful Jews under the terms of the covenant. On the other hand, it may be that, despite his devotion, Cornelius was still considered a non-proselyte Gentile and a "foreigner to the covenants of the promise," thus "excluded from citizenship in Israel" and "without hope and without God in the world" (Ephesians 2:12). What is clear is that Cornelius had been responsive to prevenient grace, and because of this responsiveness he had been granted further prevenient grace and the opportunity to receive the message of salvation through Jesus Christ. This once again demonstrates the principle discovered above, that Christ is the Father's sole aim in the dispensing of prevenient grace. God was not content to leave Cornelius ignorant of Christ, given Cornelius' dramatic responsiveness to prevenient grace. In this new era in which the Messiah has come and worked redemption for all humanity, there is no "third" option for Gentiles any more than there is a "third" option for Jews. God will not allow any Gentile who is responsive to prevenient grace to continue in his favor short of being directed to conscious, intentional faith in Christ. As with the Jewish people, any Gentile who continues to be open to the revealed truth of God (i.e., as revealed through the creation, the conscience, and verbal revelation) will ultimately be directed by God to Christ, for God has no other intention than that "all [i.e., both believing Jews and Gentiles] in heaven and on earth" be brought "together under one head, even Christ" (Ephesians 1:10).

The above consideration of God-fearing Gentiles, then, leads us to affirm what is a very common view in evangelical churches in regard to those who have never heard the gospel.

To put this view in the terms in which it is most often expressed, God gives more “light” to those who respond to the light already given them. Arminius held to essentially this position, as seen in the following quote in which he discusses the status of those who have never heard the gospel:

“. . . while they are destitute of the knowledge of Christ, yet God has not left Himself without witness, but even during that period has revealed to them some truth concerning His power and goodness; which benefits *if they had rightly used*, at least according to their conscience, *He would have granted them greater grace*; according to that, ‘To him that hath shall be given’ [Matthew 13:12] ‘All men are called with some calling,’ namely, by that witness of God by which they may be brought to find God by feeling after Him, and by that truth which they ‘hold,’ or detain, ‘in unrighteousness,’ that is, whose effect they hinder in themselves; and by that writing of the law upon their minds, according to which they have their own thoughts accusing them. But this calling, though it is not a saving one, as from which salvation cannot be immediately obtained, may yet be said to be antecedent to the saving grace by which Christ is offered, and, *if rightly used, will acquire that grace from God’s mercy.*” (“Examination of Perkin’s Pamphlet,” *The Works of James Arminius*, London Ed., Vol. 3, trans. William Nichols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1986, pp. 483-484, emphasis added)

We see this truth demonstrated dramatically in Cornelius’ case. God went to great lengths to bring the gospel to Cornelius, who on account of his favorable response to God’s prevenient grace could be considered one of Christ’s “sheep” outside the sheep pen of Israel. Once exposed to the gospel of Jesus, Cornelius continued to respond in faith and was accordingly gathered in to join the rest of the Messiah-Shepherd’s flock, Jew and Gentile alike, who had recognized the Shepherd’s voice and followed him. Cornelius was “given” by the Father to the Son, because Cornelius persisted in his faith-response to the revealed truth of God. The same is presumably true today for Jew and Gentile alike: All who are receptive to God’s prevenient grace and who persist in this faith-response will be granted further prevenient grace, ultimately leading them to intentional faith in Jesus, the Messiah-Shepherd.

The notion of persistence in one’s faith-response to prevenient grace is important, for none of Jesus’ remarks on this matter entail that God’s prevenient grace ever becomes irresistible. Though Jesus said that “all that the Father gives me will come to me” (John

6:37), this statement assumes that the ones so given are at that time in a state of receptivity to God's revealed truth. Nowhere in any of the passages explored earlier do we find any hint that a person who is resisting God's grace can simultaneously be a recipient of the saving actions of God. Nor is there any indication that once a person begins to align himself with truth and respond favorably to God's prevenient grace (thereby "belonging" to God in that sense) he will necessarily and irresistibly continue to do so. The passages we have explored above only teach that *if* a person *does* belong to God (i.e., through responsiveness to prevenient grace), God will actively intervene to direct him to intentional faith in Christ. These passages do not in themselves exclude the possibility that a person who was at one time receptive to prevenient grace might subsequently begin to resist such grace, in which case he would no longer "belong" to God and meet the sufficient conditions for coming to faith in Christ. God would in such a case no longer be obligated to direct him to Christ.⁶

