

## RECONSIDERING CALVINISM PART 2



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 (AS INABILITY)

**1.1. What this doctrine teaches =** Because the Bible teaches that we are not only born and enslaved to sin; but also that every aspect of our nature/person (spirit, mind, will and body) has been corrupted by sin, we are completely UNABLE to exercise faith in Christ or faithfully obey God. Our wills are not free to make such choices or commitments, but rather bound against them. For a person therefore to turn from their sin and be saved requires divine intervention. God must graciously grant them the necessary faith and faithfulness through regeneration – or causing them to be born again. Speaking of its importance to the Reformation, John Piper states, “The issue of man’s bondage to sin and his moral inability to believe or be holy was *the root issue of the Reformation* — and the lynchpin of Protestantism.”

**1.2. The problem w/this doctrine:** Though the Bible teaches that we are not only born and enslaved to sin; but also that every aspect of our nature/person (spirit, mind, will and body) has been corrupted by sin, it does NOT teach that such depravity has therefore made us completely unable to repent, believe or be faithful. Understanding God’s Word within its given context, reveals mankind to possess a disability (b/c of his sin) but not an inability. In other words, people – though disabled (hampered or hindered) by sin can still make the choice to turn and follow God - or exercise faith in Christ, and commit themselves in faithful (not perfect) obedience to His commands. **SUPPORT:**

#### 1.2.1. Human culpability requires the ability to repent, believe and be faithful.

If mankind did not have the ability to follow God then neither can they be deemed culpable (blameworthy/responsible) for their actions. They are instead victims. Yet the Scripture never views anyone in this light. The terms used to describe the wicked as well as the righteous infer culpability for our moral choices that is based on our ability (e.g. Gen 6:5-7; Rom 1:18-21; Rom 10:17-21; Deu 30:11-14 w/Rom 10:6-12).

#### 1.2.2. Justice assumes those being judged have the ability to repent, believe and be faithful.

The biblical basis of all justice – most especially, the punishing and identification of individuals as guilty, is the assumption that all human beings possess moral ability. Hence the reason no one is ever excluded/excused from the consequences of disobeying God’s Law (Num 15:15-16; Lev 24:22). God’s prescribed jurisprudence is also a reflection of His own (and it too assumes ability).

#### 1.2.3. An inability to repent, believe and be faithful would mean that any praise given to the faithful is not genuine.

If God is the One doing all the work in those who have faith and are faithful, then any praise given to those persons is not only unwarranted but disingenuous (e.g. Gen 6:7, 22:12; Mat 25:21-23, 31-40; Rev 3:4).

#### 1.2.4. An inability to repent, believe and be faithful makes final judgment a complete farce.

If - in both categories (good or bad), we possessed no ability, then what exactly is reflected by our deeds? Only that God did or didn’t do something on our behalf. Shouldn’t it then be a judgment based on *His* deeds? See (Mat 16:27 – “repay each person according to what *he has done*.”).

#### 1.2.5. An inability to repent, believe and be faithful would mean that God’s people (even God!) are preaching to the wrong crowd.

The Bible is filled w/examples of God or His people calling people to turn from their sin and follow Him. If however the only way that can happen is through divine intervention, then shouldn’t the preaching (or pleading) be directed at God?

**1.2.6. God hardening a person (pushing them further in the direction of their rebellion) implies that people have the ability to repent, believe and be faithful.** If not then what has been hardened? If people are already completely unable, what does furthering such inability accomplish? (e.g. Exo 7:13-14, 22, 8:15, 19, 32, 9:7, 12, 34-35, 10:1; 1Sa 6:6; Mat 13:10-15).

#### 1.2.7. God’s longsuffering or patience w/rebellious people also implies they have the ability to repent, believe and be faithful.

The writers of Scripture insist that God is slow to anger or patient w/the sinful or rebellious. Such longsuffering also implies that we have the ability to turn from such behavior (in repentance, belief and faithful obedience) since otherwise, what would be the point of God waiting? (Exo 34:6; Num 14:18; Joe 2:13; Jon 4:2; Nah 1:3; Psa 86:15, 103:8, 145:8; Neh 9:17; Rom 2:4, 9:22; 1Pe 3:20; 2Pe 3:9, 14-15).

