

The Danger of Soft-Calvinism

Publishable Outline for ECIC by Bruce Reeves

Introduction: The issues we will be discussing are real, they are important, and they are vital to the well-being of God's people. These questions will not only impact us in the present, but they will also impact future generations. In the last few years our brethren have been engaging in a significant discussion on what has been described among churches of Christ as "Neo-Calvinism," which I would prefer to identify as "Soft-Calvinism." But some are asking, "What is Soft-Calvinism?" While advocates of such views are objecting to this description. We will be asking, "Does Soft-Calvinism exist?" "Should this be a controversy?" "Will this really affect me on a practical level?" "Is this new or has it happened before?"

When controversy arises, it is always concerning. However, discussion can call us to a renewed diligence to examine the context of Scripture more deeply and to weigh our teachings with a desire "maintain the unity of the Spirit, in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:1-3). One of the reasons this study is so important is the priority of speaking with precision. This is a concern we must all have as gospel preachers and teachers as we strive to be "sound in speech which cannot be condemned" (Tit. 2:8). Even more concerning is the danger of developing unbiblical concepts and expressing those in public teaching (James 3:1). When we use ambiguous language the best thing that can happen is confusion and the worst is deception. Never is this more clearly seen than in our teachings regarding the grace of God, human nature, assurance in Christ, the qualities of a working faith, and the scope of the doctrine of Christ. We will consider the historical context of many of the ideas associated with Soft-Calvinism as they are being presented today.

I. Shades of Calvinism: Classic Calvinism

a. Sources of Classic Calvinism:

- i.* It was Augustine (354-430 AD) who integrated the doctrine into a fully developed system of theology.
- ii.* John Calvin (1509-1564) affirmed in rigorous terms his views in *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* his notions of Original Sin and Total Inherited Depravity and inherent human inability.

- iii. Martin Luther, likewise, argued for Total Inherent Depravity in a book entitled, *The Bondage of the Will*.
 - iv. It must be understood that “Calvinism” has been “altered, mediated, and redefined ... through the years to the point that the label is often almost meaningless without some qualifying clarifications” (Steve Wolfgang, *John Calvin: His Work and Influence, ECIC, 2016*).
- b. Major concepts of Classic Calvinism:
- i. Meticulous Sovereignty – God has foreordained whatever comes to pass and is the first cause of evil.
 - 1. “Nothing that exists or occurs falls outside God’s ordaining will. Nothing, including no evil person or thing or event or deed. God’s foreordination is the ultimate reason why everything comes about, including the existence of all evil persons and things and the occurrence of any evil acts or events. And so it is not inappropriate to take God to be the...instigator of evil...Nothing—no evil thing or person or event or deed – falls outside God’s ordaining will...So when even the worst of evil befalls us, they do not immediately come from anywhere other than God’s hand” (Mark Talbot, www.desiringgod.org).
 - 2. “The devil is God’s devil. He does what God allows him to do. He does what God commands him to do. No more and no less” (Reeves-Cook Debate, quote played from Gene Cook, Reeves’ third affirmative, June 24, 2005).
 - 3. *“Both evil and good come from God...So what happens when you emphasize the will of man, then evil becomes only associated, there is no sense in which God decrees evil, there is no sense in which God wills evil and so evil is only from the heart of man and from the heart of Satan,... but we recognize as reformed Christians that those are secondary*

causes, that the first cause of evil is God, Himself...Man does not resist evil when he is fulfilling the decrees of God”(Is God schizophrenic? "The Two Wills of God" Gene Cook - 8/12/05)

- ii. Total, Inherent inability and corruption of human nature
 - 1. Totally disabled in exercising faith in Christ, born with a sinful nature as a descendant of Adam, and unable to resist sin.
 - 2. Even the elect must receive a direct operation of the Holy Spirit to believe in Christ.
- iii. Unconditional Election
 - 1. God unconditionally chose particular individuals to salvation.
 - 2. This election is not based on anything they would do or any foreknowledge on His part.
- iv. Limited Atonement – Jesus only died for the unconditionally elected
- v. Irresistible Grace/ Drawing of the Holy Spirit for the Elect
- vi. Perseverance of the Saints:
 - 1. All Calvinists: “Once Saved, Always Saved”
 - 2. Extreme Calvinists: “Persevere because they are preserved”
 - 3. Moderate Calvinists: Finally saved whether they are living in sin or not.
- c. Mechanism of Triple Imputation:
 - i. Adam’s sin transferred to every human person at conception birth described as Original Sin.
 - ii. Sins of humanity directly transferred/credited to Jesus on the cross.
 - iii. The perfect, personal righteousness of Christ is transferred or laid over all believers.

II. Shades of Calvinism: Understanding Neo/Soft Calvinism

- a. Understanding what is not being discussed:

- i. If you search for “Neo-Calvinism” on Wikipedia, you will find an article about a movement in the early Twentieth Century among Dutch Calvinist.
- ii. This movement emphasized the application of Christian principles in all aspects of life.
- iii. Similarly, the search for “Soft-Calvinism” will lead you to an article about a comparable movement among American denominations later in the 1900’s.
- iv. These movements are not what our brethren have ever referenced in their use of the phrase “Neo-Calvinism.”
- v. *Neo-Calvinism in the Church of Christ* was published by the Cogdill Foundation in 1980.

