

Calvinism

Simply Explained and Biblically Evaluated

G. Michael Cocoris

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INTRODUCTION

Anyone who has been around an evangelical church for any length of time has heard about Calvinism. When they hear that word, they think of “predestination” and/or “eternal security.” While it is true that Calvinism teaches predestination and that a genuinely regenerated person can never be lost, theologically, it is much, much more than that. Calvinism is a *theological system* concerning the doctrine of salvation.

What is the theological system called Calvinism? You would think that, given the fact that the system is named after John Calvin, Calvinism is nothing more than his teachings. Granted, much of what is called Calvinism can be found in the writings of John Calvin, but what is commonly called Calvinism today goes beyond what Calvin taught. The *theological system* called Calvinism was formalized after Calvin died. To complicate matters, those who talk about Calvinism often distinguish between various schools of thought within Calvinism. They use such titles as Moderate Calvinism, Hyper-Calvinism, Five-Point Calvinism, Four Point Calvinism, etc.

In this study, the term “Calvinism” is used of the *theological system* formalized and finalized after John Calvin died. It is known as the Canons of Dort or Five-Point Calvinism. Boettner, the great defender of Calvinism, says, “The Calvinistic system emphasizes five distinct doctrines. These are technically known as the five points of Calvinism” (Boettner, p. 59). Some authors call Five-Point Calvinism Hyper-Calvinism (Aldrich, p. 248), but historically Hyper-Calvinism is different than Five-Point Calvinism. Historic Hyper-Calvinism (and moderate Calvinism) will be defined later.

The first purpose of this presentation is to simply explain *the theological system* called Calvinism. The second purpose is to biblically evaluate each of the five points of Calvinism. The major biblical passages used to support Calvinism will be examined. The list of the passages examined is not exhaustive.

I have considered myself a Calvinist. The thesis of my first sermon was “Faith alone saves, but the faith that saves is not alone.” That is the fifth point of Calvinism (the Perseverance of the Saints). At one point in my life, I would have said I was a Four Point Calvinist (I have never accepted Limited Atonement), but at the time, without being aware of it, I strongly believed things that contradicted the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints, the fifth point of Calvinism I once preached. Over time, the more I understood what Calvinism really teaches, the more I slowly began to change my mind about it, but I never took the time to think through the issues of Calvinism. That changed in June 2012 when I received a phone call from a dear friend and fellow pastor, Dave Drummond. He was working through a series of messages on Calvinism and wanted to bounce a few ideas off me. That conversation provoked me to read about and think through each of the five points of Calvinism. This presentation contains my conclusions.

I wish to thank Teresa Rogers for proofreading this material.

May this study clarify the issues in Calvinism and thus enable you to think through them for yourself.

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BACKGROUND

Before Calvinism is explained and evaluated, its historical development needs to be surveyed. The roots of what is called Calvinism go back to the fifth century, but to put what happened in the fifth century in historical perspective, it is necessary to take a look at church history prior to the fifth century. In his book, *Chosen But Free*, Norm Geisler records what seventeen Church Fathers from the second to the fifth century said about free will (Geisler, pp. 145-154). Here are a few samples.

Justin Martyr (100-165 AD) wrote, “God, wishing men and angels to follow His will, resolved to create them free to do righteousness ... So if they repent, all who wish for it can obtain mercy from God” (Justin Martyr, *Dialogue*, CXLI).

Irenaeus (130-200) wrote, “God made man a free (agent) from the beginning, possessing his own soul to obey the behests of God voluntarily and not by (the) compulsion of God ... And in man as well as and angels, he has placed the power of choice” (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, XXXVII).

Tertullian (155-225) wrote, “Man was by God constituted free, master of his own will and power, indicating the presence of God’s image and likeness in him by nothing so well as by his constitution of his nature ... Man is free with a will even for obedience or resistance” (Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 2.5).

Origen (185-254) wrote, “This also is clearly defined in the teachings of the church that every rational soul is possessed of free will and volition” (*De Principiis*, preface). “There are indeed innumerable passages of Scripture which establish with exceeding clearness the existence of freedom of the will” (*De Principiis*, 3.1).

Jerome (ca. 347-420) wrote, “We have been created, endowed with free will; still it is not this which distinguishes us from the brutes. For human will, as I said, depends upon the help of God and needs His aid moment by moment” (Jerome, *Letters*, 133).

As is apparent from these quotations, as well as the others listed by Geisler, the early church assumed that people have a free will. There was no discussion about the theological ramifications of the Fall of Mankind and sin. “The extent of sin and the consequences of the fall were not fully discussed before the Pelagius-Augustine controversy in the fifth century” (Schaff, vol. II, p. 246).

Pelagius

About 400, Pelagius (ca. 360-ca. 420), a British monk, came to Rome. He believed that each person is a separate creation of God, uncontaminated by the sin of Adam. In other words, people are *not* born with a sin nature. Therefore, everyone has the power to choose good or evil. The universality of sin is explained by the weakness of human flesh rather than by the corruption of the human will by original sin (Cairns, p. 137).

About that time, the eminent North African bishop Augustine wrote a book, *Confessions*. In it, he prayed: “Give what You command: command what You will.” Pelagius protested. He felt people had sufficient free will to perform their duty, and they should exert themselves to do so (Latourette, p. 180). He blamed Rome’s moral laxity on Augustine’s doctrine of grace.

What has become known as Pelagianism is the rejection of the concept of original sin (Adam's sin does not affect human nature; it was merely a bad example) and the belief that people have the ability to choose between good and evil by their own efforts.

Augustine

In his early writings, Augustine (354-430) believed in free will. He wrote, "In fact, sin is so much a voluntary evil that it is not sin at all unless it is voluntary" (Augustine, *Of True Religion*, 14, written in 390). "Will is itself the first cause of sin" (Augustine, *On Free Will*, 3.49, written in 388-95). "Free will, naturally assigned by the creator to our rational souls, is such a neutral power, as can either incline toward faith or turn toward unbelief" (Augustine, *On the Spirit and the Letter*, 58, written in 412). "To yield our consent, indeed, to God's summons, or to withhold it, is (as I have said) the function of our will" (Augustine, *On the Spirit and the Letter*, 58, written in 412).

Then, in reaction to Pelagius, Augustine taught that Adam's sin affected the whole human race because Adam was the head of the race. As a result of the Fall of Adam, all human beings inherit sin. That is only the beginning. There is much more.

Augustine believed in Total Depravity, but for him, that meant people do not have a free will. He wrote, "When man by his own free will sinned, then sin became victorious over him, the freedom of his will was lost" (*Enchiridion*, 30, written in 421). Augustine even concluded that people did not have the ability to believe. He said, "Lest man should ever give to themselves the merit of their own faith at least, not understanding that this too is the gift of God, the same apostle, who said in another place that he had 'obtained mercy of the Lord to be faithful,' here also adds: 'and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast'" (*Enchiridion*, 32, written in 421). Notice that Augustine used Ephesians 2:8 to prove that God gives people faith.

Augustine taught Double Predestination: "As the supreme good, he made good use of evil deeds, for the damnation of those whom he has justly predestinated to punishment and for the salvation of those whom he has mercifully predestinated to grace" (*Enchiridion*, 100, written in 421).

Augustine believed in Irresistible Grace: "Great indeed is the help of the grace of God, so that he turns our hearts in whatever direction he pleases" (Augustine, *On the Grace of Christ*, 24, written in 418). Speaking about those who claimed that people had the freedom to believe or not believe, Augustine said, "Toward whom did Christ use violence? Whom did He compel? Here we have the apostle Paul. Let them recognize in his case, Christ first compelled and afterward teaching; first striking, and afterward consoling" (Augustine, *On the Correction of the Donatists*, 6.22-23, written in 417). Augustine was willing to say that God forces people by violence to be converted!

Augustine also believed in the Perseverance of the Saints. In his view, God gives the gift of perseverance so that even though saints sin, they will repent. "Eventually, those to whom perseverance has been assigned will not be able to sin" (Latourette, p. 179).

To sum up: Augustine believed in Total Depravity, defined as man's inability to believe, Double Predestination, Irresistible Grace, and the Perseverance of the Saints (Latourette, p. 178). Furthermore, "No one can here certainly know, so Augustine taught, whether he is among the elect" (Latourette, p. 179).

What made Augustine change his mind? Cairns makes the interesting observation that before his conversion, Augustine had found his will helpless to extricate him from the morass of sin in which he found himself because of his sinful nature (see also Latourette, p. 177). Pelagius, however, a “cool, calm individual, had known nothing of the struggle of soul through which Augustine had gone before he was saved. Hence, Pelagius was more willing to give the human will a place in the process of salvation” (Cairns, p. 137).

Geisler has a different explanation. He claims that Augustine’s later theology fits his long-held belief in infant baptismal regeneration (baptizing people as babies so they will go to heaven). In other words, infants could be regenerated apart from their free choice. Geisler also points to the controversy that Augustine had with the Donatists, during which Augustine affirmed that heretics could be coerced to believe against their will (Geisler, p. 162).

The Donatists were a splinter group from the mainline church at the time. They had a high regard for the Scripture; they believed in the Trinity and the deity of Christ. Augustine’s problem with them was that they were not part of the universal church. He wanted the state to use force to bring them back into the fold!

The Donatists argued that the civil authorities should not interfere with the dispute in the church. Augustine wrote a letter (*Of the Correction of the Donatists*) to Boniface, a government official in Africa, insisting that the state should use force against the Donatists. He argued that civil law was a form of divine discipline. According to Augustine, the Donatists acted violently against Catholics, seizing property, burning homes, and extracting extortionate protection payments. This, he argued, further demonstrated that it was appropriate for the civil authorities to step in and suppress the Donatists. In answer to their argument that true faith cannot be compelled by force, Augustine points to the discipline of children and servants in the book of Proverbs, Paul being compelled by force on the Damascus Road, and Jesus as a shepherd who tames a sheep who will not respond to tender encouragement by using a whip. He concluded that the church, and by extension civil authorities who acknowledge the church, are empowered to compel heretics to return to the fold.

In 418, a synod in Carthage came out against Pelagianism and in 431, the Council of Ephesus condemned it (Latourette, p. 180), but “neither the Eastern nor the Western churches ever fully accepted Augustine’s views” (Cairns, p. 138).

Augustinism is the idea that since people are totally depraved and unable to exercise their own will to be saved, God predestinated some to salvation (and some to damnation), regenerates them, and gives them the gifts of faith and perseverance.

John Cassian

John Cassian (ca. 360-ca. 435), a monk from the Middle East, proposed a compromise position by which the human will and the divine will cooperate in salvation. He taught that humans are sinful because of the Fall and that their wills are weakened but not totally corrupted. Therefore, people can cooperate with grace in the process of salvation (Cairns, p. 138). He declared that God wanted all, not merely some, to be saved.

“The view of Cassian was condemned at the Synod of Orange in 529 in favor of a moderate Augustinian view” (Cairns, p. 138). At the same time, it also condemned the teaching that some are predestined to evil. It did speak of people being totally depraved by

Adam's sin. It said that because of sin, free will is so inclined and weakened that "no one is able to love God as he ought, or believe in God, or do anything for God which is good, except the grace of divine mercy comes first to him."

Semi-Pelagianism teaches that people are sinners, but not to the extent that they cannot cooperate with God's grace. This cooperation is not by human effort as in keeping the Law, but rather in the ability of a person to make a free will choice. People can make the first move toward God by seeking God. It is, in essence, partial depravity as opposed to total depravity.

Pelagius	No depravity. (People have the ability to obey God and thus secure their salvation.)
Augustine	Total depravity. (This is the doctrine of inability; people do not have the ability to respond to God's truth or believe.)
Cassian	Partial depravity. (People can take the first step toward salvation and they can cooperate with God; they have the ability to respond to the work of the Holy Spirit.)

John Calvin

The influential French theologian and pastor John Calvin (1509-64) wrote the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, a systematic theology, and commentaries on many of the books of the Bible. It is commonly recognized that Calvin believed in Total Depravity, Double Predestination (that is, that God ordained some to salvation and some to damnation), Irresistible Grace, and the Perseverance of the Saints. Calvin himself, again and again, pays tribute to the work of Augustine and points out that what he is saying has been said before him by Augustine. In the *Institutes* alone, he quotes Augustine over 400 times (Vance p. 104). Indeed, Calvinism is often called Augustinianism.

What is not commonly known is that Calvin did not believe in Limited Atonement. Actually, there is a debate about whether or not John Calvin himself believed in Limited or Unlimited Atonement. Since Limited Atonement is one of the five points of Calvinism, it is reasonable to assume that if Calvin believed in Limited Atonement, he would have explained and expounded upon it in his *Institutes*. He did not. In fact, it has been said, "There is too little evidence in the *Institutes* to reach a conclusion on the extent of the atonement" (Peterson, cited by Vance, p. 467). The next most logical place to look would be Calvin's commentaries. The evidence from his commentaries is as follows.

Isaiah 53:12 "He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors." Calvin wrote, "He (Christ) alone bore the punishment of many because on him was laid the guilt of the whole world. It is evident from other passages, and especially from the fifth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, that 'many' sometimes denotes 'all.'"

Matthew 20:28 "Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." Calvin said, "The word many is not put definitely for a fixed number, but for a large number; for he contrasts himself with all others. And in this sense, it is used in Romans 5:15, where Paul does not speak of any part of men, but embraces the whole human race."

Mark 14:24 “And He said to them, ‘This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many.’” Calvin says, “By the word many he means not a part of the world only, but the whole human race.”

John 1:29 “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” Calvin said, “When he (John the Baptist) says, ‘the sin of the World,’ he extends this favor indiscriminately to the whole human race.”

John 3:16 “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” Calvin said, “He has employed the universal term whosoever, both to invite all indiscriminately to partake of life, and to cut off every excuse from unbelievers. Such is also the import of the term world, which he formerly used; for though nothing will be found in the world that is worthy of the favor of God, yet he shows himself to be reconciled to the whole world, when he invites all men without exception to the faith of Christ, which is nothing else than an entrance into life.”

Other passages from Calvin’s commentaries could be cited to demonstrate he believed in an Unlimited Atonement (Rom. 5:15; Gal. 5:12; Heb. 9:28). The problem is what he said in his commentary on 1 John 2:2.

1 John 2:2 “And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.” Calvin said, “He added this for the sake of amplifying, in order that the faithful might be assured that the expiation made by Christ extends to all who by faith embrace the gospel. Here a question may be raised, how have the sins of the whole world been expiated? I pass by the dotages of the fanatics, who under this pretense extend salvation to all the reprobate and therefore to Satan himself. Such a monstrous thing deserves no refutation. They who seek to avoid this absurdity have said that Christ suffered sufficiently for the whole world but efficiently only for the elect. This solution has commonly prevailed in the schools. Though then I allow that what has been said is true, yet I deny that it is suitable to this passage; for the design of John was no other than to make this benefit common to the whole Church. Then under the word all or whole, he does not include the reprobate, but designates those who should believe as well as those who were then scattered through various parts of the world. For then is really made evident, as it is meet, the grace of Christ, when it is declared to be the only true salvation of the world.”

There is evidence that can be gleaned from some of Calvin’s other writings (*A Treatise on The Eternal Predestination of God*, his reply to Georgius Siculus, and his tract on the Lord’s Supper against Tilleman Heshusius) that seems to suggest he believed in Unlimited Atonement. Then there is a remark he made on his deathbed: “I testify also and declare but I suppliantly beg of him, that he may be pleased so to wash and purify me in the blood which my Sovereign Redeemer has shed for the sins of the human race.” Some translations of Calvin’s dying words, however, read “shed for us poor sinners.” Also, Calvin wrote a point-by-point refutation of the Council of Trent, but when he came to the statement that Christ died for all men, he stated that he had no comment.

