

## A BRIEF DEFINITION OF CALVINISM

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One of the oft-repeated commands God gave to the Israelites during their early history as a people was stated simply to remember (Deut 6:1-15, 8:1-20); to remember him, to remember his words, to recall his many great deeds, and to be careful that their entire lives were shaped in every detail by their accurate, consistent, obedient remembrances. Biblical history amply recounts many examples of Israel's failure in this regard, and the disastrous consequences that were reaped as a result. Failure to remember God and his words was an immeasurable offense as well as tragedy, and this truth is one that has continued to resound with deep relevance throughout history and into our own day.

As we remember the great servant of God, John Calvin, we primarily remember a man who through his life, his scholarship and his ministry thundered boldly in the midst of a church and in the midst of a cultural context which had largely forgotten the true words of God.<sup>2</sup> He sought to remind those who had ears to hear that the Almighty God had spoken, and that his words were to be heeded in all corners of public and private life. He was not seeking to invent a new system, or to create a new teaching—but to restate clearly what God had already said, and to apply it probingly to the minds and hearts of the individuals (and the institutions) of his place and time. History tells us that John Calvin was to a great degree quite successful in this undertaking, in that his teachings were heard and accepted by many.<sup>3</sup> As a result it is difficult to quantify the impact that this man's call to remember had on the path that history was to take concerning not only the church, but also Western society as a whole.<sup>4</sup>

If Calvin's doctrine and its practical implications (hereafter simply Calvinism) are in fact synonymous with Biblicism (which Calvinists assert), it is the writer's conviction that the people of God in our day and the culture at large also stand in need of this cry to remembrance, and would do well to visit and to revisit often what this great theologian has to say to us about the character, works and words of God. To that end this essay will attempt to cursorily define the system commonly known as Calvinism, then briefly expound its main tenets, and thirdly propose several ways in which Calvinistic doctrine impacts practical life in both the public and private sectors.

To begin, "Calvinism" represents different things in the minds of different people. For some, the term denotes simply what is contained in the writings of John Calvin himself, primarily as expressed in his final edition of *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, his expansive biblical commentary, and his other treatises on various subjects and pieces of correspondence. To others, Calvinism is primarily to be understood as the doctrinal system espoused by those who deem themselves the "Reformed" churches in distinction from

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<sup>2</sup> Cairns, Earle E., *Christianity Through the Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 272-274.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 300-305.

<sup>4</sup> Shelly, Bruce L., *Church History in Plain Language* (Nashville: Nelson, 1995), 260-262.

Lutheranism, Anabaptism, and other progeny of what might be loosely grouped together under the term “Protestant.” This generally coherent doctrinal system (though certainly not entirely uniform in every detail), as expressed in various Reformed formulas and confessions, is primarily acknowledged to have been derived from the teachings of John Calvin. Perhaps its most general (and most well known) formulation was composed at the Synod of Dort in 1618, in response to the Five Points of Arminianism derived from the teachings of Jacobus Arminius and his followers. A third and perhaps the most broad definition of Calvinism, according to B. B. Warfield, is “the entire body of conceptions, theological, ethical, philosophical, social, political, which, under the influence of the master mind of John Calvin, raised itself to dominance in the Protestant lands of the post-Reformation age, and has left a permanent mark not only upon the thought of mankind, but upon the life-history of men, the social order of civilized peoples, and even the political organization of States.”<sup>5</sup> Obviously there is great overlap among these three definitions; however, for sake of clarity and for the purpose of this article, Calvinism will be defined in accordance with the second definition given above, most popularly known as TULIP, the “Five Points of Calvinism,” or the doctrines of grace. We will briefly define and expound these points and then trace some of the practical implications of these basic Calvinistic propositions.

It is perhaps most important to begin with an overarching construct consisting of the Calvinist’s acknowledgment of the centrality of the immensity of the glory and absolute sovereignty of God. B. B. Warfield can be quoted as saying that at its most basic, “Calvinism is that sight of the majesty of God that pervades all of life and all of experience.”<sup>6</sup> To quote at greater length, according to Warfield, Calvinism is

a profound apprehension of God in His majesty, with the poignant realization which inevitably accompanies this apprehension, of the relation sustained to God by the creature. The Calvinist is the man who has seen God, and who, having seen God in His glory, is filled on the one hand with a sense of his own unworthiness to stand in God’s sight as a creature, and much more as a sinner, and on the other hand, with adoring wonder that nevertheless this God is a God who receives sinners. He who believes in God without reserve and is determined that God shall be God to him in all his thinking, feeling, and willing—in the entire compass of his life activities, intellectual, moral and spiritual—throughout all his individual social and religious relations, is, by force of that strictest of all logic which presides over the outworking of principles into thought and life, by the very necessity of the case, a Calvinist.”<sup>7</sup>

