

THE LANGUAGE OF CALVINISM

by
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Calvinistic theology has been with us for a long time. Of course, it arose with the Reformation in the writings of John Calvin around 470 years ago. This important French Reformer contributed to the Protestant revolt by reasoning farther than Luther did against the Catholic heresy of justification through human works. Influenced by the writings of Augustine, Calvin saw the root of the error in the Church's teaching about the origins of salvation. One's salvation from sin does not originate in himself, Calvin taught; it comes from God alone. This truth he believed to be the dividing issue between Protestantism and Catholicism. In his monumental *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, young Calvin went well beyond saying that sinners are justified by faith in Christ alone. He found the cause of the sinner's salvation to be an arbitrary choice made by the Lord before Creation that certain men would be saved and that the rest would be damned. Calvin taught that believers really did not make a decision to believe. God caused them to believe in Christ because He had chosen them to redemption. Although the Reformation movement as a whole applauded Calvin's defense of the grace of God, his extreme views of divine election produced controversy among the Protestants both in his lifetime and in the years that have followed. Defenders of Calvin organized and stated his theology in 1618 at the Synod of Dort. The pronouncements of that gathering have been simplified in the famous TULIP acronym:

Total inability,
Unconditional election,
Limited atonement,
Irresistible grace, and
Perseverance of the saints.

Calvinism was preserved and promoted down through the years by the Presbyterian, Congregational, and Reformed churches. It was also accepted in various forms among Baptist churches, but not by all of them. Today the system is increasing in popularity within evangelical and fundamentalist circles where it has not found favor for a long time. The promoters of Calvinism in these circles sometimes teach their theology to the unsuspecting by altering their traditional vocabulary. "Limited atonement" (that Christ died only for the elect) becomes "particular redemption." "Irresistible grace" becomes "effectual call." Often the acceptance of Calvinistic doctrine comes gradually as Christians are persuaded to believe pieces of the system labeled in such a way as to disguise them. Actually the term "Calvinism" itself is avoided by some who cherish the opportunity to teach it where its right name would shut the door. Because of this phenomenon, serious Bible students must recognize the new language of Calvinism and learn its real definitions. For the sake of clarity, understanding, and truth, the misleading terms should be identified and examined in the light of scripture.

1. "Sovereign Grace."

To be sure, God is sovereign and He is a God of grace. Yet when the Calvinist uses the term "sovereign grace," he has a particular meaning in mind that is not in line with scripture!

"Sovereign grace" is "irresistible grace" to him. It means that God sovereignly bestows His grace upon the elect. The word sovereignty, according to the dictionary, means "supreme and

independent power or authority.” To a Calvinist, God’s grace in the salvation of a sinner is granted in an act of sovereignty, solely by divine decree and totally independent of the will of the one saved. This is why Calvinists sometimes call it “free grace,” since God is “free” to bestow it upon whomever He chooses regardless of the sinner’s disposition in the matter. Sovereign grace and free grace are high-sounding terms, but they do not accurately describe the saving grace of the God of the Bible!

Is God’s grace *offered* or *imposed*? Does the sinner have a genuine choice in the matter of his own salvation? The fifth chapter of Romans certainly presents grace as a *gift offered*, received by faith in Jesus Christ. It opens this way:

“Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: by whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.” (verses 1 and 2)

How is the grace of God accessed? *“We have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand.”* By faith in Jesus Christ *“we have peace with God,”* which is ours by grace. Faith in Christ brings us the grace of God. The Calvinist, to the contrary, insists that the sovereign grace of God gives us faith in Christ. He denies the validity of the choice between faith and unbelief! Yet the Bible teaches that the decision to believe accesses God’s grace.

