

*Guest Editorial*<sup>1</sup>

**An Answer to ‘Can a Dead Man Choose?’**

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Among the BMA churches where I grew up, to be a Calvinist was normally considered one step short of committing the unpardonable sin — or at least that’s the way it seemed to me as a kid. As I grew older, though, I began to question such extreme views, and along the way even discovered that a number of our notable preachers were actually “closet” Calvinists. And later any remnant of uncertainty toward Calvinists was discarded as I studied three years at a Calvinistic seminary and saw first hand that they are not the monsters they were painted to be in my childhood.

However, the process of discovering that Calvinists are simply fellow Christians did not settle the questions of whether the tenets of Calvinism itself are correct. These questions persuaded me to pursue both formal (seminary) and personal studies on Calvinism, with a special interest in the Calvinistic-election vs. free-will debate. Much to the chagrin of at least one of my Calvinistic seminary instructors, my research confirmed the Biblical accuracy of our denomination’s traditional leanings toward man’s free will to accept or reject God’s offer of salvation.

However, there was one objection that I have long felt unable to adequately address. In discussing the theological problems of Calvinistic-election — such as demonstrating that the active verbs in “whosoever will” and “believe on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ” naturally imply a sense of free personal choice — my Reformed friends would often cite Col. 2:13 and Eph. 2:1, 5, and ask, “How can one who is dead freely choose anything, including the choice to accept Christ?” That is a valid question, and worthy of a deeper consideration that I am now finally prepared to give.

To properly understand Paul’s “dead” references in these passages, we must go back to Genesis 2 and 3 to see what this death really means. In chapter two God told Adam that if he sinned (by eating the off-limits fruit) then he would “surely die.” Then in the next chapter, when

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Eve and then Adam ate of that fruit, the forewarned consequence of sin (death) began. But how could these two people be dead when they continued to live for hundreds of years?

To answer that question we have to look closely at the makeup of man. Created in the image of our triune God, man is similarly made of three distinct, unique, yet integrated components. There is obviously the physical portion of our being (our body) which is anything that can be seen or touched. Equally obvious to the Christian is our spirit component which communes with God. But there is also a third portion of our being — the soul (cf. Heb. 4:12). This is the area that houses the non-spiritual yet non-physical parts of who we are — our personality, our thoughts, our emotions, etc.

So, which of the three parts of Adam (and Eve) died the day he sinned? The answer is both *one*, and *all three*. At the instant he sinned, his intimate connection with God was severed because his spirit immediately and completely died. But did his body and soul do the same? Did Adam's body immediately keel over when he sinned? No, it only began the process of dying, but would not be totally dead for some time.

What we easily see to be true for the body serves to illustrate what is equally true for man's soul: That which is in the process of dying may not be totally dead.

If this is difficult to accept, consider this: Jesus said that there is no greater love than to give up one's life for another person. So say there is a soldier on the battlefield that throws himself on a live grenade, choosing to sacrifice himself in order to save his comrades. According to Jesus, that is an act of love; and isn't an act of love a good act? And if that soldier is lost, his self-sacrifice is still an act of love and goodness, right? According to Jesus' statement it is.

So if a lost soldier makes a choice to do an act of goodness, where did that choice come from? It wasn't from his spirit, because his spirit is dead and incapable of good. The only answer is that the dying-but-not-yet-dead soul made this choice. And if a dying soul is capable of freely making that good choice, then it is no stretch to see that it can also make the free choice to accept God's offer of salvation.

Am I saying that a lost man can save himself? No, not in the least. It's like a man who has been in a terrible accident. He is dying, but has been offered life-saving help by an EMT who has come to his aid. Like the lost man, this accident victim is in absolutely no position to save himself and, left to his own abilities, he is doomed to die. But like the accident victim, the lost man has been offered life-giving help, and all he has to do is freely choose to accept that offer.

All the goodness he can muster to heal his fatal wounds is no more than putrid rags. However, his dying-but-not-yet-dead soul is quite able to freely accept the life-saving efforts offered from someone else. He is saved, not by his own efforts or his own goodness, but solely by those of the One that offers him aid. And all this dying-but-not-yet-dead man had to do is freely accept that offer.

Doesn't this contradict our belief in the total depravity of man? No, it doesn't. Total depravity simply means that sin has entered and infected every aspect of man, i.e., his body, his soul and his spirit; and, like a cancer, it will ultimately consume all that he is. There is no part of even the best person that is good enough to effect the spiritual healing needed to save himself from Hell.

But does this inability to save oneself make a lost mother unable to freely choose to give selfless love for her children, or make the lost soldier unable to freely sacrifice himself out of his love for his fellow soldiers? Certainly not. So the too-sick-to-save-itself soul may still be alive enough to freely choose good decisions, and can do so without undermining the doctrine of total depravity in any way.

Doesn't the Bible at times describe man as being totally dead, and speaks of it as completed action? Yes, it does. However, it also, at times, describes man's salvation in similar completed-action terms, while it elsewhere speaks of our soul as still in the process of sanctification and our body receiving its glorification in our future — both of which are a part of our total salvation, and both are far from complete at this point in time. See, from God's timeless point of view, both the total deadness of the lost and the total alive-ness of the saved are done deals, which explains why the Scriptures sometimes present them as completed action. But from our own present temporal-bound existence, the dying of the lost soul and the sanctification of the saved soul are both a matter of process. This means that the lost person that God draws to Himself still has the ability to freely make a right choice within his dying-but-not-yet-dead soul.

As strange as it may sound, in the final analysis a lost man is dead while he is also in the process of dying. It is to his dying soul, not his dead spirit, that God presents the offer of salvation. If that dying soul will freely accept that offer, God miraculously reverses the consequences of death — immediately giving full life to the spirit, progressively enlivening the soul through sanctification and eventually glorifying the body at the resurrection of the dead.

And until that time when either God removes His offer or the lost man's soul grows too dead to hear it, that soul can freely choose to accept or reject that offer of life.

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