

## Chosen But Free

[James M. Harrison](#)

Rev. James M. Harrison is currently the pastor of Red Mills Baptist Church, Mahopac Falls, N.Y. This article is used by permission of the author.

Dr. Norman Geisler is presently the President of Southern Evangelical Seminary in Charlotte, North Carolina. He has previously taught at Dallas Theological Seminary among other evangelical institutions. He is the author of hundreds of articles and dozens of books. Many have found great help in his writings, this author included. Alas, even exceptional intellects are subject to the limitations of humanity. With one Prominent Exception, our race is an unbroken line of fallible beings whose thinking process is marred by personal and ancestral histories, undetected prejudices, and undiscovered blind spots which prevent us from the objectivity that we desire in regard to our intellectual pursuits. This human frailty is more or less obvious according to the individual and the subject matter with which he is dealing. In Dr. Geisler's case, it is readily apparent that, for him, the doctrine of election in particular, and Calvinism in general, is subject to this frailty. Dr. Geisler's latest production is entitled, *Chosen But Free: A Balanced View of Divine Election* (CBF). It does not take long, however, for the theologically literate reader to understand that this particular work is anything but a "balanced" view of election. Beginning with the self-evident contradiction in the title itself, it should be evident to any objective reader that balance was not the aim in its production. Rather, CBF sets out to present its viewpoint, which is simply a form of Arminianism cloaked under another name, as being so obviously correct that the reader must wonder how exegetes and theologians of the stature of John Calvin, John Owen, B.B. Warfield, John Murray, etc., did not see it.

This presentation is flawed in a number of ways which will be dealt with in the remainder of this booklet. The first thing that strikes the reader is Geisler's blatant attempt to redefine traditional theological terminology. He furthers this end in a number of ways which will form the structure of this critique. In addition to redefinitions, one will also find an almost continuous flow of misrepresentations concerning the position of his opponents, logical leaps with little if any supporting argumentation, and a general neglect of real exegesis in favor of mere assertions.

### DEVIANT DEFINITIONS

The issue which CBF attempts to address is really much more than the doctrine of Election alone. Rather, it is the entire set of biblically derived doctrines commonly known as Calvinism. But what is Calvinism? That is a question which, in CBF, is clouded from the very beginning. As one begins to wade through CBF, one is immediately aware that Geisler is not dealing with terms in their historical context but rather redefining terms in order to demonize those who would disagree with him. Calvinism, traditionally and minimally explicated by the TULIP acrostic (Total depravity or inability; Unconditional election; Limited Atonement; Irresistible grace; Perseverance of the Saints) is said to be “extreme” Calvinism. What a surprise this must be to men such as Jonathan Edwards, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, George Whitefield, J. Gresham Machen, and contemporaries such as James Boice, R.C. Sproul and John Piper. Geisler says in a footnote to his first use of the term “extreme Calvinism”,

We use the term “extreme” rather than “hyper” since hyper-Calvinism is used by some to designate a more radical view known as “supralapsarianism,” which entails double predestination (see appendix 7), denies human responsibility...or nullifies concern for missions and evangelism....<sup>1</sup>

We should note that theologians we classify as extreme Calvinists consider themselves simply “Calvinists” and would probably object to our categorizing them in this manner. In their view, anyone who does not espouse all five points of Calvinism as they interpret them is not, strictly speaking, a true Calvinist. Nonetheless, we call them “extreme” Calvinists because they are more extreme than John Calvin himself (see appendix 2) and to distinguish them from moderate Calvinists (see Chapter 7).

Leaving aside Geisler’s apparent confusion concerning hyper-Calvinism and supralapsarianism, Geisler’s fuzziness when dealing with these theological terms must be noted. Despite his desire to wrench the term “Calvinist” from its commonly recognized usage, the fact remains that theological labels are useful only due to the near universal agreement concerning their definitions. If one were to question someone who is at all knowledgeable in the subject as to what constitutes a Calvinist, regardless of their personal viewpoint concerning the issues one would receive a reply which reflects not Geisler’s ideas, but rather those of historic, traditional Calvinism....that which Geisler calls “extreme.”

Geisler’s Calvinism, however, when put in historical context, is unrecognizable as such. He holds to only one point of traditional Calvinism, that being the Perseverance of the Saints, and yet refers to himself as a “moderate” Calvinist. Outside of his own self-serving redefinition, he would be described by the vast majority of theologians as representing the Arminian school of theology, or at

---

<sup>1</sup> Geisler, *Chosen But Free*, (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1999), 20.

best, “moderate” Arminian thought. For some reason, Geisler prefers not to identify with Arminians who would agree most closely with his own theology, but would rather appropriate for himself terminology traditionally used to describe those whose views he opposes. His purpose for doing this remains a mystery.

Geisler engages in this redefinition not only with regard to the general term “Calvinism”, but he also redefines the individual doctrines which are part and parcel of Calvinism. This is seen in his discussion of T-U-L-I-P.

Although he affirms the doctrine of Total depravity with one hand, he takes it away with the other by again redefining traditional terminology.

All the Scriptures used by extreme Calvinists are accepted by moderate Calvinists; the only difference is that moderates insist that being “dead” in sin does not mean that unsaved people cannot understand and receive the truth of the gospel as the Spirit of God works on their hearts. That is, it does not in effect erase the image of God (but only effaces it).<sup>2</sup>

This misrepresentation of the true Calvinist position will be dealt with elsewhere, but suffice it to say that Geisler’s idea of deadness is clearly the Arminian view of deadness. That is, being dead does not really mean being dead. Man, whom Scripture describes as “dead”, still has the ability to respond positively to the gospel of Christ. This may be Geisler’s view, but it is not the Calvinist view.

