

“What is Calvinism?”

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What is Calvinism?

Despite the growing resurgence of Calvinism in many sectors of American Evangelicalism, there is still a wide breadth of ignorance as to what Calvinism really is and what it is about. I saw this demonstrated two weeks ago at the Southern Baptist Convention, when CEO and president of the Executive Committee, Dr. Morris Chapman, sought to maintain that the rise of Calvinism in the SBC is the rise of a denial in man’s personal responsibility in the matter of salvation. Now thankfully, many people have come out publicly to denounce Dr. Chapman’s “strawman” version of Calvinism - but nevertheless, it proves my initial point, that there really is an ignorance (whether willful or not) as to the truth about Calvinism.

With this said, I am going to devote my next several posts to answering the most commonly asked questions about Calvinism. Whether I convince the reader or not to become a Calvinist is not my primary goal in this endeavor. But rather, what I at least want to accomplish, is to bring greater light to the truth about Calvinism; so that hopefully there can be a little less ignorance.

The first and most important inquiry we need to raise is simply - what is Calvinism? Historically and theologically, Calvinism is the relentless, uncompromising expression of God (the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit) as the Creator of the universe and hence, the Sovereign and Sustainer of all things (Rom.11:36). Calvinism affirms then the biblical testimony that God is working all things according to the counsel of His will (Eph.1:11) and nothing can frustrate His plans nor undermine His purpose (Ps.33:10,11; Isa.46:10). Calvinism, in short, is God-centered. It therefore has, as its beginning and end, the glory of God as its highest concern and aim (I Cor.10:31). Thus the doctrine of God is the root principle of Calvinism. For this reason, J.I. Packer once described Calvinism as “a theocentric way of thinking about all life under the direction and control of God’s own Word...[it] is the theology of the Bible viewed from the perspective of the Bible - the God-centered outlook which sees the Creator as the source, and means, and end, of everything that is, both in nature and in grace.”

Now the outworking of Calvinism’s root principle (the doctrine of God) has been seen most in church history by what is called, “the doctrines of grace.” In fact, Calvinism has been called “the theology of grace”. It has always expressed by confession and proclamation the biblical revelation that God alone saves sinners (Jon.2:9). That is, the Triune-God - the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - working together in sovereign power, wisdom, love and mercy to accomplish the salvation of countless sinners; whom have been chosen for eternal glory to the praise of God’s grace and according to His good pleasure (Matt.11:27; Jn.6:37,44,65; Rom.8:28-30; 9:6-24; Eph.1:3-14). This understanding does not detract nor deny man’s responsibility to believe and repent when hearing the gospel, but it explains why he ever would - it is only by God’s grace alone!

Why is Calvinism called “Calvinism”?

The term “Calvinism” is historically derived from the name of John Calvin (1509-1564) who was one of the pillar influences of the Protestant Reformation during the 16th century. Calvin was a pastor, theologian, writer, and religious reformer who had formulated many biblical doctrines into a clear and concise system of understanding. This systematization was published in Calvin’s classic work called *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, which became his magnum opus of Reformation Christianity. Through this book and many other publications, along with his massive correspondence, he gained a wide adherence from his ministry base in Geneva, Switzerland.

Calvin’s teachings however were not new. His expositions on God’s sovereignty, human depravity, and the necessity of effectual grace had actually come to clear expression in the work of Augustine of Hippo (354-530 AD). Furthermore, his teachings on justification by faith alone and the bondage of the human will to sin, were already well explained in the works of Martin Luther (1483-1546). What therefore made the significant difference in Calvin’s influence, was that he was the first Christian theologian to bring together biblical doctrines recovered during the Reformation into a helpful system of thought. In other words, John Calvin helped the Church to “connect the dots” of biblical truth in one coherent order. Thus, the biblical teachings of the Protestant Reformation have been given the nickname, “Calvinism.”

Therefore, those Christians who call themselves “Calvinists” are not strictly and solely following the teachings of John Calvin. I myself am a Calvinist, but I do not agree with Calvin’s position on baptism nor even do I agree completely with his church polity. Nevertheless, I am a Calvinist. And the reason I am a Calvinist is because I embrace those doctrines of God’s Word which Luther, Calvin, and the rest of the Protestant Reformers so ably expounded. Calvinism then goes far

beyond the man, John Calvin. Instead, it is nothing short of biblical Christianity, with the accent falling heavily on the truth of God's sovereignty.

Commenting on the name Calvinism, Baptist preacher and staunch Calvinist, Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892) once observed: We only use the term "Calvinism" for shortness. That doctrine which is called "Calvinism" did not spring from Calvin; we believe that it sprang from the great founder of all truth. Perhaps Calvin himself derived it mainly from the writings of Augustine. Augustine obtained his views, without doubt, through the Spirit of God, from diligent study of the writings of Paul, and Paul received them of the Holy Spirit, from Jesus Christ the great founder of the Christian dispensation. We use the term then, not because we impute extraordinary importance to Calvin's having taught these doctrines. We would be just as willing to call them by any other name, if we could find one which would be better understood, and which on the whole would be as consistent with fact.

What are the "Five Points of Calvinism"?

The so-called "five points of Calvinism" were the historical response of the Dutch Reformed Church to a movement within their ranks which was seeking to change their confessions on the doctrine of salvation. This movement called themselves Arminians after the Dutch theologian named, Jacob Arminius (1560-1609); who had been reared in Calvinism but came to reject it in favor of the humanist teachings of the 16th century philosopher, Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536). What Arminius believed and taught was that man has a "free will" to choose Christ, and on that basis God would save him. In other words, it was man's will that determined his salvation rather than God's will. God simply responded to whatever man's will chose to do. So then, for Arminius, man's will was sovereign in salvation and thus divided the credit between himself and God for reaching heaven.

