

An Examination of Calvinism

During the Reformation period, John Calvin's extensive writings on the Reformed view of salvation came to be known as Calvinism. These teachings continue today in the Reformed churches across the world. We want to take a look at the basic tenets of Calvinism and compare them with Scripture. While there are some aspects of Calvinism which we do believe, there are other aspects which we reject because *we believe that Calvinist theology does not embrace all aspects of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We also believe that Calvinism excludes from its system biblical truth that is not compatible with its theological conclusions.*

We recognize that divine sovereignty and human responsibility are difficult for us to fully reconcile. Why does a sovereign God, at times, ask men to pray before He chooses to act? Why does He, at times, choose to limit Himself to the preaching of the Gospel—*how shall they hear without a preacher?* How does God decree the death of His Son from eternity and yet in the fullness of time hold men accountable for the wicked act of slaying Him (Acts 2:23)? **In other words, both divine sovereignty and human responsibility are clearly taught in Scripture; and we must believe both, even if we cannot fully understand how they logically relate to each other in every aspect.** God's ways are above our ways. Election is a biblical doctrine that God has given for our assurance of salvation, and yet it does not set aside our personal responsibility to repent, believe, and persevere in the Gospel.

Calvinism is often taught with a 5 point acrostic outline known as TULIP:

- 1. Total Depravity (or total inability)
- 2. Unconditional Election
- 3. Limited Atonement
- 4. Irresistible Grace
- 5. Perseverance of Saints

We want to examine that acrostic with Scripture.

1. Total Depravity (or total inability)

Calvinists believe that man is totally depraved by sin and that sin has infected all aspects of body, soul, and spirituality. Man in his sinful state cannot on his own strength make any righteous choices or live righteously. We agree on these points.

From this premise Calvinists try to "logically conclude" that God must sovereignly choose to save someone, and then He must miraculously regenerate him so that he has the ability to believe the Gospel. They teach that it is impossible for a sinner to believe unless he is first born again. In other words, the elect are born again by God's election even before they believe the Gospel. That is an unscriptural theological conclusion.

The Scriptures teach that faith precedes regeneration. *“But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God”* (John 1:12). When we receive Christ by faith we receive power to become a son of God (new birth). We receive Christ by faith in order to become a child of God (Galatians 3:26). Ephesians 2:8 declares that we are saved by grace through faith. We agree that the ability to believe is a gift from God; but personal faith is the vehicle by which we receive God’s saving grace; therefore, faith precedes salvation. Calvinists reject the biblical order of faith preceding regeneration because it does not fit within their theological framework of total depravity and unconditional election.

We believe that God has graciously given all humans the *ability* and the *responsibility* to believe in spite of their depravity. Christ was the Light who lights everyone that comes into the world (John 1:9). The light of Christ gives us the understanding and ability to believe the Gospel. The grace of God which brings salvation appears to all men and teaches them (Titus 2:11-15). The Holy Spirit reproves the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment showing sinners their error (John 16:8-11). Christ was lifted up from the earth that He might powerfully attract all men to Himself (John 12:32).

So while we agree that man is totally depraved, and that without divine aid sinners cannot believe; we also believe the Scriptures testify that God has given all people sufficient grace to believe and be saved. We are given the light of Christ, the teaching of grace, the Holy Spirit’s conviction of sin, and the attraction of Christ on the Cross to Himself. **We believe all the truth concerning sin and grace! If you need God’s grace, reach out to Him in faith and receive it; because He has already provided free access to salvation!**

2. Unconditional Election

Calvinists define unconditional election as God’s choice to save the elect which is made without any regard for human merit or action. On the other hand, conditional election would indicate that there are some requirements that humans need to meet in the foreknowledge of God in order to be chosen by God to salvation. Calvinists believe that God simply chooses some to salvation and passes others by, or deliberately predestines some to damnation.

We also believe there are unconditional aspects of election and salvation in that it is offered freely with no regard to human merit. We believe that God makes the plans for nations and plans for our personal lives without consulting us for our agreement, as is clearly illustrated in Romans 9.

However, we also believe that there are conditional aspects of election—because we are told to make our calling and election sure. We are told that if we persevere in the Christian virtues we will never fall away and lose our salvation; but if we neglect these things we will be blinded (2 Peter 1:1-11). It is certain that we cannot make our election any stronger than what God has already made it through Jesus Christ. However we are to give diligence to make our election sure in our personal lives. By living in godly virtue we are assured of our election and have an abundant entrance opened to us. To be ungodly is to be unsure and to walk in darkness. God will not extend the surety of His election to us when living in doubt, unbelief or ungodliness. Our faith does not increase the surety of God’s elective power to save us; but it is the requirement that God has made in order for us to be personally assured of experiencing it.

