

Calvinism Critiqued

by a Former Calvinist

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Introduction

For many years, Calvinism was at the heart of my belief system. It was unquestionable that man *could not* believe the gospel. He had a latent and inborn aversion to all things spiritual, even the gracious gospel that the common people heard gladly in Jesus' day (Mark 12:37). Man, I held, was totally unable even to cry out for mercy.

The Fall had rendered him incapable of receiving its remedy. Even his best acts were filthy rags, detestable before God. What was needed was a work of Efficacious Grace - a miracle, in fact - that would remove the heart of stone and bestow saving faith.

This I deemed "sound doctrine." I elevated above the rabble of non-Calvinists all writers and theologians who championed it. They were somehow more worthy of respect. They had an inherently greater demand on my attention and belief. Clark Pinnock describes a similar attitude he developed in the course of his faith-journey:

"Certainly most of the authors I was introduced to in those early days as theologically 'sound' were staunchly Calvinistic....Theirs were the books that were sold in the Inter-Varsity bookroom I frequented. They were the ones I was told to listen to; sound theology was what they would teach me." ¹

Any Christian who dissented from my [soteriology](#) was "an [Arminian](#)," regardless of whether that person subscribed to the issues of the Remonstrance (or even heard of them). As with many Calvinists, my spiritual autobiography had two distinct peaks: my conversion to Christ and my subsequent enlightenment into "sovereign grace."

This faith was highly attractive because of the men who had held it over the centuries. My spiritual pedigree contained some of the brightest lights the faith has ever known: Bunyan, Spurgeon, Edwards, Whitefield, Brainerd and the Puritans. I was in good company. Years later, however, I seriously re-examined my beloved "five points."

The main point at which I first questioned Calvinism was the nature of man in his sinful state. To question this point of the system is to question all of it. The last four points of Calvinism rest squarely upon the first, Total Inability. Once that dogma is removed, the entire superstructure crashes under its own weight.

For those unfamiliar with the five points, I will here briefly define them:

I. Total Inability. Man has sunk so far through the Fall that he is no longer capable of believing the gospel. He can no more repent and believe than a dead man can rise up and walk. This is all the result of the sin of Adam, who communicated this absolute inability, this loss of free will, to all his posterity.

II. Unconditional Election. God has, before the creation of the world, selected a portion of humanity to be saved. This election is irrespective of any foreseen merits or faith. It is only according to the good pleasure of His will.

III. Particular Redemption. Jesus on Calvary bore the full punishment due his elect, ensuring their final salvation. He did not die for the non-elect, who are excluded and hopelessly reprobated.

IV. Efficacious Grace. God moves upon the helpless sinner before he has a single thought of responding to the good news. Grace renews the spiritually dead will, imparts a new nature and infallibly draws the sinner to Christ. Regeneration, or the new birth, occurs *before* belief in Christ. Faith, in fact, is a gift imparted to the sinner, who is entirely passive in this act.

V. Final Perseverance. Everyone regenerated by God's grace will persevere and be finally saved. No one who truly begins the life of faith will ever fall away and perish.

This, I believe, is an accurate portrayal of the system, free of caricature. Throughout this paper, many quotes from Calvinist authors should bear this out.

I. Total Inability

As stated earlier, the other points rise and fall with Total Inability. They are its logical corollary. In fact, one of the attractive aspects of Calvinism is its remarkable consistency. Each point buttresses the others. That makes it fairly easy to defend. This is especially true if one grants the very first point of Total Inability. The Calvinist knows the battle is nearly won once he establishes this crucial tenet concerning man's nature. For that reason, I will spend much more time analyzing this point than the other four.

Total Inability is said to arise out of man's sinful state, his complete spiritual ruin in Eden. It has left him incapable of doing anything good, or even desiring it. Hence, he is disabled and can neither will nor obey any spiritual command - even the invitation to receive Christ. John Calvin sums this up in stark language:

"Let it stand, therefore, as an indubitable truth, which no engines can shake, that the mind of man is so entirely alienated from the righteousness of God, that he cannot conceive, desire, or design anything but what is wicked, distorted, foul, impure and iniquitous; that his heart is so thoroughly envenomed by sin, that it can breathe out nothing but corruption and rottenness; that if some men occasionally make a show of goodness, their mind is ever interwoven with hypocrisy and deceit, their soul inwardly bound with fetters of wickedness."²

As for the source of this total corruption of man, there was but one in the mind of Calvin: "...the corruption by which we are held bound as with chains originated in the first man's revolt against his Maker."³ The Fall (not a biblical term for Adam and Eve's sin) was the cause of man's inability toward all good. Every man, therefore, is born unable to respond to God. Calvinist theologian Augustus Strong notes: "Man's present inability is natural, in the sense of being inborn, - it is not acquired by our personal act, but is congenital."⁴ As with our race or eye color, our inability is a state over which we have no control.