So, what is the conclusion? Calvin made statements that seem to suggest he believed in Unlimited Atonement, but he also made a few statements that seem to indicate he believed in Limited Atonement. R. T. Kendall, who wrote a Ph.D. dissertation at Oxford University later published under the title *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649*, concluded that Calvin did not believe in Limited Atonement. In the first chapter of his book, he opens with this statement: “Fundamental to the doctrine of faith in John Calvin (1509-64) is his

belief that Christ died indiscriminately for all men” (Kendall, p. 13). M. Charles Bell wrote a doctoral dissertation at Edinburgh University, later published under the title *Calvin and Scottish Theology*. After analyzing the passages where Calvin seems to be saying he supported Limited Atonement, Bell concluded, “It is quite clear that Calvin taught a doctrine of universal atonement” (Bell, p. 17; see pp.15-17 for his explanation of the few passages that seem to be saying that Calvin believed in Limited Atonement).

The one thing this disagreement demonstrates is that Calvin (who died in 1564) did not formalize the *system of theology* called Five-Point Calvinism; it was not formalized and finalized until the Synod of Dort. Vance says, “No creed written before or just after Calvin’s death either expressly affirms or denies Limited Atonement” (Vance, p. 460). He goes on to say, “It is only after the Arminian controversy that we find the extent of the Atonement addressed in the creeds of Calvinism. The Canons of Dort (1619) and the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) expressly affirm the doctrine of Limited Atonement” (Vance, p. 460).

Theodore Beza

Theodore Beza (1519-1605) succeeded John Calvin in Geneva. Like Calvin, he believed in Double Predestination, etc., but he changed Calvin’s methodology and also some of his theology. These changes profoundly impacted what later became known as Calvinism.

As for methodology, Beza is responsible for Aristotelian philosophy being the basis of logic and moral philosophy in the curriculum taught at Geneva. It is well known that he refused Peter Ramus a teaching post because of his anti-Aristotelian views (Armstrong, p. 38). Beza elevated reason and Aristotelian logic to a position equal to that of faith in theological epistemology (that is, how we know what we know about God) (Armstrong, p. 39). For Calvin, theology must be an echo of the biblical text without adding anything to it. He did not try to harmonize all the elements of his teaching, nor did he allow speculative remarks regarding God’s hidden purposes (Armstrong, p. 33-34).

Beza departed from Calvin’s theology. In a documented, scholarly study of Beza, Walter Kickel gives the evidence that Beza’s whole theological program was a serious departure from that of Calvin. For example, Calvin did not discuss the doctrine of predestination until he had expounded all of the other doctrines of salvation. Kickel found that Beza, on the other hand, made the doctrine of predestination the centerpiece of his theology. In his theology, the place of the Trinity, the two natures of Christ (He is both God and man), and justification are determined by the doctrine of predestination (Armstrong, p. 41). “It makes the most profound difference whether one approaches theology via predestination or simply discusses the doctrine as an implicate from grace” (Armstrong, p. 40). Also, based on Aristotelian logic, Beza rationalized Calvin’s doctrine of predestination. “By doing this, his doctrine became singularly rational and free of contradiction. It took on the character of a unified, scientific system” (Kickel, cited by Armstrong, p. 40).

Beza also introduced the doctrines of supralapsarianism (speculation concerning the decree of God in eternity past that leads to Double Predestination; it will be explained in more detail later). Imputed sin (Adam’s sin is imputed directly on every individual), and Limited Atonement (Armstrong, p. 41-42).

After the last Apostle died ca. 95 AD, the church believed in Unlimited Atonement. Here are a few examples:

Clement of Alexandria (150-220): “Christ freely brings ... salvation to the whole human race.”

Eusebius (260-340): “It was needful that the Lamb of God should be offered for the other lambs whose nature He assumed, even for the whole human race.”

Athanasius (293-373): “Christ the son of God, having assumed a body like ours, because we were all exposed to death [which takes in more than the elect], gave Himself up to death for us all as a sacrifice to His Father.”

Basil (330-379): “But one thing was found that was equivalent to all men...the holy and precious blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, which He poured out for us all.”

Ambrose (340-407): “Christ suffered for all, rose again for all. But if anyone does not believe in Christ, he deprives himself of that general benefit.” He also said, “Christ came for the salvation of all, and undertook the redemption of all, inasmuch as He brought a remedy by which all might escape, although there are many who...are unwilling to be healed.”

Augustine (354-430): “The Redeemer came and gave the price, shed His blood, and bought the world. Do you ask what He bought? See what He gave, and find what He bought. The blood of Christ is the price: what is of so great worth? What, but the whole world? What, but all nations?” He also stated, “The blood of Christ was shed for the remission of all sins.”

Some Calvinists claim Augustine believed in Limited Atonement, but there are clear statements in Augustine’s writings, such as the one just cited, that support the claim that he believed in Unlimited Atonement. Prosper of Aquitaine (ca. 390-ca. 463), a disciple and defender of Augustine, said, “As far as relates to the magnitude and virtue of the price, and to the one cause of the human race, the blood of Christ is the redemption of the whole world: but those who pass through this life without the faith of Christ, and the sacrament of regeneration, do not partake of the redemption.” He also said, “The Savior is most rightly said to have been crucified for the redemption of the whole world.”

Martin Luther (1483-1546): “Christ has taken away the sins, not of certain men only, but also of you, yea, of the whole world.... Not only my sins and yours, but also the sins of the whole world.”

Beza, however, taught Limited Atonement (Kendall, p. 210). The introduction of the doctrine of Limited Atonement has profound ramifications concerning the assurance of salvation. If Christ died only for the elect and did not die for everyone, the issue becomes, “How do I know that I am one of the elect for whom Christ died?” I can no longer say, “I know Christ died for me because He died for all and I am trusting in what He did and, therefore, I can know I’m saved.”

Kendall put it like this: “We have no pledge, as it were, that we are elect for we have no way of knowing whether we are one of those for whom Christ died. Had Christ died for all we could freely know we are elected, but Beza has told us Christ died for the elect. This makes trusting Christ presumptuous, if not dangerous: we could be putting our trust in one who did not die for us and therefore be damned. Thus, we can no more trust Christ’s death by a direct act of faith than we can infallibly project that we are among the number chosen for eternity: for the number of the elect and the number for whom Christ died are one and

the same. The ground of assurance, then, must be sought elsewhere than in Christ” (Kendall, p. 32).

For Beza, good works are the infallible proof of saving faith. In his little catechism, he asks, “But whereby may a man know whether he has faith or not? Answer: by good works.” Calvin thought that looking to ourselves would lead to anxiety or sure damnation. Not Beza. Kendall concludes that it is as though Beza says all who have the effects have faith; I have the effects, therefore, I have faith. Assurance of salvation, then, is not based on Scripture but on a syllogism, not on looking to Christ but on logic.

Since Beza makes sanctification the grounds of assurance, it is not surprising that he appeals to 2 Peter 1:10 in connection with the assurance of election, something Calvin did not do. As Kendall says, “When Christ is not held forth to all men as the immediate ground of assurance, the result is not only introspection on our part but a need to assure ourselves upon the very grounds Calvin warns against” (Kendall, p. 38).

What Beza and others who came after him did was change Calvin in several significant ways. Armstrong said, “A careful comparison of his (Calvin’s) writings with those of representative Calvinists of the 17th century reveals a radical change of emphasis. In fact, this change of emphasis is so profound that in many points, the whole structure of Calvin’s thought is seriously compromised” (Armstrong, p. xvii). He also observes, “It is axiomatic that thought does not remain static and that most great thinkers have been but imperfectly understood by their successors” (Armstrong, p. xvii).

Beza’s change of emphasis was slow. Armstrong says that the cleavage between Calvin’s and Beza’s theology was not readily apparent to the contemporary observer (Armstrong, p. 129).

Jacob Arminius

Jacob Arminius (1559-1609) was a member of the Dutch Reformed Church. In 1582, he attended the Academy in Geneva that had been founded by John Calvin. While he was there, Arminius heard Beza lecture on the book of Romans. After Geneva, Arminius was ordained in the Dutch Reformed Church and he was the pastor of the Dutch Reformed Church in Amsterdam. In 1603, he became a professor at the University in Leiden.

As a pastor preaching through the book of Romans, Arminius began to have doubts about some of the things that he had been taught at Geneva. Later, he was asked to write a refutation of a book that was opposed to Calvin and Beza’s view of predestination. During his preparation, he underwent a theological transformation and “became a convert to the very opinions which he had been requested to combat and refute” (Arminius, *The Works of Arminius*, vol. 1, p. 30).

Arminius believed that God decreed to save those He knew from all eternity would believe and persevere. He also believed that faith is a gift of God and that it is “impossible for believers as long as they remain believers to decline from salvation” (Arminius, *The Works of Arminius*, vol. 2, p. 677 ff.). The predestinarians teach that believers persevere because they were elected; Arminius says God elects believers whom He foresees will persevere. Arminius says faith can fail. In contrast to semi-Pelagianism, Arminianism teaches that the first steps of grace are taken by God.

Remonstrance

In 1610, the year after Arminius died, his views were stated in the *Remonstrance* (a word that means a strong or formal protest). The five points of the *Remonstrance* are as follows.

1. God elects on the basis of His “eternal, unchangeable purpose” and only “those who, through the grace of the Holy Ghost, shall believe on this His son Jesus Christ.” He also wills “to leave the incorrigible and unbelieving in sin and under wrath.” (In short, God decreed to save all who believe on Christ.)
2. Christ “died for all men and for every man, so that He has obtained for them all ... redemption and forgiveness of sins; yet that no one actually enjoys this forgiveness of sins except the believer.” (In short, Christ died for all, but only believers enjoy forgiveness of sins.)
3. “That man has not saving grace of himself, nor of the energy of his free will ... can of and by himself, neither think, will, nor do anything that is truly good (such as saving faith imminently is); but that it is needful that he be born again of God in Christ.” (In short, people cannot save themselves; they must be born again.)
4. “That this grace of God is the beginning, continuance, and accomplishment of all good, even to this extent, that the regenerate man himself, without prevenient or assisting, awakening, following, and cooperative grace, can neither think, will, nor do good ...” It adds, “As respects the mode of the operation of this grace, it is not irresistible.” (In short, grace is not irresistible).
5. “That those who are incorporated into Christ by a true faith ... have thereby full power to ... win the victory ... but whether they are capable ... of becoming devoid of grace, that must be more particularly determined out of the Holy Scriptures, before we ourselves can teach it with full persuasion of our minds.” (In short, those in Christ have the power to persevere, but the question of falling from grace is left open.)

Canons of Dort

For the specific purpose of dealing with Arminianism, a Synod (an assembly of clergymen) met in Dort, a city in the southern Netherlands. On May 29, 1619, the Synod of Dort issued four articles to counter the five articles of the Remonstrance (the four articles of the Synod of Dort deal with the five articles of the Remonstrance, the third and fourth articles being combined). Those now very famous five canons are summarized as follows: “1) That God’s eternal decree of predestination is the cause of election and reprobation and that this decree is not based on foreseen faith (election); 2) that Christ died for the elect only (limited atonement); 3) and 4) that men by nature are unable to seek God apart from the Spirit (inability) and that grace is irresistible (irresistible grace); and 5) the elect will surely persevere in faith to the end” (perseverance of the saints) (Kendall, p. 150, words in parentheses added).

The acronym TULIP is often used to remember the Canons of Dort. The summary of the five points of Calvinism follows the letters of the word “tulip” (the order of the Canons

of Dort follow the order of the five articles of the Remonstrance, but in order to fit the word “tulip” the order is slightly changed).

T	Total Depravity
U	Unconditional Election
L	Limited Atonement
I	Irresistible Grace
P	Perseverance of the Saints

The Westminster Confession of Faith

A few years after the Synod of Dort in Holland, an assembly was held at Westminster in England (1643-1649). The Westminster Assembly produced the Westminster Confession of Faith, which contains the doctrines in the Canons of Dort. Calvinists regard the Westminster Confession as the embodiment of their beliefs. Boettner called it “the most perfect expression of the Reformed Faith” (Boettner, p. 13). The Westminster Confession includes all the major doctrines of the Christian faith, whereas the Canons of Dort only concern the five points of Calvinism.

Summary: Most of the tenets of what is called Calvinism existed before Calvin, but the theological system called Calvinism was formalized after Calvin in the Canons of Dort.

Calvinism is a *logical* system concerning salvation. Loraine Boettner, a well-known Calvinist scholar, wrote, “The Calvinistic system especially emphasizes five distinct doctrines. These are technically known as ‘The Five Points of Calvinism’ and they are the main pillars upon which the superstructure rests.” He explains, “These are not isolated and independent doctrines but are so interrelated that they form a simple, harmonious, self-consistent system; and the way they fit together as component parts of a well-ordered whole has won the admiration of thinking men of all creeds. Prove any one of them false and the whole *system* must be abandoned. They are found to dovetail perfectly into the other” (Boettner, p. 59).

J. I. Packer agrees: “The five points, though separately stated, are really inseparable. They hang together; you cannot reject one without rejecting them all, at least in the sense in which the Synod meant them” (J. I. Packer, cited by Steele and Thomas, pp. 22-23).

This has been called “Domino Theology.” If one element is wrong, the whole system falls.

BELIEFS

TOTAL DEPRAVITY

Calvinism teaches Total Depravity. Surprisingly, so do Arminians! Arminius himself said, “In his lapsed and sinful state, man is not capable, of and by himself, either to think, will, or do that which is really good; it is necessary for him to be regenerated and renewed in his intellect, affections, or will, and in all his power, by God in Christ through the Holy Spirit, that he may be qualified rightly to understand, esteem, consider, will, and perform whatever is truly good” (Arminius, vol. 1, pp. 659-660). John Wesley said, “Man in his natural state, is altogether corrupt, through all the faculties of his soul: corrupting his understanding, his will, his affections, his conscience, and his memory” (Wesley, cited by Vance, p. 199).

The problem is the definition. Arminians believe in Total Depravity in the sense that every part of the individual is depraved, which is the way all Bible-believing Christians define it. How does Calvinism differ?

The Position

Calvinists believe in Total Depravity, not only in the sense that every part of the individual is depraved but also that the individual is so depraved that he is *unable to believe*. They argue that people are spiritually dead (Eph. 2:1-3; Augustine; Luther; Calvin; the Canons of Dort; the Westminster Confession of Faith; Jonathan Edwards). Therefore, they are unable to respond to God. It would be more accurate to say that Calvinists believe in Total Inability than it is to say that they believe in Total Depravity. According to Calvinists, to tell an unregenerate person to believe in Jesus Christ is like delivering that message to a corpse in a casket.

Boettner says, “If a man were dead, in a natural and physical sense, it would at once be readily granted that there is no further possibility of that man being able to perform any physical actions. A corpse cannot act in any way whatever, and that man would be reckoned to have taken leave of his senses who asserted that it could. If a man is dead spiritually, therefore, it is surely equally as evident that he is unable to perform any spiritual actions” (Boettner, p. 66) and “As the bird with a broken wing is ‘free’ to fly but not able, so the natural man is free to come to God but is not able” (Boettner, p. 62).

Hoeksema says: “It is alleged (that) faith is the hand by which we take hold of the proffered salvation, the salvation proffered in the gospel...this is not true...the natural man has no hand whereby he is able to accept the salvation of God in Christ Jesus” (Hoeksema, p. 479).

The Proof

Ephesians 2:1 “And you *He made alive*, who were dead in trespasses and sins.” Steele and Thomas contend, “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” (Steele and Thomas, p. 16).

1 Corinthians 2 “But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know *them*, because they are spiritually discerned.” Commenting on this verse, Calvin says, “For he (Paul) teaches that it is not owing simply to the obstinacy of the human will, but to the impotency, also, of the understanding, that man does not attain to the things of the Spirit. Had he said that men are not willing to be wise, that indeed would have been true, but he states further that they are not able. Hence we infer that faith is not in one’s own power, but is divinely conferred” (Calvin, *Commentary on 1 Cor.*). Boettner concurs, “We are at a loss to understand how anyone could take a plain, common-sense view of this passage of Scripture and yet contend for the doctrine of human ability” (Boettner, p. 63).

