

RECONSIDERING CALVINISM PART 4



Though not existing until (almost) 100 years after the Protestant Reformation began, the theological system established at the Synod of Dort¹ - 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)². 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 with the rest of the biblical witness to determine if this view is indeed the gospel of how God saves sinners³.

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 - even Augustine, the coveted saint of the Calvinistic Reformers)⁴.

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).

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; Gen 6:22 w/7:1).

2.2.1.2. God's election of Noah's household was also conditioned upon the righteous behavior of Noah (Gen 6:18; 1Pe 3:20-21).

2.2.1.3. God's election of Abe was conditioned upon the righteous behavior He witnessed in Abe (Gen 15:1-21; See also Neh 9:8).

2.2.1.4. Isaac/Jacob/Israel's elections were also conditioned upon Abe (Gen 17:1-8 w/21 w/22:16-18 w/26:1-5 w/28:10-15 w/Deu 4:31, 7:6-8; Rom 11:28).

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).

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 10:34-35, 13:47-48; 1Ti 1:12-13; Act 2:39 w/Gen 17:7-13; 1Co 7:14; e.g. Act 8:26-36; Act 16:6-10; See also Joh 4:23; Mat 9:37-38, 10:12-14; Isa 56:1-5).

¹ 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.

² 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.

³ 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).

⁴ "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

2.2.2. God's foreknowledge is also a reference to someone's behavior as the condition of their election.

A popular argument w/in Calvinist circles is that the Greek word (προγινώσκω) translated as "foreknew" in (Rom 8:29) refers to God's prior choice/election of individuals to salvation (meaning before their actions – or even existence, and therefore unconditional) rather than what that word would normally indicate (as demonstrated elsewhere in the New Testament), which is prior knowledge (Act 26:5; 1Pe 1:20; 2Pe 3:17). This however is its meaning in this text as well. It refers to God's prior knowledge as to our behavior as the basis (or condition) of God's choice/election. This interpretation not only fits nicely w/the immediate context or Paul's conversation on God's guidance and purpose for His elect, but is confirmed when the word is used again in the final chapter of this discussion in chapter 11 (See Rom 11:1-4) = Those God chooses/elects to be the remnant are those who demonstrate acts of faithfulness as it was in the time of Elijah (1Ki 19:10 w/18).

2.2.3. John 1:13 teaches the condition of spiritual birth to be identified as the elect.

Though often used to support unconditional election, the context surrounding these verses reveal them to be teaching the opposite. (Joh 1:11-13) = Those that God now chooses to become His children or elect, is no longer based (or conditioned) upon bloodline (i.e. you are a Jew – v11), nor the fact that such individuals had received the old covenant signs in their flesh (what he means by "the will of the flesh" - Gen 17:11-13). Such privilege has been removed due to the Jews rejection of Jesus (again v11). Becoming "the children of God" is instead the "right" given by God "to all who did receive Him" (i.e. Christ), to those "who believed in His name." IOW: The new condition for becoming one of God's elect sons or daughters is spiritual birth (being "born...of God") through belief in His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ (Joh 3:1-16). This condition also eliminates the idea that people can be saved simply b/c they desire to be (what Paul means by "the will of man").