1. *Table of Contents:*

- a. *Introduction to Calvinism*
- b. *Justification, and Sanctification*
- c. *Gospel and Doctrine*
- d. *Faith and Works*
- e. *Grace and Law*
- f. *Imputed Righteousness*
- g. *Authority of Examples and Necessary Inferences*
- h. *Fellowship*

b. Understanding what is being discussed:

- i. In the late 1960’s -1980’s, what is sometimes described as the “Grace-Unity Movement,” which was a small but loud faction within churches of Christ, erupted.
- ii. Unfortunately, it neither presented the biblical view of grace or produced unity in Christ, but rather division.
- iii. Those who were proponents of this movement minimized the need for baptism, argued that a pattern approach to the work of the church was not binding, accepted instrumental music in worship,

and sought to broaden fellowship with erring brethren and various denominations.

- iv. As there was an attempt to broaden fellowship by redefining grace and questioning the necessity of obedience, debates were engaged over human nature, with some arguing that man was incapable of resisting temptation.
- v. Some brethren also began to teach the imputation or transfer of the perfect righteous life of Jesus to the believer and a gospel-doctrine distinction to broaden fellowship.
- vi. Another related discussion began over continuous cleansing, i.e., the notion that sins were automatically forgiven before repentance and confession.

c. Why the phrase “Neo-Calvinism” or “Soft-Calvinism”?

- i. Most of the erring teachings that have been presented in recent years along this line are simply being recycled and are not new at all.
- ii. K.C. Moser’s material has been consistently referenced by those who emphasize “classic Protestant themes of grace, atonement, imputation, faith, and indwelling of the Holy Spirit”¹
- iii. Brother Matt Allen has referenced Moser’s work in his explanations of grace²
- iv. After questioning the use of the phrase “Soft-Calvinism” he wrote, “Among us discussion over these matters is nothing new. A century ago, men like K.C. Moser created quite a stir in many quarters with his writings and advocacy of a more grace-centered approach in our preaching/teaching. The 1960’s and 70’s saw more vigorous discussion and debate. Not it has resurfaced for a new generation”³

¹ John Mark Hicks, “Kenneth Carl Moser,” Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement (Eerdmans, 2004, 546).

² Matt Allen, Diluting the system-the-system-of-grace, www.fromfeartofaith.com

³ Matt Allen, Balancing Faith and Works, www.cornerstone.com

- v. These arguments have been seen previously from men such as Carl Ketcherside, Edward Fudge, Leroy Garrett, Bruce Edwards, Steve Dewhirst, and others who have followed their path of digression and apostasy.
 - vi. Many of the concepts that have been or will be mentioned are rooted to some degree in Calvinistic Doctrine.
 - vii. This does not mean that those who promote them claim to be Calvinists, nor that they teach the whole system of Classic Calvinism; but such does not change the fact they are conceptually rooted in Calvinistic concepts.
 - viii. Among brethren phrases such as “Neo-Calvinism” came to be a way of describing teachings that do not advocate the TULIP theory of Classic Calvinism but rely on many of the underlying principles and mechanisms of Reformed Theology.
- d. How is Neo-Calvinism Being Expressed Among Brethren?
- i. Man’s inability to resist sin, to understand Scripture, or choose faith without a direct illumination of the H.S.
 - ii. The imputation or transfer of the personal righteousness of Jesus or the personal goodness of God to the believer.
 - iii. The idea that good works are only seen after salvation.
 - iv. A Christian’s sins are automatically and continuously cleansed by the blood of Christ.
 - v. The gospel-doctrine distinction (a radical de-emphasis of the NT epistles, pattern of the NT, or the necessity of doctrinal truth).

III. The Influence of Calvinism’s View of Imputation

- a. Classic Calvinism and the Imputation of Christ’s Life to the Believer:
 - i. *James Orr, “...the term ‘imputation’ has been used in theology in a threefold sense to denote the judicial acts of God by which the guilt of Adam’s sin is imputed to his posterity; by which the sins of Christ’s people are imputed to Him; and by which the righteousness*

of Christ is imputed to his people” (“Imputation,” Editor, ISBE, V.II, pp. 1462-1463).

- ii. The term “impute” does not mean to “transfer.”
 1. The Greek term translated “impute” occurs 39 times in the N.T. and eleven of those times are found in Romans 4.
 2. The word simply means to “reckon,” “put to one’s account,” or “credit,” but it does not indicate the concept of “transfer.”
 3. Albert Barnes’ in spite of his Presbyterian background and in disregard for the position of that denomination rightly commented about the term “impute” throughout scripture, *“I have examined all the passages, and as the result of my examination have come to the conclusion, that there is not one in which the word is used in the sense of reckoning or imputing to a man that which does not strictly belong to him; or of charging on him that which ought not to be charged on him as a matter of personal right. The word is never used to denote imputing in the sense of transferring, or of charging that on one, which does not properly belong to him. The same is the case in the New Testament. The word occurs about forty times and in a similar signification. No doctrine of transferring, or of setting over to a man what does not properly belong to him; be it sin or holiness, can be derived, therefore, from this word. Whatever is meant by it here, it evidently is declared that the act of believing is that which is intended, both by Moses and Paul”*⁴
- iii. Calvinists argue that the term “impute” means “transfer.”
 1. Philadelphia Confession of Faith: *“Those whom God effectually calleth, he also freely justifieth, . . . not by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience to them, as their righteousness; but*

⁴ Albert Barnes, Commentary on Romans, 90.

by imputing Christ's active obedience unto the whole law, and passive obedience in his death for their whole and sole righteousness by faith, which faith they have not of themselves; it is the gift of God."