Romans 9:6 “So then *it is* not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy.” Referring to John 1:13 (which will be discussed later) and *Romans 9:6*, Kober said, “If the two verses prove anything, it is that man does not have a free will when it comes to the matter of salvation” (Kober, cited by Vance, p. 216).

The Product

What does the notion of Total Inability produce? Since unregenerate people are as spiritually dead as a cadaver is physically dead, they cannot do *anything* to respond to God or believe. If they are to be saved, God must do something. In fact, when it comes to salvation, God has to do *everything*. Berkhof says, “There is no cooperation of the sinner in this work whatsoever. It is the work of the Holy Spirit directly and exclusively.” Then he adds, “God alone works and the sinner has no part in it whatsoever” (Berkhof, p. 473). The remaining five points of Calvinism explain in detail that God does everything, including giving people faith.

Summary: Calvinism teaches that unsaved people are totally depraved, meaning they not only have no free will but also have no ability to believe.

The doctrine of Total Inability is critical to the whole Calvinistic theological system. If human beings are so spiritually dead (remember the corpse in the casket) that they are unable to respond to God in any way, the logical result of this Total Inability is Unconditional Election, Irresistible Grace, regeneration preceding faith, faith as a gift, and perseverance as a gift. Logic compels such a conclusion when one begins with the premise of Total Inability.

Calvinists readily concede that Total Inability is the issue in their theological system. R. C. Sproul says, “If they (students in a college class he taught) really accepted the biblical view (the Reformed view) of human corruption, the debate about predestination for all intents and purposes was already over” (Sproul, *Chosen by God*, p. 105). Hanks says, “A denial of Total Depravity leads to a denial of sovereign grace. This, in turn, leads to a denial of Limited Atonement and Unconditional Election. And the preservation of the saints necessarily falls by the wayside.” (Hanks, cited by Vance, pp. 189-90). Englesma says, “Deny this doctrine and the whole of Calvinism is demolished” (Englesma, cited by Vance, page 190).

Vance says, “If total depravity is proving to be spurious, the rest of the TULIP withers. If man does *not* have inability, then he can be saved without the other points of Unconditional Election and Irresistible Grace” (Vance, p. 190, italics his).

UNCONDITIONAL ELECTION

Calvinism teaches Unconditional Election. The doctrine of Unconditional Election logically follows the doctrine of Total Inability. Since people are dead (remember the corpse in the casket), God must do all the work in salvation.

Boettner says, “If the doctrine of Total Inability or Original Sin be admitted, the doctrine of Unconditional Election follows by the most inescapable logic. If, as the Scriptures and experience tell us, all men are by nature in a state of guilt and depravity from which they are wholly unable to deliver themselves and have no claim whatever on God for deliverance, it follows that if any are saved God must choose out those who shall be the objects of His grace” (Boettner, p. 95).

The Position

In eternity past, God unconditionally “elected” some individuals to be saved. He “predestinated” them to salvation. The word “elect” means to “select” or “choose.” Every four years in the United States, we have an “election” to choose a president. The word “predestinate” is a compound word made up of the prefix “pre” meaning “before” and “destine” meaning “determined.” Hence “predestinates” signifies “to determine beforehand.” These words, however, say nothing about the basis of God’s selection. They do not answer the questions, “Who is selected?” and “Why are they selected?” The debate is over the answer to those questions.

Election Steele and Thomas explain: “The doctrine of election declares that God, before the foundation of the world, chose certain individuals from among the fallen members of Adam’s race to be the objects of His undeserved favor. These, and these only, He purposed to save. God could have chosen to save all men (for He had the power and authority to do so) or He could have chosen to save none (for He was under no obligation to show mercy to any)—but He did neither. Instead, He chose to save some and to exclude others. His eternal choice of particular sinners unto salvation was not based upon any foreseen act or response on the part of those selected but was based solely on His own good pleasure and sovereign will. Thus election was not determined by, or conditioned upon, anything that men would do, but resulted entirely from God’s self-determined purpose” (Steele and Thomas, p. 30).

Foreknowledge It is important to note that according to Calvinism, election is *not* based on God’s foreknowledge of an individual’s faith. The Canons of Dort state, “This election was not founded upon foreseen faith ... or any other good quality or disposition in man, as the prerequisite, calls, or condition on which it depended” (Canons of Dort, article IX). According to Calvinism, foreknowledge means foreordination. Arminianism teaches that election is based on God knowing who would believe.

Double Predestination All Calvinists hold to some form of Double Predestination. The nature of the position demands it. Calvin said, “There could be no election without its opposite reprobation” (Calvin, *Institutes*, book 3, chap 23, sec 1, 225). As Sproul explains, “If there is such a thing as predestination at all, and if that predestination does not include all people, then we must not shrink from the necessary inference that there are two sides to predestination” (Sproul, p. 141).

Among Calvinists, there are two positions concerning Double Predestination. Some Calvinists say God *actively* predestined both the elect and the non-elect. Other Calvinists contend that God *passively* predestinated the non-elect.

Augustine believed that God was active in Double Predestination. He said, “As the Supreme Good, He made good use of evil deeds, for the damnation of those He had justly predestined to punishment and for the salvation of those He had mercifully predestined to grace” (Augustine, *Enchiridion*, 100).

Calvin wrote, “By predestination, we mean the eternal decree of God, by which He determined with Himself whatever He wished to happen with regard to every man. All are not created on equal terms, but some are preordained to eternal life, others to eternal damnation; and, accordingly, as each has been created for one or other of those ends, we say that he has been predestined to life or death” (Calvin, *Institutes*, book 3, chap. 21, sec. 5, 206). “God by His eternal and immutable counsel determined once and for all those whom it was His pleasure one day to admit to salvation, and those whom, on the other hand, it was His pleasure to doom to destruction” (Calvin, *Institutes*, book 3, chap. 21, sec. 7, 210-211).

Other Calvinists say God was passive in Double Predestination. One of the Canons of Dort says, “He (God) graciously soften the hearts of the elect, however obstinate, and inclines them to believe; while He *leaves* the non-elect in His just judgment to their own wickedness and obduracy” (Canons of Dort, article VI, italics added). Sproul says, “The Reformed view teaches that God positively or actively intervenes in the lives of the elect to ensure their salvation. The rest of mankind He leaves to themselves” (Sproul, pp. 142-143).

The Proof

The major verses that are used to prove Unconditional Election are in Ephesians, Romans, and Acts.

Ephesians 1 Paul says, “He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will” (Eph. 1:4-5) and “predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will” (Eph. 1:11).

Romans 9 Paul says, “For He says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion.’ So then *it is* not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy” (Rom. 9:15-16).

Acts 13 Luke writes, “Now when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of the Lord. And as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed” (Acts 13:48).

John 6 Jesus says, “Therefore I have said to you that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father” (Jn. 6:65).

The Product

The great debate produced by the doctrine of election is election versus free will. Oh, man has free will in a limited sense. Standing before Charles V on June 25, 1530, Luther said: “As regards free will ... we confess that man’s will has a certain liberty of accomplishing civil justice, and of loving the things that reason comprehends; that man can do the good that is within the sphere of nature—plough his fields, eat, drink, have a friend, put on a coat, build a house, take a wife, feed cattle, exercise a calling; as also he can, of his own movement, do evil, kneel before an idol, and commit murder. But we maintain that without the Holy (Spirit) he cannot do what is righteous in the sight of God” (Luther, cited by Erickson, p. 564).

The freedom that people have is sometimes termed “free agency,” meaning that people do what they want to do, but according to Calvinism, what people do not have is “free will.” As one Calvinist said, “The term *free agency* has been used in theology to designate that a man is free to do what he wants to do; and *free will* has been used to indicate the kind of freedom that no man has— namely, the ability or freedom to choose either good or evil, either to believe on Christ or to reject him” (Palmer, cited by Vance, p. 214, at italics his). People do not have a free will when it comes to responding to God. Luther said, “*With regard to God*, and in all that bears on salvation or damnation, he (man) has no ‘free will’” (Luther, cited by Vance, p. 214, italics added).

Summary: Calvinism teaches Unconditional Election according to the good pleasure of God’s will, not according to His foreknowledge of who would believe.

LIMITED ATONEMENT

Calvinism teaches Limited Atonement, meaning Christ died only for the elect. “This doctrine (Limited Atonement) necessarily follows from the doctrine of election. If, from eternity, God has planned to save one portion of the human race and not another, it seems to be a contradiction to say that ... He sent His Son to die for those whom He had not chosen for salvation. These two doctrines must stand or fall together. We cannot *logically* accept the one and reject the other. If God has elected some and not others to eternal life, then plainly the primary purpose of Christ’s work was to redeem the elect” (Boettner, p. 151, italics added).

The Position

According to Calvinism, Christ died *only* for the elect and His death actually redeems the elect. Since Calvinists believe that God only intended to save the elect, only the elect needed Christ to die for them. Steele and Thomas say, “Christ’s redeeming work was intended to save the elect only and actually secured salvation for them” (Steele and Thomas, p. 17).

The Proof

Various Groups To support this idea, Calvinists cite verses that say Christ died for a particular group, such as the sheep (Jn. 10:15), believers (1 Cor. 1:3), and the church (Eph. 5:25). Boettner says, “Christ died not for an unordered mass, but for His people, His bride, His church” (Boettner, p. 157).

Many Calvinists also point out that the Bible says Christ died for “many.” “Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk. 10:45; see also Mk. 14:24; Rom. 5:19; Heb. 9:28). They argue that “many” indicates it was not “all.” For example, commenting on the phrase “Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many” in Hebrews 9:28, Gill says, not of angels but of men, and these not a few, but ‘many.’ He adds that Christ did not bear “the sins of all men.”

The World Calvinists claim that when the Bible says Christ died for the world, it means the world of the elect (Jn. 1:29; 3:16; 4:42; 6:51; 2 Cor. 5:19; 1 Jn. 2:2; 4:15). Augustine said the meaning of “the whole world” in the verse that says “He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world” (1 Jn. 2:2) is “all the faithful scattered throughout the whole earth” (Augustine, *Epistles of John*: Homily, v. 9). Sproul says, “The world for whom Christ died cannot mean the entire human family. It must refer to the universality of the elect (people from every tribe and nation)” (Sproul, p. 207).

All Calvinists contend that when the Bible says Christ died for “all,” it means “all kinds of people.” Commenting on the phrase “who gave Himself a ransom for all” in 1 Timothy 2:6, Gill argues it does not mean “for every individual of mankind,” but “the meaning is, either that he gave himself a ransom for many” or “Christ gave himself a ransom for all sorts of men, for men of every rank and quality, of every state and condition, of every age and sex, and for all sorts of sinners, and for some out of every kindred, tongue, people, and nation, for both Jews and Gentiles” (see Gill’s commentary on 1 Timothy).

The Product

The doctrine of Limited Atonement has profound practical ramifications. If Christ died *only* for the elect, how do people know that Christ died for them? Those who believe Christ died for everyone use the death of Christ for all to give people assurance that He died for them and, therefore, they can know they are saved, but if Christ died only for the elect, people must look somewhere else for assurance. That somewhere is given in the fifth point of Calvinism, the Perseverance of the Saints.

Summary: Calvinism teaches that the atonement is limited to the elect, meaning that Christ died only for the elect.

Differences over Limited Atonement among Calvinists has produced Hyper-Calvinism and moderate Calvinism. Hyper-Calvinists take Limited Atonement to such an extreme, they conclude that unsaved people should not be invited to trust Christ. Moderate Calvinism, on the other hand, denies Limited Atonement altogether.

Hyper-Calvinism In the early 17th century in England, Baptists developed along two different theological lines. The General Baptists held to a “General Atonement,” that is, an Unlimited Atonement, the view that Christ died for all, making salvation possible for all who would believe. The Particular Baptists held to a “Particular Atonement,” that is, a Limited Atonement, the view that Christ only died for the elect; His death accomplished redemption for particular individuals (the elect).

Historically the term “Hyper-Calvinism” was used by the critics of a theological position among English Particular Baptists. John Gill (1697-1771), who pastored a church in London that eventually was pastored by Charles Haddon Spurgeon, is sometimes considered the founder of Hyper-Calvinism. Hyper-Calvinism teaches that the call of the gospel to repent and believe is not universal; that is, it is not for all and that unregenerate people do not have a duty to repent and believe in Christ for salvation.

For example, the confessional articles of the Gospel Standard Churches (English Baptist) is this statement, “We deny duty faith and duty repentance – these terms suggesting that it is every man’s duty spiritually and savingly to repent and believe. We deny also that there is any capability in man by nature to any spiritual good whatever. So that we reject the doctrine that man in a state of nature should be exhorted to believe in or turn to God.” Another article reads, “Therefore, that for ministers in the present day to address unconverted persons, or indiscriminately all in a mixed congregation, calling upon them to savingly repent, believe, and receive Christ, or perform any other acts dependent upon the new creative power of the Holy Ghost, is, on the one hand, to imply creature power, and on the other, to deny the doctrine of special redemption.”

An illustration of Hyper-Calvinism is the famous story of John Ryland and William Carey. When Carey wanted to go to India to preach the gospel, John Ryland told him, “Young man, sit down. When God pleases to convert the heathen, He will do it without your aid or mine.” Ryland was a Hyper-Calvinist. So was Carey. His mission society was named the “Particular Baptist Society for the Propagation of the Gospel among the Heathen.” Ryland was a consistent Hyper-Calvinist. Carey was not!

Some Hyper-Calvinists, such as John Owen, went so far as to say that God hated the non-elect. Charles Haddon Spurgeon, who was an ardent Calvinist, disagreed with Owen, saying, “I cannot imagine a more ready instrument in the hands of Satan for the ruin of

souls than a minister who tells sinners it is not their duty to repent of their sins,” and, “Who has the arrogance to call himself a gospel minister, while he teaches that God hates some men infinitely and unchangeable for no reason whatever but simply because he chooses to do so. Oh my brethren! May the Lord save you from the charmer, and keep you ever deaf to the voice of error” (Spurgeon, cited by Geisler, p. 210).

Today the descendants of the Particular Baptists are the “Strict Baptists” in England. In 1995, the Gospel Standard Strict Baptists had 6400 members in 156 churches in the British Isles, plus three churches in the United States. The Strict Baptists are roughly equivalent to the Primitive Baptists in the United States. In other words, there are a few Hyper-Calvinists today.

Moderate Calvinism Calvinists who believe in Unlimited Atonement are called “four-point Calvinists” or Amyraldians after Moise Amyraut (1595-1664; see Brian Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy*). Amyraut was a French Protestant professor and pastor. One of his students was William Penn, who later founded the Pennsylvania colony in America, based in part on Amyraut’s notion of religious freedom.

Amyraut claimed that the Calvinism of his day was a corruption of Calvin’s thought (Armstrong, p. xvii). In 1634, he published a book in which he taught that God sent His Son into the world to redeem all men provided that they believe (Armstrong, p. 82). In another work, “he sought to show that his doctrine was a faithful reproduction of Calvin’s theology” (Armstrong, p. 83). As a result of his theology, he was tried for heresy but was acquitted in 1637. He was charged again in 1644 and again, he was acquitted. There was a third charge against him at the Synod in 1659, but it too met with no success. Armstrong says that by putting Amyraut on trial for heresy, “less than one hundred years after Calvin’s death, the communion which generally bore his name considered his teaching heresy” (Armstrong, p. xviii).

Moderate Calvinists today do not accept all that Amyraut taught, but since there are many four-point Calvinists today, some of Amyraut’s theology is worth noting.

The Calvinists of Amyraut’s time accepted Beza’s Supralapsarianism as orthodoxy. Amyraut believed in predestination (Armstrong, p. 170), based on the pleasure of God (Armstrong, p. 217), but he urged people to forget about vain speculations concerning the decrees of God and instead devote themselves to what has been revealed. He claimed that Calvin never explained the order in the decree of God, nor had he the least interest in doing so (Armstrong, pp. 164-65).

Following Calvin, and in contrast to Beza, Amyraut taught that predestination should not “appear in theology before the whole of the doctrine of grace is expounded” (Armstrong, p. 160). He felt starting with the decrees of God compelled the Calvinists of his day to use a dishonest exegesis of Scripture (Armstrong, p. 165).