The Calvinist, because of his doctrine of Total Inability, denies that man has a free will. All sin-born humanity, without exception, has a will wholly enslaved to always doing what is wrong and unspiritual. Boettner explains this:

"In matters pertaining to his salvation, the unregenerate man is not at liberty to choose between good and evil, but only to choose

between greater and lesser evil, which is not properly free will...As the bird with a broken wing is 'free' to fly but not able, so the natural man is free to come to God but not able."⁵

The Genesis Account

This loss of ability to receive spiritual truth is one of the consequences of Original Sin, we are told. If this is true, we would surely expect to find some mention of it in the Genesis account. Yet there is no record there of God imposing this curse of Total Inability on man's nature. There are other curses listed. God pronounced the death sentence, which He defined as a return to the dust (Gen. 3:19). Such language obviously denotes a physical death, not a loss of spiritual ability or a death to God.

God decreed the presence of "thorns and thistles" to make toil more difficult (v.18). He told the woman that she must endure great pain in childbearing (v.16). Both of these curses are trivial compared to what would be the most debilitating curse of all: the removal of all ability to respond to God. Of this we haven't the slightest mention. George Burnap comments:

"If this doctrine is true, God did not tell man the true penalty, neither the truth, nor the whole truth, nor a hundredth part of the truth. To have told the whole truth, according to this hypothesis, He should have said, 'Because ye have done this, cursed be that moral nature which I have given you. Henceforth such is the change I make in your natures: that ye shall be, and your offspring, infinitely odious and hateful in my sight. The moment their souls shall go forth from my hand...if they are suffered to live, such shall be the diseased constitution of their moral natures: that they shall have no freedom to do one single good action, but everything they do shall be sin....What an awful blot would such a curse be on the first pages of Scripture!'"⁶

It is true that death passed upon all men through the First Adam. His expulsion from the Garden with its Tree of Life removed him from the source of immortality and made death certain. This is also true of his posterity. But the transmission of Total Inability toward God is nowhere conveyed in the text.

Two primary texts adduced to prove the doctrine of Original Sin (Rom. 5; 1 Cor. 15) say nothing about Total Inability. Nowhere are we told that an

invincible tendency to resist God was imparted to the race through the offense of one. If there were a place we would expect to find the doctrine, it would be in one of those passages dealing with the relationship between Adam and his descendants. But there is not a trace of such teaching there.

Original Perfection?

The Calvinist doctrine raises a more basic question for our consideration: Where do the Scriptures teach that man had a holy, pure nature that became corrupted and transmitted to his posterity? Calvinists, and most Christians, for that matter, assume that God made Adam morally perfect. The London Confession of Faith presupposes this when it says that God "created man after His own Image, filled with all meet perfection of nature, and free from all sin" (Section IV). But where does the Bible convey this bit of information?

It is reasonable to affirm that Adam and Eve were created with an original *innocence*. This, however, is not the same thing as the London Confession's reference to "perfection of nature." Our first parents did lose innocence when they sinned. Their eyes were then opened to good and evil, prompting them to hide from their Creator (Gen. 3:7,8). But it is another thing altogether to say that they fell from a state of moral perfection to total depravity.

Many of the 17th century Polish Brethren denied that God created Adam either immortal or morally perfect. A document drawn up by Faustus Socinus and others expresses this thought:

"As to what pertains to the qualities of Adam before the Fall, it may be asked: (1) Whether or not he was provided with an original justice. This is to be denied;...For why did Adam sin if it is as they say?...God created nothing perfect. For if he had created anything perfect, it would never have been able to sin and the angels themselves, although by far the most noble of God's creatures, are nevertheless not perfect, because they [some] sinned."⁷

The fact that God called His creation "good" does not mean it was all morally perfect. Barnabas was "a good man" (Acts 11:24), but he certainly was not a morally perfect man. "Good" can simply mean that it was complete and suitable for the divine purpose. In Ecclesiastes 7:29, it says, "God made

mankind upright, but men have gone in search of many schemes." But the word "upright" does not necessarily denote moral perfection.

It may be argued that the passages dealing with man's extreme sinfulness from birth prove the Calvinist's point. After all, how could God create beings who "drink evil like water" (Job 15:16) or who are "shapen in iniquity" (Psalm 51:5, KJV)?

While there is no denying the universal sinfulness of man, it should be noted that most of these extreme statements are from prophets and inspired poets who are expressing either outrage or brokenness of spirit. They are bold statements underscoring man's tendency to go astray. This tendency, we believe, was in Adam as well as every man who followed him. There is no [exegetical](#) reason to suppose otherwise.

The Racovian Catechism notes how the character of people - both good and bad - is sometimes expressed poetically in extreme speech denoting a "from the womb" condition:

"David uses a certain hyperbolic exaggeration - of which we have an example in his own writings (Psalm 58:3), 'The wicked go astray from the womb: they go astray as soon as they are born, speaking lies.' Similar instances are found in Isaiah 48:8, 'I knew that thou wouldst deal very treacherously, and wast called a transgressor from the womb.' John 9:34, 'Thou wast altogether born in sins.' And also, in the opposite case, Job 31:18, 'From my youth he was brought up with me, as with a father and I have guided her from my mother's womb.'"⁸

Man is a sinner. Every person has folly bound up in the heart from earliest days (Prov. 22:15). But was Adam any different? *The burden of proof is on the Calvinists to show that he was.* The Scriptures never say so, and it is not our responsibility to prove a negative (a logical impossibility).