He states that unconditional election is also held by “moderate” Calvinists. However, we again find Geisler redefining commonly accepted terminology. Calvinism has historically held that unconditional election is just what it says....unconditional. It is unconditional on the part of the God who elects and on the part of man who is elected. Geisler, however, wanting to hold on to the term while denying its meaning, redefines unconditional election.

It is unconditional from the standpoint of the Giver, even though there is one condition for the receiver — faith.<sup>3</sup>

Geisler never addresses the problems with this view, however, and this is another weakness in CBF. One would think, reading this book, that none of the issues he raises have ever been answered by traditional Calvinists, when in fact, all of them have been answered time and time again. The problems with his view of Unconditional election should be clear. If election is conditioned upon faith, which must of necessity be foreseen faith, the concept of election is itself stripped of any actual meaning. If God foresees that someone will believe, and God cannot be mistaken in what He knows, then that person will, in fact, believe. What then is there to elect? Another issue that Geisler fails to deal with, either

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 116-117.

here or in his discussion of free will, is why, if all are free to come to faith, why one does and another does not. There are only two possibilities. Either the source of faith is in the sovereign decree of God, or the source of faith is within the person himself. If, as Geisler views it, each man has the freedom to believe, then the logical conclusion is that there is something within a person which causes him to believe. Whatever this may be is necessarily lacking in the person who does not believe. Either there is a difference in intellectual capability, or in their levels of spiritual discernment or in their inherent righteousness, because to believe is a righteous act. Whichever the case, there is a difference between those who believe and those who don't. If that is the case, then those who believe have something in which to boast. Of course, this is precisely what Paul denies in Ephesians 2:8-9.

Another redefinition is seen when Geisler addresses the doctrine of Irresistible Grace. He says,

Irresistible grace is exercised on all who are willing, as was stated in chapter 5. That is, anyone who is receptive to God's work in his heart will be overwhelmed by His grace.<sup>4</sup>

But this makes nonsense of the terminology. If someone is already willing, what need is there to describe grace as irresistible?

It remains a mystery why Geisler insists upon redefining terminology which is commonly recognized by all sides of the debate. Rather than clarifying the discussion, it serves no purpose other than to cloud the issues at best, and at worst to deceive those who are less knowledgeable concerning the points under discussion. As will be seen, aside from the Perseverance of the Saints, Geisler's position is that of Arminianism, not historic Calvinism. He would have done his readers a great service to simply admit this, rather than to confuse the matter with artificially imposed definitions.

## **MISCHIEVOUS MISREPRESENTATIONS**

In addition to redefining traditional terminology, Geisler engages in a degree of either misunderstanding or misrepresentation that is surprising coming from a man of Geisler's background and ability.

He states,

Indeed, one response to the problem of divine sovereignty and human responsibility is that of extreme Calvinism. This response claims that free

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 117.

choice is simply doing what we desire, but that *no one ever desires to do anything unless God gives him the desire to do so.*" (italics mine, JMH)<sup>5</sup>

To support this contention, Geisler footnotes a comment by Edwin Palmer, whom he calls an "extreme Calvinist" which says nothing at all similar to what Geisler has asserted. I will let the reader examine the footnote in its entirety and compare what is said to Geisler's representation of what is said.

Edwin Palmer, an extreme Calvinist, insists "that man is free — one hundred percent free — free to do exactly what he wants." But this is totally misleading in view of what is said only a few lines later, namely, "Man is totally unable to choose equally as well between [the] good and the bad." He adds, "the non-Christian is free. He does precisely what he would like. He follows his heart's desires. Because his heart is rotten and inclined to all kinds of evil, he freely does what he wants to do, namely, sin." See Edwin H. Palmer, *The Five Points of Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1972), 35-36.<sup>6</sup>

Can anyone examine these statements by Palmer and in doing so, find the source of Geisler's claim that Palmer has said that no one ever desires to do anything unless God gives him the desire to do so? Now ultimately, the point may indeed be true. When understood properly, belief in the ultimate sovereignty of God can lead no where else. But Geisler's use of sources to support his contention is both inaccurate and misleading. This is representative of what is found throughout CBF. The attentive reader will find again and again individuals and positions which are misinterpreted, misunderstood, or misrepresented as well as footnotes which are completely disconnected from the statement they are intended to support.

Geisler says,

According to this view (Calvinism), God's predetermination is done *in spite of His foreknowledge of human free acts.* God operates with such unapproachable sovereignty that His choices are made with total disregard for the choices of mortal men.<sup>7</sup> (italics, Geisler's).

No Calvinist would recognize this definition of predetermination. To begin with, Geisler is assuming a definition of foreknowledge which is much in dispute. Foreknowledge, as Scripture uses the term in the passages pertinent to this discussion, does not mean simple precognition.<sup>8</sup> Rather it contains within it the ideas of both relationship and determination. God's predetermination is not in

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 46

<sup>8</sup> See, James M. Harrison, "Foreknowledge: More Than Meets God's Eye", (<http://home.flash.net/~thinkman/articles/foreknow.htm>).

spite of God's foreknowledge. Rather, His foreknowledge is based upon God's fully independent decree. That is, God knows because God decreed, and those decrees determine the free acts of His creatures. This is so clearly asserted by reformed thinkers that one wonders how Geisler can miss it.