G. Summary and Conclusion

In this central part of the present essay I have proposed an interpretation of the sufficient conditions for coming to faith in Christ found in John's Gospel (6:37, 45; 8:47; 10:26, 29; 17:6, 9, 24), an interpretation that places strong emphasis on the Jewish historical context of Jesus' words. From the Old Testament we learned that the "people," "children," and "sheep" of God are uniformly identified with the Jewish nation, and in a more restrictive sense with those Jews who because of their faith and obedience were in right covenant relationship with God. Drawing on this observation, I proposed that those whom Jesus said would come to him in faith because they "belonged" to God as his "sheep" (8:47b, 10:26) refers primarily to those Jews who had responded favorably to God's prevenient grace by being faithful to the covenant as it was revealed in the Old Testament. These had aligned themselves with God's revealed truth (e.g., 3:21, 6:45, 18:57), repented of their sins (e.g., 7:17, 9:37-39), and prepared themselves (in many cases through the ministry of John the Baptist; 1:23) for the coming of the Messiah-Shepherd into the sheep pen of Israel. Because the hearts of these faithful "sheep" were receptive to God in this way, God the Father was able to "give" these who already belonged to him to the Son, actively directing all of them to recognize and receive Jesus as the promised Messiah-Shepherd (6:37; 10:26-29; 17:2, 6, 9, 24). This was done not in a determinative or irresistible way, for that was not necessary. These "sheep" were already primed and ready to receive Jesus through their prior receptivity to prevenient grace. It was natural and inevitable that the Father would direct them to the Son in this way, because the Father and Son exist in

intimate union, and the Father has no other final aim in his dispensing of prevenient grace than the aim of leading the faithful to his Son (i.e., Christ is the Father's sole aim in the dispensing of prevenient grace). Put differently, there was no "third" way by which one might stay in right relation with the Father and yet reject the Son, as many of the Jewish leaders and people were attempting to do. I further argued that Jesus intended his words to apply in a secondary sense to God-fearing Gentiles who were responsive to the prevenient grace extended to them (10:16). Cornelius the centurion can be seen as an example of one such to whom God gave additional light of truth because Cornelius had been responsive to the previous light granted him (Acts 10).

Note that the above proposal not only takes into account a wide range of biblical data bearing on the subject, but also satisfies the key requirement that must be met by any account of Jesus' statements of the sufficient conditions for coming to faith presented in the Gospel of John. Specifically, the above proposal explains how people can already "belong" to God as his children and be considered Christ's "sheep" *before* they ever exercise saving faith in Jesus Christ. According to the above proposal, the terms "belong," "sheep," and so forth used by Jesus in the passages in question must be interpreted in light of their Old Testament usage. In their Old Testament usage these terms can best be understood as characterizing the faithful Jews in regard to their favorable response to prevenient grace, expressed in faith and repentance as required under the terms of the covenant. Calvinists, of course, have a different way of explaining how some people can "belong" to God prior to faith in Christ; namely, by virtue of being numbered among the elect (i.e., that hypothesized set of definite and particular individuals unconditionally elected to salvation from all eternity). However, this Calvinist understanding of Jesus' statements in John's Gospel fails to account for the rich biblical and historical context of Jesus' words that we have explored above.

III. Other Passages

In this part of the present essay, I will briefly examine a few other of the most important passages in John's Gospel not already considered above (cf. also Notes 2, 5, and 6) that have often been held up as providing evidence for the Calvinist Reformed view of unconditional, particular election. I will argue that in each case, the purported evidence is not compelling. The passages considered below are John 1:12-13; 3:8, 21, 27; 5:21; 6:70; 12:37-40; and 15:16.

A. *Spiritual Versus Physical Birth in 1:12-13*

John 1:12-13 states:

“Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God--¹³ children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.”