This is a serious difficulty. The Calvinist's entire system of soteriology is founded on the grand assumption that Adam was created morally impeccable. He lost perfection through sin and assumed a nature totally corrupted and alienated from God, a nature imparted to all mankind as a curse. But the Scriptural evidence for these contentions is, at best, scant. For the most part, the doctrine is assumed unquestionably. Adam's fall from moral perfection was established by Augustine's polemics against Pelagianism and passed on, without alteration, through the barren centuries of the Middle Ages. Calvin

received it *in toto* from his medieval legacy, as has each successive generation of theologians since.

A doctrine that forms such a colossal foundation-stone for the system should have *unequivocal* proof in the Bible. If a theology is based on an unproven philosophic assumption how can the rest of the system be trustworthy? The Calvinist cannot expect us to believe him unless the consistent tenor of Scripture tells us: (1) God made man morally perfect; (2) Adam's sin immediately corrupted him and rendered him unable to respond to God; (3) God transmitted this inability to all his descendants.

Total Inability and the Gospel

The Total Inability passed to us makes it impossible for us to comply with the command to believe in Christ. The most obvious fault with this doctrine is that it makes the gospel an unreasonable demand. How can God, who is perfectly just, "command all men everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30), knowing the command is impossible to obey?

This is a vexing problem for Calvinists. They will often assert that a command does not necessarily imply the ability to keep it. But the statement is certainly not self-evident. If God gives a command and threatens to punish as responsible agents those who do not comply, it certainly *does* imply the ability to obey. Orville Dewey writes: "...it would follow that men are commanded, on peril and pain of all future woes, to love a holiness and a moral perfection of God, which they are not merely unable to love, but of which, according to the supposition, they have no conception."⁹

That puts the Calvinist in a conundrum. Man is so corrupt, he *will not* and *cannot* obey even the slightest spiritual command - nor can he appreciate or even understand it. Yet, God orders him to believe; He punishes him for not believing. As Judge of the Universe, he justly condemns the sinner for not doing what he from birth cannot do. This seems to many of us to be at loggerheads with God's revealed character.

The Old Testament demands never seemed to be presented as impossibilities for the hearers. Moses said, "Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach" (Deut. 30:11). What of Total Inability here? Are we to assume that all of the hearers had received the miracle of Efficacious Grace? Moses adds, "See, I set before you today life and

prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in his ways and the commands, decrees and laws..." (v.19).

Moses sets life and death before the Israelites for their consideration. There is no intimation there that he was speaking to people utterly incapable of complying with the commands. He presents the prospects of life and death as genuine options for them to ponder.

Joshua urged the Israelites, "*choose for yourselves* this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord" (Josh. 24:15). There is nothing in Joshua's entreaty that suggests the Israelites were all unable to choose the Lord unless they first experienced an inward miracle.

Joshua did say that the people were "not able to serve the Lord" in their present sinful state (v.19). Repentance was in order. They were called upon to make a choice of the heart and turn from their evil ways. Joshua said, "throw away your foreign gods that are among you and *yield your hearts* to the Lord, the God of Israel" (v.23). Nowhere are we left with the impression that these people were all in a state of Total Inability from birth, innately incapable of yielding as Joshua commanded. Such an idea must be read into the text.

The New Testament uses the same language. On the day of Pentecost, Peter preached before thousands who had gathered in Jerusalem. Luke writes, "With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, 'Save yourselves from this corrupt generation'" (Acts 2:40). Was Peter "pleading" with these people to do something they were impotent to do? He certainly gives no hint of it. Furthermore, Peter's admonition "save yourselves" would probably be viewed as less than orthodox by many Calvinists.

Jesus himself did not seem to have been a believer in Total Inability. We read in Mark 4:11,12 that he spoke in parables as a judgment against the obstinate Jews. The purpose of parables was to keep his message from entering their ears, "otherwise they might turn and be forgiven" (v.12). Had those stiff-necked people been allowed to hear the truth straight out, *they might have turned to receive it*. But how? Calvinism tells us that no one can turn and receive the forgiveness of sins because of Total Inability passed from Adam. There must first be an inward miracle of the heart, an "effectual call."

Calvinist preachers will sometimes say that they can never persuade natural men of the gospel no matter how openly, clearly and earnestly they may

preach it. It is like presenting a sermon to a corpse - there is no response. Jesus, however, felt it necessary to obscure his message in parables to keep certain people from responding to it. Had he preached the truth openly *they would have turned and been forgiven*. This fact alone is fatal to the Calvinist dogma, for it contradicts the notion that all men have a native inability to believe.

Jesus sometimes "marvelled" at the unbelief of his hearers (Mark 6:6). But if he subscribed to and taught Total Inability, it would have been no marvel at all that men would disbelieve God.

