

RECONSIDERING CALVINISM PART 5



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 has been 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 sinners³.

Why this study should matter to you: 1) It demonstrates God's continuing protection of us (the denial of free-will and justice espoused by the determinism of the atheist evolutionists is the theology and resulting consequence of Calvinism also known as theistic determinism)⁴, 2) It demonstrates growth in our understanding of God's Word and therefore also His continual leading of us as His disciples (Christianity is Judaism 2.0 whereas Calvinism is Roman Catholicism 2.0), 3) It demonstrates our trust in God's Word as our firm foundation and only sacred cow - not our theology (Mat 7:24-27).

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; **Joh 9:41**). 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)⁵.

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:

Though the Bible does teach election, it does NOT teach that God chose/elected specific persons to be the recipients of His salvation before Creation. 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' 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. [DISCUSSED]

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: Noah, Abe, Isaac, Jacob, Israel, the New Covenant church, our personal election or the election of children born to the saints (Gen 6:5 – 9, 11-13 w/18a; Gen 6:22 w/7:1; Gen 6:18; 1Pe 3:20-21; Gen 15:1-21; Neh 9:8; 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; Eph 1:1-11; Eze 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).

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

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

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 "The moment we catch sight of the stream of causes that precede [the criminal's] conscious decisions, reaching back into their childhood and beyond, their culpability begins to disappear." – Sam Harris (Freewill); "By losing free-will we gain empathy, for we realize that in the end all of us, whether Bernie Madoffs or Nelson Mandelas, are victims of circumstance..." Jerry Coyne (Why We Really Don't Have Free-Will); "When a computer malfunctions, we do not punish it. We track down the problem and fix it, usually by replacing a damaged component, either in hardware or software. Isn't the murderer or the rapist just a machine with a defective component? Why is it that we humans find it almost impossible to accept such conclusions? Why do we vent such visceral hatred on child murderers...when we should simply regard them as faulty units that need fixing or replacing? My dangerous idea is that we shall eventually grow out of all this and even learn to laugh at it, just as we laugh at (a man) when he beats his car [when it breaks down]." – Richard Dawkins (Let's All Stop Beating Basil's Car).

⁵ "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

2.2.4. Romans 9 and 11 teaches that the only time God's election is unconditional is when it concerns those not seeking Him.

At the end of the previous chapter (chapter 8), Paul makes it clear that those who have received God's love in Christ (or thru putting faith in Christ and coming into a saving, justified state w/God) cannot be separated from that covenant relationship by external means (8:38-39). This then prompts (in Paul's mind) the question of Israel, whose majority - b/c of their rebellion, were further "hardened" - or pushed deeper into the depths of their self-inflicted blindness so as not to recognize or receive Jesus and instead become those separated (or excommunicated) from God's love (or covenant of salvation) (Rom 11:7-10; 1Co 2:8 w/Mat 13:10-15 w/Isa 6:9-10). What about them? His answer: though God has obligated Himself to extend the offer of salvation to all who are diligently and genuinely seeking Him and His righteousness (Act 10:34-35, 16:6; Joh 4:23; Rom 2:6-11; Jer 29:13), the same is not true in relation to those not seeking - or who have rejected Him - including Israel, those who had received God's salvific blessings in the past (Rom 9:1-5). In respect to these individuals, God had no obligation. Any mercy therefore that got extended to them (in terms of the offer of salvation) was completely up to God's free, optional (or unconditioned) choice. Just as it was in the case of choosing which brother would serve the other (Isaac over Ishmael and Jacob over Esau), so God (in relation to those who were in rebellion/rejecting Him), had the right to decide who would receive mercy and who was hardened (Rom 9:7-18; see also Jer 18:1-10). In this Paul asserts no failure on the part of God's past promises (regarding Abe's descendants or Israel's deliverance through the coming Messiah and New Covenant) since such promises were meant only for that Israel (or those descendants) who continued to receive God's favor. Likewise, there was also no injustice on the part of God, since His choice to refuse mercy to the majority of Israel came after incredible patience (waiting for their repentance) and the decision to spare some so as to preserve Israel's hopes in the future (Rom 9:6, 19-29, 11:1-29). God's election as taught in Romans chapter 9 is therefore not attempting to deny the very conditional nature of God's election (as demonstrated throughout redemptive history,) but rather what His obligation is toward those who do not meet those conditions, which (as Paul once more makes clear) is nothing. In such cases, He possesses no obligation, but rather can freely (or unconditionally) choose whether to have mercy on those individuals or harden them in their already rebellious state. Hence the reason Paul can call God's choice to extend mercy to those who in the past who rebelled, "grace" that is "no longer on the basis of works" (Rom 11:5-6).

