

Why I Am a Calvinist, Part 7

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

(By Phil Johnson)

Part VII: A second look at one of the shortest verses in the Bible



We're looking at five doctrinal implications of a very short verse, 1 John 4:19: "We love Him because He first loved us."

We've reached point three. This verse not only highlights the perverseness of our fallen state; and teaches us about the priority of God's electing choice; but, third, it shows us—

3. THE PARTICULARITY OF HIS SAVING WORK

What do I mean by that? Look at the verse again: "We love Him, because He first loved us." Those words express John's conviction that God has done something special for us. "We love Him . . ." but not everyone loves Him. God has done something on our behalf and in our hearts that He does not do for everyone. He has demonstrated a particular love for us.

The apostle John was always keenly aware of this fact. He gloried in the knowledge that Jesus' love for him was a special love. That is the implication of his favorite self description: "that disciple whom Jesus loved" (John 21:7). John used that phrase again and again because he delighted in the knowledge that Christ loved him in particular. God had redeemed him in particular. He was not merely the beneficiary of a general goodwill that God has for all creation; he was convinced that Christ's love for him was personal and special. Jesus loved him in particular.

You know what? Every born-again Arminian will say that, too: He loves me in particular. He loves me with a special love. I'm not merely a dog, licking up the crumbs of God's general love for all mankind. I am one of the children He has seated at His table. He has a special love for me. Every believing Arminian could refer to himself, as the apostle John did, as "That guy whom Jesus loves."

By the way, I do believe with all my heart that God has a general love of God for everyone in the human race. "His tender mercies are over all His works" (Psalm 145:9). Acts 17:25: "He giveth to all life, and breath, and all things"—and those are tokens of a genuine goodwill and lovingkindness that extends to everyone who was ever born. God even loves His enemies (Matthew 5:45) so "He maketh His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust."

Yet God's love for the elect is a particular love. He loves them with the love of a Father for His own children. He loves them each uniquely. He loves them in a special way. His love for them is the highest and most sacred kind of love known to man. No greater love can possibly be extended to any creature. And that great love is manifest in a particular way. It is a sacrificial kind of love that will stop at nothing to preserve its object. "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." Christ's love moved Him to give His life for His friends.

Look back a few verses at verses 9-10: "In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him.

Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” The proof of His electing love—and the thing that lovingly guarantees the salvation of His people—is the atoning work of Christ.

God gave Christ to die for them in order to be a propitiation for their sins. That simply means He satisfied justice on their behalf. He satisfied the wrath of God on their behalf. He bore their guilt. He died in their place and in their stead, so that they wouldn't have to suffer the penalty for their own sins. He bore the wrath of God on their behalf. He paid in full the penalty of their sins. He was their substitute. He died for them in particular.

So let's talk about "limited atonement." Some of you are thinking, There's a doctrine no Arminian presupposes. Actually, I think anyone who believes the atonement was substitutionary presupposes a Calvinistic doctrine of the atonement. And historic, evangelical Arminians do believe in substitutionary atonement. Christ suffered in my place and in my stead. He wasn't such a substitute for Judas's punishment, because if what Jesus said about Judas is true, Judas is in hell this very moment, bearing the wrath of God for himself.

I don't like the expression "limited atonement," because it suggests that the atonement is limited in its sufficiency.

Let me clear this up for you: No true Calvinist believes that. If you had the idea that Calvinism places some limit on the value or sufficiency of the atonement, forget that idea. Any Calvinist who denies that Christ's death was sufficient to atone for the sins of the whole world is a bad Calvinist. Christ's sacrifice was infinite in its sufficiency, "abundantly sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world." (In fact, that phrase, "abundantly sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world," is quoted directly from the canons of the Synod of Dort, which is the original manifesto of Calvinism.) The death of Christ is infinitely sufficient and that one sacrifice could have atoned for the sins of the whole world, if that had been God's design.

