

Recently, after reading my review of William R. Downing's book, *The Bible and the Problem of Knowledge* published in the *Creation Research Society Quarterly (CRSQ)*, a Dr. David Stone contacted me with a desire to discuss apologetic methodology.

Dr. Downing's book dealt with the subject of epistemology and its relation to apologetics. My review of Downing's work was favorable considering his presuppositional approach as well as his commitment to a biblical, reformed anthropology. Dr. Stone, being himself quite enthusiastic about apologetics and evangelism, asked me to review his article, "The Missing Heart of Apologetics" [accessed 1/23/2017]. I was honored to do so, and we engaged in a somewhat lengthy exchange.

As I read Dr. Stone's work it was quite apparent that he was a man zealous not only for the proper method of apologetics, but for regular, one-to-one, personal evangelism. I told him that I applaud his enthusiasm for evangelism and that he was quite right that 1) apologetics is intimately connected to the subject of evangelism and not to be detached from it, and, 2) that apologetics must not remain in the realm of the theoretical but must make its way to actual encounters with the lost.

This particular article did not confine itself to apologetics and evangelism, however, but touched on two other important subjects in which I did not share his opinion. One was the Bible version debate, (which I had addressed in a book review published in the *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*, (found [here](#) [please note that I completely reject the primary theological tenets of the GES, namely dispensationalism, Arminianism and antinomianism])). The other subject was Calvinism, which Dr. Stone wholeheartedly denounces as damnable heresy.

In our exchange, I was directed to another article Dr. Stone had recently written titled, "Calvinism: It's not just irrational. It's atheism" [accessed 1/23/2017]. There were some very concerning statements made by Dr. Stone relating to Calvinism initiated in the article he asked me to review and reiterated in our conversation. But since the particular article directed at Calvinism seems to summarize his objections to reformed theology, and since comments are not welcome on Dr. Stone's website (the comments always appear to be "closed"), I thought I would take the time to address some of his statements here. Though his article is not very long, the issues he raises are numerous and require some attention. My response will be posted in at least two separate posts.

Let me begin by stating that nothing herein is meant as a personal attack on Dr. Stone. As

far as I can tell, he appears to be a man who is zealous for evangelism and reaching the lost. Also, it took many years of listening to reformed preaching and reading a variety of material before my buttress set against Calvinism had finally been eroded. But because some of his statements against Calvinism are quite bold, misleading, and just plain absurd, and since in God's providence I have been given the opportunity of interacting with him on this subject, I think it would be irresponsible for me not to provide an honest rebuttal for both his sake and the sake of his readers, should they ever be providentially directed to this site. Though Dr. Stone has been made aware of this site, I am quite certain he will not be the one directing his readers to [nopeacewithrome.com](http://nopeacewithrome.com) anytime soon. In any case, we offer this short rebuttal.

Obviously, the title of his article itself is a bit shocking. To assert that Calvinism is atheism is beyond the allowable limits of "agreeing to disagree" over a "secondary doctrine". I could argue—and it has been argued—that the God of Arminianism is not sovereign, therefore not the God of the Bible, making Arminianism atheistic. But I will be cautious enough not to proceed along those lines, even though that seems quite a bit more logical than asserting that faith in a perfectly sovereign God who controls the universe somehow equates to atheism.

I also found it amusing that he chose to use the word "irrational" to describe Calvinism. I say this because it was the logical precision of men like Gordon Clark which convinced me of the perfectly rational, interconnected and systematic nature of reformed theology. In fact, it was a growing resentment toward the irrationalism and paradoxical nature of the non-Calvinist position that forced me to embrace Calvinism. You can reject Calvinism for some other reason if you like, but one thing you cannot accuse it of is irrationality. The logical consistency of Calvinism is usually not what is up for debate. Both Calvinists and non-Calvinists have acknowledged that "the five-points stand or fall together". The issue is not whether Calvinism is rational or logical, but whether it is biblical. That is where the debate typically centers, while unexegeted proof-texts are launched in typical elephant-hurling fashion.

Stone opens with a statement which cannot be brushed aside. He writes, "...You wouldn't dream of calling *Reformed Theology* a damnable heresy, would you? Yes, I would. I'm not kidding about my title...." I am genuinely concerned for someone who uses such extreme language concerning the doctrines of grace. On what basis can it be alleged that Calvinism is a damnable heresy? Furthermore, if it is such, that puts all Calvinists on the path through the wide gate to hell. So if Dr. Stone is going so far as to relegate Calvinists to the lake of

fire, we should offer an equally bold rebuttal. Surprisingly, however, he then goes on to say that “many Calvinists are born again Christians....” So, either Stone is using the phrase “damnable heresy” improperly, or he chose it for its emotional impact, or “damnable heresy” is not so damnable after all.