The Hardened Heart

Total Inability also seems to oppose the Bible teaching concerning hardness of heart. The Scriptures warn us that those who repeatedly trifle with sin may sear their consciences (1 Tim. 4:2), render themselves "past feeling" (Eph. 4:19) and enter into a hardening of the heart toward God and His truth. This is not a condition of birth, but seems to be a consequence of repeated sin.

Isaiah speaks of this condition: "Why, O Lord, do you make us wander from your ways and *harden our hearts* so we do not revere you?" (Isa. 63:17) The hardening of the heart which precludes reverence of God is here described as a condition that *has come upon these people*, probably as a judgment for rebellion. But Calvinists tell us that this condition - an invincible anti-God bent - is the birth-condition of all human beings.

In Romans 1, Paul writes of men who are "without excuse" because of the manifest presence of God in the creation. He says, "For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened" (Rom. 1:21). Here we see men who *became* futile in their thinking and were *given over to* a darkened state of the heart. The apostle is not speaking of a condition of birth, but a judgment that came upon them because of willful refusal to acknowledge the Creator.

The Calvinist is hard-pressed to show how this judgment condition of darkness differs from their notions of Total Inability - a state they deem universal. Their doctrine states that *everyone* is *born* hardened toward God,

unable to believe or take the slightest step toward Him. But if this is true, why do the Scriptures seem to say this only about *some* people?

Again, Zechariah says of rebellious Zion, "They made their hearts as hard as flint and would not listen to the law or to the words that the Lord Almighty has sent by his Spirit through the earlier prophets" (Zech. 7:12). Here, people *made themselves* insensible to the truth of God, indicating that they were not in this condition from the womb.

There is no denying that all people are born with sinful tendencies and are apt to go astray. This can be established by Scripture and experience. But it is one thing to say that all men have such tendencies and quite another that they are unable to respond to God. General human sinfulness differs from Total Inability. To prove the first is not necessarily to prove the second.

Alleged Scripture Proofs:

Romans 3:10-12

There are several passages of Scripture Calvinists employ to support Total Inability. One of the prominent proof-texts is Romans 3:10-12: "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one." The Calvinist's main emphasis is on the fact that "*there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God.*" This is supposed to be speaking of a literal condition in which all human beings are born. They cannot so much as seek God or understand Him.

This poetic "outburst," a quote from the Psalms, has been beaten and shaped on the anvil of theology to give us a notion of Total Inability. But what is the point Paul is here making? Is he erecting the doctrine of human nature and its relation to soteriology? Not at all. His point is clearly set forth in verse 9: Jews and Gentiles *alike* are "under sin." Sin is not peculiar to lowly Gentiles, but also afflicts the favored Jews. He proves his point by quoting Psalm 14, which at the outset tells the readers it is dealing with "the fool."

As a poet, the Psalmist frequently bursts into hyperbole, especially when hot with righteous indignation. David is teaching the sinfulness of men, but he does so in an extravagant Hebrew idiom to get the point across powerfully. This is a common poetic device. In verse 4, he says evildoers "devour my

people as men eat bread." That, of course, is not literal. David is not laying down a metaphysical doctrine that all men enter this world with a propensity for cannibalism.

This is poetic exaggeration, a common figure of speech not to be read with a slavish literalism. Other Scriptures tell us there *are* righteous men who do good (contrary to a literal reading of Rom. 3:10). Job is a perfect example: "This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil" (Job 1:1). The Bible also tells us of men who sought after God and found Him. In 2 Chronicles 11:16, we read: "Those from every tribe of Israel who set their hearts on seeking the Lord, the God of Israel, followed the Levites to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices to the Lord, the God of their fathers."

This is fulfillment of the oft-stated promise that "the Lord is good to those who hope in him, to the one who seeks him" (Lam. 3:25). The theme runs through the Bible without the disclaimer that such "seeking" is impossible without an inner miracle.

1 Corinthians 2:14

Total Inability is supposed to be taught in 1 Corinthians 2:14: "For the man without the Spirit [or 'natural man'] does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned."

Calvinists will sometimes say, based on this text, that the unregenerate cannot even grasp biblical truths. But is that the idea Paul is articulating? The context does not seem to be dealing with man in his state of birth, but of the various spiritual obstacles *Jews and Greeks* face. It is particularly those who are "natural men," men who relate to all things outside of a spiritual reference point. The words of 1 Corinthians 2:14 must be understood within the flow of 1:18 through 2:16.

Gentiles esteem the gospel as foolish because of their penchant for philosophical wisdom (1:22). Jews are repelled by the stumbling block of the cross and their need for signs (1:22,23). Both groups *generally* have problems that render them spiritually obtuse, driving them to the conclusion that the gospel is foolish.

All of these problems, of course, grow out of human sin. No one would deny that. But Paul is not here making a sweeping theological statement about a Total Inability in every human being. He speaking generally of those "perishing" opposers - both Jews and Greeks - of the message. The context would certainly favor this interpretation.