In regard to this passage, Yarbrough comments:

“Divine election receives sharp emphasis in John 1:13, which sheds light on the identity of ‘all who received him’ in 1:12. That is, those who savingly received the Messiah for who he truly was (1:12) did so because they were ‘born of God’ (1:13)--and not vice versa. More specifically, they cannot ultimately attribute their saved status, if they possess it, to ‘natural descent,’ their Jewishness or descent from Abraham (cf. John 8:33). They cannot ultimately attribute it to ‘human decision,’ their own act of belief alone, or their parents’ decision to have a child who would eventually declare belief in Christ. Nor is saving faith analogous to a husband’s decision to father a child; their belief is not like being ‘born . . . of a husband’s will.’” (Robert Yarbrough, “Divine Election in the Gospel of John,” in *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace*, ed. by Thomas Schreiner & Bruce Ware, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995, 2000, p. 49)

Yarbrough’s assertion here rests on a misreading of the phrases “not of natural descent [lit., ‘of bloods’], nor of human decision, or a husband’s will” as referring to human-based attempts to *obtain salvation*.⁷ However, this is not the most straightforward way to understand the text. The contrast in this passage is not between two different means of attempting to obtain salvation, but instead between two different types of *conception*, one arising from parental consent and one arising from personal consent, each type of conception yielding a different outcome. Whereas physical birth occurs without one’s personal consent (i.e., it arises instead strictly from the decision of one’s parents) and brings life only to the physical body, spiritual birth from above is a matter of one’s own faith-decision (it comes to “those who believed in his name,” vs. 12) and brings new life to the spirit. The “human decision” in verse 13 does not refer to any and

all human decisions, but instead should be identified with the immediately following phrase, “a husband’s will,” which refers specifically to parental volition in bringing about physical conception. Identifying the two phrases in this way accords with the conventions of standard Hebrew parallelism. Consequently, the passage does not entail what Yarbrough asserts, that salvation cannot be contingent upon one’s faith decision. In fact, the passage teaches just the opposite: Unlike physical birth, which arises without a child’s consent, spiritual birth is contingent upon the spiritual “child’s” consent through an act of faith in Jesus’ name (vs. 12).

B. *The Wind and the Spirit in 3:8*

In this verse Jesus describes the new birth: “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.” Shank summarizes the common Calvinist appeal to this verse and a suitable Arminian response:⁸

“Some have assumed that our Lord’s words here imply that the Holy Spirit visits some men with saving grace, but not others, because God wishes to save only some men rather than all. It is assumed that the words rule out all possibility of the existence of any pertinent condition or factor in men of which the Holy Spirit takes cognizance in effecting the new birth. Certainly the new birth is a divine operation--the action of Spirit on spirit--and not in any sense something man does for himself. But our Lord’s words in John 3:8 must be understood as *descriptive* rather than *proscriptive*. Human condition and agency, far from negated in Christ’s discourse to Nicodemus, are categorically affirmed: ‘you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?’ (v. 11f, RSV) Nothing is more emphatic in verses 14-21 than the condition ‘whoever believes’ and the affirmation of authentic human agency in the face of valid practicable options.” (Robert Shank, *Elect in the Son: A Study of the Doctrine of Election*, Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1970, 1989, p. 179)

C. *Deeds Done Through God in 3:21*

John 3:21 says, “But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.” Some commentators

(e.g., Yarbrough, *ibid.*, p. 54) have taken this verse to indicate that salvation is fundamentally a matter of God's election, not human choice. While I agree that there could be no salvation without divine initiative, this fact does not, however, contradict the necessity of authentic human agency. Arminians gladly acknowledge that the dispensing of both prevenient grace and saving grace is necessary for the salvation of any particular individual to be accomplished. John 3:21 specifically addresses prevenient grace. Note that the deeds in question which have been done "through God" are deeds that *precede* a person's coming to the light. This is clear from the context, in which those who "loved darkness instead of light" are said to have done so because their "deeds were evil" and they did not want these evil deeds to be "exposed" (vs. 19-20). Such people are contrasted to those who "live by the truth" and, in consequence, subsequently "come into the light" (vs. 21). These are the very same set of "prepared" persons described in Part II of this essay, those who have responded favorably to prevenient grace and have thereby become disposed to God's dispensing of subsequent saving grace through faith in Christ. The implication of John 3:21, then, is that all such anticipatory good deeds on the part of those who have been receptive to prevenient grace are produced, not by the person in isolation from God, but instead through the enabling agency of God's prevenient grace at work in the life of the person (i.e., such deeds are "done through God"). No one would ever choose to "live by the truth" or "come into the light" without the prior (resistible) enabling of God's prevenient grace.