But the essence of Arminius' teaching was simply a regurgitation of an old heresy from the fifth century called "Semi-Pelagianism." The basic principles behind this belief, that would be strongly followed by Arminius' followers, is explained well Dr. J.I. Packer:

"The theology which it contained stemmed from two philosophical principles: first, that divine sovereignty is not compatible with human freedom, nor therefore with human responsibility; second, that ability limits obligation. (The charge of semi-Pelagianism was thus fully justified.) From these principles, the Arminians drew two deductions: first, that since the Bible regards faith as a free and responsible human act, it cannot be caused by God, but it is exercised independently of Him; second, that since the Bible regards faith as obligatory on the part of all who hear the gospel, ability to believe must be universal."

So then, based on their Semi-Pelagian principles, the Arminians argued that the doctrine of salvation must be interpreted by the following positions which they formulated into five points. The five points of Arminianism are as follows:

1. Free will or human ability. Although human nature was seriously affected by the Fall, man has not been left in a state of total spiritual helplessness. God graciously enables every sinner to repent and believe, but He does so in such a manner as not to interfere with man's freedom. Each sinner possesses a free will, and his eternal destiny depends on how he uses it.

2. Conditional election. God's choice of certain individuals for salvation before the foundation of the world was based upon foreseeing that they would respond to His call. He selected only those whom He knew would of themselves freely believe the gospel. Election therefore was determined by, or conditioned upon, what man would do. The faith which God foresaw, and upon which He based His choice, was not given to the sinner by God (it was not created by the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit), but resulted solely from man's will. It was left entirely up to man to determine who would be elected for salvation. God chose those whom He knew would, of their own free will, choose Christ. Thus, the sinner's choice of Christ, not God's choice of the sinner, is the ultimate cause of salvation.

3. Universal redemption or General atonement. Christ's redeeming work made it possible for everyone to be saved, but did not actually secure the salvation of anyone. Although Christ died for all men and for every man, only those who believe in Him are saved. His death enabled God to pardon sinners in the condition that they believe, but it did not actually put away anyone's sins. Christ's redemption becomes effective only if man chooses to accept it.

4. The Holy Spirit can be effectually resisted. The Spirit calls inwardly all those who are called outwardly by the gospel invitation; He does all that He can to bring every sinner to salvation. But inasmuch as man is free, he can successfully resist the Spirit's call. The Spirit cannot regenerate the sinner until he believes; faith (which is man's contribution) precedes and makes possible the new birth. Thus, man's free will limits the Spirit in the application of Christ's saving work. The Holy Spirit can only draw to Christ those who allow Him to have His way with them. Until the sinner responds, the Spirit cannot give life. God's grace, therefore, is not invincible; it can be, and often is, resisted and thwarted by man.

5. Falling from grace. Those who believe and are truly saved can lose their salvation by failing to keep up their faith, etc. All Arminians have not been agreed on this point; some have held that believers are eternally secure in Christ - that

once a sinner is regenerated, he can never be lost (The citations of the “five points of Arminianism” is cited from Steele, Thomas, and Quinn’s book, *The Five Points of Calvinism: Defined, Defended, and Documented*; pgs. 5-8).

So, to summarize these five positions taken by the Arminians, we can say this: “According to Arminianism, salvation is accomplished through the combined efforts of God (who takes the initiative) and man (who must respond) - man’s response being the determining factor. God has provided salvation for everyone, but His provision becomes effective only for those who, of their own free will, choose to cooperate with Him and accept His offer of grace. At the crucial point, man’s will plays a decisive role; thus, man, not God, determines who will be the recipients of the gift of salvation” (Ibid., p.8).

Now once the Arminians had written their “five points”, they called on the Dutch Reformed Church to embrace them in place of their confessional Calvinism. So in 1618, a National Synod of the church was convened in the city of Dort to examine the Arminian doctrines in light of God’s Word. After 154 earnest sessions, which lasted seven months, the Five Points of Arminianism were found to contradict the Scriptures and declared heretical. The reason they were denounced as heresy is because at the core of Arminianism is the belief (as already mentioned) that man’s salvation depends ultimately on man. Salvation then is no longer the sole work of God’s mercy and grace, but a work of man getting himself saved.

In response therefore to the Arminians, the Dutch Reformed Church reaffirmed the position held by the Protestant Reformers as consistent with God’s Word. They formulated what would be known as The Five Points of Calvinism. And over the years the studied reply of the Synod of Dort to the errors of Arminianism has been set forth in the form of an acrostic spelling out the word TULIP.

Thus the Five Points of Calvinism are as follows:

1. T - total depravity: Because of the Fall, man is unable of himself to savingly believe the gospel. The sinner is dead, blind, and deaf to the things of God; his heart is deceitful and desperately corrupt. His will is not free; it is in bondage to his evil nature. Therefore, he will not - indeed, he cannot - choose good over evil in the spiritual realm. Consequently, it takes much more than the Spirit’s assistance to bring a sinner to Christ. It takes regeneration, by which the Spirit makes the sinner alive and gives him a new nature. Faith is not something man contributes to salvation, but is itself a part of God’s gift of salvation. It is God’s gift to the sinner, not the sinner’s gift to God.

