

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

# Calvinistic Theology

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To speak of Calvinism is to speak of the Reformed faith. The term *Reformed* is today basically synonymous with Calvinism and historically distinguishes the Calvinistic churches from the Lutheran and Anabaptist traditions.<sup>1</sup> The theology of Calvinism or the Reformed faith finds its roots in the writings of John Calvin, particularly as expressed in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Calvin's theology centers on the sovereignty of God, the other doctrines being tied to that premise. The theology of Calvin is restated in the form of many confessional statements that have been adhered to over the centuries in Europe, Britain, and America.

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## HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF CALVINISTIC THEOLOGY

### JOHN CALVIN AND THE *INSTITUTES*

John Calvin (1509–1564) was born in Noyon, Picardy, sixty miles northeast of Paris. He began study for the priesthood at the University of Paris at the age of fourteen, but through a conflict with the bishop he eventually left to study law. He became proficient in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. His conversion occurred through his contact with Protestants, probably in 1533 or 1534, but information is lacking concerning details. At that point Calvin rejected the “superstitions of the Papacy.” He was persecuted for his faith, imprisoned, but subsequently freed. He found refuge in Basel, Switzerland, where he began his extensive writing ministry. In 1536 Calvin published the first edition of the *Institutes* (when he was only 26). The *Institutes were originally written in Latin and later translated into French by Calvin. He constantly revised his writings, expanding the first edition of the Institutes from six chapters to eighty chapters in the fourth and final edition of 1559.*<sup>2</sup>

It was in Geneva, Switzerland, where Calvin was befriended by Guillaume Farel (1489–1565), a Reformation leader, that Calvin further developed the *Institutes* and also became a leader in the Reformation. At Geneva he and Farel began teaching Reformation theology but were banished. Calvin went to Strasbourg for three years (1538–1541) as a

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<sup>1</sup> W. S. Reid, “Reformed Tradition, The” in Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), p. 921; and Harvie M. Conn, *Contemporary World Theology* (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1974), p. 141.

<sup>2</sup> See the helpful summary of Calvin's teaching, as well as historical notations in Justo L. Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought*, 3 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1975), 3:120–61.

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pastor to French refugees. A change in the political scene in 1541 enabled him to return to Geneva to work with Farel. Calvin served as pastor as well as community leader, shaping a union of church and state. He imposed strict morals on the community but also developed the commerce of Geneva into a prosperous state. Calvin was also a prolific writer, writing commentaries on forty nine books of the Bible, as well as pamphlets and the ever-expanding *Institutes*.

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## SPREAD OF CALVINISM

John Calvin's influence was felt throughout Europe as his doctrinal teachings spread quickly. The Heidelberg Catechism, written in 1563 by friends of Calvin, influenced the Reformed churches in Holland, Germany, and America. The Belgic Confession, written in 1561 by Guy de Bray, became the standard of belief in the Dutch Reformed church. The Synod of Dort met in 1618–1619, condemned Arminianism and the Remonstrants, and reaffirmed Calvinistic doctrine as expressed in the Heidelberg and Belgic Confessions.

During the period mentioned earlier, Calvinism was replacing Lutheranism as an influential force. Calvinism also spread to Scotland in the form of Presbyterianism. From Scotland Calvinism would ultimately affect English Puritanism. John Knox (1505–1572), who studied under Calvin in Geneva, was the Scottish leader of the Reformation. He returned to lead Scotland to an official rejection of the Pope's authority and adoption of a Calvinistic confession of faith. In England, Calvinism also prevailed since it was the theology behind the Thirty-Nine Articles (1563) of the Church of England. The Puritans became an important force for Calvinism in England. Building on the work of William Tyndale and John Knox, the Puritans sought to purify the Church of England.

Colonization of America brought Calvinism to the North American shores. The standards of the Westminster Confession became the doctrine of the Presbyterian churches.

Ultimately, Calvinism produced some of the outstanding scholars and Christian leaders both in Europe and America. In Europe, Abraham Kuyper became both prime minister and Calvinistic scholar; James Orr wrote in defense of Calvinism in Scotland, while America produced the likes of Charles and A. A. Hodge, William G. T. Shedd, J. Gresham Machen, Benjamin B. Warfield, Cornelius Van Til, and many others.