When the Calvinist asserts that God unconditionally chooses all things regarding salvation and damnation, then it would follow that the decrees of God are the root of sin. Even if they believe that God merely passes some sinners by without giving them grace to believe, it would still be God's decree to withhold grace which keeps the sinner from believing.

Consider Adam and Eve and their choice to sin before they had a fallen nature. Did God choose for them to sin or did they choose to sin? Why would God tell them not to eat, and then choose to have them eat, and then punish them for a choice which He had ultimately made for them? In some things God's sovereign choice is that we would have the opportunity and ability to choose. *"Choose you this day whom ye will serve"* (Joshua 24:15). God chose to give Israel the *ability* and *responsibility* to choose. His overall plan for Israel was unconditional, but He chose for it to be conditionally appropriated by personal choices of the people.

We believe in both the unconditional and the conditional aspects of election because we believe all of God's Word. If you want to know if God has chosen you to salvation, choose Him—and you will find that He has already chosen you. He will give you the assurance of His election if you will choose by faith to serve Christ!

3. Limited Atonement

Calvinists believe that Jesus only died for the elect—that portion of the human race whom God had chosen to save. We agree that the atonement only saves those who believe; but we also believe that it is a propitiation, not for our sins only, but also for the sin of the whole world. Not only is it sufficient, but it truly is the propitiation of the sins of the whole world. The sinner is not lost because Jesus' sacrifice was not offered on their behalf; rather, they are lost because they do not accept the propitiation that was made for their sins (1 John 2:2).

This point is really the hinge pin of Calvinism because in order to be a Calvinist, you "must" believe that Jesus only died to save the elect. How the atonement is defined determines how election is understood. The Calvinists say the "all phrases" in Scripture with reference to the atonement mean "all the elect" or "all races" or "all classes of men;" but not truly "all" in a comprehensive universal sense. They point to some examples in Scripture where "all" is used in a qualified sense. We agree that "all" can be used in a qualified sense to only refer to all of a certain class of people. However it is evident that when referring to the scope of the atonement "all" truly means "all" in a comprehensive sense. The same words "all" which describe the scope of depravity also describe the extent of the atonement in an equivalent comparison.

Notice these Scriptures:

*"All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned **every one** to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us **all**"* (Isaiah 53:6).

*"Therefore as by the offence of one judgment came upon **all** men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon **all** men unto justification of life"* (Romans 5:18).

*"For God hath concluded them **all** in unbelief, that he might have mercy upon **all**"* (Romans 11:32).

*“For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for **all**, then were **all** dead” (2 Corinthians 5:14).*

These verses are not hard to understand. We believe the Calvinistic view of the atonement is a compromise of clear and simple Bible truth that declares a universal atonement. When the clear and simple truths are compromised we can see how an intricate system of theology can be appealing. Just like Satan with Eve, once the clear command not to eat was set aside, it was easy to engage in rationalization about the benefits of eating forbidden fruit.

To limit the scope of the atonement to the elect is to make grace more limited than the universal scope of sin. Wherever sin abounds, grace does much more abound (Romans 5:20). Calvinists have made many different arguments for limited atonement, but I’ve yet to read one good argument against the clear and simple message of these verses—that Jesus died for all. If “all” in the above verses means all have sinned, then it follows that “all” defines the scope of the atonement. It is an error to define election in such a way as to set aside the clear Scriptures which teach that the atonement was made on behalf of all who were lost. We would say verses such as these are simply the destruction of the Calvinistic view of the atonement and unconditional election.

Jesus was the propitiation for the sin of the whole world that all may be saved. If you wonder if Jesus really died for you, ask yourself if you are sinner. If you are a sinner, then by faith receive the propitiation that was made for the sin of the whole world.

4. Irresistible Grace

Calvinists teach that those whom God elects to salvation will be irresistibly drawn to Him. The sinful nature of the elect is subdued by the will of God and they are made willing to come to Christ. Those whom God has chosen to save are irresistibly drawn by His grace to salvation.