2. U - unconditional election: God’s choice of certain individuals for salvation before the foundation of the world rested solely in His own sovereign will. His choice of particular sinners was not based on any foreseen responses or obedience on their part, such as faith, repentance, etc. On the contrary, God gives faith and repentance to each individual whom He selected. These acts are the result, not the cause, of God’s choice. Election, therefore, was not determined by, or conditioned upon, any virtuous quality or act foreseen in man. Those whom God sovereignly elected He brings through the power of the Spirit to a willing acceptance of Christ. Thus, God’s choice of the sinner, not the sinner’s choice of Christ, is the ultimate cause of salvation.

3. L - limited atonement (or particular redemption): Christ’s redeeming work was intended to save the elect only and actually secured salvation for them. His death was a substitutionary endurance of the penalty of sin in the place of certain specified sinners. In addition to putting away the sins of His people, Christ’s redemption secured everything necessary for their salvation, including faith, which unites them to Him. The gift of faith is infallibly applied by the Spirit to all for whom Christ died, thereby guaranteeing their salvation.

4. I - irresistible grace (or the efficacious call of the Spirit): In addition to the outward general call to salvation, which is made to everyone who hears the gospel, the Holy Spirit extends to the elect a special inward call that inevitably brings them to salvation. The external call (which is made to all without distinction) can be, and often is, rejected. However, the internal call (which is made only to the elect) cannot be rejected; it always results in conversion. By means of this special call, the Spirit irresistibly draws sinners to Christ. He is not limited in His work of applying salvation by man’s will, nor is He dependent upon man’s cooperation for success. The Spirit graciously causes the elect sinner to cooperate, to believe, to repent, to come freely and willingly to Christ. God’s grace, therefore, is invincible; it never fails to result in the salvation of those whom it is extended.

5. P - perseverance of the saints: All who are chosen by God, redeemed by Christ, and given faith by the Spirit, are eternally saved. They are kept in faith by the power of almighty God, and thus persevere to the end (Ibid., pgs. 5-8).

Now the one great point that each of these “five points” are teaching is the biblical truth which declares: God ALONE saves sinners (Jon.2:9). From first to last it is the Triune God - the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit - who are saving sinners. Hence, the Five Points of Calvinism have been better called, “the doctrines of grace”. For it is only by God’s grace that any sinner is saved, excluding all efforts and boasting on the sinner’s part to take credit for being redeemed.

Observing therefore the key differences between the Five Points of Arminianism and the Five Points of Calvinism, consider as a final musing what Dr. J.I. Packer wrote: “Here are two coherent interpretations of the biblical gospel, which stand in evident opposition to each other. The difference between them is not primarily one of emphasis, but of content.

One proclaims a God who saves (Calvinism); the other speaks of a God Who enables man to save himself (Arminianism). One view presents the three great acts of the Holy Trinity for the recovering of lost mankind - election by the Father, redemption by the Son, calling by the Spirit - as directed towards the same persons, and as securing their salvation infallibly. The other view gives each act a different reference (the objects of redemption being all mankind, of calling those who hear the gospel, and of election, those hearers who respond), and denies that any man's salvation is secured by any of them. The two theologies thus conceive the plan of salvation in quite different terms.

One makes salvation depend on the work of God, the other on a work of man; one regards faith as part of God's gift of salvation, the other as man's own contribution to salvation; one gives all the glory of saving believers to God, the other divides the praise between God, Who, so to speak, built the machinery of salvation, and man, who by believing operated it. Plainly, these differences are important, and the permanent value of the 'five points', as a summary of Calvinism, is that they make clear the points at which, and the extent to which, these two conceptions are at variance."

What is the biblical support for the Five Points of Calvinism?

The most critical question regarding the five points of Calvinism is if these so-called "points" are biblical. I will say from the outset that they in fact are biblical - and it is because they are biblical that in every discussion or debate that I have engaged in over these doctrines, all I have ever needed for support is the Bible. I don't need to turn to John Calvin or the Synod of Dort nor even to my favorite Calvinists like Owen, Spurgeon, Edwards, Whitefield, and Lloyd-Jones. If someone asks me to show why I believe the five points of Calvinism, I simply open up God's Word and begin.

So in this post it is my aim to show the biblical support for the five points of Calvinism (or what I prefer to call them, "the doctrines of grace"). I will not be exhaustive here, just concise enough to prove that these doctrines are not the concoctions of man's ideas. If you would like to read a more comprehensive treatment though, of how the doctrines of grace are simply the straight teaching of Scripture - I would suggest two wonderful books: *The Five Points of Calvinism: Defined, Defended, and Documented*, by David Steele, Curtis Thomas, and Lance Quinn; published by P&R; and *The Foundations of Grace*, by Steven J. Lawson; published by Reformation Trust. Both of these books are extremely helpful and illuminating for the Christian who sincerely is seeking to know if the Bible does in fact teach these things. I personally count them as the very best in their field.

But for now, let me at least point out some pertinent passages of God's Word which show clearly that the five points of Calvinism are first and foremost the doctrines of the Bible. For total depravity, there is Jeremiah 17:9 which declares that "the heart of man is desperately wicked, and deceitful above all things." There is also Mark 7:20-23, where Jesus teaches that everything that is evil and thus "defiles a person" comes from within his own heart. In John 3:19-20, we are told that a sinner "does not come to the light [Christ]" because they "hate the light" and "love the darkness." And finally, in Romans 3:9-18 and Ephesians 2:1-3, the world as a whole is denounced as being "under sin" which is expounded as being unrighteous, having no spiritual understanding, never seeking after God in a saving way, worthless, unable to do anything good by God's standard, dead to God, in bondage to sin, worldly, devilish, fleshly, and seated under the wrath of God by nature.

