

## RECONSIDERING CALVINISM PART 3



Though not existing until (almost) 100 years after the Protestant Reformation began, the theological system established at the Synod of Dort<sup>1</sup> - otherwise known as the Doctrines of Grace, Calvinism, the five points of Calvinism, or the acronym, T.U.L.I.P. (Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace and Perseverance of the saints) serves as an accurate summary of arguably the Reformation's most guarded and novel belief: monergism (God is the only One working/acting in our salvation from its beginning until its end)<sup>2</sup>. The purpose of this study was to re-consider the 5 Points of Calvinism and the monergistic view of salvation it presents through re-examining those biblical texts used to support it along w/the rest of the biblical witness to determine if this view is indeed the gospel of how God saves sinners<sup>3</sup>.

1. TOTAL DEPRAVITY = We are completely unable to repent, believe in Christ and be faithful to God's commands. God must give repentance and faith to us and produce faithfulness for us (thru His work in us – i.e. regeneration/new birth)

What the Bible actually teaches/reveals:

### MORAL ABILITY

Though sin has severely affected us, it has not stripped us of our morality – or moral ability before God and others. We can – and therefore are expected to - repent of our sin, respond in faith to the gospel of Christ and live faithfully to God's commands. Countless texts in the Scripture make clear that mankind's will is still free enough to establish both his culpability and God's right to judge him when he fails (we are "w/o excuse" – e.g. Rom 1:18-21 w/2:2, 3:1-8). Equally evident from the Bible, is God's genuine displeasure when people continue in their rebellion and His desire to see them turn and follow Him (Eze 18:23, 33:11; Deu 30:19-20; Rom 2:4; 1Pe 3:20; 2Pe 3:9). Both attributes equally imply our ability to repent, believe and be faithful to His commands. Finally, God confirms this ability by explicitly stating that we can obey His commands (Deu 30:11-14). As additional support, the early church rejected the thinking promoted by the doctrine of total depravity (e.g. Justin Martyr, Tatian, Irenaeus, Athenagoras, Melito, Clement, Tertullian, Origen, Methodius, Cyril of Jerusalem, John Chrysostom).

"Neither praise nor condemnation, neither rewards nor punishments, are right if the soul does not have the **power of choice** and avoidance, if evil is involuntary." – Clement of Alexandria

"He [God] has revealed to us, through His Holy Scriptures, that **there is in man a free choice of will... God's precepts themselves would be of no use to a man unless he had free choice of will**, so that by performing them he might obtain the promised rewards." - Augustine (adopted saint of the Calvinistic Reformers).

*"Given Calvinism's long and formative influence on the western world, it would be both irrational and irresponsible not to assume there is a strong causal connection between the doctrine of Total Depravity (or more accurately, "Total Inability") and the victim mentality so prevalent today. The self-destruction created by these false inability is the direct opposite of (and therefore stand opposed to) God's justice since through its practice (justice), mankind's ability is acknowledged and empowered." – My (RSJ) opinion*

## 2. UNCONDITIONAL ELECTION

### 2.1. What the doctrine teaches:

Before God created the universe, He chose/elected specific persons to be the recipients of His salvation based/conditioned upon nothing He saw or knew about those individuals as to their moral value or potential or because He possessed some prior obligation to them, but instead based solely on His free choice and sovereign grace. As part of God's unconditional election of some to salvation, He also determined to provide those individuals with the necessary repentance, faith and faithfulness thus eliminating the obstacle created by the prior doctrine of Total Depravity (inability to repent, believe and faithfully obey) and guaranteeing their future residence into heaven.

### 2.2. The problem with this doctrine:

The Bible does NOT teach that God – before creating the universe, chose/elected specific persons to be the recipients of His salvation. Nor do the Scriptures teach that such election is unconditional – or that once saved, they are guaranteed to one day reside in heaven. In stark contrast, the picture painted by God's Word reveals the following to be the true doctrine of election:

#### 2.2.1. God election is always based/condition upon the behavior He saw in someone.

God's election/choice as to who will receive salvation is instead always based/conditioned on the past/present actions of that individual or the actions of someone else God designates to be their federal head (i.e. personal representative).