D. Receiving Only What is Given From Heaven in 3:27

John 3:27 records John the Baptist's words that "A man can receive only what is given him from heaven." This statement has often been taken as expressive of a broad principle ruling out any role for authentic human agency in the process of salvation. Two observations are in order, however. First, we should be careful about pressing John's statement too far, given that it was issued by John as a commentary on the fact that Jesus was beginning to acquire more followers than John. John's disciples worried aloud, "Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan--the one you testified about--well, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him" (3:26). The "gift" from heaven that John mentioned in his response, then, was not the gift of salvation but the gift of fruit and purpose in ministry (for a similar perspective on this verse, see William Klein, *The New Chosen People: A Corporate View of Election*, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1990, pp. 128-129). John's point in this verse was that it was up to God to decide when John's function as Christ's forerunner had been accomplished and his period

of usefulness was over. At the time of this episode, the Father was already beginning to direct many of the responsive Jews to faith in the Son (see above discussion in Part II). John recognized God's hand in this process and understood that whereas God previously had directed men and women to him (i.e., John) in keeping with John's role as Christ's forerunner, God was within his prerogative to now direct the same people to Christ, their Messiah-Shepherd.

Even if we do extend the significance of John's comment more broadly to the nature of salvation, however, it still does not follow from this verse that a person is entirely passive in the process of salvation, as many Calvinists claim. At most this verse would show that *prevenient grace is necessary* for bringing about a person's salvation, a conclusion which, as I noted above, Arminians readily accept. No one receives the gift of salvation apart from God's prior enabling to do so through the dispensing of prevenient grace (cf. John 6:44, 65). This fact does not entail, however, that the person is a *passive* recipient of either prevenient or saving grace. One must *actively* receive (i.e., through the exercise of one's free will) what God wishes to give; this holds true of both types of divine grace just mentioned. Both prevenient and saving grace are resistible.

E. The Son Gives Life to Whom He Pleases in 5:21

Jesus says in John 5:21:

“For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it.”

Yarbrough comments, “Here is a powerful analogy: As corpses depend on God's vivifying voice to resurrect them, so recipients of ‘life,’ or salvation, depend on the Son's good pleasure to give it” (ibid., p. 50). Yarbrough's comment implies two assertions: (a) The recipients of salvation are entirely passive in regard to their vivification, just as physical corpses are passive in resurrection, and (b) The identification of the recipients of spiritual vivification depends entirely on the Son's “good pleasure,” not any volitional choice on the part of the recipients of that salvation. Both of these assertions are part of the standard Calvinist Reformed view.

However, the phrase “just as” in this verse signals a parallel between the *Father and the Son*, not (as Yarbrough wrongly interprets) between spiritual and physical vivification.

This observation is in keeping with the strong emphasis through the book on the Father's relation to the Son (see discussion in Part II, Section E of this essay). The emphasis of this verse is that the Son has the same authority as the Father to raise people from the dead (whether physically or spiritually). The verse does not indicate that spiritual vivification is exactly parallel in all respects to physical vivification (i.e., that the recipient of each must be entirely passive). Though I agree that the exercise of faith and repentance is not possible without the prior extension of prevenient grace, I also believe that there is strong biblical evidence that the recipient of this prevenient grace must exercise free volition in regard to that grace once it has been received. Nothing in John 5:21 contradicts this view.

Moreover, when speaking of the Son's right to "give life to whom he is pleased to give it," we cannot infer from this verse that the Son's pleasure in this regard is necessarily unconditioned on any volitional factors within the recipient of such life. The question remains, "To whom is the Son pleased to give life?" The biblical answer is that the Son is pleased to give life *to those who exercise faith*.⁹ This can be seen from numerous verses, including some within John 5 itself (5:24, 38-40). As Klein comments, "In this confrontation with the Jews, Jesus affirms that life is only available on the Father's and his terms; one must come to God as he wills people to come. And that way is through the Son. Jesus wills to give life only to believers in him. The Son does not arbitrarily select out some to whom to give life. The fourth gospel give[s] consistent witness that he gives life to those who believe (3:16, 18, 36; 4:42, 53; 6:40, 47, et al.)" (Klein, *ibid.*, p. 138).

