

CALVINISM AND BAPTISTS TODAY

Introduction

Calvinism is the vision of the Christian faith taught by John Calvin, the sixteenth century Protestant reformer. Naturally Calvin held many beliefs in common with all Christians, such as that God is the Creator, that human beings have sinned, that Christ is the savior, and so on.

Usually what is meant by *Calvinism (Reformed theology)* is a group of beliefs that were held by Calvin but that are not held by all Christians. The principal one of these beliefs is predestination. Calvin believed that God sovereignly ordains (wills, decrees, determines, controls) everything that happens; in particular, God sovereignly predestines whether or not each person will be saved. God does this without reference to God's foreknowledge of how each person will respond to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Calvinists believe that their vision is taught in Scripture. Apart from Scripture, they say that the best early expression of God's sovereign predestination was that given by Augustine. The Roman Catholic Church agreed with Augustine, though it did not follow his ideas strictly. The medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas and the reformer Martin Luther also agreed with Augustine.

Calvinism (Reformed theology) has many strengths. Calvinists are devout Christians. Calvinism is a sophisticated theological vision. It is supportive of humility, piety, and worship. It has considerable support in the Bible. It is compatible with Christian experience. Calvinists have made enormous contributions to the church and to the world.

Calvinism is not just a Presbyterian belief. Many Christians of varied denominations hold to its teachings. Charles Haddon Spurgeon, a Baptist was a Calvinist.

Some of the greatest soul winners in history have been adherents of Calvinism. Examples would be: Charles Spurgeon, Dr. D. James Kennedy, George Whitfield, and Jonathan Edwards. The most used evangelistic materials in history, "Evangelism Explosion", were created by a Calvinist, Dr. D. James Kennedy.

Calvinism among the Baptists

The first Baptists were English citizens living in the Netherlands. In 1608-09 their pastor, John Smyth, baptized himself and then his followers. These Baptists knew about Calvinism which was then the dominant view in the church in the Netherlands, and they issued official statements opposing Calvinism. They continued to oppose Calvinism when they returned to England a few years later.

For at least twenty-five years no Baptists were Calvinists, but after Calvinism came into Baptist life in the 1630s it grew rapidly. This was true in America as well as in England.

Most of the men who founded the Southern Baptist Convention in 1845 were Calvinists. However, for the last century the majority of Southern Baptists have not been Calvinists.

There is a movement, The Founders Ministries, which works to restore Calvinism to Southern Baptist life. In their work they draw on the writings of earlier Calvinistic Baptists such as John Gill, John L. Dagg, James P. Boyce, and Charles Haddon Spurgeon.

Calvinism is being re-introduced into Baptist churches throughout the South. With occasional exceptions this is done by pastors who are committed to the Calvinistic vision.

Calvinism is being promoted effectively on college campuses by groups such as the Reformed University Fellowship and Campus Outreach.

Today there are many excellent champions of Calvinism, among them Baptists such as John MacArthur, Jr. and John Piper, and many other non-Baptists such as J. I. Packer and R. C. Sproul.

The Five Points of Calvinism

A popular summary of Calvinistic beliefs is one that was worked out at the Synod of Dort held in Holland in 1618-1619. One reason for its popularity is that in English its five points can be presented by means of the acronym TULIP: total depravity, unconditional election (predestination), limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints. In fact, the sequence followed at Dort was ULTIP: unconditional predestination, limited atonement, total depravity, irresistible grace, and perseverance.

Total Depravity:

Sin has affected all parts of man. The heart, emotions, will, mind, and body are all affected by sin. We are completely sinful. We are not as sinful as we could be, but we are completely affected by sin.

The doctrine of Total Depravity is derived from scriptures that reveal human character: Man's heart is evil (Mark 7:21-23) and sick (Jer. 17:9). Man is a slave of sin (Rom. 6:20). He does not seek for God (Rom. 3:10-12). He cannot understand spiritual things (1 Cor. 2:14). He is at enmity with God (Eph. 2:15). And, is by nature a child of wrath (Eph. 2:3). The Calvinist asks the question, "In light of the scriptures that declare man's true nature as being utterly lost and incapable, how is it possible for anyone to choose or desire God?" The answer is, "He cannot. Therefore God must predestine."

Calvinism also maintains that because of our fallen nature we are born again not by our own will but God's will (John 1:12-13); God grants that we believe (Phil. 1:29); faith is the work of God (John 6:28-29); God appoints people to believe (Acts 13:48); and God predestines (Eph. 1:1-11; Rom. 8:29; 9:9-23).