Later in the chapter, we are told that eternal life is a *“free gift”* offered to sinners by the grace of God through Jesus Christ. The *“offense”* of Adam in the Garden is contrasted with the *“obedience”* of Christ at Calvary (verses 15 through 21). Notice especially these sections:

“For if through the offence of one many be dead, much more the grace of God, and the gift by grace, which is by one man, Jesus Christ, hath abounded unto many . . . For if by one man’s offence death reigned by one; much more they which receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness shall reign in life by one, Jesus Christ . . .” (Romans 5:15 and 17)

The Greek word for *“gift”* (*charisma*) comes from the word for *“grace”* (*charis*). These words always have the idea of granting favor. They never speak of forcing or imposing something upon someone. Grace is extended or offered, not decreed or mandated. Grace is a gift!

In Romans 3, *“the righteousness of God”* is given *“by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe”* (verse 22).

“For there is no difference: for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins . . .” (verses 22b through 25a)

Can we not see that God's grace is granted to those that believe on Christ? It is offered by God and may be received or rejected by the sinner. Although this doctrine is offensive to the Calvinist, it is nevertheless the teaching of Scripture.

Yes, God's grace may be rejected and resisted. Hear what the Scripture says!

"Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye. Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? and they have slain them which showed before of the coming of the Just One; of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers . . ." (Acts 7:51-52)

"He that despised Moses' law died without mercy under two or three witnesses: of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace?" (Hebrews 10:28-29)

"Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God. For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him. We then, as workers together with him, beseech you also that ye receive not the grace of God in vain." (II Corinthians 5:20 - 6:1)

The grace of God is offered freely through Jesus Christ, not imposed sovereignly upon the elect. It may be received by faith or rejected in unbelief.

2. "God-Centered Theology."

Recently Calvinists have castigated their critics by labeling their own system "God-centered theology" while classifying all other theological systems as "man-centered." It is true that Calvinism views the salvation of men from the standpoint of God. It is also true that the Bible doctrines of foreknowledge, predestination, and election view salvation from God's point of view. They are necessitated by the vast difference between the way the eternal God views things and the way man sees them. The Lord said, *"as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts"* (Isaiah 55:9). Since God is above and beyond time, His knowledge of events within His creation is much different from man's. He knows everything that will happen as if it has already happened!

"Remember the former things of old: for I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure . . ." (Isaiah 46:9-10)

“Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world.” (Acts 15:18)

God is omniscient, knowing all things. God is omnipotent, possessing all power. God is eternal, not restricted by the dimension of time. God is sovereign, the final authority in all matters. Man, on the other hand, is limited in knowledge, power, and authority, and he is bound by the restrictions of time and by other limitations in his experience and understanding. For us to have some understanding of God’s viewpoint in our salvation, the Lord gave us the precious doctrines of His foreknowledge, predestination, and election. Foreknowledge deals with omniscience in salvation; predestination deals with omnipotence in salvation; and election deals with sovereignty in salvation. They are all *necessary* truths, but the Calvinists have them *wrong*.

Calvinism robs foreknowledge of its meaning, exaggerates predestination beyond its meaning, and perverts election in its meaning. These perversions of precious truth result from the Calvinist’s insistence on eliminating genuine human choice from the equation of salvation. However, God ordained that human choice *would* play a role in the eternal destiny of men!

According to scripture, God’s foreknowledge is connected to His predestination of believers to eternal glory. Notice the teaching of Romans 8:29.

“For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren.”

The word translated “foreknow” in this verse is *proegno*, the second aorist active indicative form of a very simple Greek verb, *proginosko*. It is based on *ginosko*, which means “I know,” and it adds the prefix *pro*, which indicates “before.” *Proegno* means that God knew certain people before. Calvinists want to twist the meaning of this simple word to give it the same definition as “chose” or “elected.” Of course, this cannot be done on the basis of Greek to English translation. The word for “predestinate” is *proorise*, which means “predetermine.” Therefore Romans 8:29 says that God predetermined certain people He knew before to conform some day to the image of His Son, Jesus Christ. Romans 8:30 calls the conforming of a justified individual to Christ’s image, glorification. The next verse says,

“What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us?” (Romans 8:31)

In other words, God says that we are going to make it! He combines His omniscience and His omnipotence to guarantee the glorification of those He justifies. This is the point of the whole passage. Actually, the final glorification of “*them which are in Christ Jesus*” is the theme of the entire eighth chapter of Romans! Verse 33 calls these foreknown, predestinated, and justified people (who will surely be glorified) “*God’s elect*.” In the sense that He foreknew and

predestinated them to glory, it can be said that they have been chosen by God.