Paul in other places makes general statements that we would never make absolute and theological. For example, he writes to Titus: "Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons" (Titus 1:12). The assessment is a quote from "a prophet of their own," but the apostle concurs in verse 13: "This testimony is true." Is it really the nature of every Cretan who enters the world? Wouldn't all agree that Paul is speaking generally and not absolutely about Cretans?

But what of the mention of the term "natural man" (lit. "soulish man") in 1 Corinthians 2:14? The Calvinist assumes that which remains to be proved. He insists that Paul means man in his natural-born state. The New International Version bolsters this view by paraphrasing "natural man" as "the man without the Spirit." But commentators are not agreed on this. William Barclay, for example, writes:

"So in verse 14 Paul speaks of the man who is *psuchikos*. He is the man who lives as if there was nothing beyond physical life and there were no needs other than material needs, whose values are all physical and material. A man like that cannot understand spiritual things. A man who thinks that nothing is more important than the satisfaction of the sex urge cannot understand the meaning of chastity; a man who ranks the amassing of material things as the supreme end of life cannot understand generosity; and a man who has never a thought beyond this world cannot understand the things of God. To him they look mere foolishness."¹⁰

"Natural man," then, need not mean "man in his native state." The Calvinist here allows his theological presuppositions to drive his exegesis. The term can very easily be understood to mean "that man who relates to life apart from a spiritual paradigm." Nothing in the text demands that this is a description of every person who enters the world.

John 6:44

The words of Jesus in John 6:44 are often appealed to as a proof of Total Inability: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." This is supposed to teach that man is in a state of inability, one that only a miracle can overcome. The "drawing" here is assumed, without any exegetical necessity, to be the work of Efficacious Grace renewing the sinner so he can - and ultimately will - believe the gospel.

Just what is the "drawing" of which Christ speaks? Calvinists make much of the Greek word, *helkuo*, which conveys the idea of "dragging." That seems, however, to run counter to what they often make pains to teach: that the sinner, once renewed, comes willingly.

John 6:44 must be understood in the light of verse 45: "It is written in the Prophets, 'They will all be taught by God.' Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me." Here the sinner comes to Christ by listening to the Father, not by passively experiencing "Efficacious Grace."

Look for a moment at the parallels in these two verses. Verse 44 says that no one can come to Christ unless drawn by the Father. Verse 45 says that all who listen to the Father and learn from Him come to Christ. It would seem clear that the teaching ministry of God through His gospel and word is the means by which men are brought to Jesus. There is nothing in the text that necessitates an "effectual call" on a totally disabled unbeliever. This is confirmed by Peter (1 Pet. 1:23) and James (James 1:18), both of whom declare that *the Word of God* is an agency of the new birth.

Ephesians 2:1

Another classic proof-text is Ephesians 2:1, where Paul says that we were "dead in transgressions and sins." The reasoning goes like this: Man is born spiritually dead. He, accordingly, cannot receive spiritual truth. Calvinists frequently will refer to man as a "walking spiritual corpse." You can no more get a spiritually dead man to respond to the gospel than you can get a literal corpse to learn Euclidian geometry. One Calvinist author writes about Ephesians 2:1: "Now it will surely be admitted that to be dead, and to be dead in sin, is clear and positive evidence that there is neither aptitude nor power remaining for the performance of any spiritual action."¹¹

But Paul is not necessarily speaking of "spiritual death" in Ephesians 2:1. Edward White makes an excellent observation:

"An almost universal custom has affixed to these expressions what is termed a spiritual sense; namely, that of alienation from God, who is the highest life of the soul, 'the strength of our life, and our portion for ever.' Hence have arisen the phrases, 'spiritual death,' and the 'spiritually dead,' both of them without example in apostolic usage.

"For there seems little doubt that the mode in which the Scripture terms here referred to are handled in the 'apostolic fathers,' more fully represents their real meaning than the modern application. That there is a figure in the Scripture use of the term the *dead*, cannot be disputed. But the question is: Are we to trace the figure in the *tense*, or in the *radical signification* of the terms? We submit that the figure is in the *tense*. The unregenerate men are described as *the dead*, and *dead in sins*, because they are *certain to die*, because they are under sentence of destruction, as men of mere *soul*. Thus the figure of *prolepsis* is employed in Gen. xx. 3: 'God said to Abimelech, *Thou art a dead man*, for Sarah, Abraham's wife.' 'The Egyptians said, We be all *dead men*' (Exod. xii. 33). 'All my father's house *were dead men* before the king' (2 Sam. xix. 28). The figure in each of these instances is that of using the present instead of the future tense. The unregenerate are 'as good as dead.'¹²

Faulty Application

One great exegetical fault of Calvinism is its tendency to take specific applications of Scripture and make them universal. For example, Isaiah says, "Your whole head is injured, your whole heart afflicted. From the sole of your foot to the top of your head there is no soundness - only wounds..." But the prophet is addressing apostate Israel, not making a theological statement about all men everywhere.