F. Jesus' Choosing of the Twelve in 6:70 and 15:16

Some commentators point to Jesus' unilateral election of the twelve apostles as evidence of God's definitive role in election of particular individuals to salvation. In John 6:70, Jesus says, "Have I not chosen you, the Twelve?" In 15:16 he reiterates, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit--fruit that will last." However, as Klein has argued in some detail, such passages (of which sort there are many instances in the New Testament) refer to election to a particular *task* (of service, in this case, service to the office of apostle), not election to salvation (see, e.g., Klein, *ibid.*, pp. 129-132). This is clear in the description of the calling of the twelve apostles as it is given in Mark's and Luke's Gospels:

"He appointed twelve--*designating them apostles*--that they might be with him

and that he might send them out to preach ¹⁵ and to have authority to drive out demons” (Mark 3:14-15)

“When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also *designated apostles*” (Luke 6:13)

The thrust in these verses is clearly election to their apostolic role, according to which they were to associate more intimately with Jesus in order to learn from him and share the authority of his ministry. The standing of the twelve in regard to faith and salvation is not directly addressed here at all, and must be considered independently. Of course, their call to apostleship presupposes that they were at the very least among the “prepared” Jews discussed in Part II of this essay; that is, they had been receptive to prevenient grace and were open to being directed by the Father to Jesus (as witnessed by the fact that they were already numbered among Jesus’ disciples *prior to* their being chosen for apostleship; cf. Luke 6:13a). However, their apostolic call does not in itself entail any more than this. Indeed, the choice of the twelve included the choice of one, Judas Iscariot, of whom it is unclear whether he ever fully experienced saving faith and salvation. We do know that some time before his arrest, Jesus already knew Judas to be “a devil” (6:70b) who would later betray him. If Judas’ election to apostleship included an election to salvation in the Calvinist sense, then it is difficult to understand how he could ultimately have turned away from Jesus.¹⁰ It makes much more sense to understand the election spoken of in 6:70 and 15:16 strictly as an election of the twelve to their apostolic office, and treat the standing of the twelve in relation to salvation as a separate matter.

G. *Hardening in 12:37-40*

I will consider one final passage in John’s Gospel that has often been considered support for the Calvinist Reformed view of election to salvation. In John 12:37-40, an explanation is given for the persistent unbelief of some of the Jews:

“Even after Jesus had done all these miraculous signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him.³⁸ This was to fulfill the word of Isaiah the prophet: ‘Lord, who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?’³⁹ For this reason they could not believe, because, as Isaiah says elsewhere:⁴⁰ ‘He has blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn—and I

would heal them.””

Calvinists point to the evidence of God’s unilateral action in this passage whereby he hardened the Jews so that they “could not believe,” in fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy (cf. Isaiah 6:9-10).

However, the question here is not *whether* God hardened these Jews, but *why* he did so. Clearly, God hardened them, “blinding” their eyes and “deadening” their hearts so that they could not understand Jesus words and believe. Yet, as I have discussed in the essay “Election in Romans Chapter Nine,” there is strong biblical evidence that God only hardens those in this way who have already resisted God’s prior dispensing of prevenient grace, who have suppressed the truth previously offered to them. Shank provides an excellent discussion of this point (see Shank, *ibid.*, pp. 166-172), to which I refer the interested reader. There Shank argues that the context both of Isaiah 6:9-10 and its cognate uses in the New Testament (including John 12:37-40) reveals that God hardened only those who had already rejected God *prior to* his hardening of them, and who thus well deserved the divine censure recorded in these passages. God’s action in hardening can thus be seen as a confirmation of what the people in question have already themselves freely chosen.