## THE SYNOD OF DORT

In the Netherlands a conflict arose between the followers of Jacobus Arminius and the Calvinists. Calvinism was attacked for its teaching of predestination and reprobation as well as for other issues. The States General called a synod in 1618 to settle the issue, but the Arminians did not come as equals. Rather, the Remonstrants were summoned to

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present their doctrines, which were subsequently condemned. The synod reaffirmed the Heidelberg and Belgic Confessions. The following points were affirmed at Dort and are given here in synthesized form.<sup>3</sup>

*Of divine predestination.* All men sinned in Adam and lie under the curse, but God made provision for salvation through the death of Christ. The fact that some and not others receive the gift of faith stems from God's eternal decree of election and reprobation. Election is unconditional, not based on God's foreknowledge; before the foundation of the world and purely out of His grace and according to His sovereign good pleasure, God chose some to salvation. The non-elect are left to condemnation, yet God is not the author of sin.

*Of the death of Christ.* While the death of Christ is of infinite value and sufficient to save the whole world, His atoning death extends to the elect only.

*Of the corruption of man and his conversion to God.* Man was created in the image of God, but through the sin of Adam all mankind is corrupted. Sin has passed to the human race so that all people are born in sin and are children of wrath. But while man is incapable of saving himself, God accomplishes salvation for elect individuals through the operation of the Holy Spirit. Those whom He has chosen in eternity, He calls effectually in time. The faith that realizes salvation is itself a gift.

*Of the perseverance of the saints.* Whom God calls, He also delivers from the dominion and slavery of sin. Since God is faithful, He preserves those who believe to the end.

## WESTMINSTER CONFESSION

The Westminster Confession arose out of the stormy political scene in England during the reign of Charles I. Charles met with resistance when he attempted to impose episcopacy on the Church of Scotland and to conform its services to the Church of England's Common Book of Prayer. A civil war erupted and Oliver Cromwell led the Puritan forces to victory. Charles I was beheaded in the process. In 1643 the English parliament commissioned the Westminster Assembly to develop the creed of the Church of England. The 121 English Puritan ministers met for 1,163 daily sessions from 1643 to 1649. The Westminster Confession of Faith, completed in 1646, affirmed a strong Calvinistic position and disavowed "the errors of Arminianism, Roman Catholicism, and sectarianism."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See the summary of the Canons of Dort in Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 3 vols., 6th ed. (Reprint. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), 1:519–23, and the full articles on 3:581–95.

<sup>4</sup> J. M. Frame, "Westminster Confession of Faith," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, p. 1168.

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The following points summarize the Westminster Confession of Faith:<sup>5</sup>

**Scripture.** The sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments are recognized to provide “divine inspiration, authority, and sufficiency as an infallible rule of faith and practice.” The traditions of Roman Catholicism, the Apocrypha, and humanism are to be rejected.

**God.** God, who is infinite in His being, exists as God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. He is absolutely sovereign, having from all eternity, by His own free will, ordained whatever comes to pass. The triune God has created the world out of nothing in the space of six days. God, in His providence, upholds all things by His sovereign authority.

**Man.** Man fell from original righteousness and became dead in sin, that sin and death being imputed to all mankind. God originally entered into a covenant of works with Adam, but when he sinned, God enacted the covenant of grace. In his sin man lost all ability to will anything spiritually good.

**Christ.** Jesus Christ is of one substance with the Father; became virgin born; as the God-Man became the Mediator, offering a perfect sacrifice. Christ purchased reconciliation for all those whom the Father has given Him.

**Salvation.** Through His Word and His Spirit, God effectually calls all those whom He has predestined to eternal life. He renews their spirit and draws them to Jesus Christ. Hence, salvation is entirely by grace. God justifies these believers, declaring them righteous; He adopts them as His children; and He sanctifies them. Saving faith is a gift of the Spirit of Christ. Repentance is a doctrine to be preached along with saving faith. Good works are the fruit of a true faith.

**Perseverance.** Those whom God has saved can neither totally nor finally fall away from grace but shall persevere to the end and be eternally saved.

**Assurance.** Only true believers will have assurance that they are in the state of grace; unbelievers will not have that assurance.

**Worship.** God is to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served with all the heart, soul, and might. Worship is to be accorded the Father, Son, and Spirit and no one else. Prayer is to be offered to God. A lawful oath may be part of religious worship.