The same is true of the reference to "filthy rags" (Isa. 64:6), the "leopard" incapable of changing its spots (Jer. 13:23) and the antediluvians whose hearts were "only evil all the time" (Gen. 6:5). To take these texts out of their specific, contextual application and make them props for Reformed theology is proof-texting of the worst sort - an unworthy [hermeneutic](#).

The doctrine of Total Inability is not necessitated by the Scripture and should be discarded. Any tenet that portrays God as exacting impossible demands of His creatures and punishing them for not complying is a slander against heaven. William Ellery Channing notes: "It will be asked with astonishment, How is it possible that men can hold these doctrines and yet maintain God's goodness and equity? What principles can be more contradictory?"¹³

It is this obvious contradiction between God's just character and revealed principles of justice that forced me to abandon Calvinism.

II. Unconditional Election

The Calvinist tells us that man has no ability at all to cry out to God for His mercy. All humanity, therefore, will certainly perish apart from a forceful intervention from heaven. There is no hope whatsoever that man's will, ever at enmity with his Maker, can avail him to the gospel. God must reach out and change the man into a new creature who can will to do right. And there is no necessity laid upon God that He must thus intervene in the lives of all of humanity, the Calvinist reasons.

God has decided, before the beginning of time, whom He will save with this "effectual call" and whom He will leave to suffer ruin. This is the doctrine commonly called Unconditional Election. The teaching has a "flip-side," Reprobation, which holds that God also foreordains the damnation of the non-elect.

There are many texts which speak of God's choice of His people. Here lies the strength of Calvinism. God chose Israel, irrespective of merit or status (Deut. 7:7,8). He chose Jacob over Esau before either "had done anything good or bad" (Rom. 9:11-13).

When the apostles preached to the Gentiles, we read that "all who were appointed for eternal life believed" (Acts 13:48). Paul said that God "chose us in him before the creation of the world" and "predestined us to be adopted as his sons" (Eph. 1:4,5). In the garden, Jesus did not pray for the world, "but for those you [the Father] have given me, for they are yours" (John 17:9).

Arminian Election

Classical Arminianism tends to base God's selection of His people upon foreseen faith. He looks down the corridors of time, sees who will believe the gospel, and chooses them. I have never been satisfied with this view. Scripture does not say that God chose us because He knew we would choose Him. That would certainly be no choice at all on the part of God.

The biblical term "foreknowledge" offers no support to the "foreseen faith" view. While it is clear that God knew us and loved us before the world was, it in no way means that He noted our future faith and chose us because of it. The Scriptures never tell us such things and we should not assume them simply to get rid of Calvinism.

Another attempt to explain election is by asserting a kind of vague, "corporate" election. In other words, God chose to have a people, a church, but has not chosen the *individuals* who are to compose that company. That seems to be a very stilted and unsatisfactory approach. In Romans 9, God's choice of Jacob over Esau was very personal. In Revelation 17:8, there is mention of specific *names* "written in the book of life from the creation of the world" (Rev. 17:8). There is nothing nebulous or "nameless" about election.

Others say that God only elects us to special service, as Christ chose his twelve apostles. Election, they say, does not pertain to salvation per se. But Paul, writing to the Thessalonians, told them that God had chosen them "to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth" (2 Thess. 2:13). Evidently, election is unto salvation, not just to specific ministries.

Election a Mystery

Divine election is clearly a Bible doctrine. It no more belongs to the Calvinist than to anyone else. It is really a part of the larger Scriptural theme of the Sovereignty of God, found everywhere in both Testaments. God sets up and deposes rulers (Ps. 75:6,7), operates the forces of nature (Job 37), overrules evil for good (Gen. 50:20) and has "determined the times set for them [the nations of men] and the exact places where they should live" (Acts 17:26).

Dewey makes no metaphysical distinction between the election of grace and the election of mundane affairs of life. All are the result of divine sovereignty, which is past finding out.

"...the apostle says, that Christians are 'predestinated according to the purpose of him, *who worketh all things, after the counsel of his own will.*' If this be true, then *everything* is a matter of divine counsel; *everything* is disposed of by election. And men are as much elected to be philosophers, merchants, or inhabitants of this country or that country, as they are elected to be Christians. If this is election, I believe there will be found no difficulty in it; save what exists in that inscrutableness of the subject, which must forbid our expecting ever to fathom it."¹⁴

Election is true, but is shrouded in deep mystery. It is one of the secret things that belong to the Lord our God (Deut. 29:29). Calvinists and Arminians both err when they make precise statements about the nature of election. God has not told us whether or not there are conditions attached to it and we should not venture into it with such bold assertions.

The Calvinist, however, does need to temper his view of election with the clearly revealed truth in Ezekiel 18:23: "Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign Lord. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?" Too often, we hear Calvinists say that the damnation of the non-elect is "the good pleasure of His will." But here, God states explicitly that He takes no pleasure in damning anyone *but prefers that they turn from sin and live*. How this idea fits into the Calvinist scheme is not at all clear.

Nor is it clear, from a Calvinistic standpoint, why Jesus should weep over Jerusalem in Matthew 23:37: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing."