2. Calvinist, David Landon wrote in his debate with brother Keith Sharp, *"The apostle Paul gives both sides of this exchange in one verse, . . . That being "made the righteousness of God" is by the imputation of Christ's righteousness to us follows from the parallel that Paul draws from Christ being made a sinner. Our Lord is not actually 'made' a sinner." Rather, our sins are imputed to Him. In like manner His righteousness is imputed to us.*
- iv. Neo-Calvinism, Grace Unity-Movement, and the Imputed Righteousness of Christ.
 1. In the 1970's in the effort to extend fellowship to denominations Ed Fudge and Arnold Hardin justified such through teaching the imputation of the perfect obedience of Christ to the Christian.
 2. In 1986 a brother in Christ cited from S.H. Hall, "Though we fall short, if we will come into and are faithful till death, all we lack in attaining sinlessness He will supply from His own perfect life...Those who do this are complete in Him, because all that they lack is supplied from His perfect life, and because of this can be presented in Christ in the judgment"⁵
 3. "This branding and choosing sides is of the devil! And these gossips that would set brethren against brethren ought to be marked in the true sense and meaning of Paul...I am quite

⁵ S.H. Hall, *The Sower*, vol. 31, No. 3, May/June 1986

capable of recognizing Calvinism when I see it!”⁶ (Arnold Hardin, *The Persuader*, Vol. XH, No. 1, August 23, 1977).

4. “For we repeat again – Imputed Righteousness (perfect life and death of Christ) is the only kind there is! What is imputed righteousness once again. It is the righteousness that Christ possesses by his perfect life as lived under God’s laws. Every sinner coming to Him by faith was credited to his account that precious righteousness⁷
5. “Such blessings are not possible through works of righteousness which we may do, but by the grace of God. They do not come because of our perfect conduct or understanding, but because God understood our plight and His Son lived a perfect life in our stead.”⁸
6. In a sermon entitled, “Becoming the Righteousness of God, preached May 8, 2022, a brother said the following: “For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.’ Did you hear what he is saying here...We go out today and we represent Jesus, however you want to label that term, we represent Jesus as those who have been reconciled to God...He has taken our sins, and it was credited to the Son and taken the Son’s righteousness and credited to us. Do you see that?”⁹
7. When we start hearing preachers teach that God puts His personal righteousness on us, that our sins have been “replaced with the righteousness from the Lord,” or that “His goodness is laid upon us” we need to be concerned.¹⁰

⁶ Arnold Hardin, *The Persuader*, Vol. XH, No. 1.

⁷ Arnold Hardin, *The Persuader*, Vol. XIII, No. 1.

⁸ Cecil Willis references this quotation in Truth Magazine, reprinted by Mark Mayberry, May, 2, 2012.

⁹ Mitch Davis, Franklin church of Christ, Franklin, TN, 49:30

8. This doctrine has been used as a mechanism for unscriptural views of grace by brethren that are attempting to advance unbiblical views of grace and fellowship.
 9. Just because one does not embrace the doctrine of “once saved, always saved” does not mean he has not adopted the Calvinistic model of the imputation of the personal righteousness of Christ to the believer.
 10. When brethren become enamored with the writings of John MacArthur, John Piper, Mark Driscoll, Matt Chandler, and Francis Chan or even men such as Ed Fudge, Bruce Edwards, or Arnold Hardin of the 1970’s they will often begin to adopt language, phrases, and slogans that are rooted in unbiblical models and systems regarding God’s grace and fellowship.
 11. I would also warn us of the fact that those departing from the truth tend to cite some of those involved in the Restoration Movement as their source, but many of those men were coming out of religious error and these brothers are meeting them on the road back into denominationalism.
 12. There are those who at first do not grasp the concepts lying behind the terms, but such is only a matter of time if they persist in drinking too heavily from denominational wells without discernment.
- v. Denial of the Sufficiency of the Sacrifice of Christ and the Transformation of the Gospel
1. Charles Hodge states, “So when righteousness is imputed to the believer, he does not thereby become subjectively righteous”¹¹ (Hodge’s Systematic Theology, 3:145).

¹¹ Charles Hodge, Systematic Theology, 3:145.

2. The doctrine of the transfer of guilt or righteousness portrays justification as an elaborate scheme of divine pretense - it is all a sublime hoax.
3. In stark contrast, biblical justification by the blood of Christ makes the sinner righteous.
4. James White, Classic Calvinist, writes about the imputation of the righteousness of Christ to the believer as follows, "*It produces no change in the individual to whom the imputation is made; it simply alters his relation to the law*"¹²

b. Key Passages Cited in Defense of Imputed Righteousness:

i. Romans 5:19:

1. Paul neither says that Adam's sin was imputed to us, nor that Christ's perfect obedience is imputed to us.
2. But he DOES say, that through Adam's one trespass, judgment came, and that through the one righteous act of Christ, his death on the cross, the gift came (Phil. 2:8).
3. Adam opened the door of sin up to the world and when we follow in his footsteps we become sinners through imitation, not inheritance.
4. Calvinists face a serious problem here – if they want to argue that this teaches automatic imputed sin to all of Adam's posterity, but they do not want to argue that it teaches automatic universal imputation of righteousness.

ii. 2 Corinthians 5:21:

1. Worst translation I have ever seen is found in the Living Letters, the Paraphrased New Testament, "*For God took the sinless Christ and poured into Him our sins. Then, in exchange, He poured God's goodness into us.*"¹³

¹² James White, *The God Who Justifies*, 114.