Amyraut believed in a universalist design of the atonement and a particularist application of its benefits (Armstrong, pp. 165-66). He argued that Calvin affirmed a universal design for the atonement in his commentary on 2 Peter 3:9 (Armstrong, p. 166). He insisted that preachers proclaim, “Believe in Christ, for He is the redeemer of the world” and to remember that “this is not the time to consider whether or not He has decreed from all eternity if we would believe in this redeemer” (Armstrong, p. 167).

Amyraut made a distinction between natural and moral ability. He believed that people could respond to grace because they had been endowed with understanding and will, but

they will not respond because they are sinful. He says, “Inability comes from the fact that we are corrupt” (Armstrong, p. 215-16).

Amyraut believed in the centrality of justification by faith. Armstrong argues that the doctrine of justification by faith was “beyond question the doctrine at the heart of the Reformation.” He cites Luther, who said, “If we lose the doctrine of justification, we lose simply everything” (Luther, cited by Armstrong, p. 223). He also quotes Calvin, who said justification was “the main hinge on which religion turns” (Calvin, cited by Armstrong, p. 223). Yet by Amyraut’s time, among Calvinists, justification was a secondary consideration, “ranking far behind the doctrines of predestination and Scripture” (Armstrong, p. 223).

As Armstrong explains, Calvin emphasized the unity of the Old and the New Testaments, which tended to blur the antithesis between works-righteousness and faith-righteousness so that the Law-gospel distinction was often minimized or lost altogether. He points out that the Westminster Confession is silent on the law-gospel distinction, emphasizes the unity of justification in the Old and New Testaments, and has no mention of the two kinds of righteousness. Thus, by the time of Amyraut, justification among Calvinists did not have the important place it did in Calvin (Armstrong, p. 224).

Like Calvin, Amyraut defined justification as a forensic term; that is, it is the remission of sins and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ (Armstrong, p. 225). Also, like Calvin, Amyraut believed that justification and sanctification were inseparable (Armstrong, p. 236).

Amyraut defined faith as “simply to be persuaded of the truth of anything” (Amyraut, cited by Armstrong, p. 242). For him, a choice is an act of understanding. Therefore faith is an operation of understanding, not of the will. (Armstrong, p. 243). He also said, “Faith is engendered in us by the grace of God almost in the same way that a blind man is made to see” (Armstrong, p. 247). The Holy Spirit illuminates the understanding (Armstrong, p. 249) and whatever He accomplishes in the understanding automatically includes the will (Armstrong, p. 250). Armstrong concludes Amyraut “comes very close to reducing faith to simple rational apprehension” (Armstrong, p. 251). Amyraut argued, however, that faith is not mere intellectual persuasion of the truth; it is much more existential than just rational persuasion (Armstrong, pp. 253-54). It should also be added that Amyraut believed that faith was a gift of God (Armstrong, p. 258).

As for assurance, Amyraut wrote, “It is revealed to us that all those who believe, believed by virtue of the election through which God has separated them from the others. So then if we are obligated to persuade ourselves that we are elect, we must reflect upon the faith which we already feel within ourselves and then from the effect we can reason to the cause” (Amyraut, Armstrong, p. 218). For him the basis of assurance is the doctrine of justification and especially the words that “Christ was crucified for our sins and raised for our justification” (Armstrong, p. 261).

IRRESISTIBLE GRACE

Calvinism teaches Irresistible Grace, which means that God's work in the elect is such that they cannot resist or reject it. Again, the doctrine of Irresistible Grace logically follows the doctrines of Total Inability and Unconditional Election.

The doctrines of Total Depravity and Irresistible Grace are so tied together that the Canons of Dort treat the two subjects under one heading: "Of the Corruption of Man, His Conversion to God, and the Manner Thereof." One Calvinist said, "One cannot maintain Total Depravity, yet deny Irresistible Grace" (Van Baren, cited by Vance, p. 475).

The doctrines of Unconditional Election and Irresistible Grace are connected. Sproul says, "The Calvinist view of predestination teaches that God actively intervenes in the lives of the elect to make absolutely sure that they are saved" (Sproul, p. 34).

If people are *spiritually dead* and *God has elected* some of them to be saved, the elect are going to get saved (God determined it); they cannot stop it, hence, the doctrine of Irresistible Grace.

The Position

God's work of grace on the elect is irresistible. Spiritually dead people cannot resist this work of God. Steele and Thomas explain, "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 (which is made to all without distinction) can be, and often is, rejected; whereas 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 the sinner 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 to whom it is extended" (Steele and Thomas, p. 18, italics added).

Notice, they say that Holy Spirit is not limited by man's will, "nor is He dependent upon man's cooperation." In other words, the individual does not have to consent. In fact, at the beginning of the process, the person cannot consent, he or she is dead (remember the corpse in the casket). Sproul argues that God plants the desire and, therefore, people do not come kicking and screaming against their will. They come because they want to come (Sproul, p. 123).

The Proof

Various Verses As with the other topics in Calvinism, Calvinists use various verses to prove the doctrine of Irresistible Grace (Rom. 9:15, 19, 21-22; Jas. 1:18; etc.). Most of verses used by Calvinists to support the doctrine of Irresistible Grace do not rule out individual choice. There are, however, several verses they use that seem to suggest that God's work is irresistible.

John 6:44 “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day.” Also, *John 12:32* says, “If I am lifted up from The Earth, will draw all *people* to Myself.” Sproul says the Greek word translated “draw” means to coerce, force, or even drag. It is translated “drag” in *James 6:2* and “dragged” in *Acts 16:19* and *Acts 17:6* (Sproul, p. 186). Thus, according to Calvinism, Jesus is saying He will force, coerce, drag the elect to Himself.

Luke 14:23 “Then the master said to the servant, ‘Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel *them* to come in, that my house may be filled.’” Since the time of Augustine, this verse has been taken to mean that God uses coercive force on the unwilling to get them saved (Geisler, p. 92). The argument is that the Greek word translated “compel” means “to compel by force.”

On the one hand, Boettner says that the word “irresistible” is “somewhat misleading since it does suggest that a certain overwhelming power is exerted upon the person, in consequence of which he is compelled to act contrary to his desires, whereas the meaning intended, as we have stated before, is that the elect are so influenced by the divine power that their coming is an act of voluntary choice” (Boettner, p. 178). On the other hand, Boettner says, “No man can come unto me except the father that sent me draw (literally, drags) him” (Boettner, p. 11). This is not the only illustration of Calvinist making contradictory statements.

The Product

1. Regeneration precedes faith. Total Inability sees people as dead. They cannot believe (remember the corpse in the casket). Therefore, they must be regenerated before there can be faith. Sproul says, “One does not first believe, then become reborn” and “A cardinal point of Reformed theology is the maxim: ‘Regeneration precedes faith’” (Sproul, p. 72).

John H. Gerstner says: “We must not get the notion that the people come to Jesus, and as a result of that they are ‘born again’... Those who do come to Jesus are not therefore born again, but on the contrary, indicate that they have been born again. In other words, they are not born again because they have come to Jesus, but they have come to Jesus because they have been born again” (Gerstner, p. 9).

The verse often used to support the suggestion that regeneration precedes faith is *John 1:13*, which says, “Who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.” The idea is that since the new birth is not of the will of the flesh, but of God, God regenerates people before they believe. Calvin argues, “The Evangelist affirms that no man can believe unless he be begotten of God; and therefore faith is a heavenly gift. It follows, secondly, that faith is not bare or cold knowledge, since no man can believe who has not been renewed by the Spirit of God” (Calvin, Commentary on the Gospel of John). “What could possibly be a plainer statement than this of the fact that salvation is conferred upon a select number who are conceived by the Holy Spirit and born again by the will of God alone” (Custance, cited by Vance, p. 217).

I once heard a professor says that faith is the first cry of a newborn baby.

2. Faith is a gift. “God gives faith and repentance to each individual whom He selected” (Steele and Thomas, p. 16).

The verse most often used to teach that faith is a gift is Ephesians 2:8, which says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; *it is* the gift of God.” Augustine said, “A man cannot be said to have even that will with which he believes in God, without having received it” (Augustine, *On the Spirit and the Letter*, 58). One of the Canons of Dort says, “Faith in Jesus Christ, and salvation through Him is the free gift of God (Eph. 2:8)” (Canons of Dort, article V). In his commentary on this verse, Eadie lists those who said the faith in this verse is the gift of God. They include Chrysostom, Jerome, Erasmus, Beza, Bengel, and Charles Hodge. He also quotes Bloomfield, who says, “All the Calvinistic commentators hold this view.” Sproul proclaimed, “This passage should seal the matter forever. The faith by which we are saved is a gift of God” (Sproul, p. 119). Eadie adds, “And yet Calvin himself was an exception.”

Another verse that is often quoted is Philippians 1:29. It says, “For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him but also to suffer for His sake.” MacArthur argues that faith is a “divine gift” and cites Philippians 1:29 as a verse that affirms his argument (MacArthur, *Faith Works*, p. 69, hereafter *FW*). Countess says, “Faith is something *given* rather than something generated within man by man” and quotes Philippians 1:29 (Countess, p. 120, italics his).

Although some Calvinists deny it, it is hard, if not impossible, to avoid the logical conclusion of the doctrine of Irresistible Grace: that God forces people against their will or *without the consent of their will* (remember the corpse in the casket). Sproul says, “If God has no right to coercion, then he has no right of the governing his creatures” (Sproul, p. 42).

Summary: Calvinism teaches Irresistible Grace, that is, those whom God has chosen cannot resist His grace.

PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS

Calvinism teaches the Perseverance of the Saints, which means that the elect will persevere in faith to the end. The doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints is the logical outcome of the preceding four points of Calvinism. If God unconditionally determined that some people will be saved and He gives them faith, they will persevere in faith. He gives the gift of perseverance.

The Position

Calvinism teaches that regenerated people will preserve in faith to the end of their life. Steele and Thomas say, “All who were 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” (Steele and Thomas, p. 18, italics added).

This does not mean that the regenerate cannot have lapses in the practice of their faith or that they will produce the same quality or quantity of spiritual fruit. It does mean that if they fall, they will repent. Hoeksema says, “God preserves even in their falls the incorruptible seed of regeneration in them, by His Word and Spirit effectually renews them unto repentance” (Hoeksema, p. 548). Spurgeon said, “The believer, like a man on shipboard, my fall again and again on the deck, but he will never fall overboard.”

How much sin is allowed in the life of a saint varies from Calvinist to Calvinist, but all insist that saints persevere to some degree. Boice says, “The mark of true justification is a perseverance in righteousness—to the very end” (Boice, cited by MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, page xii).

The Proof

Calvinists employ a number of passages to prove the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints. Here are two of the most popular.

Matthew 24:13 “He who endures to the end shall be saved.” In his commentary on this verse, Barnes says the “end” refers to “the close of life.” He goes on to explain that those who do not “shrink until death shall be saved, or shall enter heaven.”

Philippians 1:6 “Being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete *it* until the day of Jesus Christ.” John MacArthur says, “Real faith, therefore, cannot be defective or short-lived but endures forever (Phil. 1:6)” (MacArthur, *F W*, p. 24).

The Product

The idea that saints persevere has several practical results.

1. God-given faith always produces works. The passage that is used more than any other to prove that faith always produces works is James 2. For example, Barnes says, “He (James) maintains that if there is genuine faith, it will *always* be accompanied by good works and that it is only that faith which can justify and save” (Barnes, commentary on

James 2: 26, italics added). The other verse that is often used is Matthew 7:20, which says, “Therefore by their fruits, you shall know them.” The standard Calvinistic interpretation of this verse is that “them” is all believers and “fruits” refers to the behavior of believers. Commenting on this verse, Wiersbe says, “True faith in Christ changes the life and produces fruit for God’s glory.”

2. If people say they have faith and do not persevere, they do not have God-given faith. They are professors who are not possessors of faith. Calvinists use several passages to “prove” there is such a thing as false faith.

Luke 8:11-13 Jesus says, “Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. Those by the wayside are the ones who hear; then the devil comes and takes away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved. But the ones on the rock *are those* who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, who believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away” (Lk. 8:11-13). Most commentators claim that those by the wayside were not saved, because they only believed *for a while*. In his commentary on Luke, Calvin says that the “honor which they render to the Gospel resembles faith,” but that “they are not truly regenerated.” Geldenhuys says they only received the Word with emotional excitement and superficial enthusiasm; they did not allow the seed of the Word to penetrate deeply into their hearts. According to him, they were not genuinely converted; they were only temporarily taken up with the preaching of the Word.

John 2:23-24 “Now when He (Jesus) was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name when they saw the signs which He did. But Jesus did not commit Himself to them because He knew all men (Jn. 2:23-24). Calvinists claim that these people were not genuine believers. Martin Luther called this “milk faith” (Luther, cited by Morris). Calvin says that they had a “cold faith, which was only the shadow of faith.” He calls it an “appearance of faith, which hitherto was fruitless, might ultimately be changed into true faith.” According to this notion, these people did not have real faith because their faith was based on miracles (Jn. 2:23; Calvin) and because Jesus did not commit Himself to them (Jn. 2:24).

Acts 8:13, 18-23 Luke records, “Then Simon [the sorcerer] himself also believed; and when he was baptized he continued with Philip, and was amazed, seeing the miracles and signs which were done ... when Simon saw that through the laying on of the apostles’ hands the Holy Spirit was given, he offered them money, saying, ‘Give me this power also, that anyone on whom I lay hands may receive the Holy Spirit.’ But Peter said to him, ‘Your money perish with you because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money! You have neither part nor portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity.’”

Most commentators conclude that Simon was not saved. Alexander says Simon made a “false profession.” He adds, “He professed belief, became a convert in the view of others, and in the customary way, by submitting to the rite of baptism.” He then says, “As Simon had already been baptized (v. 13), the exhortation to repent might seem to have respect to this particular transgression [of wanting to buy the power to bestow the Holy Spirit], as a single act of disobedience. But the words of the Apostle show that the whole work of repentance and conversion were not yet to be performed.”

James 2:14-17 James says, “What *does it* profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?” (Jas. 2:14) and “Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead” (Jas. 2:17). The message of these verses and, for that matter, the entire passage is that faith without works is dead. MacArthur contends false faith does not produce works. “No works, no faith” (MacArthur, *FW*, p. 149). False faith is intellectual assent, “mere hearing, empty profession, demonic orthodoxy, and dead faith” (MacArthur, *FW*, p. 142).

3. Assurance is based on one’s holiness of life. “*Perseverance in holiness*, therefore, in opposition to all weakness and temptation, is the *only sure evidence* of the genuineness of past experience, of the validity of our confidence is to our future salvation.” While there can be a “temporary withdrawal of restraining grace” while an elect person is “allowed to backslide for a time,” nonetheless, “*in every such case* they are graciously restored” (A. A. Hodge, pp. 544-45, italics his).

Summary: Calvinism teaches the perseverance of the saints, which means that God-given faith will always produce works, that those who have received God-given faith will endure in faith and works to the end of their lives, and if there is no endurance, there was no faith (that was a profession without possession).

BIBLICAL EVALUATION

TOTAL DEPRAVITY

The most fundamental issue in the theological system called Calvinism is the doctrine of Total Depravity. The Calvinistic doctrine of Total Depravity raises the issue of people's inability to respond to God, the idea that regeneration precedes faith, and the notion that God gives people faith.

Inability

Ephesians 2:1 Calvinists claim that when *Ephesians 2:1* says unregenerate people are dead that means they are like a corpse in a casket, indicating they are unable to believe. Granted, people are spiritually dead, but that does not mean they are like a corpse in a casket. Dead simply means separated from God. Although spiritually dead people are separated from God, they still have some ability. The very passage that says people are dead also says that those dead people have the ability to walk (*Eph. 2:2*) and desire (*Eph. 2:3*). Obviously, spiritual death doesn't mean being unconscious or cessation of being.