He explains, “Where Calvinism is damnable heresy is that children raised on that doctrinal diet will miss their personal responsibility to choose to repent, to choose to believe, that it’s up to them whether and when to humble themselves, recognize their lost condition, turn from sin, and turn to Christ.”

In an attempt to keep this article from getting so long that no one will read it (my last response to Dr. Stone was sixteen pages), I will try to work through this and the following errors quickly and pass over the lesser ones. It should be obvious that Dr. Stone engrafts fallen rebels with a capacity to take it upon themselves to choose their eternal destiny, according to the whims of their autonomous freewill. He appears to have no reservations about proclaiming the innate ability of those described in Romans 1 as being in epistemological futility to simply “choose to repent, choose to believe...humble themselves...turn from sin, and turn from Christ.” Typically such Arminian sentiments are at least prefaced by a recognition of the divine initiative, that is, that God must at least commence the process of conversion via “prevenient grace” or some other prior work before man can do any of these things. Dr. Stone’s insistence upon such innate ability in man makes me wonder if he is more pelagian than he is “non-Calvinist”. I would like to believe that is not the case, since pelagianism actually *is* “damnable heresy”.

He then goes on to issue an attack on “total depravity”. Dr. Stone should be informed that rejecting total depravity is not something historic Arminians would likely recommend. His latent pelagianism rises more and more to the surface when he puts himself at odds not only with Calvinists but historic Arminians as well. Consider the words of Dr. Ronald Cooke on this point:

“Some people who have not done their homework either in church history or theology imagine that Total Depravity is a ‘Calvinistic’ doctrine only; and that those who are not Calvinists do not believe in it. However, Orton Wiley, who was the premier conservative Wesleyan-Arminian theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century wrote, ‘By the total depravity of man we do not mean that he is so thoroughly depraved that there can be no further degrees of wickedness. Rather, the term is used in its extensive sense, and carries the thought that the contagion of sin is spread throughout man’s entire being. It vitiates every power and faculty

of spirit, soul, and body. The affections are alienated, the intellect darkened, and the will perverted.... St. Paul affirms, For I know that in me (that is my flesh) dwelleth no good thing.”[1]

To emphasize, Dr. Cooke writes:

“When one looks at church history he will find that conservative Lutherans, conservative Methodists, Congregationalists, Baptists, Plymouth Brethren, conservative Episcopalians, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Reformed, and Wesleyan-Arminians have believed and taught this doctrine [total depravity]. Biblical Christians for centuries have taught that all sinners need a Vivifier, just like Augustin said. [Charles] Finney, however, sought to revive the anti-christianity of Pelagianism in Protestant churches.”[2]

It should be clear why my concern for Dr. Stone—that his abhorrence for what he perceives to be a distinctively Calvinistic doctrine has driven him to abandon a biblical anthropology in favor of a form of pelagianism—is well justified. Finney’s pelagianism has infected American evangelicalism at large in both soteriology and evangelistic methodology.

His next caricature is in regards to Unconditional Election and that such a doctrine inevitably means that “vast multitudes...are Unconditionally Damned”. Note the category error here. He is attempting a parallel between Unconditional Election and the reprobate, as if to say, in the same way that some are elected to salvation unconditionally, others are damned unconditionally. Such a statement reeks of an appeal to the emotions and is itself a shocking distortion of biblical election. The damned are not damned “unconditionally”. They are justly condemned because they are sinners both by nature and by choice. But Dr. Stone’s repudiation of Total Depravity leaves us with an apparently neutral being, and so perhaps that is the logic behind the allegation that the reprobate are condemned “unconditionally”—that is, for no apparent reason.

But man is not neutral (Luke 11:23). He is set against God in every fiber of his being (Romans 3:10-23). Post-Fall, such is every man’s natural condition. His willful sin adds to the weight of his cumulative wickedness, thereby justifying his destruction and consignment to the lake of fire. He is not condemned “unconditionally”. He is judged with righteous judgment, on the condition that he has willingly and knowingly broken the moral law of God. Since God’s law is embedded in the image of God, man is rendered inexcusable.

Unconditional Election is such that there are no conditions that fallen man has met or can

meet which put him in a right standing with God. Dr. Stone seems to think that if Calvinism were true it would mean that God randomly and arbitrarily selects from a pool of neutral beings who will go to heaven and who will go to hell; both original and ongoing sin somehow excluded from the equation.

Election is unconditional because there are no conditions that fallen man is capable of meeting that will make him right with God, or even prepare himself as a candidate for God's grace. But condemnation is God's justice rightly executed on sinners. It is not "unconditional", but conditioned upon the undeniable reality of man's own sinfulness as compared to the moral law of God.