The Biblical concept of election in salvation, while assuring believers, never excludes anyone from the possibility of salvation! I Timothy 2:1-6 says that we should pray for “*all men*” (v. 1) because God “*will have all men to be saved*” (v. 4) and because Jesus “*gave himself a ransom for all*” (v. 6). I Timothy 4:10 says that God is potentially “*the Savior of all men,*” and other New Testament passages indicate the same thing (John 3:16, 4:40-42; II Peter 3:9, I John 2:2, 4:14-15). What assures a man that he is one of God’s elect is the decision he makes to believe on Jesus Christ. The choice to believe or not to believe is always involved in the salvation of a soul.

The ninth chapter of Romans also mentions election. It begins with Paul’s deep desire that his Christ-rejecting Israelite kinsmen be converted and saved. His expression of sorrow for them leads into the question of how God’s promises to Israel as a nation will be fulfilled in light of the truth that both Jews and Gentiles are saved by faith in Christ and in light of the fact that most of Israel refuses to believe. In this favorite chapter of Calvinists, the concept of divine election is applied to answer this question, but not in the sense that it applies to individual salvation.

“Not as though the word of God hath taken none effect. For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel: neither, because they are the seed of Abraham, are they all children: but, In Isaac shall thy seed be called.” (verses 6-7)

God sovereignly chose to make the descendants of Abraham through Isaac the recipients of His promises. The chapter goes on to teach that divine election passed the Abrahamic promises sovereignly to Isaac’s son Jacob rather than to his twin Esau (vs. 10-13). The application of the principle of election here is to national destinies rather than to eternal destinies. Sovereignty is then applied to the case of Pharaoh (vs. 14-29) and then back to Israel. Although the doctrines of divine sovereignty and election are central in Romans 9, the chapter ends by attributing the condemnation of unsaved Jews to their choice.

“What shall we say then? That the Gentiles, which followed not after righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness which is of faith. But Israel, which followed after the law of righteousness, hath not attained to the law of righteousness. Wherefore? Because they sought it not by faith, but as it were by the works of the law. For they stumbled at that stumblingstone; as it is written, Behold, I lay in Sion a stumblingstone and rock of offence: and whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed.” (verses 30-33)

The choice not to believe on Christ is also presented as the reason for the condemnation of lost Israelites in Romans 10 (vs. 17-21) and Romans 11 (vs. 20-23). Human choice is part of Biblical soteriology, even in Romans 9, 10, and 11.

The doctrines of foreknowledge, predestination, and election view salvation from God’s

standpoint, while the doctrine of justification by faith views salvation from man's standpoint, and both are valid. The Bible does not contrast "God-centered theology" against "man-centered theology." It teaches a balanced theology of salvation that looks at the truth from both sides.

3. "Depravity."

Virtually all systems of Christian theology teach something about the depravity of man. Often it is called "total depravity," but when a Calvinist speaks of it in this way he does not mean simply that all have sinned, or that all do sin, or that all men are sinners by nature. He means that men are totally incapable of responding to the Gospel call. This is why, among themselves, Calvinists call it "total inability." Again they are denying that men have any choice in the matter of their salvation. Grace is applied to the elect without their voluntary consent, according to Calvin. But the Bible teaches from beginning to end that men, although depraved, have the ability to choose to turn to God. Examine an interesting metaphor given to us in the first chapter of Proverbs.