¹³ *Living Letters: The Paraphrased New Testament*, 2 Cor. 5:21.

2. We are made righteous through the forgiveness received by faith thanks to Christ having become the sin offering for mankind (Rom. 3:23-26; Heb. 10:10, 14; I John 2:2).
3. 1 Pet. 2:24: "And He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds, you were healed" (cf. I Peter 2:18; Heb. 2:9).

iii. Philippians 3:8-10:

1. Calvinists assume that the phrase "righteousness of God," refers to the transfer of the perfect life of Jesus to the believer.
2. This is a case of pumping systematic theology into verses so we cannot simply read the bible for what it says.
3. The righteousness of God simply refers to "rightness before God" through the forgiveness incurred by the sacrifice of Jesus by faith (Gal. 3:10-13).
4. There is nothing in this text that indicates the transfer of the perfect life of Jesus to cover our imperfections, but it emphasizes that we are made righteous through God's forgiveness in His Son.

iv. Romans 5:10: "Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by his life"

1. We are justified and saved through his death and resurrection (5:6-8; cf. 4:24-25).
2. We are saved by his resurrection life (Heb. 7:25; Romans 8:34; Acts 17:31; 1 Cor. 15:20-22).

3. Notice that there is a future reference to being saved from wrath and being saved by His life – which includes our resurrection (1 Cor. 15:21-23).
- v. Romans 4:1-8: Forgiveness or transfer?
 1. Account and impute are rendered as “credited” in the NASB.
 2. One’s faith is a condition of being counted right with God.
 3. This occurs when God forgives a person of his sins and when he by faith obeys God.
 4. Paul cites Psalm 32:1-5 in an emphasis of forgiveness.
 5. Through faith God forgives us of our sins and thus through his grace and Jesus’s sacrifice we are declared righteous and innocent before God (Acts 2:38; 22:16)
 - vi. Consequences of *The Imputed Righteousness of Christ* Doctrine:
 1. The doctrine denies the sufficiency of the blood sacrifice of Christ for our justification (Heb. 10:14).
 2. The doctrine portrays justification as an elaborate scheme of divine pretense (1 John 3:7).
 3. The doctrine allows the believer to continue in sin without God imputing that sin to his account (1 Cor. 6:9-11).
 - c. The Grace-Unity Movement and Calvinism’s Continuous Cleansing
 - i. Defining the doctrine: “The sins of a Christian are automatically cleansed even as he sins without the repudiation and cessation of those activities.”
 - ii. *“And as long as we thus ‘walk in the light’ the blood of Christ cleanses us from all sin...An example, although a poor one, is a windshield wiper on your car...it doesn’t keep the rain from getting on the windshield, but it does take it off just as soon as it gets on. Just so, the blood of Jesus does not prevent one who is ‘in the light’ from committing sin: but His blood takes away that sin, so it is not ‘imputed’ (put on the record) ...because of the constant cleansing of*

*Christ's blood, sin is not imputed to one who 'walks in the light.'*¹⁴
(Clem Thurman, Gospel Minutes 5/5/78; reproduces in *The Sower*,
1/82).

- d. Key Questions in the Examination of I John 1:5-2:2:
- i. Is the Christian cleansed automatically by the blood of Christ when he sins?
 - ii. If there are conditions to the Christian receiving the cleansing of sins he or she has committed, what are they?
 - iii. What does it mean to “walk in the light”?
 - iv. What does it mean to “confess our sins”?
 - v. What does it mean to “repent”?
- e. Exegesis of 1 John 1:5-2:2:
- i. There are a series of “if” clauses presented by John (1:6, 7, 8, 9, 10).
 - ii. Albert Barnes points out that “walking in the light” includes at least the following three things according to the apostle John: Leading a life of holiness and purity (2:15-17; 3:3-10); Walking in truth [that is embracing the truth in opposition to all error] (4:1, 6; 2 John 9-11); Enjoying the promises of God (1:3, 4; 5:10-12).
 - iii. The phrase “walking in the light” indicates continuous action on the part of the believer.
 - iv. We read that the blood of Christ “cleanses all sin.”
 - v. There are two considerations that the reader ought to contemplate about this text: the struggling Christian should be greatly encouraged in that the blood of Christ is powerful enough to cleanse “all sin.”
 - vi. Secondly, this text cannot be taken beyond its natural and contextual limits. The immediate context determines the meaning of the passage. There is NOTHING in the verb used which assumes that the sinning Christian is automatically cleansed of his errors.

¹⁴ Clem Thurman, Gospel Minutes, May 5, 1978, reproduced in *The Sower*, January 1982.

- vii. The cleansing of the Christian's sins is continuously available, but is only accessed by meeting the divine condition stated in 1:9, "if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us..." [Does not mean we must recount the date of our sins, etc.]
- viii. As we harmonize Scripture, we find that Christians who sin receive the forgiveness of sins when they "repent," "pray" and "confess sins."
- ix. Defining terms and understanding concepts is very important in understanding God's word on any subject.
- x. The term "repent" means to change one's mind (2 Cor. 7:8-11; Acts 8:18-24).
- xi. John does not say that we should merely confess that we sin, but he teaches us to confess our "sins" plural.
- xii. This demands acknowledgment of such with a desire to turn away from such errors.
- xiii. This does not mean that one is to recall dates, times, places, etc., but it does demand acknowledgment of a sin if we are to turn away from such.
- xiv. Can we "walk in the light" and "walk in darkness" at the same time? Absolutely not! We are to "walk in the light as He is in the light" (1:6-7).
- xv. Are we cleansed of sin "even as we sin"?
- xvi. Does this continuous cleansing apply to the use of instrumental music?
- xvii. If so, should we be fellowshiping each other?
- xviii. Some have decided because of these views that we should fellowship those who are involved in unscriptural practices because God automatically cleanses such sins, or we can never know the truth with any type of certainty!