This poses a thorny difficulty for the Calvinist. First of all, he must assume that the reprobation of Jerusalem was "the good pleasure" of the Father. If that is so, why was it so displeasing and heart-rending to Jesus, who was always in agreement with the divine will? Shouldn't Jesus have also been "pleased" with the Father's reprobation of these people?

Secondly, Jesus is here attributing the lost condition of Jerusalem to *her own unwillingness*, not the want of election. Jesus was willing to receive them but they were unwilling. This seems to contradict the confident assertions of Calvinists about Unconditional Election.

So what doctrine do we put in the place of the Calvinist's Unconditional Election? Do we opt for one of the many Arminian forms of election? Tempting as that may be, I must now settle on the mysterious Biblical Election, the details of which have not been fully disclosed as we look into our "glass, darkly." Perhaps further theological works by thoughtful Christians will reveal a more satisfactory resting place for our convictions.

III. Particular Redemption

This title is to be preferred to the often-used "limited atonement." In fairness to Calvinists, they usually do not place the emphasis on a limitation of the atonement, but on its power to save infallibly all who are comprehended by it. The idea is this: If Jesus died for you, you will be saved. There is no chance that you will not be saved. Berkhof writes:

"The atonement not only made salvation possible for the sinner, but actually secured it...the Calvinist teaches that the atonement meritoriously secured the application of the work of redemption to those for whom it was intended and this rendered their complete salvation certain."¹⁵

But the Scriptures do mention certain people who are in danger of perishing, *even though Christ died for them*. Peter wrote of false teachers who were "even denying that sovereign Lord who bought them - bringing swift destruction on themselves" (2 Pet. 2:1,2). Here were men "bought" who, nevertheless, had made shipwreck of their faith.

Paul urges the Romans, "Do not by your eating *destroy* your brother for whom Christ died" (Rom. 14:15). This does not seem to fit the Calvinist view of redemption, which makes destruction impossible for all objects of Christ's cross-work.

Still, the main point of contention for many is the scope of Calvary, the individuals for whom it was intended. Calvinists say Jesus made a vicarious atonement for the elect and the elect only. Arminians claim that Christ died to make full atonement for every human being on the earth. The debate over universal and limited atonement has been hot for centuries.

Universal vs. Limited Atonement

Some Calvinists will argue that a universal principle does exist in the atonement. The death of Christ, they say, has secured many non-redemptive benefits for mankind in general. This they frequently sum up under the heading of "common grace." Boettner writes:

"God makes His sun to shine on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust. Many temporal blessings are thus secured for all men, although these fall short of being sufficient to insure salvation."¹⁶

Where do the Scriptures ever state that temporal blessings in the natural realm - sunshine, rain, etc. - were secured for mankind by Christ's death? There is not a shred of evidence for this idea; it is entirely philosophical and conjectural.

In the debate over the extent of the atonement, Calvinists will point to Scriptures connecting Christ's death to a specific people: his sheep (John 10:11); his friends (John 15:13); "many" (Heb. 9:28). Arminians will produce passages indicating that Jesus died for the "whole world" (1 John 2:2); "all" (2 Cor. 5:15); "every man" (Heb. 2:9).

These texts can be harmonized when we consider that the redemptive benefits of Christ's death are both *specific* and *universal*. God has placed the life-giving fountain of Christ's blood in *His Church*. Our Lord "loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Eph. 5:25). The Church was "bought with his own blood" (Acts 20:28). That makes the atonement of Christ specific; it was for His Church.

But the atonement is universal in the sense that the Church's gates are wide open to "everyone who calls" (Rom. 10:13), to "him who is thirsty" (Rev. 21:6), to "all you who are weary and burdened" (Matt. 11:28). The invitation to believe, be baptized and enter the Church extends to "every tribe and language and people and nation" (Rev. 5:9). In that sense, the atonement is universal and available to all.

Or, looking at in another way, Christ's blood is "the blood of the covenant" (Matt. 26:28). Jesus died for those *in the covenant of grace*, not for those outside of it. Is that fatalism? Not at all. Anyone may enter that covenant by becoming a Christian. It is open-ended. The atonement, therefore, is both limited and universal. It is both specific and general.

IV. Efficacious Grace

Few Christians would deny the work of the Holy Spirit in conversion. The sweet influences of God upon sinners are sometimes sudden. A text of Scripture, a gospel sermon, an act of kindness can come alive at once to melt the heart with supernatural force. We read in Scripture of God giving people new hearts to serve Him, or turning people to Himself. He opens eyes and ears. Lydia had her heart "opened" by the Lord to give heed to Paul's message (Acts 16:14).

However, the Calvinistic doctrine of Efficacious Grace stretches far beyond the figures of speech in Scripture. Efficacious Grace, we are told, is an immediate, miraculous transformation of a man's nature. In an instant, the totally depraved sinner - who has been unable and unwilling to make the slightest move toward God - is given a new nature. He is born again unto a life he never sought and never desired.