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<sup>5</sup> Schaff, *Creeeds of Christendom*, 1:766–82 and 3:600–73. See also *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, 2nd ed., edited by Douglas Kelly, Hugh McClure, and Philip B. Rollinson (Greenwood, S.C.: Attic, 1981).

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*Civil duties.* God has appointed those in authority, and believers ought to pray for them; believers may also be called on to serve as magistrates.

*Divorce.* Marriage is between one man and one woman. The innocent party may divorce when adultery or fornication has taken place.

*Church.* The catholic or universal church consists of the whole number of the elect; the visible church consists of those who confess their faith. All believers are united to Christ and are in a holy fellowship in the worship of God. The sacraments are the seals of the covenant of grace. There is in every sacrament a spiritual relation or sacramental union. Baptism is a sacrament and also a sign and seal of the covenant of grace. Baptism is rightly administered by pouring or sprinkling water on the person. The Lord's Supper is spiritual nourishment and promotes growth in Christ. No remission of sins is made in communion; it is a commemoration. Christ has given authority to the church officers in which they enact church discipline. For the better government of the church there ought to be synods or councils.

*Death and judgment.* After death, bodies return to dust, but the soul immediately returns to God: the righteous are received into heaven; the wicked into hell. All authority has been given to Christ who will judge the world in righteousness.

## FIVE POINTS OF CALVINISM

Calvin did not author the so-called "five points of Calvinism." They originated at the Synod of Dort (1619) and are also a result of affirming the distinctives of Calvinism over the centuries since. God as sovereign was central in the theology of Calvin, and that is reflected in the five points. The five points emphasize God in His sovereignty and grace but also man in his depravity and sin. The five points are popularly named: total depravity; unconditional election; limited atonement; irresistible grace; and perseverance of the saints. (Theologians have nicknamed these points "tulip," a popular acronym based on the first letters of the doctrines.)

These five concepts are arranged logically and are contingent upon one another. If man is totally depraved, then he is unable to make an initial response to God; God must call man to salvation through unconditional election. God also makes provision for those whom He calls to salvation by the death of Christ; He secures their salvation by the effectual call of the Holy Spirit and keeps them secure in order that they might receive the eternal life He has promised them. The accompanying table and the discussion that follows will give a more detailed explanation.

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## DOCTRINAL AFFIRMATIONS OF CALVINISTIC THEOLOGY

The following discussion will affirm the major tenets of Calvinism as it is generally taught today. There are also statements about John Calvin's doctrinal teachings. It is recognized, however, that Calvinism has undergone some modifications over the centuries. The views that are presented are those *generally* held by Calvinists today and are taken from Calvinistic works. (For further information see chap. 30, "Reformation Theology.") It is not the purpose here to study all aspects of Calvin's theology; for that the reader is referred to a work like Wilhelm Niesel, *The Theology of Calvinism*.

FIVE POINTS OF CALVINISM	
DOCTRINE	EXPLANATION
Total Depravity	As a result of Adam's fall, the entire human race is affected; all humanity is dead in trespasses and sin. Man is unable to save himself.
Unconditional Election	Because man is dead in sin, he is unable to initiate response to God; therefore, in eternity past God elected certain people to salvation. Election and predestination are unconditional; they are not based on man's response.
Limited Atonement	Because God determined that certain ones should be saved as a result of God's unconditional election, He determined that Christ should die for the elect. All whom God has elected and Christ died for will be saved.
Irresistible Grace	Those whom God elected and Christ died for, God draws to Himself through irresistible grace. God makes man willing to come to Him. When God calls, man responds.
Perseverance of the Saints	The precise ones God has elected and drawn to Himself through the Holy Spirit will persevere in faith. None whom God has elected will be lost; they are eternally secure.

The purpose of this study is simply to summarize the essential distinctives that set Calvinism apart from Arminianism and from other doctrinal systems.

### SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

Foundational to the entire system of Calvinism is the doctrine of the sovereignty of God. "Calvinism asserts that the sovereignty of God is supreme; that He has absolute and undisputable authority over all creation, that nothing can lie outside of or be viewed as not being subject to the sovereignty of His will, that He is not only the Creator and

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Upholder but the Disposer of all events from the beginning of time to its close.”<sup>6</sup> Calvin himself taught that God’s providence is manifested in three ways:<sup>7</sup> (1) God sustains all creation in its being—apart from Him it would be dissolved; (2) God daily bestows life and ability to all things as it pleases Him—apart from Him nothing could have life and existence; (3) God guides all things to their appointed end. Calvin further taught that even though God sustains and guides the whole world and every individual, His providential care is particularly focused on the church, where He manifests His divine purposes.<sup>8</sup> Calvin maintained, however, that divine sovereignty does not vitiate man’s responsibility. God imbued man with reason and with a will, and people are held responsible for their decisions. On the other hand, man’s responsibility does not dethrone God from His sovereignty. God does not simply wait to see what man’s decision will be before He moves to action; rather, God subdues the actions and decisions of men to accomplish His purpose.<sup>9</sup> In a word, God is not governed by any circumstances outside of Himself, but only by His own good pleasure.<sup>10</sup> God thereby determines the result of all people, events, and things.

The result of God’s sovereignty is that His purpose will be achieved. Nothing can thwart His plan; history will be worked out according to the predetermined will of God.

## PREDESTINATION

Calvin defined predestination as follows: “Predestination we call the eternal decree of God, by which he hath determined in himself what he would have to become of every individual of mankind.... eternal life is foreordained for some, and eternal damnation for others. Every man, therefore, being created for one or the other of these ends, we say he is predestinated either to life or to death.”<sup>11</sup>

Predestination has both a wider and a narrower aspect. In its wider aspect it emphasizes that God has foreordained whatever comes to pass, based on Ephesians 1:11. From eternity past God has determined the events of history. The narrower aspect of predestination is personal; it means that from eternity past God has elected (or chosen) some to salvation while allowing remaining members of humanity to go their own way. This latter doctrine is known as reprobation (Rom. 9:16–19).<sup>12</sup> Although they deserved

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<sup>6</sup> Ben A. Warburton, *Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), p. 64.

<sup>7</sup> Wilhelm Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin* (Reprint. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), p. 70.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 75–76.

<sup>10</sup> A. Mitchell Hunter, *The Teaching of Calvin*, 2d ed. (Westwood, N.J.: Revell, 1950), p. 55.

<sup>11</sup> John McClintock and James Strong, “Calvinism,” in *Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological and Ecclesiastical Literature*, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), 2:42.

<sup>12</sup> W. S. Reid, “Predestination,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, p. 870.

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nothing and had no merit in themselves, God chose some to salvation; God also passed over some, condemning them to eternal punishment for their sins. Calvin called this a “horrible” doctrine but insisted that the Scripture clearly teaches it and that the doctrine could not be avoided.<sup>13</sup>

The word *predestinate* (Gk. *prooridzo*) means “to mark out beforehand” (Eph. 1:5, 11; Rom. 8:29; Acts 4:28; 1 Cor. 2:7). On this basis Calvinists teach that God, in the act of predestination, elected certain ones to salvation. Election itself is based on the term *call* (Gk. *kaleo*), which means “to call out from among.” It suggests the sovereign work of God in choosing some people for salvation out from among the masses of humanity. The many references to *call* in the New Testament emphasize God’s sovereign call to salvation (e.g., Rom. 1:1; 8:28, 30; 9:11; 1 Cor. 1:1, 2).

As indicated earlier, there are close relationships among the essential doctrines of the Calvinistic system. Calvinists insist that election and predestination are necessary because of man’s fall. If man is dead in trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1), then it is necessary for God to initiate salvation. If God had not marked out some to salvation, no one could have been saved. Man in his depraved state is utterly unable to make a move toward God.

## TOTAL DEPRAVITY

Total depravity should first be defined negatively: it does *not* mean “(1) that depraved people cannot or do not perform actions that are good in either man’s or God’s sight.... (2) that fallen man has no conscience which judges between good and evil for him.... (3) that people indulge in every form of sin or in any sin to the greatest extent possible.”<sup>14</sup>

The word *depravity* means that because of sin’s corruption “there is nothing man can do to merit saving favor with God,” while *total* means that depravity “has extended to all aspects of man’s nature, to his entire being.”<sup>15</sup> Calvin defined man’s depraved estate as follows: “All men are conceived in sin, and born the children of wrath, indisposed to all saving good, propense to evil, dead in sin, and the slaves of sin; and without the regenerating grace of the Holy Spirit, they neither are willing nor able to return to God, to correct their depraved nature, or to dispose themselves to the correction of it.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> W. S. Reid, “Reprobation,” *ibid.*, p. 937.