Geisler continues his misrepresentation in that same context when he asserts of Calvinists that they hold the following,

If free choices were not considered at all when God made the list of the elect, then irresistible grace on the unwilling follows. That is, man would have no say in his own salvation. Accordingly, the fact that all men do not choose to love, worship, and serve God will make no difference whatsoever to God. He will simply "doublewhammy" those He chooses with His irresistible power and force them into His kingdom against their wills (see chapter 5).<sup>9</sup>

Irresistible grace on the unwilling is a constant theme that runs throughout CBF and it is nothing more than a strawman. The reformed view is not that God forces people into the kingdom against their wills, but rather that God causes dead men to live. No one comes into the kingdom unwillingly. God so acts upon man that man becomes willing. The only people that come to Christ are those who want to. The reformed view is clear. If God did not do this work in the heart of man, that is, if He did not do what the Lord says through Ezekiel, "I will take from them their heart of stone, and will give them a heart of flesh", they would never choose Christ, for they would be forever unwilling.

Other examples of this misrepresentation abound. In his chapter entitled, *Avoiding Extreme Calvinism*, Geisler provides a chart attempting to detail the differences between what he calls "moderate" Calvinism and "extreme" Calvinism. In that chart he asserts that the extreme Calvinistic view of the will is that it has been destroyed by the fall.<sup>10</sup> It is interesting that Geisler provides no source for this statement. Surely that is because there is none. No Calvinist would say such a thing. One need only review the titles of classic reformed works concerning the will to see that this is a ridiculous charge. Martin Luther and Jonathan Edwards did not write, *The Destruction of the Will*, but rather, *The Bondage of the Will* and *The Freedom of the Will*, respectively. Can something that has been destroyed be either bound or free?

This same page contains this statement in regard to the Calvinistic view of Ephesians 2:1, "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins..."

---

<sup>9</sup> CBF, 47.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

First of all, spiritual “death” in the Bible is a strong expression meaning that fallen beings are totally separated from God, not completely obliterated by Him.<sup>11</sup>

Once again, one looks in vain for a source. Which reformed thinker has stated that spiritual death equals obliteration? We don’t know, for we are provided only with the bare assertion that such a person exists. There is not a footnote to be found in its support. And no reformed scholar that this author is aware of has or would say such a thing. But in a quote that has been noted previously, Geisler makes a similar assertion when he says that the Calvinist definition of Total depravity is that the image of God is erased. Amazingly, in his footnote on this point he reveals his knowledge that Calvinists do not actually hold to this view.<sup>12</sup> In spite of this knowledge, he feels free to misrepresent the opposing view because in his opinion,

...logically this is what their view demands and practically this is what they hold.<sup>13</sup>

Of course, this logic is never presented, nor is any evidence that this is what Calvinists practically hold. It is simply one of innumerable assertions, support for which is never even attempted.

This leads us into another problem with Geisler and CBF.

## **LOGICAL LEAPS**

The direction of the book is quickly evident as one completes the generally helpful first chapter, which is a survey of the attributes of God, and turns to Chapter Two where one will read the title, “Why Blame Me?” Geisler explains his title by asking, “If God is in control of everything, then why should we be blamed for anything?”<sup>14</sup> Whether intended or not, this question immediately puts the reader in mind of a very similar question put forth by the apostle Paul in Rom. 9:19. In a discussion of unconditional election, Paul anticipates the question that will come to the mind of the Roman Christians: “You will say to me then, ‘Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?’”

The difference in the manner in which the apostle Paul and Dr. Geisler respond to this question is stark. The inspired apostle replies to this question with a simple rebuke: “On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, ‘Why did you make me like

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 19.

this, ' will it?" Geisler, on the other hand, spends the next 223 pages trying to answer that question. And it is at this very point that Geisler goes off track. He is not satisfied with Paul's answer. He doesn't like the implications. He wishes to find an answer other than that which Paul provides, which is, simply put, God is sovereign over all and yet, in some way, remains righteous and just in holding men accountable for their sin. This is perhaps the strongest argument for the Calvinistic view (and I would argue, the Pauline view) of election that one could muster. For unless one understands Paul to be arguing for election based upon nothing but the independent decree of God, the question and answer he puts forth in verses 19-21 make absolutely no sense whatsoever.

It is startling that in a chapter specifically devoted to the very question raised by Paul in Rom. 9, this crucial passage is referred to not at all. When Geisler finally does address the passage, it is twisted beyond recognition by ignoring the clear logic of the passage in favor of an explanation which must be wrenched out of the natural flow of the text.

Geisler's first explanatory comment in this regard is to point out that the question "Who resists His will?" is not Paul's question at all, but rather a question which is anticipated to be in the mind of his readers. No one can or would argue with this conclusion. It is self-evident. The further conclusion that Geisler draws from this fact is erroneous, however. He says,

“...the idea that one cannot resist God's will may be no more part of Paul's teaching than the view that we should do evil so that good may come...”<sup>15</sup>

Geisler is referring to a similar objection introduced in Rom. 3:8. The point that Geisler ignores is that Paul is assuming that his readers, upon a proper understanding of what he is saying, will ask this question. The question itself is senseless under any other understanding of what Paul is teaching. If his readers are misunderstanding him, Paul certainly would have clarified what he was teaching, saying something like, "You will say to me then, 'Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?' But that question reflects a misunderstanding of what I'm saying. What I really mean is....." But Paul does not do this. He feels no need to clarify what he is teaching. He obviously understands that the natural response to what he is saying, will, in fact, be to ask, "Why does He still find fault?" So instead of correcting a misperception, he confirms that they do properly understand his teaching, but explains that their reaction of questioning God's active decrees, is out of place and improper.

Geisler does not stop there. He actually turns Paul's statement on its head. Geisler says, in regard to Paul's response to the imagined question,

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 89.