This grand vision of the absolute majesty of God, which was so crucial to the experience of John Calvin (as well as Jonathan Edwards and other great Calvinists), rightly lays the foundation for the rest of the system—not only in a philosophical sense, but in a practical and experiential sense as well.<sup>8</sup> Following from this commitment to seeing, understanding and seeking to reveal the

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<sup>5</sup> Warfield, B. B., “Calvinism,” Johann Jakob Herzog, Philip Schaff, Albert Hauck, eds., *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, 1:359.

<sup>6</sup> Warfield, B.B., *Calvin as a Theologian and Calvinism Today*, quoted in A. N. Martin, *The Practical Implications of Calvinism* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1979), 4.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries*, 302-303.

glory of God, the following “Five Points of Calvinism” can be elaborated within their greater context as they deal primarily with God, his relationship to man, and what is necessary for man’s salvation.

### ***Point 1: Total Depravity***

This doctrine answers the question, “Why and from what does man need to be saved?” Total depravity is the biblical assertion that when man fell into sin in the Garden of Eden, the disastrous effects were total, meaning that they extended into every facet of creation and into every facet of man himself—mind, body, spirit and will. As a result, man in his natural state is now spiritually dead, is bound helplessly by the Devil and by sin, is incapable of comprehending the things of the Spirit of God, is corrupt in his very nature and is given over perpetually to sin in his thoughts, attitudes and behavior (Rom 5:12; Eph 2:1-3; 2 Tim 2:25; 1 Cor 2:14; Ps 51:5; Rom 6:15-23; 7:21-24; Gen 6:5). As one who is spiritually dead, man is worthy only of eternal damnation (Rom 3:23), and because he is absolutely dead, he is completely unable even to open his eyes or to turn his head towards God—much less muster up faith, love or worship to him, just as a physically dead man is unable to open his eyes or to turn his head. For this reason, man must be brought back to life, “born again,” regenerated—he can in no way save himself, prepare himself for salvation, or cause himself to believe. This must be an act of Almighty God, the Creator of all things, he who raises the dead, the only one whose words make what is from what was not (Jer 13:23; Eph 2:4-10). Because of the extent to which our sin has completely incapacitated us, salvation must be truly of the Lord, from beginning to end (Ps 3:8; Jonah 2:9; Rev 7:10).

### ***Point 2: Unconditional Election***

Unconditional election answers the question, “On what basis is man saved?” This doctrine teaches that those whom God delivers from sin and death, he does so according to his good pleasure alone, in accordance with his will as held from eternity past, not on the basis of any good thing in any man (as all are totally depraved and worthy of eternal damnation), or because of any foreknown faith or good works that would be performed at some point in life. God’s choosing of individuals to be saved is his own sovereign prerogative, and serves to magnify his absolute sovereignty in choosing whom he will and in passing over whom he will.

This doctrine illuminates the immeasurable bounty of his kindness and grace that chooses to give life to some who deserve only death. This doctrine also stands firmly against any form of self-righteousness in any man who would want to attribute any goodness to himself or make any presumptuous claim on the mercy of God, as though he had any boast to make before the Almighty King. God’s election serves his purposes and is for the sake of his glory, and therefore leaves man with no response other than awe and wonder toward God, and gratitude for his completely underserved kindness (Deut 7:7, Luke 4:25-27, John 15:6, Rom 9, Eph 1:4-5).

### ***Point 3: Limited Atonement***

The doctrine of limited atonement answers the question, “Who exactly is to be saved?” This doctrine teaches that the atoning work of Christ at the cross made full and perfect satisfaction for the sins of the elect (those whom God had chosen in eternity) only, not for all men in general or for no man in particular, which is essentially no man at all. On one end of the spectrum lie the Universalists, who claim that Christ died to save all men, and therefore, all men will be saved. This we know to be biblically untenable in that all men are not saved (Matt 7:13-14), and therefore it is nonsensical to believe that the efficacy of the atonement extends to all men.