For unconditional election, there is John 6:37, where Jesus tells us that "all the Father gives me will come to me." In Matthew 11:27, Christ declared that "no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." There is also Ephesians 1:4 and II Thessalonians 2:13 which plainly say that God "chose us" for salvation "before the foundation of the world." And in Romans 9:11-16 we are told that the basis upon which God did chose to save us did not depend upon "human will or exertion" but it was solely grounded in God's sovereign mercy alone. Moreover, God's choosing to save us is the only reason that we ever came to believe on Christ, according to Acts 13:48 and Romans 8:30.

For limited atonement or particular redemption, Matthew 1:21 pronounces that Jesus shall "save his people from their sins." And in John 10:15, Jesus claims that He lays down His life only for His "sheep." Moreover, in Acts 20:28 and Ephesians 5:25, it is clearly stated that Christ gave His life for "the church." Also, there is Hebrews 2:9-17, where we're told that Jesus tasted "death for everyone", and then the "everyone" is qualified as "the many sons" God is bringing to glory (v.10); those who are being "sanctified" (v.11); those who are called Christ's "brothers" (vv.11-12) and "the children God has given [to Christ] (v.13)"; they are also identified as "the offspring of Abraham" and "the people" for whom Jesus has made propitiation for their sins (vv.16-17). The point is, the "everyone" of Hebrews 2:9 cannot be isolated from its context which identifies who the everyone are - they are not everyone without exception, but a particular people whom God is bringing to glory, sanctifying, described as Christ's brothers and His children, the seed of Abraham, and a people who have had the wrath of God removed from them through the death of Christ. Such a people can only be Christians. Jesus did not die for anyone who would be lost in hell.

For irresistible grace or effectual calling, John 3:3-8 teaches that unless one is "born of the Spirit" he cannot see nor enter the kingdom of God. In John 6:44,65, Jesus makes it quite plain that no one can come to Him unless God the Father

has “drawn” them and “granted” them the grace to come. And finally, in Ephesians 2:8-9 and II Timothy 2:25 we are taught that “faith” and “repentance” are both gifts which God grants to the sinner whom He chooses to save.

Lastly, for the perseverance of the saints, in John 6:39 Jesus promises that all those His Father has given Him, He shall lose none but raise them up on the last day. In John 10:27-29, Jesus reassures His sheep that none will perish nor be plucked out of His hand; in Romans 8:28-39, all of God’s elect shall never be separated from God’s love for them in Christ, but all things shall work together for their good and thus they can be certain that they will be glorified in the end.

As I said, these examples or proofs for the biblical support of the five points of Calvinism would not be exhaustive - but I hope that it is enough to at least provoke a careful study and consideration of these doctrines. As a Calvinist, all I need is the Bible to show why I believe what I believe regarding the sovereign grace of God in salvation. I do not claim this with arrogance but simply with a confidence in what God says in His word concerning why anyone is saved. Thus, for any fellow believer who has sincere and honest questions about the doctrines of grace, let me challenge you as I was challenged 20 years ago: go to the Scriptures and see what God Himself has said. The Bible is our final authority for everything we believe and practice as Christians. If the five points of Calvinism are not biblical then I don’t want anything to do with them (and neither should you!). But to prove that, we must explain what the Bible means about the myriad of passages which clearly point to the fact that we are saved by the sovereign grace of God alone.

What does Calvinism teach about “free will”?

Calvinism has never denied that man has the freedom to choose, but it has been very careful to clarify the precise limits of that freedom. And what Calvinism has stressed most of all about man’s freedom of choice, is that our ability to choose cannot go beyond our nature. Therefore, since man is born with a sinful nature (cf. Psa.51:5; 58:3; Jer.17:9; Rom.5:12) his natural choices will never be in favor of God but in rejection of God (Psa.10:3-4). So then, when a sinner hears the gospel he cannot understand it but thinks it to be foolish (see I Cor.1:18; 2:14); furthermore, because his heart is corrupted by sin, his desires are as well - which is why Jesus taught that sinners “hate the light” and will not come to the light because they “love the darkness” (Jn.3:19-20). And out of that love for the darkness comes a rebellion and resistance against God and His way of salvation in Christ.

Thus, if a sinner is left to himself to make the choice to follow Christ, he will renounce Christ everytime. It is not in man as a sinner to want Christ to save him. His desires and ability are both enslaved to his sinful nature, and are therefore bound to oppose God as a way of life. This is why the Bible declares as a matter of fact concerning all sinners apart from God’s grace in Christ: “...there is none who seeks for God” (Rom.3:11). This one statement in the context of Romans 3:9-18, is stating that man in his sinfulness has not one single inclination to seek God as his God and Savior. In fact, based upon the meaning of the verb “seeks” (Greek: ekzeteo), Romans 3:11 is saying that in the nature of every sinner there does not exist a searching, longing, inquiring, craving, and seeking drive to want God in a saving way. This does not mean that man has no freedom to choose, but again, his free choices are totally limited by the natural bent of his nature. And if his nature is sinful (which it is!) then he cannot and will not choose to come to Christ for salvation, left to himself.