“...the direct implication is that if it is irresistible, then we should not be blamed.”<sup>16</sup>

But it should be obvious that Paul is saying just the opposite. The question is a logical one to ask given Paul's teaching of the unconditionality of election. This is why he answers the way he does. If, for example, Paul were teaching that election were based on foreseen, freely chosen faith, his answer would have been quite different. When Paul is asked, “Why does He find fault?” we would have expected him to answer, “Haven't you been listening? They have the ability to believe and they freely choose not to. Obviously, they are responsible for their unbelief.” Of course, if that were the issue, the question never would have been raised. The question is raised in the first place because of the problem that seems to exist between God's unconditional election to salvation and the fact that he holds those who are not elect responsible. If this were not what Paul was teaching there would be no reason to ask such a question. Geisler not only ignores this fact, but attempts to deny the obvious force of what Paul is saying.

Geisler's logical leaps continue. In discussing the question of causation in regard to Lucifer's sin, Geisler assumes a contradiction in the Calvinist position, saying,

“God cannot be good and not good. He cannot be for His own essential good and be against it by giving Lucifer the desire to sin against Him. In short, God cannot be for Himself and against Himself at the same time and in the same sense.”<sup>17</sup>

Geisler demonstrates a logical leap by assuming that an act or event which seems to our finite eyes and minds to be against God, cannot in fact be for God. What Geisler is presenting here is another version of the classic problem of evil. Simply put, the problem of evil states that God cannot be both all-powerful and all-loving. If He is all-powerful, He could prevent evil from occurring. If He is all-loving, He would want to prevent evil from occurring. But evil exists. Therefore, the argument goes, God is either not all-powerful or He is not all-loving. But those who propose this argument overlook a fatal flaw that even atheist philosophers such as Michael Martin admit, and it is the same flaw that Geisler overlooks. The problem of evil is not a problem if God has a morally sufficient reason for allowing that evil to occur. Likewise, Geisler is making a logical leap when he ignores the possibility that there is a morally sufficient reason, ordained within the sovereign plan of God, for allowing Lucifer to sin. If one denies this, as Geisler does, but also admits, as he does, that Lucifer did in fact sin, one has just abandoned any possibility of the existence of a truly sovereign God.

The only way to avoid this conclusion is to join the free-will theists in redefining the nature of sovereignty. It is interesting that Geisler spends an entire chapter

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 21.

rightly critiquing free-will theism while never seeing that position as the logical extension of the very position which he holds. Clark Pinnock, Gregory Boyd, and others have correctly diagnosed the logical implications of the Arminianism which Geisler here sets forth. They have come to realize that if God foresees one's faith, then that one will, in fact, believe and that belief is inevitable. Hence, freedom as defined by Geisler and Arminianism, is an illusion. The free-will theists, having seen where the logic of Arminianism leads, were faced with two choices if they were to be consistent. They could abandon their Arminianism and embrace the biblical teaching that God is completely sovereign and has complete knowledge of all things precisely because he has determined all that will come to pass, or they could follow their Arminianism out to its logical conclusion and deny God's omniscience and immutability. Pinnock, Boyd, and others have taken the latter course. It is an unbiblical conclusion, to be sure. But it is, at least, logically consistent. Geisler has not yet faced up to the problem. Rather, he continues to hold to a logically indefensible system.

Other examples of Geisler's logical leaps should be noted. For instance, in a discussion of irresistible grace, Geisler states,

In spite of some apparent inconsistency on this point (see his comments on Luke 14:23), John Calvin faced honestly the biblical teaching that the Holy Spirit can be resisted. He recognized that Stephen said of the Jews, "You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: *You always resist the Holy Spirit!*" (Acts 7:51). Calvin remarked, "Finally, they are said to be resisting the Spirit, when they stubbornly reject what He says by the prophets." Calvin describes this resistance with phrases such as "stubbornly reject," "intentionally rebel," and "wage war on God." But if God's grace can be resisted, then it is not irresistible.<sup>18</sup>

One marvels. The assertion that Geisler makes is a classic example of question begging. His statement "If God's grace can be resisted, then it is not irresistible", is only true if one already assumes Geisler's Arminian position. But it is incumbent upon those who would undertake a work such as CBF to do more than assert. Within the Calvinist system, none of what he quotes here, either from Scripture or Calvin, presents the slightest problem. It is, in fact, entirely consistent. Who are these that Stephen is addressing? How does Stephen address them? He uses terms such as "stiff-necked" and as having "uncircumcised hearts and ears" and says that they "always resist the Holy Spirit". Is this not a wonderfully accurate description of an unbeliever in his natural state? Of course the unregenerate resist the Holy Spirit. That is why regeneration is necessary. If not for irresistible grace upon the elect, all would forever be in this state of resisting the Holy Spirit and Jesus' statement that "All

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 48-9.

whom the father gives shall come to me..." (John 6:37) would make no sense whatsoever.

Geisler's logical leaps can also be seen in his assumption that God's attributes must function in a way that Geisler himself either expects or understands.

In fact, if God is one indivisible being without any parts, as classical Calvinists believe, then His love extends to all of His essence, not just part of it. Hence, God cannot be partly loving. But if God is all-loving, then how can He love only some so as to give them and only them the desire to be saved? If He really loves all men, then why does He not give to all men the desire to be saved? It only follows then that, in the final analysis, the reason why some go to hell is that God does not love them and give them the desire to be saved. But if the real reason they go to hell is that God does not love them, irresistibly regenerate them, and give them the faith to believe, then their failure to believe truly would result from God's lack of love for them (see chapter 2).<sup>19</sup>

The arrogance of this boggles the mind and again puts one in mind of Paul's response in Rom. 9:20, "Who are you, O man, who answers back to God?" These statements might cause one to wonder when Dr. Geisler become the judge concerning how God's love should be displayed.