#### 1.2.8. An inability to repent, believe and be faithful would mean that God’s expressed desire to see people happy – as well as His displeasure in seeing the wicked perish, are both fake.

Without the ability to do those things that God instructs (to obediently follow the design of the universe’s Designer), then the (built-into-its-design) consequences/punishment we face/experience when we violate it (and Him) not only makes Him a twisted torturer (earth becomes the torture chamber we cannot escape), but also a cosmic faker – since God expresses great desire - even pleading that people choose the path of happiness, as well as great displeasure when they don’t and (instead) choose the path leading to death (Deu 30:11-14 w/19-20; Eze 18:23, 33:11; e.g. Gen 4:6-7).

#### 1.2.9. Desperately wicked hearts and dead men can still repent, believe and be faithful.

(Jer 17:8-10; Eph 2:1-9) = Neither of these texts teach inability, but rather that: 1) (Jer 17) if we are going to follow God we can’t trust our heart, 2) (Eph 2) w/o God’s gracious extension of salvation [this is the “gift” in v8 not faith], we would be condemned – or “dead” in our sins – i.e. damned since regardless of what we can do, there is still the issue of God deciding to extend the offer – which is actually the main reason for Paul’s discussion in (1-9) – we as Gentiles were “without hope and without God” b/c the offer of salvation/forgiveness was not extended to us (11-14). Our deadness then was due to lack of offer NOT lack of ability. Before moving on - notice the order of salvation in (8) = we are “saved thru faith”. IOW: faith precedes salvation – or divine intervention in regeneration/new birth – see again v5 salv. = alive/regen/new birth; also Joh 3:3).

#### 1.2.10. God’s help does not imply inability to repent, believe and be faithful.

Several texts of Scripture speak to God giving aid to people for the purpose of turning to Him in faith/faithfulness. However, in light of the prior evidence, this cannot mean that w/o such help – these individuals were helpless. To imply such things also demonstrates poor deductive skills (e.g. B/C my wife helped me shovel snow, that means I was helpless to do it w/o her).

<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).

The only way such a conclusion can be drawn is if prior evidence revealed my inability to do the job by myself. In respect to our current discussion, the evidence once more points in the other direction). The biblical picture reveals God helping people not only w/ability but oftentimes already moving in the direction of His help – whether bad (i.e. hardening) – or good (enlightening) (e.g. 1Ki 8:57-60; Hag 1:4-14 versus 1Ki 11:11-13, 29-39, 12:1ff w/2Chr 10:15, 11:4 or Psalms 105:24-25; Act 16:11-14; Rom 7:18 = Lit. “I desire good, but [the OC] gave me no motivation to do it” w/8:3-4 = The NC gift of the HS helps us in our efforts/motivation to do God’s Word. Again however, we must choose to engage His help thru setting our mind on Him/His activity; 2Ti 2:24-26 = Notice, God’s granting of repentance does not guarantee salvation/restoration. Rather it only helps in “leading to a knowledge of the truth” w/the hopes that they “may” ([of their own volition] “come to their senses”; In sum – Ezr 8:22).

#### **1.2.11. Coming to Jesus or being drawn by the Father is about discipleship not initial conversion.**

(Joh 6:35-71) = Jesus discussion about what it takes to come to Him (i.e. being drawn by the Father) in John’s gospel is directed at people who are already disciples – i.e. people who have of their own ability, already exercised faith and come to Him (66). What else is made evident in this discussion, is that: 1) what Jesus means by “come” is remain or “abide” (see 56). IOW: it is about people maintaining what they gained thru enduring discipleship (not initial conversion). Hence the reason He can guarantee that such individuals will “never be cast out” but w/raised up on the last day – b/c they persevered until the end (40, 44). 2) Being drawn by the Father (the pre-requisite to discipleship w/Jesus) requires that we continue to be teachable or submissive to God’s teaching (44-45 = “drawn = taught by God”). Like the previous point then, this is not referring to initial conversion. 3) If this section of verses were referring to initial conversion than Judas is in heaven (70-71 w/37-40, 44 = All those chosen to “come” are granted “eternal life”). Jesus’ teaching in these verses squares nicely w/His parable of the soils in (Mat 13:18-23).