<sup>1</sup> The Synod of Dort held in Dordrecht, Holland from 1618-1619, consisted of 154 meetings and lasted seven months. Theologians and secular authorities from Germany, Switzerland and England were brought together to examine 5 doctrines made popular by the late seminary professor, Jacobus Arminius. The synod - or council, ultimately disagreed with Arminius' position and in response, crafted 5 counter-points or doctrines that later became known as the "five points of Calvinism" in respect to late reformer, John Calvin.

<sup>2</sup> Monergism is in contrast to what was held in church history prior to that – i.e. synergism, man cooperating w/God (i.e. working/acting together w/God) in the process of his salvation.

<sup>3</sup> The reason I use the words "re-consider" and "re-examine" is b/c Calvinism has been - in whole or part, the conviction of myself and the teaching of our church for over 25 years. I have preached through the 5 points of Calvinism numerous times and received my theological training from Calvinist/Reformed seminaries (e.g. Reformed Theological Seminary).

For example:

**2.2.1.1. God's election of Noah was conditioned upon the righteous behavior He witnessed in Noah.**

(Gen 6:5 – 9, 11-13 w/18a) = God's election/choice to extend "favor" or "establish covenant" – i.e. to save Noah from His coming judgment against sin was due to/conditioned upon the fact that Noah was a "righteous man, blameless in his generation", a man who "walked with God" and "did all that God commanded him." Should there be any doubt to the conditional nature of the previous statements, the last verse of chapter 6 and first of chapter seven make it abundantly clear (Gen 6:22 w/7:1 – "Then the Lord said to Noah, 'Go into the ark, you and all your household, for I have seen that you are righteous before me in this generation.'")<sup>4</sup>.

**2.2.1.2. God's election of Noah's household was also conditioned upon the righteous behavior of Noah.**

The fact that God chose to save (from the coming flood) not only Noah but his entire household implies that they (too) benefited from Noah's righteous behavior. IOW: that they were included in the covenant God made w/Noah. It sb noted that the term "ark" used to refer to the boat built by Noah is the same word used when speaking of the ark of the covenant – the place where the Book of the Covenant resided and where the sacrifice for atonement was made. Additionally, the ark was carried into battle ensuring the Israelites' success. It represented the place of God's saving power. To be in the presence of one of God's arks meant you were in the place of salvation – i.e. that you existed in a saving covenant relationship w/Him. Hence the reason God's instruction to take Noah's family into the ark (and through it save them from the flood) immediately follows His words regarding the covenant (see again Gen 6:18 = coming into covenant w/God is what gave them access to His ark of salvation). For further support in regard to viewing Noah's ark as a soteriological sign – or symbol of saving covenant relationship see (1Pe 3:20-21) = Like Noah's family who were saved thru the waters by the ark which rose above their deathly threat, we too are saved thru the waters by the archetype [literally, ark-type] of Jesus who also rose above/from death. That God makes His salvation available to others in the household when its head (or federal head – i.e. father/husband or parent – 1Co 7:14) is righteous is the consistent practice of Scripture. From a theological perspective, this is sometimes referred to as "household" or "corporate election." (tbd)

**2.2.1.3. God's election of Abraham was conditioned upon the righteous behavior He witnessed in Abraham.**

(Gen 15:1-21) = Abram's righteous behavior here – as well as in the previous chapters (e.g. Gen 12:1-4) become the basis (or condition) for God's decision to enter into a saving (covenant) relationship w/him (See Neh 9:8)<sup>5</sup>.

**2.2.1.4. Isaac, Jacob and the nation of Israel's elections to salvation were all conditioned upon the righteous behavior of Abraham.**

(Gen 17:1-8 w/21 w/26:1-5 w/28:10-15 w/Deu 7:6-8) = God's election to salvation of the patriarchs (Isaac and Jacob) along w/the twelve tribes (making up the one nation of Israel) were all conditioned upon God's original promise to Abraham.