Geisler points out that death "does not mean a total destruction of all ability to hear and respond to God, but a complete separation of the whole person from God" (Geisler, p. 57). He argues that if spiritual death is annihilation, the second death is eternal annihilation (Geisler, p. 58). Being spiritually dead, that is, separated from God, unsaved people can know and choose, but they are incapable of initiating our attaining their own salvation (Geisler, p. 58; see also the next section on ability).

Pink, a staunch Calvinist, rejects the interpretation his fellow Calvinists use concerning being spiritually dead. He says, "Instead of attempting to draw analogies between spiritual and physical death and deriving inferences from them, we must stick very closely to the Scriptures and regulate all of our thoughts by them" (Pink, cited by Vance, p. 221). Amen!

1 Corinthians 2:14 "The natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know *them*, because they are spiritually discerned." Calvinists say the phrase "nor can he know them" means that unsaved people are unable to believe.

This verse is saying that unsaved people do not *receive the things of the Spirit of God*, nor can they *know the things of the Spirit of God*. The Greek word translated "receive" means "to welcome" and the one rendered "know" means "to know, recognize, understand." It is the Greek word that means "to know by experience," whereas another Greek word translated "know" means "to know by reflection." Thus, Paul's point is that unsaved people do not welcome and they cannot know by experience *the things of the Spirit of God*.

What is the meaning of the phrase "the things of the Spirit of God?" Paul begins this passage by saying, "We speak wisdom among those who are mature" (1 Cor. 2:6). He proceeds to explain that the Holy Spirit searches the deep things of God (1 Cor. 2:10), that we have received the Spirit who is from God (1 Cor. 2:12), and that the Spirit teaches us (1 Cor. 2:13). Then Paul says he compares spiritual things with spiritual (1 Cor. 2:13), meaning he gives spiritual things, that is, wisdom/the deep things of God, to spiritually mature people.

Paul gives the wisdom of God, the deep things of God, to the spiritually mature because unsaved people do not welcome it, cannot understand it, nor know it experientially (1 Cor.

2:14). He goes on to say that the spiritually mature have the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:15-16) and that he could not speak to the Corinthians as to spiritually mature people because they are babes in Christ (1 Cor. 3:1).

In other words, 1 Corinthians 2:14 has nothing to do with salvation or the ability of unsaved people to believe. It is simply teaching that unsaved people do not welcome, understand, or experience *the deep things of God*. It is obvious that Paul is not talking about the gospel because he goes on to say he couldn't give this to the either and they were believers (1 Cor. 3:1-3).

Romans 9:16 Calvinists contend that the phrase “not of him who wills” in Romans 9:16 proves that unbelievers are unable to believe. That is not Paul's point. In verse 15, Paul quotes God telling Moses that he would have mercy on whomever He willed. Then Paul concludes, “It (showing mercy) is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who *shows mercy*” (Rom. 9:16, italics added). Concerning this verse, commentators say the *basis* of mercy is in God, it is not in people (Charles Hodge). It is not of their will (Godet; Charles Hodge) or their effort (Sandy and Headlam; Charles Hodge). The *ground* of God's compassion is not in people's choice or people's conduct but in God's choice. That is not to say that when God, the *source* of mercy, does show mercy, people do not have the ability to believe in order to receive it.

Ability

The Scriptures are clear that unregenerate people have some ability. Paul says, “And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their pre-appointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us” (Acts 17:26-27). God fixed it so that people could *seek* Him, that they might *grope* for Him.

In Romans, Paul says, “For since the creation of the world His invisible *attributes* are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, *even* His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse” (Rom. 1:20). Because of the revelation of God in creation, people at least *understand* that there a God, who has power and intelligence. Furthermore, Paul says, “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness” (Rom. 1:18). Even though people are spiritually dead, they can *understand* and *suppress* the truth about God.

The Scriptures are clear that unsaved people have the ability to respond to God. Jesus says, “If anyone wills to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or *whether* I speak on My own *authority*” (Jn. 7:17; see also 6:37). He also says, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under *her* wings, but you were not willing!” (Mt. 23:37) and “but you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life” (Jn. 5:40). Jesus is saying people are not saved because they are not *willing*.

Jesus told a parable in which He said, “The kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who arranged a marriage for his son, and sent out his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding; and *they were not willing to come*” (Mt. 22:2-3, italics added).

The Scriptures are clear that unbelievers have the ability to believe. In the parable of the Sower, Jesus says, “Those by the wayside are the ones who hear; then the devil comes and takes away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved” (Lk. 8:12). The devil snatches the gospel out of unbelievers’ hearts *lest they should believe and be saved*. If Satan did do that, unbelievers would believe precisely *because* they have the ability to believe. Jesus taught that people have the ability to believe. He says, “If you do not believe that I am *He*, you will die in your sins” (Jn. 8:24) and “I told you, and you do not believe” (Jn. 10:25; see also 12:37).

Paul echoes Jesus. He says, “But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them” (2 Cor. 4:3-4). Although the gospel is clearly manifested, it is nevertheless hidden from those who are perishing. Their problem is two-fold. Satan has blinded their minds and they do not believe. Were it not for Satanic blindness and *personal* unbelief, the light of the gospel would shine on them. Unbelievers have the ability to believe.

Paul told the Romans, “God be thanked that *though* you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered” (Rom. 6:17). Unbelievers are commanded to believe (Acts 16:31). The Roman unbelievers obeyed that command from the heart.

Is not Cornelius an illustration? Cornelius, an unbeliever, was “a devout *man* and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always” (Acts 10:2). Here was a man who was seeking God. In response, God sent Peter to him to give him the gospel. Peter preached that “whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins” (Acts 10:43). Luke says, “While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word” (Acts 10:44). Commenting on this passage, Meisinger says, “Here was a man with a strong sense of God-consciousness, and the Lord worked in him to bring him to faith in Christ. His prayers and alms did not eternally save him, but his seeking postured him to believe the gospel when he heard it preached. There is nothing in this chapter to suggest that Total Inability was Cornelius’ condition. In fact, it is difficult to say he was crippled toward God, let alone ‘dead’” (Meisinger, vol. 11, p. 87).

None of these examples describe a corpse in a casket. Granted, unregenerate people are spiritually dead. They are separated from God and totally depraved. They cannot be saved apart from the work of the Holy Spirit, but that does not mean that they have no ability whatsoever. They can understand there is a God. They can seek Him. They can respond to the conviction of the Holy Spirit. They can believe or they can reject the gospel. All theologians agree that people are responsible, but “there is no responsibility where there is no ability to respond” (Geisler, p. 29).

According to the Scripture, when sinners believe, they are saved. According to Calvinism, the best that sinners can do is *hope* that they are one of the elect and wait to see if God will save them if they are.

Summary: The Bible teaches that unsaved people are spiritually dead, that is separated from God, but it does not teach that unsaved people have no ability to respond to spiritual truth, which is not to deny the work of the Holy Spirit in conversion.

People are totally depraved. Every area of the personality has been affected by sin.

People cannot come to Christ apart from the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit convicts of sin, righteousness, and judgment (Jn. 16:8-11). He enlightens (2 Cor. 4:3-4).

Luke says, “The Lord opened her (Lydia’s) heart to heed the things spoken by Paul” (Acts 16:14). The fact that the Lord opened her heart does not in any way remove her responsibility to believe (Marshall). Just because the Lord opened her heart does not mean she was passive (Wiersbe; see 2 Thess. 2:13-14). Geisler puts it like this: “God moves upon the hearts of unbelievers to persuade and prompt them to exercise faith in Christ ... God does not force anyone to believe in Him” (Geisler, p. 186).

López explains that the Greek word translated “opened refers to “opening of the eyes to make understanding possible and enable perception” and that many of the New Testament occurrences of “heart” “refer to the mind, as it does here; God opened Lydia’s ‘eyes of the heart’, as if removing a mental veil (2 Cor. 4:3-4), so that she would understand and respond. God enabled her to understand Paul’s message so that she could believe and be saved. But opening her heart (or understanding) is not the same as giving her faith. Acts 16 does not say God gave her faith. Instead, He enabled her to understand so that she could exercise faith” (López, p. 264).

People have to believe to be saved. At the 1966 World Congress on Evangelism in Berlin, Dr. Harold John Ockenga prepared a paper entitled “The Basic Theology of Evangelism.” In it he said, “Man is commanded to repent, to believe, to convert. The Bible places these acts within the ability of man. ... For my part, I approve a practical synergism of offering prevenient grace, the responsibility of each individual, and of election in Christ of all who believe. Thus I can say that salvation is all of God, reprobation is all of man” (*Christianity Today*, Oct. 28, 1966, pp. 9-14).

UNCONDITIONAL ELECTION

Unconditional election is the issue for which Calvinism is most known. It is commonly called predestination. Are some people unconditionally elected to be saved?

Election

Election The Bible teaches that God elects some to salvation. God predestinates people to salvation according to the good pleasure of His will (Eph. 1:4-5, 1:11). The election is unconditional (see “according to the good pleasure of His will” in Eph. 1:5) and individual (see “whom” in Rom. 8:29 and “whomever” in Rom. 9:15). It was determined in eternity past (Acts 13:48). There are other verses used to prove unconditional election, such as, “Therefore I have said to you that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father” (Jn. 6:65).

Since Acts 13:48 is the verse that convinced me of this doctrine, I shall explain it. Luke records, “As many as had been appointed to eternal life believed” (Acts 13:48). The Greek word translated “appointed” means “assign, appoint, order” (A-S; it is used in 15:2, 18:2, 28:23; Mt. 28:16; Rom. 13:1; 1 Cor. 16:15). Liddell and Scott list “appoint, assign, order, ordain,” as meanings. A. T. Robinson says “appointed” is better than “ordain” (KJV). In Acts 15:2, it is translated “determined.”

Alford says the meaning here is as many as were “disposed” to eternal life believed. Alexander asserts that the violent attempts to eliminate the doctrine of election from this verse by rendering the verb “disposed” can never change the simple fact that wherever this verb occurs elsewhere, it inevitably expresses the assertion of power or authority, divine or human, and being in the passive voice, cannot denote mere disposition, much less self-determination, any more than the form used in Acts 2:40, which some have cited as a parallel example.

Foreknowledge One objection to this explanation of election is that the Bible says that election is based on foreknowledge. Peter plainly says, “Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father” (1 Pet. 1:2). Arminians argue that what God foreknew was which individuals would have faith. Calvinists claim that foreknowledge means foreordination.

The noun “foreknowledge” occurs only twice in the New Testament, here and Acts 2:23. The verb appears five times (Acts 26:5; Rom. 8:29, 11:2; 1 Pet. 1:20; 2 Pet. 3:17). The word means “to know beforehand in advance.” In several of these passages it *does not* and *cannot* mean foreordination (Acts 26:5; 2 Pet. 3:17). In the other passages, it seems to imply more than advance knowledge. In the final analysis, what can be said for certain is that *election is based on foreknowledge* (1 Pet. 1:2; Rom. 8:29), but the Bible *never says what God foreknew*. To say that it was faith is speculation. “Election is not *based on* or *dependent on* foreknowledge. Rather it is merely *in accord with it*” (Geisler, p. 68, italics his).

The Bible teaches unconditional individual election that is not based on the foreknowledge of who would believe, but it does not teach Double Predestination.

Free will

The great objection to election is free will. As was pointed out earlier, the Scriptures are clear that unregenerate people have some ability (Acts 17:26-27; Rom. 1:20), that unsaved people have the ability to respond to God (Mt. 23:37; Jn. 5:40, 6:37, 7:17), and that unbelievers have the ability to believe (Lk. 8:12; Jn. 8:24, 10:25, 12:37; Rom. 6:17; 2 Cor. 4:3-4). Unbelievers are free to believe (Jn. 3:16) and, in fact, unbelievers are commanded to believe (Acts 16:31). Furthermore, God is not willing that any should perish (2 Pet. 3:9) and “desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1Tim. 2:4).

Note carefully: *Both unconditional election and free will are in the Bible.* The great debate is how to explain that. The Calvinists choose unconditional election and end up eliminating free will (they will object to that, but that is the logical conclusion of their system). The Arminians side with free will, claiming that election is based on foreknowledge.

The biblical balance is that both election and free will are true. Ephesians 1 not only speaks of predestination, it also speaks about the fact that we believe (Eph. 1:12-13). Romans 9, which speaks so strongly about God’s sovereign choice, is followed by Romans 10, which says faith comes by hearing, not by God giving it to people. Acts 13:48 traces believing back to being appointed to eternal life, but Acts 19:9 traces a lack of faith back to individuals hardening their hearts.

Paul puts both together when he says, “We are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord because God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth” (2 Thess. 2:13).

Many other verses demonstrate that both the sovereignty of God and the free will of man are true. God sovereignly predetermined that Jesus would be crucified and yet those who were involved freely chose their actions and are personally responsible for them.

Jesus said, “Truly the Son of Man goes as it has been determined, but woe to that man by whom He is betrayed!” (Lk. 22:22). God determined Jesus would die and Judas chose to betray Him.

Speaking of the crucifixion of Jesus, Peter says, “Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death” (Acts 2:23). God determined Jesus would die and the Jewish leaders chose to have Him killed. Notice, they were morally responsible for what they did (see “lawless”).

In Acts 3, Peter said, “God foretold by the mouth of all His prophets, that the Christ would suffer” (Acts 3:18) and, by their own choice, people “delivered (Jesus) up and (they) denied (Him) in the presence of Pilate, when he was determined to let *Him* go” (Acts 3:13). The people chose to ask “for a murderer” (Acts 13:14). They chose to “kill the Prince of life” (Acts 3:15).

In Acts 4, the people prayed saying, “For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done” (Acts 4:27-28). God’s purpose determined Jesus would die and Herod, Pontius Pilate, the Gentiles, and the people of Israel chose to gather together to kill Him.

During the voyage to Rome, the ship Paul was on encountered a storm that threatened to destroy the ship. Paul said, “And now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. For there stood by me this night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve, saying, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul; you must be brought before Caesar; and indeed God has granted you all those who sail with you.’ Therefore take heart, men, for I believe God that it will be just as it was told me” (Acts 27:22-25). When the situation got worse and soldiers threatened to jump ship, “Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, ‘Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved’” (Acts 27:31). God said that all would be saved and for them to be saved, they had to decide to stay on the ship.

How can God’s sovereignty and man’s free will both be true? Some theologians say the solution is that God’s sovereignty and man’s free will are an antinomy. An antinomy is a philosophical idea of contradictory conclusions. It is accepting two things as true that *contradict* each other. To say the same thing another way, a thesis is contradicted by an antithesis. In his book *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Immanuel Kant, the famous German philosopher, spoke about antinomy. He gave four examples: time and space, atomism (whole consists of indivisible atoms), freedom, and God. Kant’s example concerning freedom says everything is caused *and* there is free choice. Some theologians apply the philosophical concept of antinomy to the problem of God’s sovereignty and man’s freewill.

Geisler contends that Zeno’s “paradox” (Zeno of Elea, ca. 490–430 BC, was a Greek philosopher who, posed philosophical problems) and Kant’s “antinomy” are not the explanation of God’s sovereignty and man’s free will. His reason for rejecting those explanations is that they involve logical contradictions. He points out that the only time that the Greek word for “contradiction” is used in the Bible is in 1 Timothy 6:20, which says, “O Timothy! Guard what was committed to your trust, avoiding the profane *and* idle babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge.” In other words, contradictions are to be avoided. Geisler prefers calling God’s sovereignty and man’s free will a mystery, in the sense that these issues go beyond reason, but they do not go against reason (Geisler, p. 44, fn.).

Geisler has a point. The dictionary definition of “antinomy” is “a contradiction or inconsistency between two apparently reasonable principles.” It should also be pointed out that when theologians use the term “antinomy,” they modify the definition to be “an apparent contradiction,” but that is not the meaning of the word nor the way it is used in philosophy.

Another possible answer is that God’s sovereignty and man’s free will are a mystery. The Bible is full of such mysteries. There is one God; He is a Trinity (that is $1 + 1 + 1 = 1$). Jesus is 100% man; He is 100% God (that is 200%). Paul wrote Romans; the Holy Spirit wrote Romans.

