

Calvinism Critiqued by a Former Calvinist*

Part Two

STEVE JONES

II. UNCONDITIONAL ELECTION

The Calvinist tells us that man has no ability at all to cry out to God for His mercy. All humanity, therefore, will certainly perish apart from a forceful intervention from heaven. There is no hope whatsoever that man's will, ever at enmity with his Maker, can submit to the gospel. God must reach out and change the man into a new creature who can will to do right. And there is no necessity laid upon God that He must thus intervene in the lives of all of humanity, the Calvinist reasons.

God has decided, before the beginning of time, whom He will save with this "effectual call" and whom He will leave to suffer ruin. This is the doctrine commonly called Unconditional Election. The teaching has a "flip side," Reprobation, which holds that God also foreordains the damnation of the non-elect.

There are many texts which speak of God's choice of His people. Here lies the strength of Calvinism. God chose Israel, irrespective of merit or status (Deut. 7:7, 8). He chose Jacob over Esau before either "had done anything good or bad" (Rom. 9:11-13).

When the Apostles preached to the Gentiles, "all who were appointed for eternal life believed" (Acts 13:48). Paul said that God "chose us in him before the creation of the world" and "predestined us to be adopted as his

* All Scripture references are from the New International Version unless otherwise indicated.

sons" (Eph. 1:4, 5). In the garden, Jesus did not pray for the world, "but for those you [the Father] have given me, for they are yours" (John 17:9).

1. Arminian Election

Classical Arminianism tends to base God's selection of His people upon foreseen faith.

He looks down the corridors of time, sees who will believe the gospel, and chooses them. I have never been satisfied with this view. Scripture does not say that God chose us because He knew we would choose Him. That would certainly be no choice at all on the part of God.

The biblical term "foreknowledge" offers no support to the "foreseen faith" view. While it is clear that God knew us and loved us before the world was, it in no way means that He noted our future faith and chose us because of it. The Scriptures never tell us such things and we should not assume them simply to oppose Calvinism.

Another attempt to explain election asserts a kind of vague, "corporate" election. In other words, God chose to have a people, a Church, but has not chosen the *individuals* who are to compose that company. That seems to be a very stilted and unsatisfactory approach. In Romans 9, God's choice of Jacob over Esau was very personal. In Revelation 17:8, there is mention of specific *names* "written in the book of life from the creation of the world." There is nothing nebulous or "nameless" about election.

Others say that God only elects us to special service, as Christ chose his twelve Apostles. Election, they say, does not pertain to salvation *per se*. But Paul, writing to the Thessalonians, told them that God had chosen them "to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth" (2 Thess. 2:13). Evidently, election is unto salvation, not just to specific ministries.

2. Election a Mystery

Divine election is clearly a Bible doctrine. It no more belongs to the Calvinist than to anyone else. It is really a part of the larger scriptural theme of the sovereignty of God, found everywhere in both Testaments. God sets up and deposes rulers (Ps. 75:6, 7), operates the forces of nature (Job 37), overrules evil for good (Gen. 50:20) and has "determined the times set for them [the nations of men] and the exact places where they should live" (Acts 17:26).

Dewey makes no metaphysical distinction between the election of grace and the election of mundane affairs of life. All are the result of divine sovereignty, which is past finding out.

The apostle says that Christians are “predestinated according to the purpose of him, *who worketh all things, after the counsel of his own will.*” If this be true, then *everything* is a matter of divine counsel; *everything* is disposed of by election. And men are as much elected to be philosophers, merchants, or inhabitants of this country or that country, as they are elected to be Christians. If this is election, I believe there will be found no difficulty in it; save what exists in that inscrutableness of the subject, which must forbid our expecting ever to fathom it.¹

Election is true, but is shrouded in deep mystery. It is one of the secret things that belong to the Lord our God (Deut. 29:29). Calvinists and Arminians both err when they make precise statements about the nature of election. God has not told us whether there are conditions attached to it and we should not venture into it with such bold assertions.

The Calvinist, however, does need to temper his view of election with the clearly revealed truth in Ezekiel 18:23: “Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked?” declares the Sovereign Lord. “Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?” Too often, we hear Calvinists say that the damnation of the non-elect is “the good pleasure of His will.” But here, God states explicitly that He takes no pleasure in damning anyone *but prefers that they turn from sin and live*. How this idea fits into the Calvinist scheme is not at all clear.