There are many who deny eternal hell and would turn Dr. Geisler's question back on him, asking, "How, if God is love, can He send anyone at all to hell?" The fact remains that hell will be the final destination of untold numbers of fallen human beings. Apparently, that is not inconsistent with the love of God. Geisler's inevitable contention that there is a difference concerning the basis upon which human beings arrive in hell does not address the issue. Both Arminians and Calvinists agree that there is something God values to a greater degree than the ultimate salvation of every man, woman, and child. The typical Arminian response is that God does not desire robots. Therefore, that which He values more than a person's ultimate salvation, is a person's free-will. The Calvinist, in addition to denying the assertion that a lack of Arminian free-will equals a robot, will agree that there is something which God values more highly than the salvation of every man, woman, and child. But it is something infinitely more valuable than the absolute free-will of His creature. It is, rather, the glorification of His own attributes, specifically, those of His mercy and justice. We must not lose sight of the fact that just as we are told that our highest priority is God's glory (1 Cor. 10:31), so it is also God's highest priority. His utmost concern in all that He does is His own glory. That includes the existence of eternal hell, whether Dr. Geisler is able to understand it or not.

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 49.

Further examples of logical leaps could be multiplied. Simply consider the following statement in which Geisler describes the capability of one who is “spiritually dead”.

A spiritually dead person, then, is in need of spiritual life from God. But he does exist, and he can know and choose. His faculties that make up the image of God are not absent; they are simply incapable of initiating or attaining their own salvation. Like a drowning person, a fallen person can reach out and accept the lifeline even though he cannot make it to safety on his own.<sup>20</sup>

The problems in this statement should be obvious. First, Geisler once again builds another of his strawmen in his statement that the spiritually dead man “does exist”. Is there really someone who has denied the existence of spiritually dead men? Is there someone who has theorized that this world of unbelief is populated by phantoms, or figments of imagination? What actual meaning can such a statement have? But more important is Geisler’s description of this spiritually dead man. We need only examine the terminology which is presented and then ask, “Can a dead man do this?” Geisler says that a spiritually dead man can “know” spiritual things, can “choose” in a spiritual context. In what sense, then, we must ask, is he “dead”? Metaphors are used in order to convey meaning. What meaning is conveyed by the description of death, if we turn around and begin speaking of dead people “knowing” and “choosing”?

Furthermore, with no logical or exegetical warrant, Geisler takes it upon himself to change the metaphor of Scripture. No longer are we speaking of a dead person, but this metaphor of death is now equated with a new metaphor introduced not by Scripture, but by Geisler himself...that of drowning. A drowning man, Geisler tells us, can reach out and accept the lifeline. True enough. But can one who is already drowned do so? Geisler’s problem is that the scriptural metaphor does not fit his system, and so he must import a metaphor of his own.

A related logical leap takes place in the preceding chapter. In commenting upon a quote by the Puritan William Ames, and attempting to represent the Calvinistic view, he says,

In fact, fallen human beings are so dead in sin that God must first regenerate them before they can even believe. Dead men do not believe anything; they are dead!<sup>21</sup>

“So” dead? Are there degrees of deadness? In the movie, *The Princess Bride*, the hero of the story, Westly, has been tortured to death by the evil Prince Humperdink. Having been found by his friends with no apparent signs of life, his body is carried to the home of Mad Max the Miracle Worker. Upon examination,

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 47.

Mad Max mutters, “Ehh. I’ve seen worse.” He then goes on to explain that there is a difference between being “mostly dead” and being “all dead”. “Mostly dead,” Max informs the friends, “is a little alive. All dead, well, with all dead there’s only one thing you can do...go through his pockets and look for loose change.”

It appears that Dr. Geisler’s view of spiritual death was learned from Mad Max the Miracle Worker. But when Scripture uses terminology like “death”, it is not referring to the Hollywood version. Either dead is dead or it is something other than dead. There is no such thing as being “so dead in sin,” as if one could be only “mostly dead.”

In spite of the of the problems found in CBF which have been presented thus far, that which causes the greatest degree of frustration for the reader concerns Dr. Geisler’s exegesis, or lack thereof.

## **EXASPERATING EXEGESIS**

When an author is dealing with a tradition that has produced such a super-abundance of exegetical material, one would think that exegesis of pertinent passages would be a priority. But if one were to assume such a thing, one would be terribly disappointed with CBF. Dr. Geisler is dealing with a position which has produced, for example, John Owen’s seven volume commentary on the book of Hebrews alone; Calvin’s Commentaries on virtually every book of the Bible, save Revelation; Spurgeon’s Treasury of David, a three volume commentary on the Psalms, and innumerable other volume’s by men such as Machen, Murray, Lloyd-Jones, and the host of Puritan divines.

In response to this wealth of exegetical treasure, we are provided with virtually nothing. At the most, texts which are central to the issue at hand are given one page, but the vast majority of texts do not rate even that much, but merely a paragraph or two. As the reader would expect, very little real exegesis takes place within those kinds of space restraints. The result is assertion after assertion, with virtually no serious attention given to either the text itself, or to Reformed explanations and exegesis.

A few examples will have to suffice.

### **John 6:37**

In support of his contention that faith is “not a gift that God offers only to some” but rather “all are responsible to believe and ‘whoever’ decides to believe can believe” the reader is provided with a number of the usual passages used in support of this contention.<sup>22</sup> After John 3:16 and 18, however, we read,

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 35.

“*Whosoever comes to me* I will never drive away” (John 6:37, italics, Geisler’s). Apparently, Dr. Geisler believes that nothing more needs to be said concerning the contention that this verse supports his proposition. But does it?