This is why Jesus made it so plain in John 6:44, that “no one can (Greek: dunamis - “power or ability”) come to me, unless the Father draws (Greek: elkuo - “take possession of”) him.” Think carefully about what this verse is saying: no sinner has the ability to come to Christ unless God takes supernatural possession of him and brings him savingly to Christ. But this possession is not coercion. God is not forcing the sinner to come against his will. Rather, by giving the sinner a new nature through the new birth (Ezk.36:26; Jn.3:1-8; II Cor.5:17), he comes to Christ willingly and freely as he is enabled by the Holy Spirit (cf. Jn.6:63). This truth is expressed in the most comprehensive way in Chapter Ten of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith:

“At a time appointed by and acceptable to God, those whom God has predestinated to life are effectually called by His Word and Spirit out of the state of death in which they are by nature, to grace and salvation by Jesus Christ. Their minds are given spiritual enlightenment and, as those who are being saved, they begin to understand the things of God. God takes away their heart of stone and gives them a heart of flesh. He renews their will, and by His almighty power He sets them to seek and follow that which is good, at the same time effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ. And to all these changes they come most freely, for they are made willing by divine grace.”

This therefore is Calvinism’s position on the idea of “free will”: man has the natural ability and desire to choose many things, but because he is by nature a sinner, he cannot make the righteous and spiritual choice to trust Christ to save him. He is morally and spiritually unable and unwilling to exercise his will towards Christ. The great gospel evangelist and Calvinist, George Whitefield (1714-1770), summed up the Calvinist doctrine on free will best when he said: “Man has a free will to go to hell but none to go to heaven, till God works in him to will and do for His good pleasure.”

Does Calvinism kill missions and evangelism?

In nearly every discussion or debate that I have engaged in over Calvinism, it never fails that this question will surface as either a sincere inquiry or an objection to dispute the truth of Calvinism. But this question is raised due to a misunderstanding on two different fronts: First, there is an historic perversion of Calvinism called Hyper-Calvinism, which goes beyond the bounds of Scripture concerning God's sovereignty and man's depravity. It reasons that since God has already chosen who will be saved and since men do not have the ability to believe the gospel and repent, there is therefore no point in promoting evangelism and missions. This view is solely based on fallen human reasoning rather than the divine revelation of God's Word. The "Hyper-Calvinist" grasps the truth of man's depravity and the truth that God will save only His elect, but he wrongly deduces that there is no necessity therefore to preach the gospel to all sinners and to engage in efforts to reach the lost. His "logic" in going beyond the Scriptures brings him into an unbiblical position where he ceases to see the necessity and divine command of using God-ordained "means" to produce the God-ordained goals. What is so sad about the Hyper-Calvinist is that he loses all zeal and compassion for reaching the lost, and even justifies himself for his anti-evangelistic attitude. But combined with this sad commentary, is that when most people in the church today (especially Baptist churches) hear about Calvinism, they rarely think of evangelical Calvinism but only of hyper-Calvinism.

The second contributor to believing the error that Calvinism kills evangelism, is that for many Christians in our day, they cannot accept the doctrine of God's sovereign election being a means of motivation for reaching the lost. Most Christians seem to reason like the Hyper-Calvinist when it comes to election and predestination: if God has already chosen who will be saved then why evangelize? For such people, their reasoning causes them to reject God's election of sinners for salvation in favor of a man-centered view of salvation and missions. In other words, they take the biblical truth of man's responsibility to believe and repent, along with the church's mission to reach the lost, but go beyond the bounds of Scripture denying God's sovereignty and thus turning salvation into an act determined totally by man's will. Hence, they end up being driven by a carnal dependence on methods to save sinners rather than looking to God's grace and power as man's only hope. This way of thinking is of course the classic position of Arminianism.

But the position of historic evangelical Calvinism embraces without reservation the biblical teaching, that God has chosen to save a people for Himself out of every nation of Adam's fallen race (see Jn.6:37; 10:15,16,26; Acts 13:48; 15:14; Rom.9:14-24; Rev.5:9; 7:9); and God has also chosen the work of evangelism and missions to call His elect to their appointed salvation (see Rom.10:13-17; I Thess.1:4,5; cf. Acts 13:48). Taking therefore these two truths together, the Calvinist reasons biblically: since the preaching of the gospel is God's chosen instrument to bring His elect home, then every Christian should be enflamed with a zeal and compassion to evangelize all men, because the church is assured by God that their labors will never be in vain (see I Cor.1:18-24; 3:5-7; 15:58).

So then, election and predestination do not kill evangelism but guarantee its success. "All the Father gives me," Jesus declared, "will come to me" (Jn.6:37). None of the elect will be lost. All whom the Father has given to His Son to save will be saved. It's certain. It's sure. It's guaranteed. Thus, when we obey Christ's command to go and preach the gospel to all people everywhere - we are not pursuing a mission that will fail. The success rate in evangelism is always 100% because all of God's elect will come to faith in Christ. And this is how historic evangelical Calvinism has always reasoned from the Scriptures. Missions and evangelism is not rejected because of God's election but embraced because of God's election. Thus, true Calvinism (not Hyper-Calvinism) will never kill evangelism and missions, but in fact will be its greatest defender and mobilizer.

And the history of the church bears out this testimony. For the greatest and most sacrificial evangelists and missionaries were all staunch, evangelical Calvinists. Just to name a few: there was Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) the famed preacher and pastor of New England during the 18th century revival in Colonial America; also David Brainerd (1718-1747) who was a missionary to the unreached native American Indians in southern New England; and of course, George Whitefield (1714-1770) who has been hailed as "the greatest evangelist since the Apostle Paul"; then there was William Carey (1761-1834), English Baptist minister and "the Father of Modern Missions", who labored for forty years in India; also Andrew Fuller (1754-1815), who worked hard in the support of foreign missions, and gave special assistance to William Carey; Henry Martyn (1781-1812) was a missionary to India who translated the New Testament in Persian; Adoniram Judson (1788-1850) was the first Baptist foreign missionary from America, who went to Burma, India; Luther Rice (1783-1836) was a pioneer in organizing the Triennial Convention, which was the first official mission agency and board for all Baptists in America; Charles H. Spurgeon (1834-1892) pastored in London, England for thirty-seven years and was a diligent evangelist who saw under God's blessing a church grow to over 5,000 members, with 82% being brought in by conversion to Christ; John G. Paton (1824-1905) labored many years as a missionary to the New Hebrides in the South Pacific; and finally, there was Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899-1981) who faithfully pastored Westminster Chapel in London, England for thirty-years, holding every Sunday evening "evangelistic services", where he preached the gospel and saw many conversions over those long years. But the most important truth and fact about all these men, is that none of them ever lacked for passion and labor in preaching the gospel to the lost, yet they were all convinced that God had elected to save a people for Himself, and only the elect will be saved.