The concept of Middle Knowledge has been used to explain how God’s sovereign election and people’s free will are both true. Luis de Molina (1535-1600) was a Spanish Jesuit professor who is credited with creating the concept of Middle Knowledge (Molinism). Molinism is the theory that God has three types of knowledge. The first is God’s knowledge of necessary truths. It is also called “natural knowledge” (for example, all bachelors are unmarried). The third is God’s free knowledge. It is God’s knowledge of what will happen in the future (God will create a new earth). Between the first and third types of knowledge, there is a second or middle knowledge. Middle Knowledge is God’s

knowledge of what creatures with free will would do in any circumstance (God knows Joe will order coffee with cream and sugar for breakfast). The biblical support for Middle Knowledge that is most often used is Jesus' statement, "If the mighty works which were done in you (Capernaum) had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day" (Mt. 11:23). The point is a sovereign God can arrange circumstances so that people will make the choice He desires without overriding their will. Hence the sovereignty of God and the free will of man are both true.

Hodges put it like this: "If there is one thing five-point Calvinists hold with vigorous tenacity, it is the belief that there can be no human *free will* at all. With surprising illogic, they usually argue that God cannot be sovereign if man is granted any degree of free will. But this view of God actually *diminishes* the greatness of His sovereign power. For if God cannot control a universe in which there is genuine free will, and is reduced to the creation of 'robots,' then such a God is of truly limited power indeed. We would argue quite differently. The God of the Bible is in fact great enough to create creatures with genuine powers of choice. Yet so perfect is His omniscience of all choices, possible and actual, that He can devise an almost infinitely complex scenario for mankind in which His sovereign purposes are all worked out perfectly through—and even in spite of—the free choices made by His creatures. This view of things is sometimes called 'Middle Knowledge'" (Zane C. Hodges, "The New Puritanism: Part 3, *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*, Autumn 1994, vol. 7:12).

Summary: God elects some to be saved (not based on the foreknowledge they would believe), but people have a free will, including the ability to believe.

LIMITED ATONEMENT

Limited Atonement is a critical component of Calvinism. Yet there are people who accept four of the five points of Calvinism and reject Limited Atonement. They are called Moderate Calvinists.

Limited Atonement

Scripture states that Christ died for particular groups, such as the sheep (Jn. 10:15), believers (1 Cor. 15:3), and the church (Eph. 5:25), but that does not mean that He died *only* for the sheep, believers, and the church. For a father to say he loves his son does not mean he only loves his son and no one else.

As was pointed out earlier, most Calvinists declare that the death of Christ actually redeems only the elect. Vance argues that to say that is tantamount to saying that the elect were saved before they were born. He argues that the Calvinists confuse the *provision* of the death of Christ with the *application* of the death of Christ. He concludes that the death of Christ is actual, but it is potential; it is complete, but it is conditional (Vance, p. 428). In other words, Christ died for various groups, but that does not save people; they must trust Christ.

Unlimited Atonement

Christ Died for Many When Calvinists see the word “many,” they conclude that it means “not all.” Christ died for “many” (Mk. 10:45), not all. The word “many,” however, can mean “all.” The *all* were *many*. As Dave Drummond, a pastor friend of mine, pointed out to me, “many” is used, not in contrast to “all” (many, but not all), but in contrast to a “few” (many, not a few). Daniel 12 says, “Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame *and* everlasting contempt” (Dan. 12:2). The “many” includes the saved and the lost. In other words, *all* people will be raised. So “many” can mean all.

In the Old Testament, the use of “many” in relationship to Christ’s death includes “all.” Three times in Isaiah 52:13-53:12, Isaiah speaks of the work of the Messiah for “many.” He will “sprinkle many nations,” meaning He will cleanse many nations of their sins (Isa. 52:15). He will “justify many, for He shall bear their iniquities” (Isa. 53:11). He will bear “the sin of many” (Isa. 53:12). In the context of Isaiah 52:12-53:12, the word “many” is used to refer to the fact that the Messiah will die for Gentiles as well as Jews (see “many nations” in Isa. 52:15); in other words, all. Many commentators have concluded that New Testament references to “many” are an allusion to Isaiah 53.

Christ Died for the World When Calvinists encounter the word “world,” they say it means the world of the elect, not the whole world. What they have to do with the text of Scripture to justify that interpretation is simply amazing. John Owen is one of the great defenders of Limited Atonement; he wrote the classic work *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*. Here’s how he handles John 3:16: “God so loved his elect throughout the world, that he gave his Son with this intention but by Him believers might be saved” (Owen, cited by Geisler, who calls this “a shocking retranslation,” p. 193).

The problem with the interpretation that says the word “world” means the world of the elect is that it is clear from the context of passages where it appears that it means the whole world, including unbelievers. For example, John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.” The world in this verse is not the world of the elect; it is the whole fallen world of humanity. Just keep reading. John 3:17 says, “For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.” The world is the world that could be condemned. John 3:19 says, “And this is the condemnation that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.” To say that light has come into the world of the elect and men loved darkness rather than light makes no sense. It is simply unmistakable that the word “world” in this passage is the unsaved world.

Furthermore, the word “world” occurs in the gospel of John 80 times. Granted, it is used in different ways, but it never refers to the “elect.” The world did not know Christ (Jn. 1:10). The world hates Christ and their works are evil (Jn. 7:7). Satan is the prince of this world (Jn. 12:31, 14:30, 16:11). The world cannot receive the Holy Spirit (Jn. 14:17). No less than Sproul, the crusading Calvinist, proves that the word “world” in the Gospel of John does not mean the world of the elect. He says, “Jesus’ atonement and His intercession are joint works of His high priesthood. He explicitly excludes the non-elect from His great high priestly prayer. ‘I do not pray for the world but to those whom you have given me’ (John 17:9). Did Christ die by those for whom He would not pray?” (Sproul, p. 206). In other words, Sproul says the world is the world of the non-elect!

Jesus died for the sins of the whole world of humanity. John writes, “He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world” (1 Jn. 2:2). This statement obviously means that Christ died for believers and *for the whole world*. If the “whole world” means the world of the elect, the statement is redundant. As if that is not enough to explain what John means, he clearly defines what he means by the whole world. A few verses later, John says, “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that *is* in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world” (1 Jn. 2:15-16). Later in the book, he says, “The whole world lies *under the sway of* the wicked one” (1 Jn. 5:19). John leaves no doubt about what he means by the word “world.”

Christ Died for All When Calvinists come to the word “all,” they conclude it does mean “all;” it means “all kinds of people.” So Christ died, not for all people, but for all kinds of people. For example, they would say that the “all” in the statement “And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all” (Isa. 53:6) means the Lord laid on Christ the sins of all kinds of people, but the word “all” in Isaiah 53:6 means “all.” It says, “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, everyone, to his own way; and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.” Obviously, the word “all” in the statement “All we like sheep have gone astray” means “all,” not “all kinds.” So Christ died for all.

Paul said, “For this *is* good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:3-4). Charles Haddon Spurgeon, who believed in Limited Atonement, could not deny the obvious meaning of these verses. He describes attempts to avoid the obvious. According to Spurgeon, here is how some deal with this text: “Older Calvinistic friends” say this refers

to some men; “as if the Holy Ghost could not have said ‘some men’ if he had meant some men. The Holy Ghost by the apostles has written ‘all men,’ and unquestionably he meant all men.” He goes on to say that one expositor applied grammatical gunpowder to this text and exploded it by way of expounding it. He added, “I would sooner one hundred times over appear to be inconsistent with myself than be inconsistent with the word of God” (from Spurgeon’s sermon entitled “A Critical Text on 1 Timothy 2:3-4, cited by Geisler, pp. 201-02).

Christ Died for False Teachers Peter says, “But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, *and* bring on themselves swift destruction” (2 Pet. 2:1). The Greek word translated “bought” is the word “redeemed.” The verse clearly teaches Unlimited Atonement. Christ died even for those who deny him. When I thought that I was a four-point Calvinist, it was this verse that stopped me from becoming a five-point Calvinist. After that, I realized I also did not believe in the Perseverance of the Saints.

In the final analysis, the atonement is not limited in its extent; it extends to the whole human race, but it is limited in its application. Its benefits only apply to those who trust Christ. The atonement makes salvation possible for everyone, but it is not actual until a person trusts Christ.

Summary: Christ died for the elect, but he also died for the sins of the world.

IRRESISTIBLE GRACE

Irresistible Grace is probably the least known of the five points of Calvinism, but it is an essential element in the system. Given the doctrine of inability, Irresistible Grace is indispensable.

Irresistible Grace

Using the same Greek word, two verses speak of drawing. John 6:44 says, “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day.” John 12:32 says, “If I am lifted up from the Earth, will draw all *people* to Myself.” Sproul claims the Greek word translated “draw” means to coerce, force, or even drag. It is translated “drag” in James 6:2 and “dragged” in Acts 16:19 and Acts 17:6 (Sproul, p. 186). Thus, according to Calvinism, the Father and Jesus force, coerce, drag the elect to Jesus.

The problem with that explanation is a Greek word, like an English word, can have, and often does have, several meanings. The meaning is determined by the context. The English word “trunk” can mean the trunk of a tree, the trunk of a car, the trunk in the attic, the nose of an elephant, etc. In this case, the Greek word translated “draw” means, “to draw” and is used figuratively of “to draw, lead, impel.” No English translation renders “draw” in John 12:32 as “dragged.”

Furthermore, in John 6, Jesus goes on to explain the drawing. He says, “It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall all be taught by God.’ Therefore, everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to Me” (Jn. 6:45). He quotes Isaiah 54:13, which promised direct divine teaching. *God draws people by teaching them.* Everyone who hears and learns from the Father comes to Christ.

Wiersbe says, “Jesus further explained how the sinner can come to God: it is through the truth of the Word (John 6:44-45). The Father draws the sinner by His Word. Jesus quoted Isaiah 54:13 (or perhaps Jer. 31:33-34) to prove His point: ‘And they shall all be taught of God.’ It is through the teaching of the Word that God draws people to the Savior. (Note John 5:24 and its emphasis on hearing the Word.) The sinner hears, learns, and comes as the Father draws him. A mystery? Yes! A blessed reality? Yes!”

Luther acknowledged that drawing involves teaching. He said, “But the ungodly do not ‘come,’ even when he hears the word unless the Father draws and teaches him inwardly; which He does by shedding abroad His Spirit. When that happens, there follows a ‘drawing’ other than that which is outward; Christ is then displayed by the enlightening of the Spirit, and by it man is rapt to Christ with the sweetest rapture, he being passive while God speaks, teaches and draws, rather than seeking or running himself” (Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, pp. 310ff.). Notice that Luther speaks of drawing and immediately inserts the work of the Holy Spirit. He imports more into the passage than is there. Jesus did not say anything about the work of the Holy Spirit in drawing. In fact, the point is Jesus draws *by teaching*, which assumes the person is involved. The individual is learning and choosing.

Luke 14:23 says, “Then the master said to the servant, ‘Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel *them* to come in, that my house may be filled.’” The argument is that the Greek word translated “compel” means “to compel by force.” Granted, it can mean “compel by force,” but it means can also “compelled by force or persuasion, constrain” (A-

S). In other words, like the word “draw,” the word “compelled” has a range of meaning that includes compelling by persuasion, not just force.

Sproul wants to argue that God plants the desire and, therefore, people do not come kicking and screaming against their will. They come because they want to come (Sproul, p. 123). That is theological double-talk. The individual has no choice (remember the corpse in the casket). The individual does not even consent, but *after* he comes, he *wants* to come. According to Calvinism, the individual had no choice or say *at first*; he was dead. (In the vernacular, “Give me a break!”)

The way Calvinism teaches the doctrine of Irresistible Grace, it is simply inescapable that God saves *apart from people’s consent*. Geisler remarks, “In other words, once someone is dragged against his will, then he acts willingly. But no matter how well the act of ‘Irresistible Grace’ is hidden by euphemistic language, it is still a morally repugnant concept.” Geisler goes on to say the problem is that there is “no informed consent.” Then he adds, “The patients are dragged kicking and screaming into the operating room, but once they are given a head transplant, they (not surprisingly) feel like an entirely different person!” (Geisler, p. 97, at italics his).

Insisting that there is no biblical support for Irresistible Grace on the unwilling, Geisler says that with the exception of Augustine “no major church father up to the Reformation held to irresistible grace on the unwilling.” Geisler adds that Luther’s view was reversed by his disciple Melancthon and Calvin’s view was opposed by Arminius and is rejected by all moderate Calvinists” (Geisler, p. 233).

Resisting Grace

The plain statement of Scripture is that people can resist the work of the Holy Spirit.

Matthew 23:37 Jesus said, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under *her* wings, but you were not willing!”

John 5:38-40 “But you do not have His word abiding in you, because whom He sent, Him you do not believe. You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life.”

Acts 7:51 Stephen said, “*You* stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers *did*, so *do* you.”

Acts 13:46 “Then Paul and Barnabas grew bold and said, ‘It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles.’”

In his commentary on Acts, concerning Acts 17:51, John Calvin wrote, “And those are said to resist the Spirit who contumaciously reject him when he speaks in the prophets” (contumaciously means “obstinately disobedient or rebellious”). Calvin goes on to say that they “purposely, and not of ignorance, resisted God” and “Therefore, lest, like giants, we make war against God, let us learn to hearken to the ministers by whose mouth he teaches us.” In other words, Calvin acknowledged that unsaved people can “rebelliously reject” the Holy Spirit, and they can on purpose, not just out of ignorance, “resist God.” If he believed that God could be resisted, he did not believe in Irresistible Grace.

The Nature of God

The doctrine of Irresistible Grace produces a problem concerning the nature of God. C. S. Lewis wrote, “The irresistible and the indisputable are two weapons which the very nature of his (God’s) scheme forbids Him to use. Merely to override a human will . . . would be for Him useless. He cannot relish. He can only woo” (Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, p. 128).

Pointing out that R. C. Sproul, the ardent Calvinist, says that “the dreadful error of Hyper-Calvinism is that it involves God coercing sin” (Sproul, p. 145), Geisler says, “What he does not seem to appreciate is that *it is also a dreadful error to coerce good*. Forced freedom, whether of good or evil, is contrary to the nature of God as love and contrary to the God-given nature of human beings as free. Forced freedom is a contradiction in terms” (Geisler, p. 96, italics his). Put simply, “Since love is always persuasive but never coercive, God cannot force anyone to love Him— which is what irresistible love on the unwilling would be” (Geisler, p. 233).

Regeneration does not precede faith

John 1:13 Calvinists claim that regeneration precedes faith. The question is, “Where does the Bible explicitly say that God regenerates people before faith?” Verses that could possibly be used to prove such a proposition are in short supply. Geisler says that some Calvinists acknowledge that this belief is more of a logical consequence of their system than it is the result of the analysis of any given verse (Geisler, p. 227). The one verse that is most often used is John 1:13.

At the end of John 1:12, John says, “to those who believe in His name.” Then John adds, “Who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God” (Jn. 1:13). John 1:13 is not saying that regeneration precedes faith. Look at the progression. John 1:12 says, “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name.” The way to receive Him is to “believe in His name.” To say the same thing another way, when people “believe in His name,” they are born again; they become children of God. In John 1:12, faith precedes the new birth. Faith is the *means* of the new birth.

At this point in the passage, John discusses the *source* of the new birth. The Greek word translated “of” in verse 13 means “from out of;” the idea is origin or source. The *source of the birth* is “not of blood,” meaning “not by parents.” The Jews grounded their claim to be God’s children on their descent from Abraham. John claims having proper parents will not suffice. “Even if your parents were the two best Christians that ever lived, they cannot give you divine life” (Ironside). The source of the new birth is not “the will of the flesh,” that is, not out of personal effort. “A person does not have the power in his own flesh to produce the new birth” (MacDonald). The source of the new birth is “not of the will of man,” which means the source of the new birth is not someone else, such as a priest, pastor, or preacher. The Greek word translated “man” is not the word for mankind, but for an individual man. John concludes that the source of the birth is “of God.” When people trust Jesus Christ, they are born of God.