Nor is it clear, from a Calvinistic standpoint, why Jesus should weep over Jerusalem in Matthew 23:37:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.

This poses a thorny difficulty for the Calvinist. First of all, he must assume that the reprobation of Jerusalem was “the good pleasure” of the Father. If that is so, why was it so displeasing and heartrending to Jesus,

¹ Orville Dewey, *Discourses and Reviews upon Questions in Controversial Theology and Practical Religion*, New York: Charles S. Francis, 1873, Vol. III, 99.

who was always in agreement with the divine will? Shouldn't Jesus have also been “pleased” with the Father's reprobation of these people?

Secondly, Jesus is here attributing the lost condition of Jerusalem to *her own unwillingness*, not the want of election. Jesus was willing to receive them but they were unwilling. This seems to contradict the confident assertions of Calvinists about Unconditional Election.

So what doctrine do we put in the place of the Calvinist's Unconditional Election? Do we opt for one of the many Arminian forms of election? Tempting as that may be, I must now settle on the mysterious Biblical Election, the details of which have not been fully disclosed as we look into our “glass, darkly.” Perhaps further theological works by thoughtful Christians will reveal a more satisfactory resting place for our convictions.

III. PARTICULAR REDEMPTION

This title is to be preferred to the often-used “limited atonement.” In fairness to Calvinists, they usually do not place the emphasis on a limitation of the atonement, but on its power to save infallibly all who are comprehended by it. The idea is this: If Jesus died for you, you will be saved. There is no chance that you will not be saved. Berkhof writes:

The atonement not only made salvation possible for the sinner, but actually secured it . . . the Calvinist teaches that the atonement meritoriously secured the application of the work of redemption to those for whom it was intended and this rendered their complete salvation certain.²

But the Scriptures do mention certain people who are in danger of perishing, *even though Christ died for them*. Peter wrote of false teachers who were “even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves” (2 Pet. 2:1). Here were men “bought” who, nevertheless, had made shipwreck of their faith.

Paul urges the Romans, “Do not by your eating *destroy* your brother for whom Christ died” (Rom. 14:15). This does not seem to fit the Calvinist view of redemption, which makes destruction impossible for all objects of Christ's cross-work.

² L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949, 393.

Still, the main point of contention for many is the scope of Calvary, the individuals for whom it was intended. Calvinists say Jesus made a vicarious atonement for the elect and the elect only. Arminians claim that Christ died to make full atonement for every human being on the earth. The debate over universal and limited atonement has been hot for centuries.

Universal vs. Limited Atonement

Some Calvinists will argue that a universal principle does exist in the atonement. The death of Christ, they say, has secured many non-redemptive benefits for mankind in general. This they frequently sum up under the heading of “common grace.” Boettner writes:

God makes His sun to shine on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust. Many temporal blessings are thus secured for all men, although these fall short of being sufficient to insure salvation.³

Where do the Scriptures ever state that temporal blessings in the natural realm—sunshine, rain, etc.—were secured for mankind by Christ’s death? There is not a shred of evidence for this idea; it is entirely philosophical and conjectural.

In the debate over the extent of the atonement, Calvinists will point to Scriptures connecting Christ’s death to a specific people: his sheep (John 10:11); his friends (John 15:13); “many” (Heb. 9:28). Arminians will produce passages indicating that Jesus died for the “whole world” (1 John 2:2); “all” (2 Cor. 5:15); “every man” (Heb. 2:9).

These texts can be harmonized when we consider that the redemptive benefits of Christ’s death are both *specific* and *universal*. God has placed the life-giving fountain of Christ’s blood in *his Church*. Our Lord “loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Eph. 5:25). The Church was “bought with his own blood” (Acts 20:28). That makes the atonement of Christ specific; it was for his Church.

But the atonement is universal in the sense that the Church’s gates are wide open to “everyone who calls” (Rom. 10:13), to “him who is thirsty” (Rev. 21:6), to “all you who are weary and burdened” (Matt. 11:28). The invitation to believe, be baptized and enter the Church extends to “every

³ Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957, 160.

tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9). In that sense, the atonement is universal and available to all.