**2.2.1.5. The election to salvation of New Covenant saints or the Church – most especially Gentiles, is conditioned upon the righteous behavior of Christ.**

(Eph 1:1-11) = The "us" and "we" mentioned in these verses refers to the "saints who are in Ephesus" – or more broadly speaking, all those a part of the New Covenant community or the church – including Gentiles – those (as Paul says in 2:11-12, were once "far from the covenants and promises of God" and "without hope"). As such, they are also who Paul is referring to when speaking of God's predestination (or choosing before "the foundation of the world"). Not specific persons, but a specific group of people or community. It is again, the saints or New Covenant Church, people whose election to salvation was not baseless but rather conditioned upon the righteous behavior and sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Hence the reason all such references to predestination or "prior-to-Creation" choosing are qualified w/ the preposition, "in Him" or "through Jesus Christ". Which means that what is said about predestination has more to do with what was pre-planned concerning Him – not us. IOW: our eventual existence as the people of God was only b/c of what could be made certain before it all began – that Jesus would one day come into the world and establish not only perfect redemption/true atonement for sin, but a covenant through which all peoples of the world could be saved.

**2.2.1.6. God's election (personally/individually) was conditioned upon either our parents' or our own behavior.**

(Ezr 8:22; Rom 2:6-8; Act 10:35, 13:47-48) = These passages do not teach that God's decision to choose /elect us (specifically) for salvation was based on nothing in us, but rather that our actions – or those of our federal head (i.e. our parents) afforded us this gracious invitation. IOW: though rebels, God saw that we were desiring/seeking to change things in the direction of righteousness – or that our parents were already in covenant relationship w/Him. And as a result of those things, orchestrated the means necessary to hearing the gospel and coming into a saving relationship w/Him (1Ti 1:12-13; Act 2:39 w/Gen 17:7-13; again 1Co 7:14). No doubt this is the reason God told Philip to go south to Gaza to meet the Ethiopian Eunuch (Act 8:26-36) = The condition prompting God to send Philip to this man's chariot sb obvious. He was seeking to "worship" God – even attempting to understand His Word! To see this account any other way (i.e. God's choice of the Eunuch was not conditioned upon his behavior) requires deliberately (or very ignorantly) ignoring a substantial amount of evidence pointing in the opposite direction. In this light consider also (Act 18:5-10) = God told Paul to continue preaching in Corinth b/c there were "many people" there that were ready to turn from their sins/seeking righteous that God therefore had chosen to hear receive the gospel message and be saved. The fact that Paul ends up in Corinth (or Macedonia) is itself, testimony to God's conditional nature regarding election (Act 16:6-10) = Paul was directed away from his original mission to Asia and told to go to Macedonia. Such change of plans begs a reason on the part of God. Something related to the people in both of those regions and the success Paul would have in attempting to preach the gospel to one versus the other. In this case, it was the Macedonians who would prove to be his best missionary bet. God saw the hearts of the people in Macedonia were ripe for turning from their sins (remember the vision of the man pleading that someone come?) whereas in Asia, they were not. This kind of decision-making as to where or w/whom to share the gospel was at the heart of Jesus' missiology – including His teaching regarding the Father instruction to His disciples (Joh 4:23; Mat 9:37-38, 10:12-14; see also Isa 56:1-5).

<sup>4</sup> That the kind of covenant God established w/Noah was salvific or referring to eternal salvation is attested to God's preparation and appointment of him to the priestly act of making burnt offerings (Gen 7:2-3 w/8:20-21).

<sup>5</sup> Jewish tradition equally taught that Abraham was a man exhibiting righteous behavior prior to God's extension of grace (or offer of salvation), "Abraham, endowed with great sagacity, with a higher knowledge of God and greater virtues than all the rest, was determined to change the erroneous opinions of men. He was the first who had the courage to proclaim God as the sole Creator of the universe, to whose will all the heavenly bodies are subject, for they by their motions show their dependence on Him. His opposition to astrology provoked the wrath of the Chaldeans, and he had to leave their country and go to Canaan. Berosus mentions our father Abram without naming him when he says thus – 'In the tenth generation after the Flood, there was among the Chaldeans a man righteous and great and skillful in celestial science.'" – Josephus ("Antiquities"). Abraham's revolt against Chaldean idolatry is also spoken of in Philo ("On Abraham").