

## RECONSIDERING CALVINISM PART 1



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 both 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 with the rest of the biblical witness to determine if this view is indeed the gospel of how God saves sinners<sup>3</sup>.

Why this study should matter to you: 1) because many of those claiming to be Christians today – especially those claiming to be reformed, biblical or paedobaptist in their view of baptism, will also be Calvinists. 2) because Calvinism/Monergism is not what the Bible teaches and (in my opinion) has done as much to promote a false gospel as the Roman Catholic Church (i.e. the false gospel of the Pharisees – “antinomianism”). 3) because being informed as to the beliefs of Calvinism and the teaching of the Bible on these points is what opens the door to conversations about what Luther and many of the Reformers missed in their creation of an alternate work-based salvation requiring such monergistic thinking (i.e. marriage covenant theology [of gain and maintain]). 4) because many of us are Calvinists and (if I am right in my assessment of the Scriptures), we need to change (to the glory of God).

### 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.

Martin Luther, the 16<sup>th</sup> century German monk and progenitor of the Reformation, was also the forerunner to this later doctrine. It was a part of his debates with Roman Catholic theologian Erasmus and the subject of his self-attested proudest effort – his book *On Un-Free-will (or On the Bondage of the Will)*<sup>4</sup>. More importantly, it was the doctrine he (and the other Reformers) believed was necessary not to the Reformation's validity, but also a person's salvation. That because it is this doctrine which most establishes the soteriological position of monergism<sup>5</sup>. Speaking of its importance to Luther and his “reformed theology”, John Piper states,

“At the heart of Martin Luther's theology was the conviction that human beings are totally dependent on God's omnipotent grace to rescue us from the bondage of the will by creating and decisively fulfilling every inclination to believe and obey God. The debates of the sixteenth century about the freedom of the will versus the bondage of the will were not peripheral to the Reformation. *They were at the heart of the issue* [emphasis mine]. At least Luther believed they were...For Luther, 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 with 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 exercise faith or be faithful to God. 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 follow God - or put faith in Christ, and commit themselves in faithful (not perfect) obedience to His commands.

#### 1.2.1. Culpability requires ability

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:

1.2.1.1. (Gen 6:5-7) = If our depravity makes us unable to follow God, then what about Noah? If his righteous living is due to divine intervention, then why is that not disclosed in the text? More importantly, why is God so mad with everyone else (enough to destroy

<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 with God (i.e. working/acting together with 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).

<sup>4</sup> Among all Luther writings, it was only this (and one other) he believed were worth keeping. In 1537, he wrote to a friend, “Regarding [the plan] to collect my writings in volumes, I am quite cool and not at all eager about it... I would rather see them all devoured. For I acknowledge none of them to be really a book of mine, except perhaps the one *On the Bondage of the Will* and the Catechism.

<sup>5</sup> “This is my absolute opinion: he that will maintain that a man's free-will is able to do or work anything in spiritual cases, be they never so small, denies Christ. This I have always maintained in my writings.” - Martin Luther

the entire earth over it) if they really can't do anything about it? Doesn't it seem a little silly to speak of Noah "finding favor" for being righteous if in reality, he was like everyone else and the only reason those things were true was due to what God (secretly) did to change him? (e.g. Recent college scam: the reason it is such a big deal is b/c of the inequity it creates – some get in b/c they did the work; others b/c they someone paid their way). If the doctrine of Total Depravity is true, then the same is true in re: to those who go to heaven. It's not b/c anyone actually was (or could be responsible for their actions), but rather b/c God "got us in". This btw does not bring more glory to God/Christ. Rather it strips it away (e.g. Which gives more glory to my wife? 1) I make the decision to marry her b/c I recognize her beauty and value 2) I don't see any beauty and value in marrying her and so her dad casts a love spell on me to make me see those things.).

1.2.1.2. (Rom 1:18-21) = If our sin has totally taken away our ability, then we indeed possess an "excuse". Paul however makes it clear that this is not the case. Jesus says the same about the Jews who rejected Him (Joh 15:22, 24). Excuses remove culpability. That is their purpose. Not possessing them therefore establishes the opposite (e.g. a child missing school b/c they are sick versus a child missing b/c they are playing hooky). Saying therefore that human beings are "without excuse" communicates they possess both ability and culpability for their actions.

1.2.1.3. (Rom 10:17-21) = The reason the Jews rejected Jesus was not b/c they couldn't understand spiritual things or possessed some spiritual inability. It is this very ability that causes Paul to call them "disobedient". Do we call people disobedient who do not possess the ability to be obedient? (e.g. Baby Knox is "disobedient" b/c he never reads the Bible, confesses Jesus with his mouth or fellowships w/the saints).

1.2.1.4. (Deu 30:11-14 w/Rom 10:6-12) = Paul uses what is taught in Deuteronomy 30 to reinforce his message of "no excuse" – or that all people [v12 – "there is no distinction between Jew and Greek"] have the ability to respond to God's gospel/commands and follow Him. Notice also, there is no mention of divine intervention – or the need for God to intervene. Instead, ability and therefore also – culpability, are placed squarely upon our shoulders ("Do not say in your heart" = Do not make an excuse; "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart –that is, the word of faith we proclaim" = You have the ability to respond in faith. Hence once more the reason Paul calls the Jews "disobedient" in vv17-21).

## 1.2.2. Justice assumes ability

The attribute most communicated and celebrated by the writers of scripture is God's justice. Can we really say that God is just if people are eternally condemned who possessed no ability to do what was required of them? It is the combination of this argument (along w/the aforementioned implication) that psychologists and criminals today attempt to use to escape justice in our courtrooms (i.e. inability to discern right/wrong). The doctrine of total depravity is the "Christian" version of this justice-destroying kind of thinking. 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 no doubt a reflection of His own.

1.2.3. An inability to 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. It is no different than those today who give out medals to kids who lose the race (e.g. Gen 6:7, 22:12; Mat 25:21-23, 31-40; Rev 3:4).

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

In the same vein as the previous point, the final judgment according to *our* deeds (Rev 20:11-15) becomes 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?

1.2.5. An inability to repent or believe would mean that God's people (even God!) are preaching to the wrong crowd.

The Bible is filled w/examples of God (Deu 30:15) 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? Likewise, our prayers sb that God would save them. Never does Scripture prescribe such prayers (e.g. Rom 10:1 – "my prayer to God for them is that they may be saved" = Notice Paul doesn't pray that God intervene to save them, but rather that they "may be saved" – i.e. that their current rebellion would not cause God to harden them – or push them further in the direction of darkness, but rather continue extending His mercy/offer of salvation. Paul has good reason for speaking this way given what he says in the previous and preceding verses (Rom 9:18 w/11:8-10 = Many of the Jews who rejected Jesus were "hardened").

1.2.6. God hardening a person (pushing them further in the direction of their rebellion) implies prior ability.

Think about it. If I already don't possess the ability for faith or faithfulness, then the idea of hardening a person make no sense. How do I make a person less responsive to the gospel that they already have no ability to respond to? The same could be said in relation to those passages which speak of a person hardening themselves. How does a person make themselves less able to do something they (supposedly) already have no ability to do? (e.g. Exo 7:13-14, 22, 8:15, 19, 32, 9:7, 12, 34-35, 10:1; 1Sa 6:6 = Notice Pharaoh is considered to be the one hardening his own heart before it is furthered by the hand of God. Yet in both cases, the only way this makes sense is if ability existed.). This idea of hardening – or God no longer revealing/extending Himself to those who continue in disobedience is what Jesus is getting at in (Mat 13:10-15).