

WHAT DOES CALVINISM TEACH?

By Charles C. Ryrie

The ideas conveyed by the word "Calvinism" are many and vivid. "The absolute sovereignty of God," "Once saved, always saved," "limited atonement" are just a few. To some it is a system of doctrine and way of life that have brought no end of blessing to the world; by others it is considered a blight. Just what is this teaching and who are Calvinists?

Historic Calvinism is not hard to define. It, of course, has its roots in the voluminous writings of John Calvin, the reformer of Geneva (1509-1564). It had its creedal expression at the Synod of Dort in 1618-19 which met to examine the views of James Arminius and his followers. Arminius was a Dutch seminary professor (1560-1609) who could not accept the strong predestinarian views of Calvinism and who wanted a synod convened at which he promised to state his own more moderate views. While the controversy was raging, Arminius died, but his followers presumed to state his views in a five point remonstrance to the five main points of Calvinism. The Calvinistic answer to this remonstrance of the Arminians was the Synod of Dort. To this day Calvinism and Arminianism have been on opposite sides of the theological fence.

What are these five points of each system? They may be briefly compared and stated as follows.

The Five Points of Arminianism

1. Man is in a state of sin and has no saving grace of himself; but he does have a free will and it is not enslaved to a sinful nature.
2. God's election of certain individuals is based on His foreseeing that they would respond to His call. He elected only those who He knew would believe of their own free wills.

The Five Points of Calvinism

1. Total depravity affects every part of man's nature so that he not only completely needs the regenerating work of God, but also his will is in bondage to his evil nature.
2. God's election rests solely on the unconditional choice of His sovereign will. It was not based in any way on any foreseen response on the part of man

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| <p>3. Christ died for all men although only believers will be saved.</p> | <p>3. Christ died for the elect only.</p> |
| <p>4. The grace of God can be resisted by man since his will is free. The Spirit can draw to Christ only those who allow Him to do so.</p> | <p>4. All the elect will be saved since the grace of God extended in the effectual call to salvation cannot be resisted.</p> |
| <p>5. Some Arminians believe that a regenerated person cannot be lost; others, that one truly saved can be lost.</p> | <p>5. All who are chosen by God and who are irresistibly drawn by the Spirit are eternally secure and can never be lost.</p> |

Historic Calvinism, therefore, has been associated with these five points. They are often abbreviated to spell the word Tulip--Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irrestible grace, Perseverance of saints. It should be added, however, that Calvinism is not simply these five points--it is a basic viewpoint of "consistent supernaturalism in religion" (as Warfield put it). In terms of salvation this means that Calvinism emphasizes that God saves sinners in every aspect of that work, first and last, whole and entire, past, present and future.

Calvin himself was a Frenchman born in 1509 though he is usually associated in most peoples' minds with Geneva where he did a great work with the church. His church-state in Geneva was almost an Old Testament theocracy, but it did transform the entire complexion of the city and caused it to become the cradle of Protestantism. Above everything else, however, Calvin was a man of letters. His writings fill 59 quarto volumes. At the head of the long list of books stands the Institutes of the Christian Religion, a work which became the foundation of the subsequent development of Protestant theology. Second to the Institutes are Calvin's commentaries. They fill 30 volumes and cover almost all the books of both Testaments. In them Calvin constantly applies the grammatico-historical method of exegesis and stresses the natural sense of the text of

Scripture. His writings are immensely practical as well, large sections being devoted to the cultivation of the spiritual life. He was no cold technical, but a skilled technician who sought not only to open the Scriptures but also to apply them to everyday life.

The focus of his writings is not, as most imagine, predestination or even the sovereignty of God. It is Christ. "The Scriptures are to be read," said Calvin, "with the purpose of finding Christ there." Scripture can only be understood he said by a captive as well as a studious mind. The theme of the grace of God and the sovereignty of God are, of course, major ones in his thought. Calvin felt obliged to shut the door to the notion that anything happens other than under the control of God's will. Yet he makes this not a harsh and autocratic concept but that which alone can bring peace of mind to man. His concept of the grace of God in salvation could not leave room for making election conditioned on God's foreknowledge of man's faith. Sinners cannot save themselves in any sense at all. It is true that Calvin linked the reprobation of the non-elect with the operation of the will of God. Though it was to him dreadful to contemplate what the decree of God meant to the damned, he nevertheless insisted that the idea not be denied or evaded. He was very impatient with those who implied that this would make God the author of sin. The difficulties lie, he said, within our feeble understanding.