Unconditional Election:

God does not base His election on anything He sees in the individual. He chooses the elect according to the kind intention of His will (Eph. 1:4-8; Rom. 9:11) without any consideration of merit within the individual. Nor does God look into the future to see who would pick Him. Also, as some are elected into salvation, others are not (Rom. 9:15, 21).

Limited Atonement:

Jesus died only for the elect. Though Jesus' sacrifice was sufficient for all, it was not efficacious for all. Jesus only bore the sins of the elect. Support for this position is drawn from such scriptures as Matt. 26:28 where Jesus died for 'many'; John 10:11, 15 which say that Jesus died for the sheep (not the goats, per Matt. 25:32-33); John 17:9 where Jesus in prayer interceded for the ones given Him, not those of the entire world; Acts 20:28 and Eph. 5:25-27 which state that the Church was purchased by Christ, not all people; and Isaiah 53:12 which is a prophecy of Jesus' crucifixion where he would bore the sins of many (not all).

Irresistible Grace:

When God calls his elect into salvation, they cannot resist. God offers to all people the gospel message. This is called the external call. But to the elect, God extends an internal call and it cannot be resisted. This call is by the Holy Spirit who works in the hearts and minds of the elect to bring them to repentance and regeneration whereby they willingly and freely come to God. Some of the verses used in support of this teaching are Romans 9:16 where it says that "*it is not of him who wills nor of him who runs, but of God who has mercy*"; Philippians 2:12-13 where God is said to be the one working salvation

in the individual; John 6:28-29 where faith is declared to be the work of God; Acts 13:48 where God appoints people to believe; and John 1:12-13 where being born again is not by man's will, but by God's.

Perseverance of the Saints:

You cannot lose your salvation. Because the Father has elected, the Son has redeemed, and the Holy Spirit has applied salvation, those thus saved are eternally secure. They are eternally secure in Christ. Some of the verses for this position are John 10:27-28 where Jesus said His sheep will never perish; John 6:47 where salvation is described as everlasting life; Romans 8:1 where it is said we have passed out of judgment; 1 Corinthians 10:13 where God promises to never let us be tempted beyond what we can handle; and Phil. 1:6 where God is the one being faithful to perfect us until the day of Jesus' return.

Calvinism and the Bible

Concerning the Bible, many Calvinists claim that their view is the only biblical view, and many non-Calvinists claim that their view is the only biblical view. These claims lead to a stalemate.

Non-Calvinist passages:

John 3:16-18... "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. NIV

1 Tim 2:1-4... "I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone- 2 for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. 3 This is good, and pleases God our Savior, 4 who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth." NIV

Rom 10:13... "for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." NIV

Many more could be cited.

Calvinist passages:

Eph 1:3-6... "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. 4 For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love 5 he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will- 6 to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves." NIV

Rom 8:29-30... "For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. 30 And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified." NIV

Eph 1:11-12... "In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, 12 in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory." NIV

Many more could be cited.

It seems to me that the situation is actually as follows. There are many biblical passages that, taken at face value, teach Calvinism; a classic example is Romans 9; let us call these the C (Calvinistic) passages. There also are many biblical passages that, taken at face value, teach against Calvinism; a classic example is 1 Timothy 2:1-6; let us call these the B (non-Calvinist) passages.

Calvinists naturally take the C passages at face value, and they then interpret (= offer a meaning other than the face value meaning) the B passages. Non-Calvinists naturally do the reverse; they take the B passages at face value, and they interpret (= offer a meaning other than the face value meaning) the C passages.

Since this is what is actually happening, it is natural to ask, "What leads Calvinists to take the C passages at face value, and what leads non-Calvinists to take the B passages at face value?" The answer seems to be that Calvinists are guided by their understanding of the sovereignty of God to take the C passages at face value, and non-Calvinists are guided by their understanding of the love of God to take the B passages at face value.

What Are We To Believe?

First, we acknowledge that both Calvinist believers and Non-Calvinist believers are Christians who share many beliefs in common. Many of these beliefs are more important than the beliefs about which they differ.

Second, we acknowledge that there are passages in the Bible that, taken at face value, seem to support both the Calvinist and non-Calvinist view. We must live with this. If we had all the answers, we would not need to trust God. Many things that make sense to our infinite, Almighty God may not make perfect sense to finite, limited, human beings like ourselves (see Ecclesiastes 7:1-6).

Third, both Calvinists and non-Calvinists agree that since we do not know who will respond to the Gospel, we must share the Gospel with all who will give the message a hearing. Both Calvinists and non-Calvinists completely agree that the Great Commission is the main business that all Christians are called to fulfill.

Matthew 28:18-20... "Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." NIV

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