To sum up, when people “believe in His name,” they become children of God; they are born again. In other words, the *means* of the new birth is believing in His name. The *source* of the new birth is God, not parents, personal effort, or a priest or preacher. This passage

is not teaching that faith precedes regeneration. On the contrary, it teaches that faith precedes regeneration, *which is from God*. In other words, what the Calvinists are saying about this verse is the exact opposite of what the passage says.

“To use John 1:12, 13 to prove that the regeneration must precede faith in Christ is like using a globe to prove the earth is flat. No one coming to this passage without a Calvinistic bias could interpret as does Gerstner... Unless one is wearing Calvinist colored glasses, such a Calvinistic interpretation of this passage (i.e., rebirth before faith in Christ) is very difficult if not impossible to maintain” (George Bryson, “The Five Points of Calvinism”).

What must a person do to be born again? When Jesus told Nicodemus that he had to be born again (Jn. 3:7), Nicodemus asked how (Jn. 3:10). Jesus told him: “No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life” (Jn. 3:13-15). In other words, Jesus told Nicodemus to believe in order to be born again. Those who believe are given eternal life, that is, they are born again. So, according to Jesus, faith precedes regeneration.

Throughout the New Testament, believing comes before regeneration. Those who believe are born again (Jn. 3:15). Those who believe are given eternal life (Jn. 3:36; 20:30-31). To put regeneration before faith is to reverse the order of Scripture. It is to put the cart before the horse.

God does not give faith

Calvinists believe God gives people the faith to be saved. The major passage that is used to support that notion is Ephesians 2:8-9, which says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast” (Eph. 2:8-9). Some interpret the phrase “and that not of yourselves” to mean that the faith is not of you (Charles Hodge). They conclude that God gives a believer faith, but that cannot be Paul’s meaning here.

In the Greek of the New Testament, gender agreement (masculine, feminine, or neuter) is used to identify the antecedent of a demonstrative pronoun. In Ephesians 2:8, Paul uses a neuter demonstrative pronoun (that). The question is, “What is the antecedent of the pronoun ‘that?’” Is it “faith?” The answer is, “No.” Faith cannot be the antecedent of that because faith is a feminine noun. The antecedent of “that” cannot be grace for the same reason. Grace is also a feminine noun. The neuter demonstrative pronoun can look back to a phrase or clause. In the case of Ephesians 2:8, the conceptual antecedent of “that” is salvation. It is salvation, which is not of us; it is of God.

Besides, as Aldrich points out, “The whole context, especially verse 9, makes clear that the issue is salvation by grace opposed to the ever-present error of salvation by works” (Aldrich, p. 249; Aldrich also cites Sir Robert Anderson who said, “To read the text as though faith were the gift, is to destroy not only the meaning of verse 9, but the force of the whole passage”).

In his commentary on Ephesians 2:8-9, Calvin says, “Many persons restrict the word gift to faith alone. But Paul is only repeating, in other words, the former sentiment. His meaning is, not that faith is the gift of God, but that salvation is given to us by God, or, that we obtain it by the gift of God” (Calvin; although Calvin says faith is not a gift from God

in this passage, in his commentary on 1 Cor. 2:14, he writes that because Paul says the natural man is not able to know the things of the Spirit of God, “we infer, that faith is not in one’s own power but is divinely conferred”).

For a detailed, technical, and theological analysis of “it is the gift of God” in Ephesians 2:8 see René A. López, “Is faith a gift from God or a human exercise?”, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, no. 164, July-September 2007, pp. 259-76. He concludes, “The assumption that people are spiritually unresponsive and thus unable to exercise faith for salvation does not stand up to biblical scrutiny” (López, p. 276).

Another passage that is often used to prove that God gives people faith is Philippians 1:29, where Paul says, “For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ not only to believe in Him but also to suffer for His sake.” The Greek verb rendered “granted” means “to show favor, to give freely, bestow.” This verse is simply saying their *opportunity* to suffer for Christ was a gift from God. God gave them the opportunity to suffer, but they still had to respond to it. Likewise, God gave them an opportunity to believe, but they still had to respond to it. It is “a privilege to be permitted to believe on Christ” (Barnes).

The context of this passage is persecution, not salvation. Paul is saying that God has granted them the opportunity to trust Him and suffer for Him. As Geisler explains, “Paul is not speaking here of initial faith that brings salvation but to the daily faith and daily suffering of someone who’s already a Christian” (Geisler, p. 183).

Other passages are used to try to prove the notion that faith at salvation is a gift of God, but upon examination, they are weighed and found wanting. For example, after analyzing the Calvinistic use of 2 Peter 1:1, Aldrich says, “To use such a verse to prove that saving faith is a special gift of God is only to show how desperate the advocates of this theory are for Scriptural proof” (Aldrich, p. 251). After looking at the other passages, Aldrich concludes by asking, “Is not this theory (of faith at salvation being a gift from God) a deduction from the doctrine of election rather than an induction from the teaching of the Word?” (Aldrich, p. 253; hint: the answer is—YES!).

Summary: The Bible teaches that God’s grace can be resisted.

God uses persuasion, but it is short of coercion. In other words, God can use Irresistible Grace on the willing (Geisler, p. 96). God woos people like a man woos a woman to marry him. God’s grace is so great it is irresistible, to those who are willing to see just how great it is.

PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS

The logical outcome of the first four points of Calvinism is the fifth point. If God does all the work of salvation, His work will endure.

Perseverance

Matthew 10:22, 24:13 Calvinists use the expression “he who endures to the end will be saved” in Matthew 10:22 and Matthew 24:13 to say that people who do not endure to the end of their lives will not be saved. Their lack of endurance proves they did not have real faith. The problem with the explanation is that the subject of both passages is *not* salvation. The subject is service in the Tribulation, just prior to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

In Matthew 10, Jesus commissions the Apostles to go Israel. He told them *not* to go into the way of the Gentiles, *only* to Israel (Mt. 10:5-6). In verse 22, however, He speaks of them being *before Gentiles* (Mt. 10:18). Therefore, verse 22 is not talking about the immediate commission of the Apostles. It must be at some future time. In Matthew 24, there is no doubt the subject is the Tribulation. Jesus said so (Mt. 24:29)! Besides, it takes place just prior to the Second Coming (Mt. 10:23. 24:29-30). Therefore, endurance in this passage is enduring the persecution of the Tribulation and being saved is deliverance from it.

In Matthew 24, the apostles asked about the end of the *age* (Mt. 24:3). In His answer, Jesus mentions “the end” three times (Mt. 24:6, 13, 14). In each case, the end is not the end of one’s life, but the end of the Tribulation. The Greek word translated “saved” means “save, deliver” (Strong says it means “protected”). In this passage, “saved” is not salvation from sin, but deliverance from physical death. Jesus says, “And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect’s sake those days will be shortened” (Mt. 24:22). No flesh being saved means no one escapes physical death.

Philippians 1:6 Calvinists use the statement, “Being confident of this very thing that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ” in Philippians 1:6 to say that genuine believers will endure to the end of their lives.

The question is, “To what ‘good work’ does Paul refer? In this passage, he has said he thanks God (Phil. 1:3) for their fellowship in the gospel (Phil. 1:5), which means their financial support. Now he adds that he is confident that the good work (singular) that God began, God will complete until the day of Jesus Christ, a reference to the Judgment Seat of Christ (Phil. 2:16). In this context, the good work is their financial support of Paul’s ministry (see “fellowship in the Gospel” in 1:5). In other words, God will use their gift until the Judgment Seat of Christ. Their gift resulted in Paul writing this and several other letters, which God is still using.

Some do not Persevere

Some believers do not persevere. They only believe for a while and they fall away (Lk. 8:13; see the discussion in the next subsection). They resist God’s correction to the point of physical death (1 Cor. 11:30-32). They stray from the faith (1 Tim. 1:5-6; 6:9-10, 6:20-21). They shipwreck their faith (1 Tim. 1:18-20). They depart from the faith (1 Tim. 4:1-

3). They deny the faith (1 Tim. 5:8; the fact that they are worse than an unbeliever indicates they are believers). They cast off their first faith (1 Tim. 5:12-15). They deny the Lord (2 Tim. 2:12). They end up faithless (2 Tim. 2:13; the fact that Paul says “we” are faithless indicates Paul is talking about believers).

In 1 Corinthians 5, there is a believer living in sexual immorality who refuses to repent. Paul instructs the Corinthians in his name to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh “that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” (1 Cor. 5:5). In other words, this believer lived in sin, refused to repent, died in a sin, and went to heaven. Some saints don’t persevere.

The New Testament teaches that believers *should* preserve (see “should” in Titus 3:8; Eph. 2:10). Peter says believers must “give all diligence” to add to their faith “virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love” (2 Pet. 1:5-7). God does not produce perseverance in every believer (2 Pet. 1:8-9)! “A challenge to the Calvinistic view of the perseverance of the saints is not to deny the importance of saints persevering—even to the end” (Bryson, p. 52).

Those who keep the faith receive a reward (2 Tim. 4:7-8). Those who do not endure lose rewards (1 Cor. 3:12-15).

False Faith

Matthew 7:20 According to Calvinists, in the verse “by their fruits you shall know them” (Mt. 7:20), “them” is believers and “fruits” refers to the behavior of believers. The subject of Matthew 7:15-20 is not believers; it is false prophets. The passage begins with Jesus saying, “Beware of false prophets” (Mt. 7:15). He goes on to say that these false prophets “come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves” (Mt. 7:15). What the false prophets say seems plausible, enabling them to pass as prophets. The truth is they are not what they appear to be. Instead of being harmless sheep, they are destructive wolves, who are the natural enemy of sheep. Jesus gives the test of a false prophet: “You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles?” (Mt. 7:16). The test of a *false prophet* is his fruit. The fruit of a prophet is prophecy. Later in His ministry, Jesus used the fruit-test illustration and the “fruit” there is clearly “words” (Mt. 12:33). The test of a false prophet is his fruit, that is, what he teaches.

Luke 8:13 Calvinists use the phrase “who believe for a while” in Luke 8: 13 to teach that there is a “false faith.” In Luke 8:12, Jesus said if people believed, they would be saved. Then, He speaks of people who believed for a while (Lk. 8:13). If the word “believe” in verse 12 is saving faith, the word “believe” in verse 13 is also saving faith. There is no indication in the text or context that the meaning of the word “believe” changed from one verse to another.

Furthermore, they “received the word” (Lk. 8:13). The Greek word translated “receive” means “to receive, accept.” It is used of “taking what is offered” (A-S). It is same word that is used in 1 Corinthians 2:14, where it is said that the *natural man does not receive* the things of the Spirit of God, that is, the Word of God. Besides, the seed that fell upon the rocky ground was able to germinate; life sprang up, but the soil lacked moisture (Lk. 8:6). Note, the seed *germinated*; life sprang up.

John 2:24 Calvinists use this verse—that people believed in Jesus’ miracles, believed in His name, and Jesus did not commit Himself to them—to say they did not have genuine faith. That conclusion is far from the mark.

These people had real faith. In the first place, just because people believed because of miracles does not mean their faith was not genuine. John recorded the miracles so that people would believe! (Jn. 20:31). Furthermore, the Greek text says “they believed *into*,” which scholars have argued is the strongest Greek construction for faith in the New Testament. That expression, “believed in His name,” only appears three times in the Gospel of John and in both of the other places, it describes genuine faith (see 1:12, 3:18). In fact, John 3:18 specifically says, “He who believes in Him is not condemned, but he who does not believe is condemned already because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.” The reason they are condemned is that they do not believe in the name of the only begotten Son of God!

The point of this passage is that they trusted Christ (and at that point received eternal life), but Jesus did not trust them because He knew all men. Hodges suggests that the meaning of Jesus not committing Himself to them is that they did not have the courage of their convictions to confess Him before men. As a result, they were not His friends (Jn. 15:15; see the article by Hodges, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, vol. 135, pp. 140-153).

Acts 8:13 Calvinists use Simon the sorcerer in Acts 8 to illustrate that false faith is possible. The text plainly says, however, “Simon himself also believed” (Acts 8:13). According to Luke, if a person believes, he is saved (Acts 16:30-31). That and that alone should settle the issue. Also, note that Luke says, “Simon himself *also* believed” (Acts 8:13). If the others who believed were saved, so was Simon. Moreover, Philip thought Simon was saved. He baptized him!

If Simon was a genuine believer, what is the explanation of Peter’s strong language? Peter told Simon, “Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money!” (Acts 8:20). “For I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity” (Acts 8:23). The Greek noun translated “perish” can refer to either temporal or eternal destruction. Therefore, the use of this word does not necessarily mean that Peter was threatening Simon with eternal damnation. Notice, if Simon went to hell, so did his money! Simon’s perishing is the temporal perishing of physical death. In Hebrews 11:39, this word unmistakably refers to the physical death of believers. The writer identifies himself with his readers (“we”) as those who draw back to perdition, that is, destruction, the same word that appears in Acts 8:20. Those who draw back are in danger of a premature physical death (1 Cor. 11:30). Hebrews 11:39 proves that *believers* (“we”) can “perish,” but that does not mean they go to hell. Simon was bitter and in the bond of iniquity. Believers can be bitter (Eph. 4:31) and be bound by sin (Rom. 6:12, 7:23).

James 2:14, 17 Calvinists use the expression “faith without works is dead” in James 2 to say that there is such a thing as dead faith. James 2 is talking about genuine faith. The question at the end of verse 14, “Can faith save him?” proves that James has genuine faith in mind. Furthermore, “faith without works is dead” indicates that faith was once alive! A dead battery was once a live battery and is still a battery. The same Greek word translated “faith” here is used in James 5:15 of real faith. Even the faith of demons in this passage is real faith. They really believe there is one God (Jas. 2:19). That is not the faith that gets a person to heaven, but as far as it goes, it is real faith. What they did not do was *trust* Jesus Christ to get them to heaven.

The issue in this passage is not real faith versus false faith. It is *real* faith that is *alone*, meaning without works (Jas. 2:17), versus *real* faith that is *not alone*; it has works.

If the faith in James 2:14 is genuine faith that produces eternal life, what does James mean when he says, “Can faith save him?” (Jas. 2:14)? The word “saved” occurs five times in the book of James (Jas. 1:21, 2:14, 4:12, 5:15, 5:20). Each time it refers to the saving of temporal life, not the saving of the eternal soul. For example, James 5:15 says, “The prayer of faith will save the sick.” Thus, James is not talking about going to heaven. He is simply asking, “Can faith without works save a person’s *life* from something?” The question is, from what? The answer is, “Save your life from being wasted and possibly save it from physical death.” James 2:14 must be kept in context. James 1:15 mentions physical death. James 1:21 speaks of the saving of one’s life from defilement, destruction, and death of sin. The Word of God is able to save your life.

James 2 teaches justification by faith. James says, “And the Scripture was fulfilled, which says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness’” (Jas. 2:23). That is a quote from Genesis 15:6, the same verse, incidentally, which Paul uses to prove that justification is by faith (Gal. 3:6, Rom. 4:3).

James 2 also teaches justification by works. James says, “Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar?” (Jas. 2:21). That is a reference to Genesis 22:9, 12. In Genesis 15, Abraham was justified by faith. Years later, in Genesis 22, Abraham was justified by works when he offered Isaac on the altar. Justification by faith is *before God*. Paul says, “For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something of which to boast, *but not before God*” (Rom. 4:2, italics added). Justification by works is *before people* (“you see” in Jas. 2:22).

James concludes, “Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works, faith was made perfect?” (Jas. 2:22). In the case of Abraham, faith was *working together* with works to *perfect* faith. The Greek word translated “perfect” does not mean “without fault or flawless.” It means “full-grown, mature.” As Abraham worked, that is, as he offered Isaac on the altar, his faith grew and matured.

The point of James 2 is that if people have genuine faith in Christ and do not perform works, their faith is dead, that is, inactive. If, however, their faith is active, they will work and those works will mature their faith.