Stone goes on to say that at conversion, according to Calvinism, there is "no intellectual or emotional or willful choice" on the person's part. Not so. Justification is by faith alone (I hope Dr. Stone would at least agree with that), and faith is intellectual assent to a proposition. Saving faith is belief in the gospel of Jesus Christ. The regenerated person is given the gifts of faith and repentance, as well as a new heart desirous to do the will of God. The will, mind and emotions of the unregenerate are intimately connected and equally infected with the depraved nature. The believer is made willing because he has been given a new nature. But apart from God's Spirit breathing new life into dry bones, there is no willingness to be raised to life, and no power of contrary choice. Those dead in trespasses and sin do not of their freewill decide to be resurrected. Bruce Ware elaborates:

"...[Man] is not constrained or coerced in his choosing but rather chooses according to his *deepest* desire, his *strongest* inclination, or according to what he most wants. Of course, since the agent chooses according to his deepest desire or strongest inclination, it makes no sense to imagine that his freedom consists in his ability to do otherwise—right? If his deepest desire and strongest inclination is to choose A, then what sense does it make to say that he might, instead, have chosen -A or B? Why would he choose contrary to his *deepest* desire or *strongest* inclination? What sense does that make? For to choose -A or B would be to choose against what may be thought to be his highest desire, but if he really did that, then his choice of -A or B would actually be the choice he desired most! The simple way to understand freedom of inclination is this: as morally free agents, we always choose and do what we most want.

"...His freedom, then, [is] seen in his ability to choose and act according to his strongest inclination, not in some supposed power of contrary choice." [3]

Another cause for concern is that in quoting non-Calvinist David Cloud who, while making his own case against Calvinism notes that he appreciates the Calvinists' emphasis of God's sovereignty, Dr. Stone "totally disagrees". He writes, "Calvinist *sovereignty* (a word not found in the KJV) is nothing like the concept of sovereignty in common usage in the English language and in the history of the world." Unfortunately one faulty assumption is used to buttress another. Dr. Stone and I exchanged a few words about the Bible version debate, Stone revealing his devotion to the KJV. Part of his argument against "Calvinistic" sovereignty here is based on the apparently infallible KJV. Interestingly, the word sovereignty is indeed found in a number of other translations. And although the following point is irrelevant to Dr. Stone, having been influenced by Jack Moorman and his outright dismissal of any other translation, it is noteworthy that the ASV, NKJV, NASB, NIV, HCSB, NRSV and even Darby's translation all contain the word "sovereignty".

More importantly, Dr. Stone asserts that the common English usage of the word should determine its meaning. Well, if the KJV English is more relevant than the Hebrew and Greek texts then I suppose there is some argument here. But of course the Hebrew and Greek words in their proper context determine the meaning of the word, not the English of a seventeenth century translation. Further, it is the *concept* that is ultimately in question, not the use of a particular word. I shouldn't have to give the obvious example that the *word* "trinity" is not found in the Bible while no orthodox Christian denies this *doctrine*. I don't want to belabor the point but I think it should be given a little more attention.

Is it unusual that we should insist on the truth of a doctrine—such as "Calvinistic sovereignty"—based on the analogy of faith and the cumulative weight of evidence from Scripture rather than the success of finding one specific verse that uses the exact terminology in question? Many theological concepts deduced from Scripture are explained in terms that are not used in Scripture. To name a few, consider the use of such terms as, inerrancy, epistemology, hermeneutics, omnipresence, omniscience, impassibility, soteriology, monergism, depravity, eschatology, millennium, etc.[4] None of these words are in Scripture but the teachings can be easily deduced and defended. To insist upon a "chapter and verse" where such terms can be found and declare victory when it is shown that they are not used in Scripture is very faulty reasoning indeed. Such is the *word-thing fallacy*: "Words and things are not the same. The absence of a particular term does not entail the absence of a particular concept." [5]

Naturally, freewill is a major component of Dr. Stone's objection to Calvinism. He writes, "Every man knows that our system of laws and justice make no moral sense whatsoever if

man has no free will.” He essentially argues that it is illogical to punish someone for a crime which they had no freedom *not* to execute. This is typical of anti-Calvinistic rhetoric and I am guilty of having once used similar arguments myself. The flaw is twofold: One who argues this way is conflating “freewill” with the freedom with which morally responsible agents are endowed. While man is a free moral agent—committing sin of his volition and not of coercion—he is not free in the Arminian sense of the word. Lazarus was not free to be resurrected or not, depending upon his power of contrary choice, mood, weariness, or any other emotion. Again, man is not a morally neutral being free to decide whether or not he will enjoy resurrection life. Yet he is responsible for his actions and must suffer the due penalty of the law as carried out by the civil magistrate. More importantly, his responsibility to repent and believe the gospel does not imply that he possesses the natural ability to do so. More than once he confuses responsibility and ability. I take this up in **Human ability and the imperative mood**.