We agree that it is the grace of God which subdues our stubborn will and makes us willing. But we also believe that God’s Word commands all men everywhere to repent and believe the Gospel—even those who reject it. We agree that God uses more extreme measures to save some than others. He struck Paul down to bring him to salvation. He sent a whale to recover Jonah. He ordained twelve Apostles and kept them all except for Judas that the Scripture might be fulfilled. However, this does not mean that God’s grace has never been resisted by others in Scripture. Nor does it mean that God always uses extreme or irresistible measures that He used with some. God does not use a blinding light to bring all to salvation, nor does He use a whale to recover every backslider. The cases of coming and returning to Christ in Scripture are varied.

The fact that some won’t come is not because God has not chosen to draw them, but because they have chosen to resist God’s call. God stretched out His hands all day to a disobedient and gainsaying Israel (Romans 10:21) that He had saved out of Egypt (Jude 1:5), and in the end they resisted His grace because of their unbelief, and their carcasses fell in the wilderness (Hebrews 3:17-19). The Jews of Jesus’ day resisted being gathered to Christ as a hen would gather her chicks. Stephen told these same Jews that they always resist the Holy Ghost just like their fathers did. God was willing and they were not, and God chose to let them resist Him.

Again, we believe the whole Bible: we see where God has used more extreme measures to irresistibly draw some people and make them willing, and we also see where He has chosen to allow others to make a choice in unbelief against His sincere desire to save them. The fact that God uses more extreme measures to draw some does not mean that He damns the rest or that Jesus has not died for their salvation. All those who have heard the Gospel and are lost have chosen to resist the grace of God which was drawing them. If they had opened their hearts to grace and come to the Father and said, "Make me as one of your servants," God would have made each one a chosen child.

If you sense the need to be drawn to God and the need for your heart to be made willing—He can do that for you. He can take out the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. Open your heart to God's grace and you will find that it is sufficient to overcome all obstacles to your salvation.

5. Perseverance of Saints

Calvinists believe that all those who have been elected to salvation will persevere in their walk with the Lord and be preserved from falling away. Because they are chosen by God and irresistibly drawn and saved it is impossible for someone to fall away from the faith if God has chosen to save them. The classic Calvinist does not believe that a person can be saved and continue living in sin; rather they believe that if a person is saved, though he may fall into sin at times, he will never fall away completely from God and lose his salvation, but will persevere in faith unto the end.

We would agree that all who will be saved will persevere and endure unto the end. We also believe that saints do not lose their salvation as soon as they fall into sin, even if they repeatedly fall into sin or struggle against sin all their lives. We also believe the Spirit strives with us and in us to recover us from error to keep us from falling away from the faith and into perdition.

However we also see a clear example of apostasy and a final falling away with many in the nation of Israel whom God had saved out of Egypt. After starting out in faith, they eventually resisted God's mercy and persisted in unbelief. As a result they could not inherit the Promised Land and were destroyed in the wilderness. Jude 1:5 says God destroyed those who after being saved were fallen into unbelief. This was after being baptized in the cloud and the sea and drinking from the Rock which was Christ (1 Corinthians 10:1-13). There are individual cases that could be examined in Scripture, but the case of Israel is a very clear example where apostasy and destruction happened on a large scale. It is also clear from 1 Corinthians 10 that God always provides a way to resist temptation and overcome it. Israel did not apostatize because they were reprobates whom God rejected. Rather, they became reprobates because they rejected God's hand which was stretched out to them. They did not seek God's way to escape temptation; instead, they allowed themselves to be overcome by temptation.

We see this repeated in Romans 9:4—they were given the covenant promises; but many would reject the Gospel of Christ and die in unbelief. What covenant promises could they have been given unless God sincerely offered them salvation? The promises of God did contain their salvation. Yet they fell away after being given those promises.

Israel is given as a warning that we can fall away if we repeatedly resist the grace of God. At the same time we can see that their final fall did not come just by falling into sin, as they were recovered numerous times. Their final fall came by repeatedly resisting God's grace and ultimately rejecting His promises in their unbelief. They could not enter into Canaan because of their stubborn refusal to believe God's Word that Canaan was their promised inheritance, and that with God's help they could subdue all their enemies in spite of their weakness and many failures.

If you feel uncertain about your election or persevering to the end, reject that doubt before it becomes unbelief, and by faith believe that God "is able to keep you from falling and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy" (Jude 1:24).

There is much about the sovereignty and grace of God that we do not know. However, the Scriptures clearly reveal that God has graciously provided His Son as a propitiation for the sins of the whole world, so that whosoever will may partake of the water of life freely. Today is your day of salvation, for tomorrow may be too late. Do not harden your heart by resisting the voice of the Spirit one more day. God is graciously offering salvation to all who are willing to receive it.

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