2.2.5. Election refers to the calling of God not our conversion to Christ.

Calvinists' view God's work in election as conversion (i.e. choosing to change the state of an individual from unsaved to saved, pagan to Christian) versus what the Bible actually teaches, which is (as) calling (i.e. choosing to extend the offer of salvation thru the preaching of God's gospel - Rom 10:8-15). Hence the reason Peter can use the two terms (election and calling) synonymously and admonish Christians to pursue lives that will make "sure" their original offer does not prove in vain (2Pe 1:10-11; For similar instruction see Phi 2:16; Heb 12:15; For synonymous usage of calling and election see also Rom 9:11). It should be noted that the only time election is associated w/conversion is when referring to those who have responded appropriately to God's electing call (by faith in Christ). They are identified as "the elect" or "the called" or "the chosen" (e.g. Mat 24:22, 24, 31; Luk 18:7; Rom 1:6-7, 33, 11:7; 1Co 1:24, 2:7; Col 3:12; 2Ti 2:10; Tit 1:1; 2Jo 1:1, 13; Jud 1:1; Rev 17:14; even Isa 43:20-28; for a combination of these two ideas see Joe 2:32).

2.2.6. Election does not guarantee (final) salvation since the elect or chosen (i.e. those who have responded appropriately to God's electing call by faith in Christ) can (and many do) go apostate and to Hell.

Not maintaining what the elect/chosen have gained (by faith) thru faithful, enduring obedience will mean missing heaven (just like the pagan) -only w/worse consequences (1Th 1:4 w/3:5; Mat 22:1-14; Deu 7:9-12; 2Pe 1:8-11 w/3:20-22; Rom 11:20-24, 28-29).

2.3. Historical support:

2.3.1. Justin Martyr : Christian apologist (100-165 A.D.) "God, wishing men and angels to follow His will, resolved to create them free to do righteousness. But if the word of God foretells that some angels and men shall certainly be punished, it did so because it foreknew that they would be unchangeably (wicked), but not because God created them so. But lest some suppose, from what has been said by us that we say that whatever happens, 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, and chastisements, and good rewards, are rendered according to the merit of each man's actions. Since if it be not so, but all things happen by fate, neither is anything at all in our own power. For if it be fated that this man, be good, and this other evil, neither is the former meritorious nor the latter to be blamed. And again, unless the human race have the power of avoiding evil and choosing good by free choice, they are not accountable for their actions, of whatever kind they be. For not like other things, as trees and quadrupeds, which cannot act by choice, did God make man: for neither would he be worthy of reward or praise did he not of himself choose the good, but were created for this end; nor, if he were evil, would he be worthy of punishment, not being evil of himself, but being able to be nothing else than what he was made... We do not affirm that it is by fate that men do what they do, or suffer what they suffer, but that each man by free choice acts rightly or sins. The Stoics, not observing this, maintained that all things take place according to the necessity of fate. But since God in the beginning made the race of angels and men with free-will, they will justly suffer in eternal fire the punishment of whatever sins they have committed. and this is the nature of all that is made, to be capable of vice and virtue. For neither would any of them be praiseworthy unless there were power to turn to both (virtue and vice)."

2.3.2. Clement: bishop of Alexandria (150-200 A.D.) "Let us review all the generations in turn, and learn that from generation to generation the Master has given an opportunity for repentance to those who desire to turn to him."

2.3.3. Irenaeus: bishop of Lyon (130-200 A.D.) "If, therefore, in the present time also, God, knowing the number of those who will not believe—since he foreknows everything—has given them over to unbelief and turned his face away from men of this kind, leaving them in the darkness which they have themselves chosen for themselves, then why would it be amazing if he also, in that time, gave Pharaoh—who would never have believed—along with those who were with him, over to their unbelief? As the Word said to Moses from the bush, "I am sure that the king of Egypt will not let you go except by a mighty hand."

2.3.4. Hermas: author of the Shepherd of Hermas (140-160 A.D.) "To those whose heart he saw would become pure and obedient to him, he gave power to repent with the whole heart. But to those whose deceit and wickedness he perceived, and saw that they intended to repent hypocritically, he did not grant repentance, lest they should again profane His name."