- xix. How far will the next generation take these ideas? Women preachers, appointing women as elders, fellowship with those who have not been baptized for the remission of their sins, etc.?
- f. Questions, Answers, and Concerns:
 - i. The problem of a false conceptualization of sin.
 - ii. “We cannot understand the Bible?”
 - iii. “You are teaching sinless perfection”
 - iv. Sins relative to growth (Heb. 5:11-14)
- g. Problematic View of Sin
 - i. Many brethren see sin as unavoidable: *“State it anyway you wish that which I cannot avoid I have to do”* (Sower).
 - ii. However, the Bible says that we can escape temptation to sin by taking the way of escape (1 Cor. 10:12, 13), although we all fail to do so at some point (Romans 3:23).
 - iii. Much preaching has been done that has left Christians with the feeling that one could not “drive across town without sinning,” i.e. one cannot go a day or hour without transgressing God’s law.
 - iv. Yet John said: *“My little children, I write these things unto you that ye sin not...”* (1 John 2:1).
 - v. This argument cannot be used to defend the practice of denominationalism, unscriptural worship and work of the church, immoral practices, etc.

IV. Classic Calvinism: Is There Something Sinful About Human Nature?

- a. Three Pillars of Classic Calvinism’s view of human nature
 - i. Inheritance: Every human being as children of Adam have inherited a sinful nature called “Original Sin.”
 - 1. *“We are not sinners because we sin; we sin because we are sinners. Since the fall human nature has been corrupt. We are born with a sin nature. Our acts of sin*

*flow out of this corrupted nature*¹⁵ (Sproul, *What is Reformed Theology*, pp. 118-19).

ii. Inability to choose faith in Christ without a direct operation of the Holy Spirit and faith being given as an irresistible gift.

1. Westminster Confession of Faith says that because of the fall, man “hath wholly lost all ability to will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation”¹⁶
2. “Man lacks the capacity to exercise what Scripture calls ‘royal freedom,’ a liberty for spiritual obedience”¹⁷
3. R.C. Sproul rightly points out the inconsistencies of partial, watered-down, and moderate Calvinism when he writes, *“If ever the Reformed doctrine of total depravity has been crystallized into one brief statement it is here. The moral inability of fallen man is the core concept of the doctrine of total depravity or radical corruption. If one embraces this aspect of the T in TULIP, the rest of the acrostic follows by a resistless logic. One cannot embrace the T and reject any of the other four letters with any degree of consistency”*¹⁸

iii. Inability to resist sin:

1. “We sin out of a kind of moral necessity because we act according to our fallen nature. We do corrupt things because we are corrupt people”¹⁹

V. Neo-Calvinism: Is There Something Sinful About Human Nature?

- a. There is no doubt we all sin, so the issue is not:
 - i. Is humanity guilty of sin (Rom. 3:23)?
 - ii. Do we deserve salvation (Eph. 2:8-9)?

¹⁵ R.C. Sproul, *What is Reformed Theology*, 118-19.

¹⁶ Sproul, 128.

¹⁷ Sproul, 131

¹⁸ Sproul, 131.

¹⁹ Sproul, 128.

- iii. Are we able to save ourselves merely based on sinless perfection (Rom. 3:20-24)?
- b. But why do we sin?
 - i. Acquired sinful nature of all human beings?
 1. There are those who will argue that we have a sinful nature, but it is neither “total” or “inherited,” yet it is there.
 2. The use of the term “nature” in Ephesians 2:1-3 is describing those who through “long practice” has made sin their “second nature” if you will.
 - ii. Lack of ability?
 1. The doctrine that “Man has to sin” because of inability is the tap root of Neo-Calvinism.
 2. If we cannot keep from sinning and cannot know truth, then we must devise schemes of pardon devoid of biblical repentance.
 3. Brethren that have affirmed our inability to resist sin tend to turn to the imputation of the righteous life of Christ to the believer or to unscriptural views of continuous cleansing.
 4. The error that man “has to sin” or that the inability to resist temptation is inherent in human nature is a spinoff of Calvinistic concepts even if one does not accept Classic Calvinism.
 5. One brother has written, “That which I cannot avoid I have to do”²⁰ (The Sower, 1986).
 6. One of the major discussions that arises with Classic Calvinists is whether God can be just and command us to do something we cannot do?
 7. Soft-Calvinist face the same problem – “Is there any example of God commanding us to do a thing that we do

²⁰ Sower, 1986

not have the ability to do?" (Rom. 6:16-17; James 1:17; 1 Cor. 10:13; Deut. 30:11-14).

8. It is true that if we choose to yield to sin then we cannot please God, but that is not an issue of human inability, but an issue of spiritual incompatibility.
9. Our salvation does not depend on our flawlessness, but at the same time we must avoid any concept that says we cannot obey God unless He directly empowers us to do so.

iii. Cannot understand God's will?