IV. Summary and Conclusion

In this essay I have reexamined the most important passages in the Gospel of John that have been adduced as evidence in favor of the Calvinist Reformed view of unconditional, particular election and the related doctrines of effectual calling and irresistible grace. I have concluded that in no instance does the scriptural evidence that has been adduced prove convincing. Moreover, I argued that the standard Calvinist interpretation of those passages that are commonly considered to provide some of the strongest support for Calvinism to be found in all of Scripture (John 8:47, 10:26, and related vss.) fails to adequately take into account the rich historical context of Jesus’ statements in those verses. Specifically, I argued that those who “belonged” to God as Christ’s “sheep” (i.e., prior to their faith in Christ) should be taken in context as referring primarily to those members of the Jewish community who had been receptive to God’s prevenient grace and, through repentance, faith, and loyalty to the covenant, were prepared to receive the Messiah-Shepherd upon his introduction to the nation of Israel. These are the ones whom

the Father was able to “give” to the Son (6:37 and similar vss.), directing them--through the working of his Spirit in their hearts--to recognize and accept Jesus as the long-awaited Christ. In a secondary sense, those who “belonged” to God as Christ’s “sheep” (prior to faith in Christ) also included God-fearing Gentiles who had likewise been responsive to prevenient grace (10:16; cf. Cornelius in Acts 10). These too, because of their openness to God’s revealed truth, were directed by the Father to the Son. More generally, we can draw from these scriptural data an important theological insight, namely, that *Christ is the Father’s sole aim in the dispensing of prevenient grace*. All who are open to the prevenient grace bestowed by God will ultimately, if they persist in their responsiveness, be directed to intentional faith in Jesus as the Messiah-Shepherd, the Savior.

The above arguments, in my thinking, form a reasonable and satisfactory response to Calvinist claims that Jesus’ statements in the Gospel of John are incompatible with Arminian thought. There is a central place for divine initiative, enabling, and direction in the process of salvation, it is true. However, such divine agency is resistible, and the human recipients of divine prevenient grace must exercise authentically free agency in response to that grace; otherwise, they will not be numbered among those who “belong” to God as his “sheep” and who are directed by the Father to faith in the Son for salvation. This was true in Jesus’ day of the Israelites in the “sheep pen” of Israel, and it is still true today of all people, in or out of that fold.

Notes:

1. Consider too in this regard Ezekiel 34:

“For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. ¹² As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. ¹³ I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. . . . ¹⁵ I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD. ¹⁶ I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, *but the sleek and the strong I will destroy*. I will shepherd the flock with justice.’ ¹⁷ As for you, my flock, this is what the Sovereign LORD says: ‘*I will judge between one sheep and another, and between*

rams and goats. ¹⁸ Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture? Must you also trample the rest of your pasture with your feet? Is it not enough for you to drink clear water? Must you also muddy the rest with your feet? ¹⁹ Must my flock feed on what you have trampled and drink what you have muddied with your feet? ²⁰ Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says to them: See, *I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep.* ²¹ Because you shove with flank and shoulder, butting all the weak sheep with your horns until you have driven them away, ²² I will save my flock, and they will no longer be plundered. *I will judge between one sheep and another.* ²³ *I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd.* ²⁴ I the LORD will be their God, and *my servant David will be prince among them.* I the LORD have spoken.” (Ezekiel 34:11-13, 15-24)

It is clear that when the “one shepherd, my servant David” comes (Ezekiel 34:23), not all of the “sheep” of Israel will be included within the flock that he tends. Specifically, all of those “sleek,” “strong,” and “fat” sheep will be destroyed (vss. 16-22), all those who have muddied the water for the other sheep and have butted and driven them away. For the Lord “will judge between one sheep and another” (vs. 22).

2. Calvinists have sometimes argued that the Greek word translated as “draw” in John 6:44 is stronger than can be accounted for within the Arminian position. Berkouwer comments, for example, “The word *draw* which Christ uses here has always attracted much attention. Kittel says that when it refers to man it has the meaning of *to compel*, of *irresistible superiority*, as in James 2:6 where the rich *drag* the poor before the judge, and as Paul and Silas are *dragged* into the market place in Acts 16:19” (G. C. Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, Translated by Hugo Bekker, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1960, pp. 47f). In response, Arminian theologian Robert Shank asserts, “Berkouwer’s whole case here rests on an assumed significance of the word *draw* . . . and collapses in the face of the fact that the same word (*elkuo*) is used in John 12:32, where Jesus declares, ‘And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me’” (*Elect in the Son: A Study of the Doctrine of Election*, Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1970, 1989, p. 176). Shank’s point is that the Greek word for “draw” as it is used in John 12:32 cannot mean to “irresistibly compel” without entailing universal salvation; therefore, the word cannot have that sense here and, consequently, need not have the irresistible sense in John 6:44 either.