Arminians stand in the middle saying that Christ died for no one in particular, but potentially for anyone who will believe or ‘decide for’ Christ, at which moment of faith the atonement becomes efficacious to the new believer. This, of course, is inconsistent with both the biblical doctrines of total depravity and unconditional election, in that a spiritually dead man cannot ‘decide for Christ’ and therefore apply redemption to himself, as well as the fact that salvation is of God alone on the basis of his sovereign election only and not on man’s choosing when he would like to be saved. This makes a mockery of the biblical teaching regarding God’s sovereignty, essentially makes man more powerful than God in his own salvation. In the Bible it is clear that Christ died to save “his people,” “his sheep,” and gave himself up for the church specifically and not for mankind in general (Eph 1:4; John 17:9; Matt 26:28; Eph 5:25; Rom 4:25; Isa 53:11; John 6:37). The price that Jesus paid will be ineffectual in no sense. Every man whom Christ paid for will be saved, and they only.

### ***Point 4: Irresistible Grace***

The doctrine of irresistible grace is perhaps most simply explained by Rom 8:29, which states, “Those whom he predestined he also called.” God not only elects or chooses men in eternity past, he also effects the means by which their salvation is made efficacious by applying his grace to them through his call. The central question that is answered by this doctrine is, “Is God’s plan ever thwarted?” Biblically speaking, the answer is a resounding “NO,” and this applies to the salvation of men as much as to anything. If God has purposed to save a man, and has elected him from the foundations of eternity, then it follows unavoidably that that man will receive God’s call and his grace, and will be saved by it. In other words, man’s will cannot ultimately overpower God’s will, as God is sovereign, and man is not (John 6:37; 6:44-45; Rom 8:14; Gal 1:15; 1 Pet 5:10).

### ***Point 5: Perseverance of the Saints***

The doctrine of the perseverance of the saints (stated in other words by some as “the Perseverance of God”) conveys the idea that those whom God saves can never lose their salvation, but will persevere to the end by the grace of God. Again this doctrine speaks to the immutability and absolute sovereign power of God, which cannot be thwarted by man in any way. Man cannot wriggle himself free from the grasp of the Almighty, and God himself in his

faithfulness provides all that is needed for his children to be sustained, protected, and nurtured toward maturity in Christ to the very end. They will not be cast off, or wander off on their own, but ultimately will be brought to the purpose that God has decreed for them. Again, Rom 8:29 is instructive: “And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.” We see that there is a progression that is rooted in the sovereign decree of God. Those whom he chooses will be glorified, and neither the will of man nor the assault of the enemy will ever be able to undermine his sovereign will (Phil 1:6; John 6:39; 10:28; Rom 5:10; 8:1, 28-39).

By way of conclusion, the above doctrines lead to several implications. On both the levels of biblical and systematic theology, the “Five Points of Calvinism” are well documented and supported both textually and logically. However, beyond theological formulation at an abstract level, lies the urgent need of the church and the world today to appropriate in understanding and in practice the full weight of these propositions.

Today’s culture is opposed to the idea of a God who has supreme power and who rightfully demands unwavering loyalty from man, and is bent on a view of mankind that exalts his self-determination and the weight of his own right to have no master but himself. In this culture and church that continue to lose their bearings and give in to idolatry the basic tenets of Calvinism sound a clarion call. In a world and in a church where the understanding of the heinousness of sin has all but disappeared, the doctrine of total depravity calls us to remember the wages of sin and the degree to which each of us in every facet of our being has been infected and stands under the sentence of death. In a context where our self-confidence and the fashioning of God in our own likeness has all but eliminated awareness of the fact that we cannot save ourselves no matter how positively we think, or how morally we attempt to live, Calvinism clearly presents the unmerited favor of God for sinners, and the unfolding plan of the Almighty God that cannot be thwarted by any power or principality, be it man or the Devil himself. In a world that wonders what the truth is, or what the purpose of life is—hopelessly resigned to an unknown fate, Calvinism stretches forth the gracious revelation of God himself unto the knowledge of the highest end man could ever comprehend, to know, to enjoy, and to glorify God both now and forever.

Calvinism certainly has its consequences, and failure to remember the words, works and character of God as set forth in the Scripture and taught by Calvinism also has dire consequences, many of which are sadly visible in the world and in the church today. May God continue to raise up more and more men who, like John Calvin, will boldly and clearly call people to remember—to remember their God, to remember his character, his works and his words; and might the course of history be set on a new trajectory, to the glory and praise of God.