1. Calvinists contend that God's will is so mysterious that we can only understand it by the direct illumination of the Holy Spirit.
2. The Scriptures teach that the will of God is understandable (Eph. 3:1-4; 5:17).
3. There has been a strong attempt to argue that we cannot be certain about any of our conclusions based on CENI and principles of biblical authority therefore we should fellowship erring brethren.
4. Where does it stop? What about our denominational friends?
5. This hermeneutical argument is being paired up with human inability to understand God's truth and pattern in the NT, dismiss necessary inferences and the binding nature of approved examples.
6. The entire premise is unbiblical! These are not isolated misstatements – this is a framework to change the direction God's people are heading!

iv. To fulfill scripture?

1. It has been asserted by some that we have to sin to fulfill Scripture – this is a disturbing argument.

2. The confuses statement of fact with predictive prophecy – it is grounded in a fundamental misunderstanding of Calvinist in their failure to distinguish between foreknowledge and foreordination.
3. Divine knowledge does not demand divine micromanagement and meticulous control of every human action.
4. This argument confuses cause and effect and makes God responsible for our sin.
5. I must sin only if I yield to temptation, but since I don't have to yield, I don't have to sin.
6. The Scripture is not responsible for my sin, I am!
7. Whether advocates of such a view accept the entire system of Calvinism such arguments are Calvinistic!

VI. Major Prooftexts for Advocates of Human Inability

- a. Romans 3:9-23: Paul's argument is that the world (Jew and Gentile) is guilty of sin before God (3:9, 23).
 - i. This truth sets up the theme of Romans and helps us understanding chapters 6-8 as well.
 - ii. When Paul says, "There is none righteous, no not one" he is not arguing for the inability to obey God, but rather for the fact of his spiritual condition and his need for grace.
 - iii. Psalm 14 refers to a man who has turned astray rather than hearing God.
 - iv. No one is made righteous through the Law of works, but we are made righteous before God in the gospel through the obedience of faith (Rom. 3:20; 6:16-18; cf. 1:5).
 - v. He is not saying that for the Christian even on his best day He is unable to be right with God; He is saying that if we are outside of Christ even on our best day we are not right before God.

b. Major Prooftexts for Advocates of Human Inability: Romans 7-8

(While brethren have discussed this text for years, some have attempted to use it to argue for an acquired sinful nature that disables us from consistently obeying God).

i. Understanding the broader context:

1. While brethren have discussed this text for years, some have attempted to use it to argue for an acquired sinful nature that disables us from consistently obeying God.
2. Paul in chapter 6 describes sin as a Master in this personification the big categories of “righteousness” versus “unrighteousness,” as well as “justification” and “condemnation are mentioned.
3. God’s grace has set us free from the enslavement to sin as our Master (Rom. 8:1-2).

ii. Freedom from the bondage of sin:

1. The Christian is not to continue in slavery to sin (Rom. 6:1-2).
2. He has “died to sin” (Rom. 6:3-8)
3. Baptized into His death (6:3)
4. He is to “walk in newness of life” (6:4)
5. The old person has been “crucified with Christ...so that we no longer are to be slaves to sin” (6:6)
6. He who has died is “freed from sin.”
7. Sin no longer has dominion over our lives (Rom. 6:9-14)
8. The believer is a servant of righteousness (Rom. 6:15-23)
9. You cannot simultaneously serve righteousness and unrighteousness! (Rom. 6:18, 20).
10. Paul continues the same line of argumentation in Romans 8:5-15.

c. Who is being depicted in Romans 7?

- i. Paul is describing the man seeking to be right with God under the Law, outside of Jesus.
- ii. The main point of the context is the Mosaic Law:
 - 1. Delivered from the Law to be married to Christ (Rom. 7:1-6)
 - 2. “For while we were in the flesh, the sinful passions, which were aroused by the Law, were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit for death. But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter” (Rom. 7:4-6).
- iii. Paul is not describing his difficulties as a Christ for several reasons.
 - 1. Total defeat and death, not merely a spiritual struggle (Rom. 7:9-11, 14, 24)
 - 2. The Christian is not under the Law of Moses, but this man was under the Law (Rom. 7:1-14, 16; 8:3).
 - 3. Romans 7 never mentions the Holy Spirit in contrast to Romans 8 in with the Spirit explodes off the page.
 - 4. The phrase “in the flesh” does not refer to the physical body but refers to the sphere of influence in a person’s life outside of Christ (7:7-25 unpacks 7:5).
 - 5. Cannot be a slave of righteousness and unrighteousness at the same time (6:16, 18, 20; 8:2, 5-8).
- iv. This man is unable to live free from the dominion of sin once he had violated the Law
 - 1. Prior to his knowledge of the Law, Paul was “alive,” but when the Law convicted him of transgression, he “died.”
 - 2. While the Law’s purpose was to reveal and expose sin (7:13, 20), once sin had been committed the Law in and of itself could not break the power of sin.