In response to the sort of argument presented by Shank, Yarbrough states,

“this contention fails on at least two counts. First, it requires that the word *draw* have exactly the same meaning wherever it appears. Such insensitivity to specific context is a linguistic mistake; “draw” can in principle refer to the work of irresistible grace in some passages and to a more general attraction that, say, renders persons accountable but not yet regenerate in others. Second it overlooks the likelihood that “all men” in John 12:32 refers to all--both Jew and Gentile--that the Father has given to the Son. . . . the immediate context, in which Jesus pronounces the climactic fulfillment to his ministry as Gentiles seek him out (John 12:20, 23), suggests that “all” here refers to the elect of both Jewish and Gentile origin, not to the general benevolent effects of the atonement on the human race as a whole.” (Robert Yarbrough, “Divine Election in the Gospel of John,” in *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace*, ed. by Thomas Schreiner & Bruce Ware, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995, 2000, p. 52)

What of Yarbrough’s response? In regard to his first point, I agree. It is nearly always a mistake to dogmatically assert that a word must have exactly the same meaning wherever it occurs. Context is always “king,” as the saying goes. Notice, however, that this fact cuts both ways. Just as Arminians cannot, based simply on the word’s usage in 12:32, dogmatically assert that “draw” in John 6:44 *must* refer to a *resistible* attraction, so in the same way Calvinists cannot, based on the word’s usage in the passages cited by Berkouwer above, dogmatically assert that “draw” in John 6:44 *must* refer to an *irresistible* attraction. Ultimately, the context of the word’s usage in 6:44 will have to decide which meaning, that of resistible or of irresistible attraction, is most favored. As I have noted in the main text, I believe that the fact that “draw” in 6:44 is presented as a *necessary* rather than *sufficient* condition (i.e., it occurs in a structure of the sort “*No one can . . . unless . . .*” instead of a structure of the sort “*Everyone who . . . will . . .*”) favors the resistible reading.

In regard to Yarbrough’s second point, I have no significant objection to his proposal that the “all” in 12:32 may refer to the inclusion of both Jews and Gentiles in the fulfillment of Jesus’ ministry plan. (This interpretation has roots at least back to Calvin himself.) Having acknowledged the first point above, however, that the meaning of “draw” may vary with the specific linguistic context, Yarbrough cannot use this second observation

(that “all” in 12:32 may have Jews and Gentiles in its scope) to confirm an irresistible sense of “draw” in 6:44. In principle, the Jew/Gentile interpretation of “all” for 12:32 is compatible with either an Arminian or Calvinist understanding of Jesus’ statements in John’s Gospel.

3. It is important to bear in mind here that a *sufficient* condition does not properly entail *irresistibility*. Though all those who “belong” to God as Christ’s “sheep” unfailingly come to Christ, this is not because they are irresistibly determined to do so, but because their hearts are already freely predisposed (in response to prior prevenient grace) to continue exercising faith. The action of God in “giving” these ones to Christ is merely that of directing their existing faith to a new, more focused object, namely, Christ as the Messiah-Shepherd.

4. See the companion essay “Election in Romans Chapter Nine” for discussion of another important principle regarding prevenient grace, namely, that *God may sovereignly discriminate in his dispensing of (particular) prevenient grace*.

5. Some might argue that 11:51-52 supports the Calvinist doctrine of limited atonement (i.e., that Christ died only for the elect). However, to say that Christ died for one set of individuals (e.g., the elect, or the “scattered children of God,” or Christ’s “sheep,” etc.) does not entail that he died *only* for them and for no others, as Jack Cottrell has rightly noted. “A particular body of people is being addressed, in the grammatical form of first person plural. To say to any [particular] audience, ‘Christ died for us!’ does not [logically] imply ‘for us and no one else’” (*Basic Theology Syllabus*, 65; quoted by Terry Miethe, “The Universal Power of the Atonement,” in *The Grace of God and the Will of Man*, ed. by Clark Pinnock, Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1989, p. 73). Nor does the doctrine of limited atonement follow from the passage itself, for if we limit the set of those for whom Christ died strictly to the people mentioned in these verses (as Calvinist seeking to support the doctrine of limited atonement might wish to do), then in order to be consistent we must conclude--contrary to Calvinistic doctrine--that Jesus died for *all* members of the Jewish nation (cf. 11:51b), even those who would never believe in Christ. The use of this passage to support the doctrine of limited atonement, then, proves to be self-defeating for Calvinism.