The first observation one might make concerning this verse is that Dr. Geisler has failed to quote it in its entirety. The first half of the verse actually denies Geisler’s premise. “*All that the Father gives Me* will come to Me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away” (italics, mine - JMH).

Secondly, a little digging would have demonstrated that the NIV errs in this rendering as there is no indefinite relative pronoun (whosoever) at this point, but rather reads as the NASB renders it, “the one who comes”, or “the one coming”. Who is “the one coming”? The context speaks for itself. It is the one “that the Father gives”. With no exegetical support whatsoever, Geisler attempts to turn this verse on its head, claiming for it a meaning in direct opposition to what it actually says.

### **John 12:39-40**

On that very same page of CBF we are provided with another example of exegetical headstands. In these verses, John states,

For this reason they could not believe, for Isaiah said again, “He has blinded their eyes and He hardened their heart, so that they would not see with their eyes and perceive with their heart, and be converted and I heal them.”

And yet, amazingly enough, Geisler moves from this clear passage to a completely different passage and states,

Jesus was speaking to hardhearted Jews who had seen many indisputable miracles (including the resurrection of Lazarus [John 11] and who had been called upon many times to believe before this point (cf. John 8:26), which reveals that they were able to do so;<sup>23</sup>

Leaving aside the fact that the words spoken in these verses are not Jesus’, but John’s, the crucial issue remains the fact that in spite of the plain words of the passage that “they could not believe”, the conclusion that Geisler comes to is that “they were able to do so.” It seems that Geisler cannot shake his presuppositions. He assumes that if God commands something, that command necessitates the ability to obey. But we need not look far to see that this is not the case. The Mosaic Law was commanded. All Israel was obligated to obey. Did they? Obviously not. Could they? No. And yet they were commanded to do so, and held accountable for their failure. The people of God have been commanded

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 35.

to love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, and strength. Have we? Can we? The answer is clear. And yet, because of his faulty premise, Geisler is unable to deal with the clear words of the text. They “could not” believe, and furthermore, this state of inability was brought about by the active work of God. “He” blinded them. “He” hardened them. Why? So that they would not see and be converted. And yet, once more, Geisler’s presuppositions force him to turn the text on its head.

It was their own stubborn unbelief that brought on their blindness. Jesus said to them, “I told you that you would die in your sins, if you do not believe that I am, you will indeed die in your sins.” (John 8:24). Thus, it was chosen and avoidable blindness.<sup>24</sup>

John says that their blindness was the work of God. Geisler says that it was their own choice. Note that Geisler cannot demonstrate his point by addressing the text at hand. Instead, he must reach into a different context altogether, that of John 8. But even there he finds no help for we find no explanation in Jesus’ words of who it is that will or will not believe, nor any indication of ability to do so. We are give a plain statement of fact: If one does not believe that Christ is I AM, they will die in their sins. Every word of that is true, and yet not one word of that tells us whether or not His hearers are able to believe.

### **Romans 8:7-8**

A perfect example of the lack of any real interaction with pertinent texts is found as we examine this crucial passage.

because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

Each of us have, early on in our elementary school careers, learned the difference between “can” and “may”. Little Johnny raises his hand asks, “Can I go to the boys room?” To which his teacher dutifully replies, “I’m sure you can Johnny. But that’s not the question you meant to ask, is it?” Johnny, if he is bright, realizes what the teacher is getting at, and corrects himself, “I meant to ask, ‘May I go to the boys room?’” Johnny was not asking about his physical capability concerning his journey to the boy’s room, he was seeking permission. But his question was one of ability. So is this verse one which speaks to ability, or rather, the lack of ability. “Those who are in the flesh,” we are told, “cannot please God.” They are unable.

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 35.

But what does Geisler read in this text? We really don't know, because he provides no exegesis whatsoever. What we have in reply to the plain meaning of the text are more assertions of his already declared position.

We are born with a bent to sin, but we still have a choice whether we will be its slaves.<sup>25</sup>

Is that what the text says, even though it appears on its face to be saying the very opposite? Apparently not even Dr. Geisler believes so, for he provides not one shred of supporting evidence that would lead us to understand the text in any way other than what it actually says, namely, that the unregenerate are unable to please God. He simply, once again, offers his assertions, based on his presuppositions.

One would think that at least those passages which would seem, on their face, to support Geisler's positions would be given detailed attention. But again, one would be wrong. Even in support of his own contentions, the most the reader finds is a few paragraphs with only the most cursory attempt at what one could call exegesis.

#### **1 Timothy 2:3-4**

The text of the passage is as follows,

This is good, and pleases *God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved* and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

Geisler's first comment upon the passage is this...

From the time of the later Augustine this text has been manhandled by extreme Calvinists.<sup>26</sup>

If only Dr. Geisler would have handled the text at all. But he does not. All we find is this ridicule of Calvinists and two paragraphs informing us that Spurgeon, though an "extreme Calvinist" according to Geisler's lights, agreed with Geisler concerning this passage. We find no independent exegesis of any kind, indeed, no exegesis whatsoever. Neither will one find any interaction with Calvinistic interpretations. If one did not know better, one would think that Calvinists had never offered a reasoned and coherent alternative to Geisler's position. They have, of course, and that position is not difficult to defend.

The argument revolves around the meaning of the words "all men" in verse one. Was Paul speaking about each individual in the world? That is the assumption

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 201.

that Geisler and other Arminians make. But is that assumption warranted? Upon closer examination of the text, one may decide that his first assumption is not necessarily a true one.

Just prior to the verses that Geisler wishes to use, we find Paul's admonition to pray for "all men."