We are told in verse 7 that "*the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge.*" How then does a man begin on the path of knowledge in the fear of God? Is this "*fear*" placed sovereignly in the heart of a chosen man, or does he have a choice? After admonishing the young man to heed his parents (vs. 8-9) and to resist temptation (vs. 10-19), Solomon draws a symbolic picture of what happens in the heart that makes one wise or foolish. Wisdom cries out in a public place to the young men that pass by.

"How long, ye simple ones, will ye love simplicity? and the scorers delight in their scorning, and fools hate knowledge? Turn you at my reproof: behold, I will pour out my spirit unto you, I will make known my words unto you." (verses 22-23)

God's Wisdom promises to enlighten those who will turn to God. Many of those who hear refuse to heed (vs. 24-26). They will bear the consequences of their refusal because, the Bible says,

"... they hated knowledge, and did not choose the fear of the LORD." (verse 29)

Wise men fear God by choice and thus receive the knowledge of God. Fools choose not to fear God.

The many commands and appeals in God's Word for men to choose God over sin are genuine and valid because depraved men *can truly repent*. Certainly divine enablement is involved in saving repentance, but God's work to produce repentance is extended to all. It is their choice that determines whether repentance happens.

"My spirit shall . . . strive with man . . ." (Genesis 6:3)

"That was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world." (John 1:9)

“And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me.” (John 12:32)

Depraved men are able and responsible to repent and turn to God for salvation.

“And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent.” (Acts 17:30)

4. “Perseverance.”

Some Baptists mistakenly think that the Calvinist “point” titled “perseverance of the saints” means the same thing as the eternal security of the believer. However, strict Calvinists do *not* teach eternal security, that one who has believed on Christ for salvation can never be condemned. Although such great chapters as John 10 and Romans 8 clearly teach this doctrine, Calvinism says that good works alone assure the believer of his final salvation. Listen to Calvinist commentator Charles Hodge about perseverance:

“False security of salvation commonly rests on the ground of our belonging . . . to a privileged class (the elect) . . . Neither the members of the church nor the elect can be saved unless they persevere in holiness; and they cannot persevere in holiness without continual watchfulness and effort.”

Although in this passage he sounds like an Arminian, Hodge was a prominent Calvinist theologian. This point of Calvinism is at the root of Lordship-salvation preaching and teaching, and makes the possession of eternal life an open question until death. Yet many statements in God’s Word promise eternal security to those who turn to Christ at a point in time. They are all over the book of John!

“He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life . . .” (John 3:36)

“Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.” (John 4:14)

“He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life.” (John 5:24)

“I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst . . . Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me hath everlasting life. I am that bread of life.” (John 6:35, 46-48)

5. “Arminian.”

Jacobus Arminius was a teacher born in the late sixteenth century who suggested modifications in the teachings of Calvin to conform them more to the Scriptures. He allowed for the will of man to be involved in the determination of salvation. He taught that Christ died for all, and not only for the elect. He believed that God’s grace could be resisted. Yet his

followers over the years have also held that believers in Christ can fall from faith and holiness and finally be lost. The difference between Arminians and Calvinists at this point has been that followers of Arminius say that people can lose salvation after receiving it while Calvin's disciples insist that those who fall away never had divinely-given salvation. However when a Calvinist calls anyone or anything "Arminian," we cannot be sure that he is referring to the lose-your-salvation view. Virtually any teaching contrary to the points of Calvinism is labeled Arminian! Some Calvinists think that Humanism and Marxism are forms of Arminianism. Don't be misled or intimidated by the misuse of this label. Many non-Arminians are called Arminians by Calvinists! No one should take them seriously.

Although Calvinism is a respected theological system with a long history, it is not what many claim for it: the heart of the truth. Fundamentalists who derive their non-Calvinist beliefs from an unprejudiced study of the Bible should be careful not to be swept away with the wave of Calvinism. Neither should they be confused by the language the Calvinists are using.

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