### **1.3. Historical support: the early church believed people had the ability to repent, believe and be faithful:**

#### **1.3.1. Justin Martyr: Christian apologist (100-165 A.D.)**

“Let some suppose, from what has been said by us, that we say that whatever occurs happens by a fatal necessity, because it is foretold as known beforehand, this too we explain. We have learned from the prophets, and we hold it to be true, that punishments, chastisements, and good rewards, are rendered according to the merit of each man’s actions. Now, if this is not so, but all things happen by fate, then neither is anything at all in our own power. For if it is predetermined that this man will be good, and this other man will be evil, neither is the first one meritorious nor the latter man to be blamed. And again, **unless the human race has the power of avoiding evil and choosing good by free choice, they are not accountable for their actions—whatever they may be.**”

#### **1.3.2. Tatian: Christian theologian (120-180 A.D.)**

“We were not created to die. Rather, we die by our own fault. **Our free will has destroyed us.** We who were free have become slaves. We have been sold through sin. Nothing evil has been created by God. We ourselves have manifested wickedness. But **we, who have manifested it, are able again to reject it.**”

#### **1.3.3. Irenaeus: bishop of Lyon (130-200 A.D.)**

“This expression, ‘How often would I have gathered my children together, and you would not,’ **set forth the ancient law of human liberty**, because God made man a free (agent) from the beginning, possessing his own soul to obey the precepts of God voluntarily, and not by compulsion of God...And in man as well as in angels, He has placed the **power of choice**...If then it were not in our power to do or not to do these things, what reason had the apostle, and much more the Lord Himself, to give us counsel to do some things and to abstain from others?...But man, being endowed with reason, and in this respect similar to God, **having been made free in his will, and with power over himself, is himself his own cause that sometimes he becomes wheat, and sometimes chaff.**”

#### **1.3.4. Athenagoras: Christian apologist (150-190 A.D.)**

“men...have **freedom of choice as to both virtue and vice (for you would not either honor the good or punish the bad; unless vice and virtue were in their own power, and some are diligent in the matters entrusted to them, and others faithless)**...”

#### **1.3.5. Melito: bishop of Smyrna (100 -180 A.D.)**

“There is, therefore, **nothing to hinder you from changing your evil manner to life, because you are a free man.**”

#### **1.3.6. Clement: bishop of Alexandria (150-200 A.D.)**

“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.**”

#### **1.3.7. Tertullian: Christian apologist (155-225 A.D.)**

“I find, then, that **man was by God constituted free**, master of his own will and power; indicating the presence of God’s image and likeness in him by nothing so well as by this constitution of his nature. **For a law would not be imposed upon one who did not have it in his power to render that obedience which is due to law. Nor again, would the penalty of death be threatened against sin, if a contempt of the law were impossible to man in the liberty of his will...Man is free, with a will either for obedience or resistance.**”

#### **1.3.8. Origin: Christian scholar (185-254 A.D.)**

“This also is clearly defined in the teaching of the church that every rational **soul is possessed of free-will and volition**...There are, indeed, innumerable passages in the Scriptures which establish with exceeding clearness the existence of **freedom of will.**”

#### **1.3.9. Methodius: Slavic missionary (260-315 A.D.)**

“Those [pagans] who decide that **man does not have free will**, but say that he is governed by the **unavoidable necessities of fate**, are guilty of impiety toward God Himself, making Him out to be the **cause and author of human evils.**”

#### **1.3.10. Cyril of Jerusalem: Christian Theologian (312-386 A.D.)**

“The **soul is self-governed**: and though the Devil can suggest, he has not the power to compel against the will. He pictures to us the thought of fornication, if you will, you can reject it. **For if you were a fornicator by necessity then for what cause did God prepare hell? If you were a doer of righteousness by nature and not by will, wherefore did God prepare crowns of ineffable glory?** The sheep is gentle, but never was it crowned for its gentleness; since its gentle quality belongs to it not from choice but by nature.”

#### **1.3.11. John Chrysostom: archbishop of Constantinople (347-407 A.D.)**

“All is in God’s power, but so that our **free-will** is not lost...it depends therefore on us and on Him. We must first choose the good, and then He adds what belongs to Him. **He does not precede our willing, that our free-will may not suffer.** But when we have chosen, then He affords us much help...It is ours to choose beforehand and to will, but God’s to perfect and bring to the end.”