First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men,

But who are "all men"? Are we really to believe that Paul was exhorting Timothy to pray for every specific individual in the entire world individually? Of course not. That would be ridiculous. What, then, is Paul saying? We are immediately given help in our understanding as we continue reading in verse two.

for kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity.

It becomes readily apparent then, that when Paul speaks of "all men" he is speaking not of every individual person, but rather all classes or all kinds of men, such as kings and those who are in authority. If time and space permitted, it would not be difficult to demonstrate the consistency of this meaning of "all men" elsewhere in the Scripture. Such examples could be found in Acts 21:28; 22:15; Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11; and throughout the book of Titus.

That being the case, when we finally arrive at verse four, and are told that God desires all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth, we should not be surprised to note that the meaning "all sorts of men" is carried through from verse one to verse four and on into the following discussion of the atonement in verses five and six.

Several other lines of argument can be traced which demonstrate the falsity of Geisler's assumptions at this point. They are arguments that unfortunately, Dr. Geisler has neglected to deal with. One wonders how Dr. Geisler can expect to convincingly prove his points when time and time again he refuses to deal substantially with opposing viewpoints. Assertion and ridicule are no substitute for sound exegesis and argumentation. Unfortunately, CBF largely consists of the former and is sorely lacking the latter.

## **2 Peter 3:9**

This is arguably the most prominent of the Arminian proof texts. We read,

The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.

Throughout Geisler's Appendix in which he presents the texts he feels are favorable to his position, he uses the term "plain meaning". This is no exception. In the section subtitled, GOD DESIRES ALL TO BE SAVED, the reader will find two sub-headings. First, The plain meaning of 1 Peter 3:9 and then Implausible interpretation by extreme Calvinists. Surely statements such as this require the readers attention.

Geisler says,

...contrary to the unreasonable view of the extreme Calvinists, this does not mean "all classes of men," namely, the elect from all nations. Words have limits to their meaning by context. And when "any," "all men," and the "whole world" (1 John 2:2) are taken to mean only "some" (unless used as figures of speech), then language has lost its meaning.<sup>27</sup>

This statement of Geisler's is in dire need of examination. Let's take it line by line.

...contrary to the unreasonable view of the extreme Calvinists, this does not mean "all classes of men," namely, the elect from all nations.

It behooves us to once again point out the fact that assertions and ridicule are not proof. We do not really know whether or not the Calvinistic view is unreasonable, because the Calvinistic view is never really interacted with. The most that we find in the two short paragraphs headed, Implausible interpretation by extreme Calvinists, are more assertions concerning what Calvinists believe and additional assertions that there is no basis for those interpretations. In the face of literally volumes of reformed exegesis and argumentation on this very issue, Geisler offers his readers 14 sentences. Is the Calvinistic view unreasonable? Maybe. But Geisler surely hasn't proven it.

Words have limits to their meaning by context.

Dr. Geisler is absolutely correct. Word meanings are limited to their context. So let's take a look at the context of 2 Peter 3:9 and see if we can determine the meaning of its words.

As we do this, we run across a number of interesting items that Dr. Geisler never sees fit to mention. For instance, as we examine the context, the first thing that the reader is made aware of is the fact that Peter's primary subject matter is not salvation. Rather, Peter is speaking of the parousia...the second coming of Christ. That said, all we see in this passage, including his passing mention of repentance, must be seen in the light of what Peter is actually discussing, namely, the reason for delay in the return of Christ.

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 199.

Another interesting aspect of Peter's discussion has to do with those to whom his writing is addressed. Are we given any clue as to the nature of Peter's audience? Yes, we are. The pronouns that Peter uses are extremely important. Peter refers to his readers in 3:1 as, "beloved." They are continually referred to a "you" in verse 1 and 2, and then again in verses 8 and 9. But what about those verses in between? Those verses speak of the mockers who cast disdain at the idea of Christ's return. How are the mockers referred to? The mockers are not part of the beloved. They are not referred to as "you", but rather as "they". This is a crucial part of the context of the passage and yet goes unmentioned by Dr. Geisler. Why is this crucial? Because it defines for us, in context, who the "you" is in verse 9 when Peter tells his readers, those who are "beloved", those who are addressed as "you", that the Lord is patient toward "you", not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance. Unless one is willing to rip verse 9 from its contextual home, one has no grammatical choice but to see the "you" of verse 9 in harmony with the "you" of the remainder of the passage as referring not to every single individual in the world, but rather to a specific audience of those Peter refers to as "you" in opposition to "they". Peter has already defined those he addresses as "you". They are those to whom he writes his epistle. In 2 Peter 1:1-3 we read,

Simon Peter, a bond-servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who have received a faith of the same kind as ours, by the righteousness of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ: Grace and Peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord; seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence.

Need we say more? Peter makes himself clear. The "you" in Chapter 3, including verse 9, can only be those same ones he addresses here in 1:1-3. Namely, those "who have received a faith of the same kind as ours." The result is that those whom God is not wishing to perish cannot be proved from this passage to mean every individual in the world, indiscriminately. Rather, in this context, it must be confined to those already in view from 1:1, that is, those "who have received a faith of the same kind as ours," or believers, or the elect.

Geisler is absolutely correct when he says that "Words have limits to their meaning by context." Unfortunately, Geisler never examines the context in order to determine that meaning. If he did, he might have seen that in context, the "you" of 3:9 is a specific group, the elect, and that what Peter is saying is that God is patient, delaying His coming for the purpose of the ingathering of the elect.

Geisler also said,

And when “any,” “all men,” and the “whole world” (1 John 2:2) are taken to mean only “some” (unless used as figures of speech), then language has lost its meaning.