But was that God's design? Or was the central and supreme object of His death the salvation of those whom God had loved with a special love from before the foundation of the world? I believe those questions are definitively settled forever by 1 Timothy 4:10: "We trust in the living God, who is the Saviour of all men, specially of those that believe." In the design of God, the atoning work of Christ has a special significance for the elect, because it was the means by which He secured and guaranteed their salvation forever. "The good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep" (John 10:11). And even Arminians affirm the basic gist of that truth—Christ's atonement is efficacious only for those who actually believe.

Notice: when John writes, "We love Him, because He first loved us," he is addressing those who were the particular objects of Christ's redemptive work. Look once again at verse 9: "In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him." This was the object of God in the death of His Son: "that we might live through Him." He undertook this saving work for us in particular, because we are special objects of His eternal love.

There's more. Here's a fourth doctrine we find taught in this verse:

4. THE POWER OF HIS LOVING DELIVERANCE

Look at our verse again: "We love Him because He first loved us." John is saying that God's love for us is the cause—the effectual cause—of our love for Him. Once again, he is not saying merely that God's love is a motive or an incentive for our love. Rather, John's point is that God's love is the actual productive cause of our love.

Remember that it is impossible for an unregenerate person to love God. The heart of fallen flesh is by definition an enemy of God. It has no power to change itself, any more than a leopard can change its spots. It is the nature of a sinner to love sin, and nothing is more contrary to a sinful heart than love for God. So it is morally impossible for the sinner to love God.

“Who then can be saved?” Do you remember Jesus’ answer to that question? “With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26). He does the impossible. His own love for us is such that He purchases us and pursues us and persuades us lovingly to love Him. And in order to make that love possible, He even graciously gives us new hearts that are capable of loving. That’s the promise He makes to His people in Ezekiel 36:

25 Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you.

26 A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh.

27 And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in My statutes, and ye shall keep My judgments, and do them.

That speaks of God’s regenerating work, whereby He resurrects us to a state of vibrant spiritual life, enlightens our minds to understand His truth, and makes the glories of His love so attractive to us that we find them absolutely irresistible.

In fact, that is exactly the expression we sometimes use to speak of this truth: irresistible grace.

Some people misunderstand that term and imagine that there is some type of violent force or coercion involved in God’s drawing us to Christ. But irresistible grace isn’t something that pushes us against our wills toward Christ; it is something that draws us willingly to Him.

It is similar to my love for my wife. I find her irresistible. But she doesn’t force my love for her. She doesn’t employ any constraint other than the sheer attractiveness of her charms to draw me to her. But she is irresistible to me.

God’s saving grace is irresistible to the elect in the very same sense. We speak of it as “effectual grace,” because it always secures its object. God always procures a reciprocal love from those upon whom He has set His redemptive love. As Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:14, “the love of Christ constraineth us.” He died for us, so we cannot henceforth live unto ourselves.

Think about what this means: We cannot take personal credit for loving God. Our love for God is a fruit of the Spirit, according to Galatians 5:22. It is the work of God in us. “We love Him, because He first loved us”—our love for Him is the natural fruit of His great love for us. So you see the power of His loving deliverance.

Here’s a fifth doctrinal lesson from this simple verse: It also reminds us of—

5. THE PERFECTION OF HIS REDEMPTIVE PLAN

Just consider the first two words of our verse: “We love.” Again, that speaks of a totally transformed heart. At first, we didn’t love. “But after that the kindness and love of God our Saviour toward man appeared, Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost.” That’s

Titus 3:4 5. It speaks once again of that regenerating work that turns our cold, unloving hearts of stone into hearts that are capable of true love for God.

And inherent in the same lovingkindness that obtained our salvation is a guarantee that we will persevere in that love to the very end. We love Him. We're completely free from that sinful enmity that once kept us hostile to Him. And He loves us. He will not permit anything or anyone to snatch us out of His hand.

Notice verses 17-18:

17 Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment: because as He is, so are we in this world.

18 There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love.

That love is a fruit of God's own Spirit, and therefore it is a permanent love. It casts out fear; it gives us boldness even in the day of judgment. It will not fade or diminish. Why? "Because as He is, so are we in this world." This love conforms us to His image, and keeps conforming us to His image, until that goal is perfectly achieved. In other words, the same love that guaranteed our salvation from sin in the first place guarantees our perseverance in the faith.

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