<sup>14</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, “Depravity, Total,” *ibid.*, p. 312. See also Edwin H. Palmer, *The Five Points of Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Guardian, 1972), pp. 9–13.

<sup>15</sup> Ryrie, “Depravity, Total,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, p. 312.

<sup>16</sup> McClintock and Strong, “Calvinism,” in *Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological and Ecclesiastical Literature*, 2:44.

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The Scriptures<sup>17</sup> emphasize the depravity of man by man's continual sinning (Gen. 6:5; Jer. 17:9; Rom. 3:10–18). The reason is that man is born a fallen creature with the pollution of sin (Ps. 51:5). Depravity also affirms the inability of man to do good (Matt. 7:17–18; John 15:4–5; 1 Cor. 12:3). Depravity further affirms man's inability to understand the good (Matt. 13:14; John 1:11; 8:43; Acts 16:14; 1 Cor. 1:18; 2:14; 2 Cor. 3:12–18; Eph. 4:18). Depravity also indicates man cannot desire the good (Matt. 7:18; John 3:3; 6:44; 8:43; 15:4–5; Eph. 2:1).

Total depravity indicates man's utter inability to do anything for his salvation. God must initiate the process if a person is to be saved.

## UNCONDITIONAL ELECTION

Unconditional election is logically tied to the doctrine of the total depravity of man. If the Scriptures teach that man is totally depraved, dead in trespasses and sin, then man is unable to initiate a response toward God for salvation. God must act. Calvinism teaches that from eternity past, God has unconditionally elected certain ones to salvation regardless of any merit on their part. *Unconditional* emphasizes that election is not conditioned on God's foreknowledge that certain ones will believe in Christ. Election is not conditioned on man's ability or response. *Unconditional* emphasizes that God alone initiates the process.

There are six main features involved in election.<sup>18</sup> (1) Election is a sovereign, eternal decree of God (Rom. 8:29; Eph. 1:4, 5, 11). (2) Election is necessary because of man's fall and total depravity. It therefore reflects the grace of God, not human effort (Rom. 9:11). (3) Election is "in Christ." From eternity past God chose believers to be united to Christ (Rom. 8:29; Eph. 1:4, 5, 11). In election God effects salvation through sending the Savior and effectually calling certain ones to salvation. (4) Election involves the salvation of the elect and the provision for their salvation. God determined to predestine, call, justify, and glorify certain ones (Rom. 8:29–30). This was planned and effected in eternity past. (5) Election and reprobation are individual, personal, specific, and particular. The pronouns in Romans 8 and Ephesians 1 emphasize the individual nature of election. (6) The goal of election is the glory and praise of God (Eph. 1:6, 12). Everything is to ascribe glory and praise to God.

## LIMITED ATONEMENT

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<sup>17</sup> See the discussion of biblical passages by Palmer, *Five Points of Calvinism*, pp. 1319.

<sup>18</sup> F. H. Klooster, "Elect, Election," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, pp. 348–49.

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This view, also referred to as particular atonement or particular redemption, states that “God purposed by the atonement to save only the elect and that consequently all the elect, and they alone, are saved.”<sup>19</sup> Christ’s death saves all it intended to save. Connection is again made with the preceding doctrine of unconditional election. If God has elected certain ones to salvation from eternity past, then it logically follows that He will also provide for the redemption of precisely those whom He has chosen.

The emphasis on particular atonement is seen in a number of passages (italics added): Christ “will save *His people* from their sins” (Matt. 1:21); the Good Shepherd “lays down His life for *the sheep*” (John 10:11); Christ prayed only for “those *whom Thou hast given Me*” (John 17:9); Christ purchased the *church of God* “with His own blood” (Acts 20:28); God sent His Son, delivering “Him up *for us all*” (Rom. 8:32); Christ “loved *the church* and gave Himself up *for her*” (Eph. 5:25). In each case the biblical passage suggests not everyone, but only the elect. Christ died for “His people,” “His sheep,” “the ones He prayed for,” “the ones given Him by the Father,” and “the church.” In a passage like John 3:16 the word “world” does not mean everyone, but “the whole world in the sense of people from every tribe and nation—not just the Jews.”<sup>20</sup> In passages like John 1:29; 1 John 2:2, and 1 Timothy 2:6 the references that seemingly suggest everyone should rather be understood in a restricted sense. At times the Bible uses “world” and “all” in a restricted sense.<sup>21</sup>