This is such a careless statement. Surely Dr. Geisler realizes that words have more than one legitimate meaning. One can open up any dictionary and find multiple meanings for virtually any word which one’s finger might rest upon. The Oxford American Dictionary provides nine different definitions for the word “world” alone.

Even Geisler’s acceptance of figures of speech begs the question, for who will then decide what is or is not a figure of speech as opposed to a definition. It appears that Geisler would like to say that to define “world” as “all kinds of men” or “all the nations” would be to impose a definition upon the term. But any dictionary will provide definitions such as the following:

1. the universe, all that exists.
2. earth with all its countries and peoples.
3. a heavenly body like it.
4. a section of the Earth, the western world.
5. a time or state or scene of human existence; this world, this mortal life.
6. the people or things belonging to a certain class or sphere of activity, the sporting world; the insect world.
7. everything, all people, felt that the world was against him.
8. material things and occupations (contrasted with spiritual), renounced the world and became a nun.
9. a very great amount, it would do him a world of good; she is worlds better today.<sup>28</sup>

Admittedly, one cannot argue the meaning of biblical terms from an English dictionary. But it can and should be pointed out that to portray the meaning of certain terms as inarguable, and self-evident, is to avoid the very issue in question. According to this dictionary, Geisler’s definition of “world” is only the seventh most common usage, while the Calvinistic interpretations come in at numbers two and six.

Despite the clear contextual evidence, and the legitimacy of less than all-inclusive definitions of terms like “all,” “you,” and “world,” Geisler asserts that the Calvinistic interpretation of this passage is unreasonable. Evidence for the assertion may have been helpful, but again, we find none. Instead, we find outrageous statements like the following,

---

<sup>28</sup> *Oxford American Dictionary*, “World”, (New York: Oxford University Press), p. 803.

Others offer an even less plausible suggestion: that “God does not will that any of us (the elect) perish.” As a firm believer in inerrancy, R.C. Sproul is aware of how dangerous it is to change the Word of God.<sup>29</sup>

Not only does Geisler ignore the clear context of the passage, provide no real exegesis, and erroneously make a case for one definition over another, but he compounds his error by what can only be an intentional misrepresentation of another writer’s intentions. To accuse one who disagrees exegetically of changing the Word of God goes beyond the pale. It should be clear, even to those who only read what Geisler has provided of Sproul’s statement, that Sproul is in no way “changing” the Word of God. Rather, he is doing the job of the exegete. That is, he is interpreting the Word according to its grammar and context, something that Dr. Geisler has not bothered to attempt. This accusation is a common one for Dr. Geisler, for he throws the same charge at John Owen, as well.

Arguably, the best defense of extreme Calvinism on limited Atonement comes from John Owen. His response to this passage is a shocking retranslation to: “God so loved his elect throughout the world, that he gave His Son with this intention, that by him believers might be saved”! This needs no response, simply a sober reminder that God repeatedly exhorts us not to add to or subtract from His words (Deut. 4:2; Prov. 30:6; Rev. 22:18-19).<sup>30</sup>

Well, Owen may need no response, but Geisler certainly does, for his misrepresentation is clearly unjust, and if Geisler has actually read Owen’s Death of Death in the Death of Christ, from which this quote comes, there can be no excuse for these intentionally misleading statements. Owen never claimed that this statement is a “translation”. Quite the contrary. Like Sproul, Owen was exegeting the text. After ten full pages of closely reasoned argumentation, Owen concludes with the words that Geisler quotes. But wait. Something is missing in Geisler’s quotation. Let’s examine that quote in its context.

Secondly, I deny that the word here is distributive of the object of God’s love, but only declarative of his end and aim in giving Christ in the pursuit of that love, — to wit, that all believers might be saved. *So that the sense is*, “God so loved his elect...”

Any objective observer can see Geisler’s contention that Owen was “retranslating” the Scripture for what it is...another clear misrepresentation. There is no retranslating going on. Rather, Owen has painstakingly exegeted the passage, and concludes his exegesis by giving what he believes to be “the sense”, or interpretation of the text. It is unfortunate for all concerned that Dr. Geisler prefers to misrepresent Sproul and Owen rather than to deal substantially

---

<sup>29</sup> CBF, 199.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 193.

with their arguments. But that, alas, is what characterizes CBF from beginning to end.

## CONCLUSION

To examine and respond to each inaccuracy found in CBF would require a book-length treatment many pages in excess of what Geisler has himself written. It has not been this author's purpose to address Dr. Geisler point by point but rather to demonstrate the general problems which are found throughout CBF.

Furthermore, we must all endeavor to pay heed to Paul's commendation of the Berean Christians who tested all things by the Word of God. This is a responsibility that cannot be taken too seriously. Let us not be confused by the one who would take familiar terms and twist them into unrecognizability. Let us not be lulled into inattention by those who would distort the opinions of others in order to make their own viewpoints appear self-evident. Let us not be led blindly into the labyrinth of illogic without first examining the legitimacy of the premises which are offered. Let us not be dissuaded from our task of solid exegesis by those who would convince us that no difficult exegetical issues exist, or that there is no reasoned disagreement among men of keen intellect. Finally, let us not disarm our minds by laying down the process of critical thought at the mere mention of words such as "balanced" and "moderate". Truth needs no adjective. Truth is truth. It is neither balanced, nor moderate. It simply is.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*. If you would like to discuss this article in our online community, please visit our [Reformed Perspectives Magazine Forum](#).

### Subscribe to Reformed Perspectives Magazine

RPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like RPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [Reformed Perspectives Magazine](#), please select this [link](#).