Or, looking at it another way, Christ’s blood is “the blood of the covenant” (Matt. 26:28). Jesus died for those *in the covenant of grace*, not for those outside of it. Is that fatalism? Not at all. Anyone may enter that covenant by becoming a Christian. It is open-ended. The atonement, therefore, is both limited and universal. It is both specific and general.

IV. EFFICACIOUS GRACE

Few Christians would deny the work of the Holy Spirit in conversion. The sweet influences of God upon sinners are sometimes sudden. A text of Scripture, a gospel sermon, an act of kindness can come alive at once to melt the heart with supernatural force. We read in Scripture of God giving people new hearts to serve Him, or turning people to Himself. He opens eyes and ears. Lydia had her heart “opened” by the Lord to give heed to Paul’s message (Acts 16:14).

However, the Calvinistic doctrine of Efficacious Grace stretches far beyond the figures of speech in Scripture. Efficacious Grace, we are told, is an immediate, miraculous transformation of a man’s nature. In an instant, the totally depraved sinner—who has been unable and unwilling to make the slightest move toward God—is given a new nature. He is born again unto a life he never sought and never desired.

This is a logical necessity of Total Inability. Man cannot believe; therefore, God must act upon him and bestow a new capacity. God must regenerate the passive, spiritually oblivious man before he can even accept the gospel. The Westminster Confession defines it:

All those whom God has predestined unto life, and those only, He is pleased in His appointed and accepted time, effectually to call, by His Word and Spirit, out of that state of death, in which they are by nature, to grace and salvation by Jesus Christ; enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly, to understand the things of God; taking away their heart of stone and giving them a heart of flesh; renewing their wills, and by His almighty power determining them to that which is good; and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ, yet so as they come most freely, being made willing by His grace (Chapter X, Section 1, 2).

Boettner believes the “inner call” is so swift that the sinner is not even aware of this miraculous change:

It is an instantaneous change from spiritual death to spiritual life. It is not even a thing of which we are conscious at the moment it occurs, but rather something which lies lower than consciousness.⁴

The Calvinistic doctrine leaves many questions unanswered. First of all, we must ask where the Scriptures ever teach that God must regenerate a man’s nature before he can believe. While this is consistent with Total Inability, it does not seem to be a truth revealed in the Bible with any consistency. Did God have to grant Abraham a new nature before he could make the decision to leave Ur of the Chaldees? Was the call to faith “irresistible”? If so, it seems peculiar that the Bible would praise his faith. Abraham could certainly not be commended for something in which he was wholly passive.

1. The New Birth, Conversion

The authors of Scripture attribute the new birth to the hearing of the Word, not an instantaneous act that precedes faith: “He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures” (Jas. 1:18). “For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God” (1 Pet. 1:23).

Jesus spoke of being “born from above” or “born again” in John 3. Speaking to Nicodemus, he said, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again” (v. 3). Calvinists will tell us that man is as passive in the new birth as an infant is in literal birth. Charles Hodge writes, “At birth the child enters upon a new state of existence. Birth is not its own act. It is born. . . . The Scriptures teach that it is thus in regeneration.”⁵ But figures of speech should not be pressed into the service of theology in this way. The context of John 3 would indicate that man is *not* passive in the new birth.

In verse 5, still on the subject, Jesus says, “no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.” Evidently, being “born of water and the Spirit” is the same thing as being “born again.” Birth of water seems to indicate Christian baptism (alternative

⁴ *Ibid.*, 165.

⁵ *Ibid.*

interpretations here are extremely tenuous). But a person entering into New Testament baptism is anything but passive.

The new birth, then, is the transformation of a person’s status through the hearing of the Word, the reception of the Spirit and submission to Christian baptism. These things usher the believer into the Christian community and give him a new beginning, a new identity. He is no longer who he used to be. He is born anew.

The conversion of Lydia (Acts 16:14) does not prove the Calvinist’s point. God was not opening the heart of a totally depraved rebel. She was already “a worshipper of God,” not a so-called “spiritual corpse.”

John 6:44

The words of Jesus in John 6:44 are often appealed to as a proof of God’s “invincible call”: “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.” This is supposed to teach that man is in a state of inability, one that only a miracle can overcome. The “drawing” here is assumed, without any exegetical necessity, to be the work of Efficacious Grace renewing the sinner so he can — and ultimately will — believe the gospel.