Calvin also had a great deal to say about sanctification as the process of our advance in piety through life. He considered a true church as characterized by true preaching and hearing of the Word and the right administration of the sacraments. He held a very high view of the ministry and argued for the real but not localized presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Lord's Supper. The body of Christ remains in heaven and could not therefore be enclosed in the bread and wine. Instead, the communicant is spiritually lifted up to partake of that body by the secret operation of the Spirit. His position, usually, ^{but} ~~is~~ too simply, called "spiritual presence," is difficult to comprehend, and he himself said, "I rather experience than understand it."

What of Calvinism today? What Calvin himself taught can be easily discovered from his writings. The conclusions of the Synod of Dort are a matter of record. But just who can rightly be labelled a Calvinist today is not so easy a question to answer. The answer generally depends on the personal theological viewpoint of each one asking the question. It may sometimes be linked to how many of the five points one must hold to in order to be able to be called a Calvinist. Some Calvinists would disown a conservative like Henry C. Thiessen whose Calvinistic views are quite moderate. Others would accept Karl Barth into the camp. The answer, I say, is not a simple one.

However, it is not difficult to disassociate Barth from Calvinism. Whatever he does mean by what he says, he does not mean what John Calvin taught and he affirms that the Synod of Dort did not reflect Calvin. His downgrading of the written Word of God; his denial of the historicity of many parts of the Bible; his acceptance of many of the tenets of liberalism; his latent universalism all exclude him from the Calvinistic camp. Although Barthians like to claim to be the new interpreters of Calvin and thus to present a New Reformation Theology, this is only wishful thinking. Their theology is new but it is not reformation.

If one insists that the only true Calvinists today are those who subscribe to the five points, then Calvinists will be found generally in the Reformed and Conservative Presbyterian churches only. If Calvinism can be described as Cornelius Van Til does in a recent article in Baker's Dictionary of Theology, then many who are called moderate Calvinists can be included. He says that his Calvinism may be described as a system of truth taken from the Scriptures and not derived in an a priori fashion from some major principle such as the sovereignty of God. He further declares that it presents an unrestricted, universal offer of the gospel and that it recognizes human responsibility within the framework of the plan of God. Many could subscribe to these points.

But when this matter of who can be called Calvinistic is boiled down, it is probably best to be realistic. Indeed, it is probably unrealistic not to be so!

Most Baptist and independent groups consider themselves Calvinistic. They emphasize the grace of God in salvation, and they affirm the eternal security of the believer. But they would not subscribe to the statement that Christ died only for the elect. They recognize that while His death was for the entire world it will not be effective unless one believes, though only the elect will believe. They could subscribe to Calvin's statement: "Christ died sufficiently for all, but effectually only for the elect." Some, like Thiessen, hold that election was based on God's foreknowledge of man's subsequent actions. Indeed, probably many more than we realize believe this and yet consider themselves Calvinists (though the writer does not believe such an idea can be supported by Scripture). On the other hand there are those who affirm unconditional election and deny limited atonement. But it would be unrealistic not to include in the stream of Calvinism today those who are united in their belief in eternal security of the believer and the efficacious grace of God in calling and regenerating the elect. All this boils down to the fact that in the area of soteriology (the doctrine of salvation) Calvinists place strong emphasis on the totality of God's work while Arminians give room for man's efforts.

Many historic Calvinists are amillennial; that is, they do not believe in an earthly rule of Christ in the future. But these same Calvinists recognize a postmillennialist like Loraine Boettner as an ardent Calvinist. At the same time they often reject premillennialists. On what grounds this is done is not clear, since, generally speaking, premillennialists do subscribe to the basic teachings of Calvin. It is actually unrealistic, therefore, not to admit that premillennialists can also be Calvinist.