Many Calvinists emphasize that although the atonement is particular, Christ died only for the elect, yet the offer of the gospel is for everyone.<sup>22</sup> How both of these facts can be true is paradoxical—a mystery that cannot be explained; it is one of many “irreconcilable” opposites of Scripture. God’s thoughts and ways are not man’s thoughts and ways. He has always been faithful and true. Therefore we trust Him where our philosophical efforts to harmonize His mysteries are utterly confounded.

## IRRESISTIBLE GRACE

Grace is the unmerited favor of God. Calvinists emphasize the necessity of God’s grace in salvation. If man can do nothing to save himself, then God must act; God must provide grace in order that man might be saved. That is the work of irresistible grace, which is also referred to as special or efficacious (because it is effective) grace. Opponents of this doctrine might suggest that if grace is irresistible then God forces someone to come against his own will. That is not the idea of irresistible grace, according to Calvinists. It does not make someone come contrary to his will. Rather, irresistible grace makes the

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<sup>19</sup> R. B. Kuiper, *For Whom Did Christ Die?* (Reprint. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), p. 62.

<sup>20</sup> Palmer, *Five Points of Calvinism*, p. 45.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 50–52.

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individual *willing* to come, as is seen in Berkhof's definition: "By changing the heart it makes man perfectly willing to accept Jesus Christ unto salvation and to yield obedience to the will of God."<sup>23</sup> Irresistible grace is the supernatural work of God wherein He works in the soul of the individual, changing the entire nature by the Holy Spirit's operation.<sup>24</sup>

In the logic of Calvinism, God, through His Spirit, draws precisely those whom God unconditionally elected from eternity past and Christ died for. Thus the purpose of God is accomplished. He elected certain ones, Christ died for those very ones, and now through the Holy Spirit, God dispenses His irresistible grace to them to make them willing to come. They do not want to resist.

The scriptural basis for irresistible grace is John 6:37, 44.<sup>25</sup> Jesus said that the precise ones whom the Father has given Him will come to Him; moreover, they do not come of themselves. They cannot come unless the Father supernaturally draws them to Christ. Jesus, as the Good Shepherd, brings all the sheep to Himself; none are left out (John 10:16). Paul also affirms that the ones Christ elected He also justified and will ultimately glorify (Rom. 8:28–30). None are lost in the process.

Irresistible grace does not remove man's responsibility to believe. Man must heed the call, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved" (Acts 16:31). But when man believes in Christ, it is God through irresistible grace who enables him to believe.

## PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS

This is the fifth and final factor of the five points of Calvinism. Again it should be observed that perseverance of the saints is logically connected with the preceding points. If man is totally depraved then he cannot respond to God; God must unconditionally elect man to salvation. For those who are elected, Christ has died to secure their salvation. God then irresistibly draws them to effect their salvation but also keeps them secure in that salvation to the end.

John Calvin taught the perseverance of the saints

God, who is rich in mercy, from his immutable purpose of election, does not wholly take away his Holy Spirit from his own, even in lamentable falls; nor does he so permit them to glide down that they should fall from the grace of adoption and the state of justification; or commit the "sin unto death," or against the Holy Spirit; that, being deserted by him, they should cast themselves headlong into eternal destruction. So that not by their own merits or strength, but

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<sup>23</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), p. 436.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 437.

<sup>25</sup> Palmer, *Five Points of Calvinism*, pp. 60–66.

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by the gratuitous mercy of God, they obtain it, that they neither *totally fall* from faith and grace, nor *finally continue* in their falls and perish.<sup>26</sup>

The doctrine of perseverance has often been expressed “once saved, always saved.” Concisely defined, the perseverance of the saints means that believers “will persevere in trusting Christ as their Savior.... Thus they will always be saved.”<sup>27</sup> Berkhof defines perseverance as “that continuous operation of the Holy Spirit in the believer, by which the work of divine grace that is begun in the heart, is continued and brought to completion.”<sup>28</sup>

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The doctrine is sometimes referred to as “eternal security,” which emphasizes the certainty of the salvation of the elect. However, perseverance also has an important emphasis, namely, that the Christian perseveres in believing. Although the term *perseverance* seems to suggest that continuance in the faith depends on the believer, that is not the stress of the doctrine. Continuance in the faith is dependent on God.