Just what is the “drawing” of which Christ speaks? Calvinists make much of the Greek word, *helkuo*, which conveys the idea of “dragging.” That seems, however, to run counter to what they often make pains to teach: that the sinner, once renewed, comes willingly.

John 6:44 must be understood in the light of verse 45: “It is written in the Prophets, ‘They will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me.” Here the sinner comes to Christ by listening to the Father, not by passively experiencing Efficacious Grace.

3. A Change of Heart

Passages that speak of God changing a man’s heart or giving a new one do not necessarily teach the Calvinist doctrine. It is not uncommon for the Scripture to speak of man’s inability to do things without the divine influence; yet this does not make man wholly passive. For example, in Psalm 127:1 we read: “Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchmen guard in vain.”

Solomon is not saying that man is passive and cannot erect a house until God supernaturally removes an inability toward building. This is figura-

tive speech conveying man's dependence upon his God in all things. No one would think of contriving a metaphysical dogma that man is dead to building homes or guarding cities.

Man needs a heart toward God and righteousness. Sometimes the Bible tells us that God changes the heart, sometimes that man must change it. Both things are true. One text is looking at conversion from the divine perspective, the other, from the human.

The Calvinist may find support in Deuteronomy 30:6: "The Lord your God will *circumcise your hearts* and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live." But in Jeremiah 4:4 we read: "Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, *circumcise your hearts*, you men of Judah and people of Jerusalem." One text speaks from the divine side, the other, the human.

Accordingly, the Psalmist asks that his heart might be inclined by God toward keeping the commandments (Psalm 119:36). Later on in the same Psalm, the writer says that he had inclined his own heart to do this (v. 112). Neither statement was intended to formulate a tenet of theology. They are simply two perspectives on the same subject.

V. FINAL PERSEVERANCE

The Calvinist believes that once quickened by Efficacious Grace, the believer can never fall away. The change effected on the sinner is permanent. The Westminster Confession says:

They whom God hath accepted in His Beloved, effectually called and sanctified by His Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace; but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved (Chapter XVII, Section 1).

This is one of the most passionately debated of the Five Points. The various arguments for and against this view are many and would take us far beyond the scope of this article. One hindrance to seeing the issue clearly is the tendency of many Christians to see salvation primarily as a past event. Hence, it is common to hear people ask, "When were you saved?" Scripture sometimes puts salvation in the past tense (Luke 7:50). Usually, however, it is viewed as an eschatological event. "Through faith [you] are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Pet. 1:5).

If the New Testament authors saw salvation primarily as a future event, then it is not productive to any discussion to ask whether a man "can lose his salvation." None of us fully possesses salvation *as yet*, except for the "earnest," our inheritance (2 Cor. 1:22).

The Apostles expected to pass through a judgment according to works before they would fully enjoy salvation (Rom. 2:6). Paul did not see himself as already having attained it (Phil. 3:10-12) and so he pressed forward. In the meantime, he recognized that he was to keep control of his body, lest he himself should be disqualified (1 Cor. 9:27).

Final salvation is conditioned upon continuing in the way of faith and bringing forth the "fruit" of Christian living. Jesus said, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man *remains in me* and I in him, he will bear much fruit" (John 15:5). Those unfruitful ones who do not remain in Christ (presented here as a real possibility, if words have meaning) are "picked up, thrown into the fire and burned" (15:6).

Paul told the Colossians they were reconciled by Christ, "holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation" (Col. 1:22). But he was careful to qualify that statement: "If you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel" (v. 23).

1. Conditional Promises

The glorious promises of the Scripture are always conditioned upon perseverance in the faith, even when this is not expressly stated. We believe perseverance is an *unspoken condition* in all the passages adduced to prove a rigid notion of "once saved always saved." This includes John 10:27, 28. Here Jesus says, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand."