Calvinism's Most Controversial Doctrine: Part One

There is no doubt that the most controversial and hotly debated doctrine of Calvinism is the doctrine of reprobation. I will also add that this doctrine is the most slandered of any teaching within Reformed theology. Sadly, for many Christians, they will not even entertain a discussion about it. The moment they hear that God has not chosen to save everyone, they immediately cry out: "Unfair! Unjust!" They cannot stomach the idea that God's election to salvation is not determined for all people without exception.

But what's most important for us as Christians, is not what we think but what does the Bible actually teach about these things. Remember: the very term "Calvinism" is simply an historic nickname for biblical Christianity. So, when we talk about this doctrine called "reprobation", we are talking about a teaching of God's Word as opposed to a teaching of John Calvin. Calvin believed in the doctrine of reprobation only because he saw it in the pages of God's Word. Therefore, what is mandatory for our discussion of this doctrine should always be: does the Bible teach it?

Now to begin with, I believe it is important that we start with a definition of reprobation. What is the teaching of this doctrine? Reprobation is the name given to God's eternal decision regarding those sinners whom He has not chosen to save. The essence of His decision is NOT to change them but to leave them in their sin (which is the desire of their sinful hearts), and to finally judge them as they deserve for what they have done in their sin. This is the truth of reprobation. It is God's sovereign eternal decree to pass over sinners by not choosing to save them and thus leaving them to receive the condemnation they deserve for their sins.

What must be clarified about this doctrine is that it differs in a very important way from the truth of election. And that difference can be best understood by exposing a common misunderstanding about reprobation. There is a false view of reprobation which goes by the name of "equal ultimacy". The best and simplest explanation of this view I have ever read comes from R.C. Sproul, in his book *Chosen by God*. Sproul wrote:

"Equal ultimacy is based on a concept of symmetry. It seeks a complete balance between election and reprobation. The key idea is this: just as God intervenes in the lives of the elect to create faith in their hearts, so God equally intervenes in the lives of the reprobate to create or work unbelief in their hearts."

In other words, the basic idea behind "equal ultimacy" is that God determines the destinies of the elect and non-elect in exactly the same way. In the same way God creates faith in the elect to believe on Christ, He also creates unbelief in the non-elect to reject Christ. So when it comes to those whom God chooses not to save, according to equal ultimacy, God has consigned them to hell apart from anything they have done and thus apart from anything they deserve. Instead, it is God who has created in them the sin that will drive them to hell.

Needless to say, this is a very scary doctrine! It is a doctrine which paints a view of God to be some cruel, cold ogre who arbitrarily chooses to send people to hell. It is also a doctrine which makes God the author of sin. Suffice to say, the equal ultimacy view of reprobation is a patently false heretical doctrine! The truth about reprobation is this: when it comes to those whom God chooses not to save, God leaves them to themselves. He passes over them. He does not create unbelief in their hearts. That unbelief is already there. Nor does God coerce them to sin. They sin by their own choices. What God does is to pull back His restraints on the non-elect whereby they continue down a path of sin; which is already the path their own hearts have chosen.

Now understanding this, what makes the difference between election and reprobation? In the act of election, God actively intervenes in the hearts of those sinners He has chosen to save. He does not leave them to the judgment of their own sinful choices. Rather, God creates faith and repentance in the hearts of all His elect so that they will come to Christ and lay hold of Him as their Savior and follow Him as their Lord.

But for those whom God has not chosen to save - He simply does nothing with them but leaves them in their sin. He withholds His special grace that would bring them to salvation by giving them over to the full intentions of their sinful nature which is always to rebel against God. So then, with the elect they receive what they don't deserve (salvation) and with the non-elect they receive what they do deserve (judgment for their sin). And this is the ultimate difference between election and reprobation.

As a footnote to all of this, let me make an important clarification. Those who hold to the aforementioned "equal ultimacy" view of reprobation are historically called "Hyper-Calvinists". The reason I make this clarification is because those Christians who are Evangelical Calvinists usually get accused for holding to the Hyper-Calvinist view of reprobation. But let me be as plain as I can on this matter: those who are true Calvinists and are thus Evangelical Calvinists have never held to the view of equal ultimacy! Evangelical Calvinists believe in the doctrine of reprobation - but only as it is taught in the Bible as God's righteous judgment of sinners He chooses not to save. In my next post, I will look at the doctrine of reprobation as expounded from the Bible itself.

Calvinism's Most Controversial Doctrine: Part Two

In my last post I simply defined and made clarifications as to the doctrine of reprobation. But in this present article, I want to actually show this truth as it is expounded from God's Word. Specifically, the classic biblical text is in Romans 9:17-18, which says: "For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, 'For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.' So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills."