Scriptural consideration for this doctrine is found in John 10:27–29 where Jesus emphasizes that He gives eternal life to the sheep and they cannot ever perish.<sup>29</sup> In Romans 8:29–30 Paul indicates that the ones God foreknew, He predestined, called, justified, and will ultimately glorify. None are lost in the process. Ephesians 1:3–14 also emphasizes this truth. God the Father planned the salvation of certain ones and marked them out for salvation (Eph. 1:3–6); God the Son secured their salvation by redeeming them through His blood (Eph. 1:7–12); God the Holy Spirit effected their salvation by sealing them—the sign of their eternal security (Eph. 1:13–14).

## SUMMARY EVALUATION OF CALVINISTIC THEOLOGY

There are seven Calvinistic emphases that deserve specific evaluation.

- (1) The emphasis on the sovereignty of God is scriptural (Ps. 135:6; Dan. 4:35; Eph. 1:11, etc.).
- (2) Predestination and election are biblical concepts. The reason many reject these doctrines is that they suppose the doctrines exclude human responsibility. However,

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<sup>26</sup> McClintock and Strong, “Calvinism,” in *Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological and Ecclesiastical Literature*, 2:44.

<sup>27</sup> Palmer, *Five Points of Calvinism*, p. 68.

<sup>28</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 546.

<sup>29</sup> The double negative *ou me* in the Greek text of John 10:28 is particularly emphatic: “They shall not never perish”

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most Calvinists recognize the antinomy (the seeming contradiction of biblical teaching about both God's sovereignty and human responsibility), and they live with it as a divine paradox. There are differences among Calvinists on how these two contrasting ideas are interrelated. To be biblical in theology both concepts must be preserved to the full extent of scriptural revelation. Human responsibility must not be sacrificed because of a myopic interpretation of the sovereign predestination and election of God.

- (3) The doctrine of total depravity is consistent with Scripture (cf. Eph. 2:1). The Fall did not merely wound man; man died spiritually, thus affecting his mind, heart, and will. As a result of the Fall man is not disposed to seek God (Rom. 3:11).
- (4) Unconditional election is both a logical necessity and a scriptural emphasis. Believers are chosen from before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4). The corollary doctrine of reprobation (that God decreed the nonelect to suffer eternally in hell) is not sustained by Scripture, at least in the clear way that positive election is. Although John Calvin taught reprobation, not all Calvinists agree on that point.
- (5) The doctrine of limited atonement may well be the most controversial point of Calvinism—some Calvinists accept it, while moderate ones either categorically reject it or modify it. Many moderates say that Christ *actually* died only for the elect but *potentially* died for all. Strict Calvinists insist that limited atonement is a logical necessity in view of God's sovereignty. If Christ died for everyone and not everyone is saved, then God has been defeated; for His sovereign purpose to be accomplished, Christ died only for the elect, and precisely those, and only those, are saved. Although the doctrine may be defensible logically, it is difficult to sustain biblically. In limited atonement, Scriptures that indicate Christ died for the world (John 3:16) must be restricted to the elect; moreover, passages like 1 Timothy 2:6, 2 Peter 2:1, and 1 John 2:2 teach that Christ died for everyone.
- (6) Irresistible grace is also a necessity if humanity is totally depraved. Correctly understood, irresistible grace does not teach that God brings people into the kingdom contrary to their wills, but rather He moves upon their wills to effect willingness to come to Christ for salvation.
- (7) Perseverance of the saints (security of the believer) is a strong emphasis of Scripture. Since salvation is a result of grace, with the believer being chosen from the foundation of the world, being redeemed by Christ, and being sealed by the Spirit, loss of salvation is impossible.

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## FOR FURTHER STUDY ON CALVINISTIC THEOLOGY

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- \*\* Cornelius Van Til. *The Case for Calvinism*. Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1963.
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<sup>30</sup> Enns, P. P. (1989). *The Moody handbook of theology* (pp. 475–488). Chicago, IL: Moody Press.