

Why I Am a Calvinist, Part 4

... and why every Christian is a Calvinist of sorts.

(By Phil Johnson)

Part IV: One more recommendation, and an explanation of why this issue is important to me



Here's a recommendation for your iPod: If you are someone who is resistant to Calvinism, or you don't feel you fully understand enough about it, and you want a single, simple overview of the substance and the history of Calvinism, I gave a message to our college students almost two years ago titled "The Story of Calvinism," where I did my best to cover all that ground in one shot. It's on the internet with the rest of my sermons, and you can download it for free. The web address is swordandtrowel.org, and look for the title "The Story of Calvinism."

In that message, I explained that I have not always been a Calvinist. I grew up in a family that had been Wesleyan Methodists for generations — and even after I became a Christian, it was several years before I finally came to the point where I could affirm the biblical doctrine of election without trying to explain it away.

One of the things that first got me thinking seriously about the sovereignty of God was an incident in a college Sunday School class, in a Southern Baptist Church, in Durant, OK, where I had a Sunday school teacher who hated Calvinism with a passion and wasted no opportunity to make an argument against the sovereignty of God. And his continual emphasis on the subject got me thinking about it a lot.

Then one Sunday, while this guy was taking prayer requests, a girl in the class raised her hand and asked, "Should we really be praying for our lost relatives? It seems like it's a wasted effort to pray to God for their salvation if He can't do any more than He has already done to save them."

I vividly remember the look on the face of this Sunday School teacher. This was clearly a question that had never occurred to him. So he thought about it for a moment, and you could see the wheels in his head turning while he tried to think of a good reason to pray for the salvation of the lost. And finally, he said, "Well, yeah, I guess you're right." From that Sunday on, he never accepted any more prayer requests for people's lost loved-ones.

That just didn't seem quite right to me. I had just done a Bible study in Romans 10:1, where Paul says, "Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved." Not only that, I began to wonder why we should pray about anything in the realm of human relationships if God never intrudes on the sanctity of human free will. You know: Why should I pray for God to move my English teacher to look favorably on my work when she graded my paper if she is ultimately sovereign over her own heart? Those were questions I couldn't answer, and I really struggled with questions like that.

But the more I studied the Bible, the more it seemed to challenge my ideas about free will and the sovereignty of God. One by one over a period of more than 10 years, the doctrines of election, and God's sovereignty, and the total depravity of sinners became more and more clear to me from Scripture.

Every time one of my arguments against Calvinist doctrines would fall, and I would embrace some doctrine that I was desperately trying to argue against, it never felt like I was undergoing any major paradigm shift. It was more like I was resolving a nagging conflict in my mind. Because I kept discovering that the major ideas underlying the doctrines of grace were truths that I had always affirmed: God is sovereign, Christ died for me, God loved me before I loved Him, He sought me and drew me and initiated my reconciliation while I was still His enemy. Those were truths I believed even when I was a rank Arminian. Embracing Calvinism was natural — and inevitable — because all I was doing was ridding my mind of wrong ideas and faulty assumptions about human free will and other notions like that, which are not even taught in the Bible — so that I could wholeheartedly affirm what I really believed anyway: That God is God, and He does all His good pleasure, and no one can make Him do otherwise, and He is in control and in charge no matter how much noise evildoers try to make. And not only is He in charge, He is working all things out for my good and His glory.

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