Dr. Stone likens the sovereignty of the almighty God of Scripture to the atheistic/mechanistic/deterministic “universe’s master computer program”. An issue he raised in our exchange was that my denial of freewill entailed the embrace of a universe in which everything happened according to the decrees of God and there was subsequently no room for human choice. Without delving into a long discourse here, I would simply question why someone with a passion for biblical inerrancy (albeit a misguided view of such due to unjustified textual allegiances) seems to prefer a universe governed by the free and arbitrary actions of billions of wicked, selfish, God-hating, idolaters. Perhaps a review of Romans chapter one’s descriptive list of the natural man would be helpful at this point. Would you prefer a universe where billions of vile worms with their freewills perpetually collide in a constant state of rebellion? That such would be a better hope for humanity’s fate? I will opt for the God of Scripture who unapologetically does whatever He pleases (Psalm 115:3; 135:6; Isaiah 46:10; Ephesians 1:11).

“But Calvinism blasphemes God by teaching Limited Atonement and Unconditional Damnation for 98% (or more) of the human race. This must be a doctrine of Satan, to blaspheme the grace of God and the love of God, deceiving people that God is arbitrary, that all fates are in His hands without human recourse. By the way, this is also Islam!”

I will assume that Dr. Stone is using the word “blaspheme” here for the emotional charge and dramatic effect it supplies and not because he actually believes it blasphemous to assert that God is not obligated to rescue every wicked sinner from their rightful and just condemnation. In what sense is it blasphemous to insist that God saves His own elect people

according to His purposes in accordance with the covenant of redemption established “before time began” (2 Timothy 1:9)? One may not like that God did this, he may prefer that God merely made a general, potential atonement for those who would of their own volition “decide to follow Jesus” (in which case no one would be saved), but it could hardly be called blasphemous for God to save whomever He wills. Rather, if we are going to throw the word blasphemy around, it would more rightly be applied to the pelagian path upon which Dr. Stone appears to be walking.

Calvinism is likened to both atheism and Islam by Dr. Stone. It is difficult to take such charges seriously. He assured me in our exchange that he had not missed any relevant reformed works in settling on the position he now holds, but we have to wonder just how much actual reformed writing Dr. Stone is acquainted with that he could with good conscience hurl such accusations. He appears to take an even stronger position against Calvinism than some of the non-Calvinists he seems to have been influenced by.

There is much more worth addressing in Dr. Stone’s article. I plan on taking some of it up in part 2. For now, let it be recognized that the blind allegiance to “freewill” so prevalent in our day is nothing more than the fruit of Charles Finney and his pelagian anthropology. What concerns me most with Dr. Stone is not his refusal to embrace reformed soteriology. TULIP is not the gospel as recorded in 1 Corinthians 15 and it is not required that one be a Calvinist in order to be saved. What concerns me is that a denial of Total Depravity and the epistemological futility of the natural man results in other departures from orthodoxy. His own defense of presuppositionalism, for example, is quite inconsistent with his appraisal of man as an apparently neutral being. If he is neutral, like a jury who has not heard any opening statements yet, why not just do your best to convince him of the gospel using all evidentialism has to offer?

Furthermore, a patent denial of Total Depravity does not put one outside of reformed theology but outside of orthodox Christian theology. As has been shown, it is not a distinctively Calvinistic doctrine. It may be argued that only the Calvinist holds the doctrine consistently, since it is the foundation for the rest of the five-points, but it is not something exclusive to avowed Calvinists. Man has an innate problem. It is not merely that he sins, but that he “was brought forth in iniquity” (Psalm 51:5).

I humbly exhort Dr. David Stone to reconsider his objection to this heartily biblical doctrine.

-Nick Sabato

[1] Cooke, R., *Pelagianism, Barthianism, Self-Esteem & Romans 5:12-18*, Truth International Ministries, Max Meadows, VA, 2012, pp. 48-49.

[2] Cooke, R., ref. 1, p. 146.

[3] Ware, B.A., The compatibility of determinism and human freedom, in Barrett, M. and Nettles, T.J., (eds.), *Whomever He Wills*, Founders Press, Cape Coral, FL, 2012, p. 228.

[4] Excerpted from a more exhaustive list in Blackburn, E.M. (ed.), *Covenant Theology: A Baptist Distinctive*, Solid Ground Christian Books, Vestavia Hills, AL, 2013, p. 24.

[5] Taylor, J., Was there a covenant of works?, in ref. 4, p. 137.

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