

What Is Calvinism?

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As a religious reformer, John Calvin rode the crest of the 16th century Reformation, a little younger than, but contemporary with, Martin Luther. Born in 1509, Calvin was reputedly the most learned man in Europe at the age of 22 years. He was reared a Roman Catholic but became convinced of his errors in his late teens. He began preaching Reformation concepts by the age of 20.

Calvin was a powerful preacher, but his greater power was in his pen. Through his literary efforts he not only influenced his own generation, but millions of people in succeeding generations, down to the present.

Calvin's most potent work was his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, completed in 1536 when he was only 27. In it he grappled with the weighty issues of predestination, election, grace and the free will of man. The Synod of Dort, convened in 1618, crystallized Calvin's doctrinal platform into five statements:

1. Predestination.
2. The Death of Christ.
3. Man's Corruption.
4. Grace and Free Will.
5. Perseverance.

"Five-point Calvinism" has had a staggering effect upon Protestant faith and practice. The creeds of all major Protestant groups have been greatly flavored with Calvinism, some of them built almost entirely around these five points.

Predestination means to decide or determine in advance. Based on a misapplication of certain Scriptures, Calvin concluded that before creation God chose (elected) specific individuals and angels to be saved and all others lost. This election was both unconditional and immutable. It is impossible to harmonize this view with Jesus' invitation to all men to come to Him (Mat. 11:28). It conflicts with the order to take the Gospel to the whole creation, with the promise that all who believe it and are baptized shall be saved (Mark 16:15-16). If God has predetermined by name and number who shall be saved, the preaching of the Gospel is a vain effort. On the death of Christ, Calvin taught that the blood atonement of Jesus was not for all men, but only for those unconditionally chosen by God for salvation.

This erroneous doctrine is logically required by the prior assumption of unconditional election. It is plainly taught in the New Testament that potentially, Christ died for every man: He gave Himself a ransom for all (1 Tim. 2:5-6); salvation has been brought to all men (Tit. 2:11); Jesus tasted death for every man (Heb. 2:9), et al. All men can be saved, but not all will be because they will not come to Christ (John 5:40).

Concerning the nature of man, Calvin taught that "All men are conceived in sin, and born the children of wrath, indisposed to all saving good, propense to evil . . ." If this doctrine is true, it must follow that every little child that dies will go to Hell. But Jesus said Heaven belongs to them (Mat. 19:14).

How are the good thoughts and inclinations of unsaved people explained if we are totally depraved (Luke 8:15)? Also, if sin can be inherited from sinful parents, why is not righteousness inherited from godly parents? Sin and its guilt are always personal (Eze. 18:20; 1 John 3:4). The **consequence** of Adam's sin (physical death) is shared by all (1 Cor. 15:22), but not the guilt.

If man is born in sin and incapable of good, then he has no free will to serve God if he chooses, Calvin taught. He cannot break the shackles of his evil nature without direct Divine intervention. This Divine grace is irresistible, he concluded. Nothing is more foreign to God's Word. From the beginning man could choose to obey and receive God's grace or to disobey and be rejected (Gen. 3:1-6). Every invitation to serve God and every warning about disobedience is utterly vain if Calvin's doctrine is true.

The doctrine of "perseverance of the saints" is a logical necessity if unconditional predestination is true. If the number of the saved is unalterably set by God, it must follow that, if one is in that number, he cannot be lost, even should he want to. However, Paul believed he could be lost (1 Cor. 9:27). Simon was in danger of perishing (Acts 8:20-23). Christians who sought justification through the law of Moses were "fallen away from grace" (Gal. 5:4). It is lamentable that with all of the influence Calvin had, the preponderance of it was for error rather than for Truth.

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