3. Romans 7:14-25 is an inspired depiction of a man who is frustrated and helpless to justify himself, once having sinned against God's law outside of the grace of Jesus Christ.
 4. Does Romans 7 describe the same person as Romans 8:1-8?
 5. Paul uses the first-person pronoun to describe a hypothetical person, not his present self, in several contexts of Scripture.
- d. The flow of the context:
- i. Dead (7:8-11)
 - ii. Carnal, sold under sin (7:14)
 - iii. Guilt for violation of the Law (7:15-22)
 - iv. Indwelling or influence of sin (7:7, 17, 20)
 - v. Cannot get to a justified place no matter how much good is done (7:18)
 - vi. Bondage, captivity, wretched, miserable (7:14, 25).
- e. What is Paul talking about?
1. 7:15: What I want to accomplish (keeping the Law) I do not practice or produce because I have sinned.
 2. 7:16: If I hate what I practice (violation of the Law) then I can know that the Law is good in its condemnation of such.
 3. 7:17-21: His mind consented to the righteous requirements of the Law, but the fact was that he had sinned and, thus he did not always fulfill those requirements.
 4. He wanted to be pleasing to God but could not remedy his spiritual condition in and of himself under the Law.
 5. Even when he attempted to serve God the realization of his guilt was with him.
 6. The one outside of Christ may not be living in extreme immorality, but they are in bondage to sin because of the impotence of the Law of Moses to rescue them from enslavement to sin once it was violated (Gal. 3:10-11).

7. When Paul says “nothing good dwells in me” he is not saying is incapable of doing anything good, he is saying that he cannot get to a right relationship with God under the Law without Christ because he has sinned.
- f. Three Laws (8:1-3):
 - i. Law of sin and death – ruling principle of sin and death
 - ii. Law of Moses
 - iii. Law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus – Gospel
 - iv. Paul says, “We have been freed from sin by the gospel” – does that sound like a wretched man, who is in bondage to sin and death?

VII. Soft-Calvinism: Transforming Grace and Surrendering Faith

- a. How does Paul use the term “faith” in the book of Romans?
 - i. There is a significant portion of the religious world that has presented a *cheapened view of grace* and a *thin view of faith*, whereas the apostle Paul presents a transforming view of grace and a “thick,” “robust,” and “comprehensive” concept of faith in Christ.
 - ii. It is a faith that transcends mere mental assent or *easy believe-ism*.
 - iii. Genuine faith is not a “non-doing trust,” but it is active trust, faithful-loyalty, surrender, fidelity, and allegiance to Jesus as King.
 - iv. True faith participates in the death and resurrection of Christ in our spiritual transformation (Rom. 1:5; 6:16; 16:26; 6:3, 4; Gal. 2:20).
 - v. This is the faith that the Lord calls us to in the gospel by his grace (Rom. 5:1).
 - vi. Paul’s use of the term “faith” describes a working faith (Rom. 5:1; Gal. 5:6).

- vii. One of the subtle dangers is seen by those who reject Classic Calvinism but then define faith itself as a “non-doing trust,” grace as excluding obedience, and “works” as “anything you do.”²¹
- b. Paul’s Description of Abraham’s Faith: Rom. 3:27-5:1
- i. To appreciate what Paul is emphasizing we must have some knowledge of Abraham’s story in Scripture.
 - ii. Paul’s contrast between faith and works is not a contrast between mere mental assent and obedience, but a contrast between a works system of justification (“law of works”) and a faith system of justification (“law of faith”) [Rom. 3:27].
 - iii. We cannot be saved by any system of justification outside of Christ and His gospel.
 - iv. We are not saved by sinless performance, but through forgiveness and a submissive faith” (Rom. 4:4-8).
 - v. Paul’s use of the “works” that do not save does not refer to obedience to the gospel (Rom. 4:6; 6:16; Col. 2:11-12).
 - vi. The notion that Romans 4 does not mention anything Abraham did is a fundamental misunderstanding and misinterpretation of how Paul uses the Genesis narrative and the explicit statements of the context itself (Rom. 4:12, 20-22).
 - vii. Clearly 4:12 is describing what he did, and the entire story includes what he did in faith.
- c. Faith is a transformed life, not a snapshot!
- i. We all have some *snapshots* of which we are deeply ashamed, but those *snapshots* do not have to become the whole of our identity.
 - ii. Initial call of God: The Lord called him out of idolatry in which his family had participated in Ur of the Chaldeans (Joshua 24:2, 3; Gen. 11:31; Acts 7:2-4) and Abraham showed his initial faith by

²¹ I would encourage the consideration of Michael J. Gorman’s treatment of the nature of faith in his works *Cruciformity*, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God*, and *Becoming the Gospel*.

leaving not knowing where he was going (Hebrews 11:8-10; Gal. 3:6, 8; cf. Genesis 11:28-12:6).

- iii. Abraham was walking by faith in Genesis 12-14, but then God made a general statement about his faith in Genesis 15:6.
 - iv. Abraham was not circumcised until Genesis 17, and we see the fruition of his faith in Genesis 22.
 - v. This is Paul's argument regarding Abraham being the father of faith to the circumcised (Jews) and the uncircumcised (Gentiles) (Rom. 4:9-16, cf. Gen. 17:5, which references back to the original promise of Gen. 12:1-3).
 - vi. Genesis 15:6 is a general description of Abraham's faith which is reference in Romans 4:3, but Romans 4:20-21 parallels Genesis 21 and speaks of God's power to bring life from the "deadness of Sarah's womb."
 - vii. Paul's use of the story of Abraham illustrates a faith that "walks in the steps of Abraham" in trusting God's promises in obedience to experience life from the dead in the forgiveness of our sins (Rom. 5:1; Rom. 6:3-4).
 - viii. Interestingly, James connects the statement of Genesis 15:6 about Abraham's belief with his obedience in Genesis 22.
 - ix. Genesis 15:6 is a general statement that encompasses the whole of Abraham's life of faith – including his initial call (Gen. 12); trusting God (Gen. 21); offering Isaac (Gen. 22; cf. James 2:23).
- d. The Gospel Calls Us to a Working Faith (James 2:14-26)
- i. Paul and James do not contradict each other
 - ii. They both appeal to Abraham as an example of a surrendering and working faith.
 - iii. They both reference Gen. 15:6; cf. Rom.4:3; Gal. 3:6; James 2:23).
 - iv. They both see faith as an active, obedient faith (Rom. 1:5; 6:16; 16:26).
 - v. They both describe justification before God.