Calvin was not a covenantal theologian (that is one who sees the covenant of grace as God's all-encompassing plan for salvation throughout all human history). Covenant theology was given its first creedal expression after the reformation in the Westminster Confession in 1647. But Calvinism and covenantal theology cannot be regarded as Calvinistic. It is probably true to say that dispensational

theology is not reformed theology (because of its de-emphasis of the Covenant of grace), but it is not accurate to say that dispensational beliefs automatically exclude one from being a Calvinist. Indeed, as far as staunchly supporting the authority of the Scriptures and promoting the study of the plain sense of the Bible, dispensationalists are in the forefront of Calvinists. In their concept of God's total place in the work of saving men, dispensationalists are completely Calvinistic.

It seems, therefore, that the answer to the question, "Who is a Calvinist today?" cannot be formulated along the lines of groups, denominations, or even certain doctrines. As one Calvinist stated it to a convention on Calvinism, "To shut ourselves up to some 99 44/100 percent pure variety would be insane." Some may be called "High Calvinists" -- these are they who subscribe to Calvin's Calvinism as polished up by his successors, and some may be called "Low Calvinists" -- these would not necessarily stand on all points with Calvin. But both are Calvinists because they share the basic viewpoint of the sovereign power of God as displayed particularly in His work of salvation.

Objections which are raised against Calvinism usually center in its teachings concerning sovereignty and election. (1) If God is sovereign, then, it is claimed, He must be the author of sin. (2) If God has chosen a plan for man then he really has no free choice. (3) If salvation is eternally secure then man can and will live as he pleases.

It has already been pointed out that Calvin recoiled from the idea that God is the author of sin. Yet he refused to allow anything to be outside of a relationship to the plan of God. It is admitted that God is the author of a plan which included sin, but this does not personally involve God with sin. But the only alternative to acknowledging that God knowingly authored the plan which He did, is to conceive of God being caught off guard suddenly when sin first appeared in His plan and thus having to revise that plan. To say simply that God foreknew that sin would occur is to have to face the further question, How did he know unless it was certain? and How could it have been certain without

having been included?

Arminianism claims to have restored the freedom of the human will in theological thought. Of course, no human will is free. We are all limited in what we can will to do by the limitations of humanity itself, by the limitations of circumstances around us and by the limitations of a sin nature which has enslaved us (Rom6:20) (and even the Arminian concept of merely a tendency to sin instead of a sin nature is a limitation). It is far better to speak of human responsibility than human free will. Calvinism affirms vigorously human responsibility, but insists, as Van Til clearly states, that it "does not take place within a vacuum. It takes place within history which is under the ultimate disposition of God." The actions of human responsibility are part of the plan of God but are incorporated in it as responsible acts. God's relationship to various actions of men varies. In some instances, as in the case of Ananias and Sapphira, He takes a direct, active part. In other cases, He takes His hands off, giving men up to their own ways (Rom. 1:24,26,28). Calvinism is different from fatalism because Calvinism does not say, "What is going to be is going to be anyway". It declares, "What is going to be is going to be in very specific ways which include the responsible acts of human beings." Calvinism does not relieve man of any responsibility; rather it places greater responsibility on him to live in accord with the detailed will of God. For instance, a Calvinist believes that God had predetermined exactly the day of his death and that he cannot die one day sooner. But Calvinists also eat to live! Responsibility and sovereignty are not incompatible ideas.

To note that some Calvinists do not live as they should is sadly true; but to attribute it to Calvinism is a false analysis. Calvinism of itself does not breed licentious living any more than Arminianism does. The Devil, the flesh and the world do this, and Calvinists, like all others, are besieged by these enemies. But the grace of God, eternally secure to believers, does not breed license. Paul settles the matter with his resounding negative answer to the

question, "Shall we sin that grace may abound?" (Rom. 6:1). Indeed, the knowledge and assurance of the all-encompassing scope of God's grace motivates the child of God to live a godly life. He lives in confidence, not fear, and under grace, not under a threat of losing his salvation, which is always hanging over his head.

The history of Calvinism does not support the charge either. Who can read the lives of the Covenanters without being inspired by their godliness? And, after all, the Puritans were not called Impuritans--for good reason!

The God of Calvinism is a great and mighty God in whom one can safely, eternally and intelligently place his trust. The inherent sinfulness of man is not glossed over; rather the Biblical teaching on total depravity, complete inability and inherent sinfulness is emphasized. The glory of God is stressed not only as a motivating factor in God's overall plan but specifically in the lives of His children. Calvinism is a theology of godliness because it is a theology of God.