Calvinists and other believers in "eternal security" argue that real apostasy of a born-again person is an impossibility because Christ said that his sheep "shall never perish." This does not follow. God makes promises both with and without expressly mentioning conditions. In Deuteronomy 33:27, 28, God says to the people of Asher, "The eternal God . . . will drive out your enemy before you, saying, 'Destroy him!' So Israel will live in safety alone; Jacob's spring is secure in a land of grain and new wine, where the heavens drop dew." The promise is presented as if there were no strings attached. Earlier in the book, however, God lays down stringent conditions for receiving such blessing and protection (28:15-68). There is no contradiction here. The promises are to be under-

stood in the light of conditions, *even in those places where the conditions go unmentioned.*

2. Apostasy Texts

The passages that warn Christians against falling away give no end of trouble to Calvinists. On the one hand, they must affirm that the threats are real and to be taken seriously. On the other, they are forced to confess that there is something hypothetical about them—that they will never truly come to pass for the “saved” person. Wrote the author of Hebrews:

It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace (Heb. 6:4-6).

The usual way out of this knotty problem is to say that these are not truly born-again disciples. They are false professors, tares among the wheat. J. C. Ryle, for example, writes:

The person here described as falling away has no characteristics which may not be discovered in unconverted men, while it is not said that he possesses saving faith and charity, and is elect.⁶

But the text does say these people have “shared in the Holy Spirit,” which certainly sounds as if they were Christians. Besides that, these warnings are against “falling away,” a misnomer if they never attained the position from which to fall.

In chapter 10 of Hebrews, we read a similar warning:

Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? (vv. 28, 29).

⁶ John Charles Ryle, *Never Perish*, Choteau, Montana: Gospel Mission Press, reprinted 1980, 16.

For years, I tried to read this passage in a way that would make these people false Christians who never experienced regenerating grace. That is a difficult task, however. The text declares that someone can be “sanctified” by “the blood of the covenant” and still fall from the faith.

This does not mean I believe that Christians are in constant peril of apostasy. While we are called to vigilance, we ought not to go through the life of faith in a fearful state. We have been delivered from that (Rom. 8:15). God is faithful. The Hebrew Christians to whom these warnings were written were in danger of *giving up the faith utterly* and retreating back into Judaism.

For the most part, it seems likely that Christians will persevere in their faith until the end. But that does not preclude the possibility of forsaking that narrow way leading to life. We must be on guard, as the Scriptures warn us repeatedly, but we have ample reason to be hopeful if we are following Christ. Dewey writes:

We believe, that a man, who has become thoroughly and heartily interested in the true gospel, doctrine and character and glory of Jesus Christ, is *very* likely to persevere and grow in that interest I can hardly conceive, how a man, who has once fully opened his eyes upon that Light, should ever be willing to close them. And I believe that in proportion as the Gospel is understood and felt, felt in all its deep fountains of peace and consolation, understood in all its revelations and unfoldings of purity and moral beauty; that in proportion to this, the instances of falling away, whether into infidelity or worldliness, will be more and more rare.⁷

VI. CONCLUSION

Calvinism is one more illustration of the futility of systematic theology. God’s truths, particularly relating to soteriology, are too lofty to be put into concise formulae. The Five Points of Calvinism oversimplify the profound truths of God. They derive their force from proof-texts rather than the general tenor of Scripture.

More than that, the doctrines frequently create a spirit of division, elitism and theological snobbery. The system erects walls between believers. It creates a class of Christians within the church general who are supposedly part of a worthy “inner circle.”

⁷Dewey, 91, 92.

Many Calvinists read nothing but Reformed titles; hence these brethren seldom learn new perspectives. On the contrary, they are continually reaffirming their own "theological correctness." Such authors as A. W. Pink, the Puritans, John Murray and such publishing companies as Banner of Truth become the sole staple for many. I say without intending offense that such exclusiveness differs little from that of Jehovah's Witnesses or other authoritarian groups.

Of course, I do not intend to paint all Calvinists with this brush. Many are thinkers who read outside literature, even Arminian literature. But the overarching trend in this tradition—a tradition of which I was once a part—is often one of narrow-mindedness and doctrinal superiority. As we have seen, the Scriptures give no warrant for such bigotry. The average Calvinist may be amazed at just how weak his system is when scrutinized in the light of revealed truth.

May our brethren see fit to adopt a Berean spirit (Acts 17:11) and honestly rethink their Calvinism. We would urge them to, for a time, lay aside the commentaries of Calvin and Gill, the theology of Warfield and Hodge. With an open Bible and mind, may they take a second look at the so-called "doctrines of grace" to see if they truly are the doctrines of Christ.