- vi. The only distinction is Paul says we are not saved by works and James says we are – they are using “works” differently
- e. Why the Difference?
 - i. The difference is not that Paul speaks of justification of the alien sinner and James speaks only of the Christian because James describes Abraham as a child of God and Rahab as an alien sinner.
 - ii. This is a denominational argument and is unbiblical.
 - iii. Whether we are considering the faith an alien sinner must have to be saved or the type of faith that a Christian is to have to be right with God – it is the same type of faith.
 - iv. In the same article he wrote that works “are not the prerequisite for salvation but the product” – this is a common Calvinistic argument (Matt Allen, Cornerstone, CC).
 - v. He went on to say that “works stand as tangible evidence of our faith...works are an expression, the evidence of the recreated life that plays itself out in a grateful response to what God has done...”
 - vi. Saving faith is working in obedience to the gospel and it is working as we remain faithful to the Lord.
 1. Is baptism tangible evidence of our faith and an expression of our faith? Yes!
 2. Are we spiritually alive prior to baptism? No (Rom. 6:3-4)
 3. The author would agree with me about the necessity of baptism but offering Calvinistic definitions of grace, faith, and works is leading to gross and a dangerous pathway of accepting error!
 4. The idea that there are no works prior to salvation is error.
 5. Paul is emphasizing that we are not saved by the works of the Law (Rom. 3:27; Gal. 3:10-14), Jewish boundary markers Rom. 2:28-29; 4:11), or sinless performance (Rom. 4:4-5), but we are saved by a working faith (Rom. 6:16; James 2:14-26).

- f. The term “works” must be defined by the context:
 - i. Law of works: Jewishness, circumcision, national pride, justification by keeping the Law without Jesus Christ
 - ii. Law of faith - gospel
 - 1. Faith is Believing, trusting, obeying, surrendering, loyal faithfulness.
 - iii. Is it true there are no works before salvation as some brethren are teaching?
 - 1. Is faith not a work (John 6:28-29), repentance (2 Pet. 3:9), confession (Rom. 10:9-10), baptism (Acts 2:38; 22:16).
 - 2. Acts 10:34-35 to a lost man: “I most certainly understand now that God not one to show partiality but in every nation the man who fears Him and works righteousness is welcome to Him.” [Working righteousness=believes, v. 43, and being baptized in the name of the Lord, 10:48].
 - 3. If “works” is always defined in one way and that is “obedience to a command” and there are no works prior to salvation, then that means there is no obedience to a command of God prior to salvation.
 - 4. Is that what the Bible teaches?
 - 5. A working faith is a prerequisite to salvation and continues to grow throughout our lives as Christians!
- g. The Gospel Calls Us to a Grace that Transforms (Romans 6:1-17)
- h. A shallow definition of grace is also quite dangerous and undermines the life we are to have in Christ.
 - i. Grace is not a license to sin (Rom. 6:1)
 - ii. The NT usage of grace includes reciprocity and response (Eph. 2:8)
 - iii. Conversion involves crucifixion and resurrection (6:4-6)
 - iv. Freedom from slavery occurs by grace (6:5-17)

- v. Obedience from the heart is necessary to be saved from our sin (Rom. 6:17).
- vi. Transformation is the heart of the gospel (Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 3:18; Gal. 4:19; 2 Pet. 1:4).

VIII. Methodologies of Advocates of Neo/Soft Calvinism

- a. Psychological and emotional framework:
 - i. Convince brethren any critique is unloving and unforgiving.
 - ii. Condescend to, mischaracterize, and dismiss faithful brethren from the past and in the present.
 - 1. In one breath one talks about “love and unity,” and in the next breath describes faithful brethren as “traditionalists,” “legalists,” “law-dogs,” “heartless,” “unloving,” “emotionless,” and as “Pharisees.”
 - 2. Build false narratives and constructs to insulate the unbiblical nature of teachings.
 - iii. Build dissatisfaction with the truth (1 John 2:19)
 - iv. False comparisons
 - v. Redefining biblical terms unbiblically
 - vi. Misrepresentations (“either – or” fallacies).
 - vii. Silent pulpits/elderships
 - 1. Spoken truth
 - 2. Unspoken truth
 - 3. Unspoken error
 - 4. Spoken error

IX. What Can the Faithful Do?

- a. Be discerning in the recognition of error and those who teach it
 - i. Make judgements based on teaching and practice
 - ii. Demand clarity and certainty in preaching and teaching
 - iii. Devote ourselves to well prepared and equipped proclamation of the gospel of Christ
- b. Don't be passive or inactive in teaching the truth and opposing error

- c. Don't compromise Biblical teaching
- d. Insist on repentance and change
- e. Be lovingly courageous
- f. Be kind, but firm; loving, but uncompromising
- g. Trust the power of the gospel