As we begin considering these two verses, the first thing we must see is that they are an exact parallel to what Paul has written in verses 15-16 of this same chapter. In those verses, Paul illustrates the sovereignty of God's mercy from Moses, and then draws his conclusion that God's purpose of election does not depend on man's choices or efforts but on God's will to show mercy. But now, here in verses 17-18, Paul is illustrating the negative side to God's sovereign action over sinners - namely - His right NOT to save. And his illustration is in the case of Pharaoh.

What Paul is seeking to prove by the historical example of Pharaoh, is God's sovereign determination to pass over sinners He leaves to perish in their sins for the manifestation of His divine justice. Pharaoh is the great historical representation of all reprobates who will eventually face the full expression of God's wrath for their sin.

Now the particular passage Paul cites to establish this is Exodus 9:16. In the original context of this verse, God is sending Moses back to Pharaoh following the first six plagues which God has already sent upon Egypt. The message Moses is giving to Pharaoh in this passage, is to put this powerful Egyptian monarch on notice - that although God could have destroyed him with all of Egypt from the start; yet, God has spared him for one purpose. Pharaoh's life is preserved by God to show forth God's power in judgment on sinners, and thus glorify the name of the Lord.

To fully appreciate what Moses said to Pharaoh on this occasion, let me quote from verses 15-16 together in Exodus 9: "For by now I could have struck you and your people with pestilence, and you would have been cut off from the earth. But for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth."

The most important term in this whole passage are the words, "I have raised you up..." What did God mean by that? These words quoted in Romans 9:17 come from a Greek verb that carries the idea of "bringing forward" or "lifting up", and was used of the rise of historical figures to positions of prominence. In this context therefore, God is making it known to Pharaoh that he has been brought upon the scene of history to display the power of God's judgment on sinners.

Now in the light of this, how does Paul explain what happened to Pharaoh - and for that matter, how does Paul explain what happens to all sinners whom God chooses not to save? The answer to this question takes us directly to verse 18: "So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills." This verse is obviously a conclusion. It is a conclusion to what Paul has stated in verse 17 - but it is also a conclusion to Paul's entire answer to the objection set forth back in verse 14. And we could go one step further: verse 18 even sums up what Paul was explaining back in verses 7-13.

You see, what Romans 9:18 is stating with one broad stroke of the brush, as it were, is how God deals with all people in every generation of history. In every generation of history there are those on whom God has mercy and then there are those He hardens. Or to say it another way: God chooses to save some while He passes over others. And Paul has been giving us historical examples of each. There is Isaac, Jacob, and Moses who represent those on whom God shows mercy (see 9:7-15). But then, there is Ishmael, Esau, and Pharaoh who represent those whom God hardens (9:7-13,17). These are the reprobate, the non-elect.

Now seeing verse 18 from this broad context, let's come in a little closer and go back to our leading question: how does Paul explain what happened to Pharaoh and all sinners God chooses not to save? In other words, what is God's action toward the reprobate? Romans 9:18 says that God hardens them. What does this mean? The word translated hardens is the Greek verb *skleruno* which means literally to "make hard", and metaphorically "to render stubborn and obstinate."

In the account of Pharaoh in the book of Exodus, we are told ten times that God hardened Pharaoh's heart (Ex.4:21; 7:3; 9:12; 10:1,20,27; 11:10; 14:4,8). And in a few places we are also told that Pharaoh hardened his own heart (Ex.7:13; 8:32; 9:34). But the predominant testimony of Scripture is God hardening the heart of Pharaoh. What are we to make of this? How are we to explain this? To begin with, we must remember that Pharaoh was already a sinner with an evil disposition bent on rebelling against God. This was Pharaoh's natural inclination (see Jer.17:9). God therefore did not make Pharaoh sin nor did He create in Pharaoh a heart of unbelief. Pharaoh was a natural born unbelieving sinner - which is why he could harden his own heart.

For God therefore to harden Pharaoh's heart was simply to aggravate the unbelief that was already there. How did God do this? He pulled away the restraints of His common grace which were holding Pharaoh back from further evil and wickedness. To put this in the terms of Romans 1:24,26,28 - God gave Pharaoh up to his own sin. In other words, God made the decision to remove His restraining influences; while the wicked part of this process was carried out by Pharaoh himself. Understand this: God did no violence to Pharaoh's will. He just simply gave Pharaoh up to the sinful desires of his own will. This is how God hardens sinners! Listen to how R.C. Sproul explained this:

All that God has to do to harden people's hearts is to remove the restraints. He gives them a longer leash. Rather than restricting their human freedom, he increases it. He lets them have their own way. In a sense he gives them enough rope to

hang themselves. It is not that God puts his hand on them to create fresh evil in their hearts; he merely removes his holy hand of restraint from them and lets them do their own will.

So what God did with Pharaoh and what He did with Esau and Ishmael (cf. 9:7-13) - and what He has purposed to do with all those He has chosen not to save, is to give them their heart's desire: that is, to resist and rebel against God all their days. This is how God hardens the non-elect. This is what God does in the act of reprobation. He leaves sinners to their own sinful desires which will eventually drive them to self-destruction and condemnation under the holy wrath and judgment of God.

But of course, the greatest point in all of this from Romans 9:17-18 is that God has every right to treat sinners in this way. God is fully justified to have mercy on whomever he wills, and to harden whomever he wills. You cannot say in either case that God is being unfair. On those He shows mercy He is giving them what they don't deserve; and on those He hardens He is giving them exactly what they do deserve. Neither sinner is being treated unfairly or unjustly. God is therefore free to save whoever He chooses to save and He is under no obligation to save anyone - because all have sinned and have come short of His glory (see Rom.3:9-18; cf. v.23). So then, whoever God chooses to pass over in judgment cannot charge God with injustice. In my next and final post on reprobation, I will answer the question: why would it be useful for me to know this doctrine?