The New Testament teaches that believers *should* work, not that they will automatically work. Paul says, “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we *should* walk in them” (Eph. 2:10, italics added). Notice that Paul says, *should*, not *will* (see also Titus 3:8). When it comes to works, there are three “theological” opinions. Calvinism teaches that true believers *will* work and if they do not they were never saved. Arminianism teaches that believers *must* work and if they do not, they lose their salvation. True Grace teaches that believers *should* work and if they do not, they lose rewards.

Assurance of Salvation

The doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints makes it impossible to have the assurance of salvation. Think about it. If genuine saints persevere to the end and professing saints do not, it is impossible to know which one you are *until the end!* If the doctrine of

the Perseverance of the Saints is strictly applied (some Calvinists try to wiggle out of this problem), assurance is impossible. No one can know he or she is saved *until the end*.

I once had a conversation with a seminary professor who is a five-point Calvinist. I asked him point-blank if he knew for sure he was going to heaven. His answer to me was that he had every reason to believe that he had met all the conditions necessary. When I pressed him further, all he could say is, "I have every reason to believe that God is working in my life." No matter how hard I tried, I could not get him to say that he knew for sure that he was going to heaven. In other words, he was a consistent Calvinist.

To deny that assurance of salvation is possible now is to fly in the face of 1 John 5:13, which says, "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life."

Calvin taught that an unbeliever could have "temporary faith" (Lk. 8:13; Heb. 6:4-5), but Calvin did not go to the next step as those after him did and concluded that assurance was based on works produced by faith. "We shall not find assurance of our election in ourselves," Calvin wrote (*Institutes*, vol. 3, XXIV, 5). Kendall declares, "He (Calvin) thinks Christ's death is a sufficient pledge and merely seeing Him is assuring. Never does he employ 2 Peter 1:10 in connection with seeking assurance of salvation" (Kendall, p. 125). "Calvin constantly urges men not to look to themselves" (Kendall, p. 25). "If we want to know we're in the number of the elect, we must be persuaded that Christ died for us" (Kendall, p. 28).

Calvin wrote, "The election of God will be a fatal labyrinth for anyone who does not follow the clear road of faith. Thus, so that we may be confident of remission of sins, so that our conscience may rest in full confidence of eternal life, so that we may boldly call God our Father, under no circumstances must we begin by asking what God decreed concerning us before the world began. Rather we must begin by seeking what through His parental love He has revealed to us in Christ and what Christ himself daily proclaims to us through the gospel. We must seek nothing more profound than we become the sons of God" (Calvin, cited by Armstrong, p. 163).

Summary: The Bible does not teach that all true believers will endure to the end, nor that there is such a thing as false faith, nor that assurance of salvation is based on behavior.

There is a difference between the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints and the doctrine of Eternal Security. Both affirm that once people are saved, they will always be saved, but there is a significant difference between them. Perseverance says people who are genuinely saved will persevere in faith and, to some extent, in righteousness. Eternal Security says that once people are saved, they are saved regardless of how they may behave. The Bible teaches that not all believers endure to the end, but all believers are eternally secure (Jn. 5:24).

CONCLUSION

After summarizing Calvinism, permit me a few observations and a personal word.

Summary

The Name What is called “Calvinism” today began with Augustine in the fifth century, more than 1000 years before Calvin was born. Calvin adopted Augustine’s view of salvation. Calvinism was formalized and finalized at the Synod of Dort. Thus, the Canons of Dort are the five points of Calvinism (Calvinism is sometimes called “historic Calvinism,” “classic Calvinism,” “strict Calvinism,” “Hyper-Calvinism,” “extreme Calvinism,” etc.). Moderate Calvinism rejects Limited Atonement (the third point) and accepts the other four points. Historically Hyper-Calvinists practice their Calvinism to an extreme; most Calvinists do not.

The System Calvinism is built on their explanation of Total Depravity, which should be called Total Inability. Since unregenerate people are spiritually dead (remember the corpse in the casket), they are unable to believe, so God elects the ones who will be saved, send His Son to die for them (and no one else), regenerates them (which they cannot resist), gives them faith and perseverance. That is the simple explanation of Calvinism.

The Nuances Admittedly, there are many nuances within Calvinism that have not been discussed. For example, the relationship between being called and Irresistible Grace has not been discussed. To explain some of the passages that obviously speak about people resisting God’s call to be saved, Calvinists make a distinction between two kinds of calls, a general call and an effectual call. These are sometimes referred to as an outward call and an inward call. The idea is that the general or outward call is extended to all men and can be resisted, whereas the effectual or inward call cannot be resisted. To say the same thing another way, for the general or outward call to actually save someone, there must be an inward or effectual call. The problem with this concept is there is no biblical basis for it. Nowhere in the Scripture is there a distinction made between a general and an effective call. This is a theory imposed on the text instead of the truth naturally flowing from the text.

Calvinists differ from each other on some of the nuances within the system. They differ from each other on such things as coercion in Irresistible Grace and the possibility of the assurance of salvation, etc. It is not too much to say that, in some cases, they are “in hopeless disagreement among themselves” (Vance, p. 267).

Within Calvinism, there is a controversy over Lapsarianism. Lapsarianism is the theological theory that in eternity past, God made a decree that included such things as the election to salvation, the creation of man, the fall of man, and the atonement. The issue is the *order* of these items within the decree. The word “lapsus” is a Latin word that means “fall.” Thus the issue is, within the theoretical decree of God, what did He decree would happen *before* the Fall and what did He decree would happen *after* the Fall?

Supralapsarianism (“supra” comes from the Latin word “above”) is the doctrine that God decreed the election of some and the damnation of others *before* He decreed the Fall. This is a logical, not a temporal, distinction. This is the position of Double Predestination. The critics of this position say it makes God the author of sin and directly responsible for the damnation of the non-elect.

There is only one verse that could possibly be used to support Supralapsarianism, namely Ephesians 3:10. Ephesians 3:9 ends with the phrase “God who created all things through Jesus Christ.” Verse 10 begins with the phrase “to the intent that,” which in the Greek text introduces a purpose clause. Supralapsarians contend that verse 10 is teaching that the purpose of creation is redemption. Therefore, God decreed redemption, including salvation and damnation, before the decree to create and the decree for the Fall. In his commentary on Ephesians, Charles Hodge, a Calvinist theologian, points out this passage is saying Paul was given the grace to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ in order that the manifold wisdom of God might be made known through the church. Hodge concludes, “It is not the design of creation, but the design of the revelation of the mystery of redemption of which he is here speaking.”

Some Calvinists say that Calvin was a Supralapsarian. Other Calvinists argue Calvin was not a Supralapsarian, but Beza was. At any rate, Supralapsarianism was not incorporated in the Canons of Dort or the Westminster Confession (Vance, p. 289). Such Calvinist theologians as Charles Hodge, Dabney, and Shedd did not accept it. Very few today do. It is held almost exclusively today by the Protestant Reformed Church (Herman Hoeksema is a theologian in the Protestant Reformed Church). In 1926, The Protestant Reformed Church split from the Christian Reformed Church. They have about 28 congregations.

Infralapsarianism (“infra” comes from the Latin word “below”) is the view that *after* the decree of the Fall, God decreed the election of some and the damnation of others. Those who hold to infralapsarianism say God was passive in Double Predestination, that is, He actively elected some to salvation, but He simply passed by others, who would, therefore, be damned.

Sublapsarianism (both “infra” and “sub” mean “below”) is the theory that after God decreed the Fall and the atonement for all, He decreed the election of some and the damnation of others. This is the position of Unlimited Atonement.

Some theologians have too much time on their hands! I understand that the lapsarian controversy is logical. I also understand that it is the kind of thing the Scripture does not do.

Observations

A Logical System Calvinism is a theological system that is built on logic. Calvinists readily admit that Calvinism is a logical system such that if one point is proven wrong, the whole system collapses. Armstrong explains how this happened. He says that in contrast to Calvin, those who came after him were much more interested in metaphysics and systematization and thus were “preserving elements of the medieval scholasticism” (Armstrong, p. xix). Medieval scholasticism was a method of didactic reasoning in medieval universities. It used speculative tendencies and inferences to resolve contradictions. Armstrong concludes that Calvinism became “a narrower, more defensive, more intolerant, and more impervious system” (Armstrong, p. xix).

Observing that Protestant scholasticism is more of an attitude than a list of beliefs, Armstrong says it practically defies precise definition. At the same time, there are four more-or-less identifiable tendencies. 1) It is primarily a theological approach, “which asserts religious truth on the basis of deductive rationalization from given assumptions or

principles, thus producing a logically coherent and defensible system of belief.” 2) “Reason assumes at least equal standing with faith in theology, thus jettisoning some of the authority of [divine] Revelation.” 3) “The scriptural record contains a unified, rationally comprehensive account and thus may be formed into a definitive statement which may be used as a measuring stick to determine one’s orthodoxy.” 4) It has “a pronounced interest in metaphysical matters, in abstract, speculative thought, particularly with reference to the doctrine of God.” Armstrong concludes, “The strongly biblically and experientially-based theology of Calvin and Luther had, it is fair to say, been overcome by the metaphysics and deductive logic of a restored Aristotelianism” (Armstrong, p. 32).

Armstrong insists a proper appraisal of Calvin’s theological program shows a striking absence of the characteristics of Protestant scholasticism (Armstrong, p. 32). He cites Rist, who said for Calvin, “Christian doctrine is contained in the Holy Scriptures, not in dogmatics, and this is why theology can only be an echo of the biblical text, returning to it constantly but not permitted to add anything to it” (Armstrong p. 33). Luther struck out against Aristotle’s corrupting influence in theology, saying he was grieved “to the heart that this damned, conceited, rascally heathen with his false words deluded and made fools of so many” (Armstrong, p. 32-33).

Armstrong concludes that scholasticism, not Calvin’s theology, prevailed in reformed Protestantism (Armstrong, p. 37). Although a number of men who came after Calvin represented this divergence, it was probably Beza who was the most influential. Therefore, much of the blame for scholasticism in Reformed theology belongs to Beza. As was pointed out earlier, it was Beza who was responsible for Aristotelian philosophy being the basis of logic and moral philosophy in the curriculum at Geneva (Armstrong, p. 38).

Not a Scriptural System What the logical system of Five-Point Calvinism does to Scripture, the doctrine of salvation, and the place of God is tragic. In order to support this system of theology with Scripture, verse after verse is misinterpreted. Passage after passage is viewed through the theological system instead of the context of the passage. In exasperation over one such mishandling of Scripture, Geisler exclaims, “It is painful to watch the contorted logic” (Geisler, p. 193). Concerning the doctrine of limited atonement, Vance says it is “blatantly anti-Scriptural.” He adds, “Honest Calvinists even recognize the Bible appears to support an Unlimited Atonement in the majority of its text” (Vance, p. 406; he cites John Murray and A. A. Hodge).

Out of Balance Calvinism takes God’s part in salvation too far. By putting too much emphasis on God’s work in salvation, from a biblical point of view, it is out of balance. Truth exists in balance. There is one God who exists in a Trinity. To say there is one God to the exclusion of the Trinity is out of balance. Jesus is both God and man. To say that He is man to the exclusion of His deity is out of balance. God is sovereign, and man has free will. To say that God is sovereign to the exclusion of free will, which is what Calvinism does, is out of balance. Any doctrine out of balance is error.

In the final analysis, the Calvinistic view of the sovereignty of God, which is way out of balance, is the issue. They call their system of salvation “Sovereign Grace.” When Calvinists say that God is sovereign in salvation, they mean *everything* is an act of God’s sovereignty. God sovereignly elects. God sovereignly regenerates. God sovereignly gives the gift of faith. God sovereignly gives the gift of perseverance. In fact, although some Calvinists do not go this far, Calvinism is really built on the concept that God sovereignly controls *everything*. I know of the seminary professor who, standing before his class,

dropped a pencil and said it was ordained of God! Calvinists argue that if God foreknows, He must predetermine.

Furthermore, Calvinists argue that God must be sovereign in salvation in order for Him to be glorified. If you listen to Calvinists, you will discover they give glory to God. Practically, in a church service or in personal conversation, that is as it should be. The problem is that doctrinally they claim the only way God can get all the glory is if He does everything in salvation. For example, Hanko insists that “the truth of total depravity (he means Total Inability) is the only truth which preserves intact the glory of God” (Hanko, cited by Vance, page 233). The argument is that God designed it this way in order to prove it is all of Him and none of anyone else—so that He would get all the glory.

To glorify God is to reveal, show, and demonstrate what God is like. Jesus said, “He (the Holy Spirit) will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you” (Jn. 16:14; the word “for” indicates that the second half of the verse is the explanation for the first half). God is glorified in creating man with a free will, in sending His Son to die for the sins of the world, and in saving the ungodly by their faith apart from their works. All of this, and more, glorifies God because it reveals not just God’s sovereignty but also His justice, love, and grace. Calvinism exalts the sovereignty of God to such an extent that many conclude it distracts from, if not distorts, the place of the love of God. While it is true that God is sovereign, that is not His only characteristic. God is also loving, gracious, merciful, just, righteous, and holy. God is glorified in saving sinners not only by the fact that it demonstrates His sovereignty but also by the fact that it reveals His justice and grace. That is a balanced biblical view of God.

Personal Word

My Position Calvinists think that Calvinism is biblical Christianity. They think there is Calvinism (the correct biblical view) and everything else is Arminianism (heresy). The attitude of staunch Calvinists says to repudiate the Canons of Dort automatically makes one an Arminian is simply a manifestation of their ignorance.

Calvinists who read this study will conclude that I am an Arminian. I am clearly not a Five Point Calvinist, but neither would I call myself an Arminian. I do not believe that election is based on God knowing who would believe and I do not believe that believers can lose their salvation. Here is what I believe.

I believe in original sin (Adam’s sin affected the human race), that is, inherited sin (all humans inherit Adam’s sin nature), but I do not believe in imputed sin (Adam’s sin is placed directly on every human being so that they are guilty simply because Adam sinned).

I believe in Total Depravity; I do not believe in Total Inability.

I believe in unconditional, individual election. Election is based on foreknowledge, but the Bible does not indicate what it was that God foreknew other than the good pleasure of His own will.

I believe in Unlimited Atonement; I do not believe in Limited Atonement.

I believe the Holy Spirit *must* convict, enlighten, and draw people in order for them to be converted, but people can resist the Holy Spirit, or they can believe as a result of His work.

I believe faith precedes regeneration; I do not believe regeneration precedes faith.

I believe God commands believers to persevere; I do not believe that all believers do persevere to the end.

I believe in eternal security.

In other words, forgiveness is available to everyone, but people can refuse the offer. So God selects some and persuades them to accept His offer. It is like a governor pardoning everyone in prison. He sends his messenger to tell them the good news, but all the prisoners refuse to leave the prison. So, the governor personally goes to the prison and persuades some to leave. The governor manifested his mercy in issuing a pardon for all and shows his sovereignty by personally persuading some without violating their free choice to stay in prison.

Richard Montague (1577-1641) asserted that he was “neither an Arminian, nor a Calvinist, nor Lutheran, but a Christian.”

My Experience I have had several friends who were Five-Point Calvinists. They were good, godly, gracious men. I have also known Five-Point Calvinists, who were obnoxious. For them, Calvinism is not only a logical system; it is a rigid and intolerant system.

My Advice Obnoxious Calvinists need to heed what Paul says about not becoming obsessed with disputes: “If anyone teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which accords with godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing, but is obsessed with disputes and arguments over words, from which comes in the strife, railings, evil suspicions, useless wranglings of men of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth” (1 Tim. 6:3-5).

If you are not of the Five Points persuasion, Paul has a word for you too: “Avoid foolish and ignorant disputes, knowing that they generate strife. And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance so that they may know the truth and that they may come to their senses” (2 Tim. 2:23-26). Do not “strive about words to no profit to the ruin of the hearers” (2 Tim. 2:14). If need be, “From such withdraw yourself.” (1 Tim. 6:5).

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