6. Similarly, Jesus’ statements in John’s Gospel do not entail that a person who has already been given by the Father to the Son and has received Christ by faith will

necessarily and irresistibly continue in that faith. Calvinists have often argued otherwise, pointing to Jesus' statement in 6:37 that he "will never drive away" those who come to him, the statement in 6:39 that Jesus will "lose none of all that [God] has given [him], but raise them up at the last day," and the statement in 10:28 that those who come to Jesus in faith "shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand." However, none of these statements exclude the possibility (for which I believe there is overwhelming biblical evidence) that a person who has come to faith may later of his own will reject that faith and with it his standing in Christ. Jesus' promise that he "will never drive away" one who comes to him excludes only the possibility that Jesus himself would initiate a rejection of one who at that time is presently coming to him (Greek *ton erchomenon*, 'the one who is coming,' present, middle, participle of *erchomai*, 'to come'). Jesus' statement here does not address a situation in which the person--not Jesus--initiates a break in the relationship by rejecting his former faith in Christ. In such a situation, the person would in that sense no longer be "coming" to Christ.

Similarly, Jesus' statement in 6:39 that he will "lose none" of those whom the Father has given him must be taken in the context of the following verse, in which eternal life is promised only to those who are presently looking to the Son and trusting in him (the verbs translated "looks" and "believes" in the NIV are actually present participles in the Greek and can be translated with this continuous emphasis: *theoron*, 'watching,' and *pisteuon*, 'trusting').

Finally, Jesus' statement in 10:28 that "no one can snatch" his followers out of his hand addresses only the question of whether a follower of Christ can be removed from his standing in salvation by an *external* force (cf. Romans 8:31-39, which should be read in the same light). As Osborne points out, those who "snatch" the sheep must be identified in context "with the thieves and wolves (vv. 10, 12) of the allegory, and it is erroneous to read into this the impossibility of personal apostasy" (Grant R. Osborne, "Soteriology in the Gospel of John," in *The Grace of God and the Will of Man*, ed. by Clark Pinnock, Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1989, p. 251). In other words, though there is no external force or person who can endanger my salvation or compel me to turn away from faith in Christ, this does not exclude the possibility that I may myself revoke the faith that I once held and thus lose the eternal life that I once possessed in Christ. Keep in mind that all the spiritual blessings that we possess as believers (including eternal life) are ours only insofar as we are "in" Christ (Ephesians 1:3), and we are "in Christ" only insofar as we persist in our faith in him. (See my devotionals "When an Immunization Becomes

Fatal” and “Deliberate Sin Erodes Faith” for more discussion.)

7. See also J. I. Packer (“Regeneration,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Ed. by Walter A. Elwell, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1984, p. 925).

8. See Walter Reymond (*A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998, p. 720) and J. I. Packer (“Regeneration,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Ed. by Walter A. Elwell, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1984, p. 925).

9. I recall that Arminius made this observation on at least one occasion, though I have not been able to locate the quote.

10. Calvinists usually recognize that Jesus’ words in these verses refer to election to a task; however, they often try to maintain that the election in view includes election to salvation as well. Yarbrough openly struggles with the problem that Judas Iscariot’s case poses for this dual-sense interpretation of the apostolic election: “One of the twelve, Judas Iscariot, fell away; in his case the ‘choice’ of which Jesus speaks is a step removed from sovereign election to actual salvation in the full sense” (Yarbrough, *ibid.*, p. 51). Yarbrough adds in a footnote: “Perhaps Jesus’ choosing of the Twelve was carried out at the Father’s prompting but without Jesus’ specific knowledge at that time that not all those he ‘chose’ in a general sense would prove to be savingly ‘chosen’ in the strong sense” (*ibid.*, footnote 11, p. 51). Needless to say, such maneuvering greatly weakens the Calvinist appeal to these verses as evidence of election to salvation.

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