Calvinism's Most Controversial Doctrine: Part Three

It might be very hard for many Christians to believe that a doctrine like reprobation would have any application at all to them. But we must remember what we are told in II Timothy 3:16 about the Word of God as a whole: "All Scripture...is profitable." So with that affirmation we have to ask ourselves: how does the doctrine of reprobation serve me as a Christian? Why would it be useful for me to know this doctrine? I will answer these questions in three different ways:

1. Reprobation teaches us that we too would have suffered eternal punishment had not God stepped in to save us. May we understand this once and for all: left to ourselves, we are no better than any other sinner. What we all deserve is the hardening of God that I covered in my last post from Romans 9:17-18. And this should be the first great truth that grips us about this doctrine. God could have and He should have passed over me. And due to this fact, every Christian should say with George Whitefield (1714-1770) whenever we see or consider the lost state of many men and women in this world: "There but for the grace of God go I." The doctrine of reprobation therefore, if understood properly, should drive us to such thankfulness to God and utter humility before all people everywhere. Had God not stepped in and saved us, we would all face what we actually deserve - eternal punishment for our sins.

2. Reprobation keeps before us the all-important truth that salvation is entirely of grace and that no works of man contribute to it. First of all, the doctrine of reprobation gives us a graphic and terrible picture of what man will do if left to his own will bound up in his sinful nature. He will not seek God (Rom.3:11). He will not have any saving affection for Jesus Christ.

In fact, what we need to understand very clearly - is that there is no such thing as someone who is knocking on the door of heaven trying to get in, but God is turning them away because He has not chosen to save them. We need to get that picture completely out of our minds. Why? Because there is no such person who exists! Those whom God has chosen not to save He leaves to their own will which is always heading for sin and hell. And what we need to remember is that this is true of everyone in the world - therefore if anyone is saved, it will not be determined by anything man chooses or what man does (Rom.9:16; cf. Jn.15:16; Eph.2:8-9). Salvation is entirely of God's sovereign will and grace! And the doctrine of reprobation keeps this before us, because it reminds us that God chooses to save us based on His mercy and not on our merits. "So, it (that is, God's purpose of election: cf. Rom.9:11) does not depend on human will or exertion but on God, who shows mercy" (Rom.9:16).

3. Reprobation helps us to see the glory of God in His justice. In the same way that the doctrine of election glorifies God in His mercy - reprobation glorifies God in His justice. By this doctrine, we are given a greater and more clearer picture of who God is. He is more than loving, kind, good, and gracious. But God is holy, righteous, and just. Therefore, when He chooses to harden sinners, and thus leave them in their sin to receive the condemnation they deserve for their sin - by this action, God is magnifying the glory of His justice. In fact, it is for this great purpose (magnifying God's justice) that the reprobate will serve for all eternity. The reprobate in hell will show forth the glory and rightness of God's justice against sin.

So, the doctrine of reprobation is very useful and profitable for every Christian. It reminds us of God's sovereign and free grace in saving us. It also reminds us of God's holiness and justice against sin. And it truly humbles us and keeps us from looking down our noses at other sinners. We are no better than anyone else. "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Rom.3:23). It is only God's grace in Jesus Christ that has made any of us to differ. But when we think about reprobation, I believe our ultimate application comes from the wise words of Dr. J.I. Packer, when he wrote:

“The reprobates are faceless so far as Christians are concerned, and it is not for us to try to identify them. Rather, we should live in the light of the certainty that anyone may be saved if he or she will but repent and put faith in Christ. We should view all persons that we meet as possibly being numbered among the elect.” Amen.

What are the benefits of Calvinism?

For the past nine posts I have written, my aim has been to answer the most common questions raised about the theology of Calvinism. I trust that the answers given have been helpful. I at least hope that whatever misconceptions may have been lingering in one’s mind over Calvinism, have been taken away by these previous articles. Even if I have not convinced you of the truth of Calvinism, maybe when you think about it, there will not be the typical strawman version which is so common in our day. To say this another way, if you’re going to disagree with Calvinism, at least disagree with what it really teaches and not a false idea you have about it.

Now for my closing post in this series, I simply want to give a list of eleven reasons that historic evangelical Calvinism is beneficial to the health and progress of Christians, both as individuals and collectively as the church. I will give no commentary to each of the points, but simply let them stand as sufficient statements to declare why every Christian who wears the label of a Calvinist has no shame in this badge of biblical theology.

1. Calvinism promotes the glory of God above all things and humbles the sinner.
2. Calvinism promotes the sovereignty of God over all things and humbles the sinner.
3. Calvinism upholds the authority, sufficiency, inerrancy, and infallibility of God’s Word as what alone should be preached and determine all that we believe about God, man, salvation, the world, sin, etc.
4. Calvinism engenders a passion for personal holiness and godliness.
5. Calvinism spreads a passion for God-centered worship.
6. Calvinism spreads a passion for Christ-exalting evangelism.
7. Calvinism motivates a Christian’s life to self-denial, cross-bearing, and Christ-following.
8. Calvinism enlarges the heart to trust and depend on God for all things at all times.
9. Calvinism gives a God-centered view of the world as under His control and all events being worked out according to His sovereign plan.
10. Calvinism creates a greater hunger and thirst to know God and love Him for who He is.
11. Calvinism glories in the grace of God through the work of Christ by the power of the Spirit as the only true reason any sinner is saved.