This is a logical necessity of Total Inability. Man cannot believe; therefore, God must act upon him and bestow a new capacity. God must regenerate the passive, spiritually oblivious man before he can even accept the gospel. The Westminster Confession defines it:

"All those whom God has predestined unto life, and those only, He is pleased in His appointed and accepted time, effectually to call, by His Word and Spirit, out of that state of death, in which they are by nature, to grace and salvation by Jesus Christ; enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly, to understand the things of God; taking away their heart of stone and giving them a heart of flesh; renewing their wills, and by His almighty power determining them to that which is good; and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ, yet so as they come most freely, being made willing by His grace" (Chapter X, Section 1,2).

Boettner believes the "inner call" is so swift that the sinner is not even aware of this miraculous change.

"It is an instantaneous change from spiritual death to spiritual life. It is not even a thing of which we are conscious at the moment it occurs, but rather something which lies lower than consciousness."¹⁷

The Calvinistic doctrine leaves many questions unanswered. First of all, we must ask where the Scriptures ever teach that God must regenerate a man's nature before he can believe. While this is consistent with Total Inability, it does not seem to be a truth revealed in the Bible with any consistency. Did God have to grant Abraham a new nature before he could make the decision to leave Ur of the Chaldees? Was the call to faith "irresistible?" If so, it seems peculiar that the Bible would praise his faith. Abraham could certainly not be commended for something in which he was wholly passive.

The New Birth, Conversion

The authors of Scripture attribute the new birth to the hearing of the Word, not by an instantaneous act that precedes faith: "He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures" (James 1:18). "For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God" (1 Pet. 1:23).

Jesus spoke of being "born from above" or "born again" in John 3. Speaking to Nicodemus, he said, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again" (v.3). Calvinists will tell us that man is as passive in the new birth as an infant is in literal birth. Charles Hodge writes, "At birth the child enters upon a new state of existence. Birth is not its own act. It is born....The Scriptures teach that it is thus in regeneration."¹⁸ But figures of speech should not be pressed into the service of theology in this way. The context of John 3 would indicate that man is *not* passive in the new birth.

In verse 5, still on the subject, Jesus says, "no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit." Evidently, being "born of water and the Spirit" is the same thing as being "born again." Birth of water seems to indicate Christian baptism (alternative interpretations here are extremely tenuous). But a person entering into New Testament baptism is anything but passive.

The new birth, then, is the transformation of a person's status through the hearing of the word, the reception of the Spirit and submission to Christian baptism. These things usher the believer into the Christian community and give him a new beginning, a new identity. He is no longer who he used to be. He is born anew.

The conversion of Lydia (Acts 16:14) does not prove the Calvinist's point. God was not here opening the heart of a totally depraved rebel. She was already "a worshipper of God," not a so-called "spiritual corpse."

Passages that speak of God changing a man's heart or giving a new one do not necessarily teach the Calvinist doctrine. It is not uncommon for the Scripture to speak of man's inability to do things without the divine influence; yet, this does not make man wholly passive. For example, in Psalm 127:1, we read: "Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city the watchmen guard in vain."

Solomon is not here saying that man is passive and cannot erect a house until God supernaturally removes an inability toward building. This is figurative speech conveying man's dependence upon his God in all things. No one would think of contriving a metaphysical dogma that man is dead to building homes or guarding cities.

Man needs a heart toward God and righteousness. Sometimes the Bible tells us that God changes the heart, sometimes that man must change it. Both things are true. One text is looking at conversion from the divine perspective, the other, from the human.

The Calvinist may find support in Deuteronomy 30:6: "The Lord your God will *circumcise your hearts* and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul and live." But in Jeremiah 4:4 we read: "Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, *circumcise your hearts*, you men of Judah and people of Jerusalem...." One text speaks from the divine side, the other, the human.

Accordingly, the Psalmist asks that his heart might be inclined by God toward keeping the commandments (Psalm 119:36). Later on in the same Psalm, the writer says that he had inclined his own heart to do this (v. 112). Neither statement was intended to formulate a tenet of theology. They are simply two perspectives on the same subject.

V. Final Perseverance

The Calvinist believes that once quickened by Efficacious Grace, the believer can never fall away. The change effected on the sinner is permanent. The Westminster Confession says, "They whom God hath accepted in His

Beloved, effectually called and sanctified by His Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace; but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved" (Chapter XVII, Section 1).

This is one of the most passionately debated of the Five Points. The various arguments for and against this view are many and would take us far beyond the scope of this article.

One hinderance to seeing the issue clearly is the tendency of many Christians to see salvation primarily as a past event. Hence, it is common to hear people ask, "When were you saved?" Scripture sometimes puts salvation in the past tense (Luke 7:50). Usually, however, it is viewed as an eschatological event. "Through faith [you] are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Peter 1:5).

If the New Testament authors saw salvation as a future event, then it is not productive to any discussion to ask whether a man "can lose his salvation." None of us fully possesses salvation *as yet*, except for the "earnest" or our inheritance (2 Cor. 1:22).

The apostles expected to pass through a judgment according to works before they would fully enjoy salvation (Rom. 2:6). Paul did not see himself as already having attained it (Phil. 3:10-12) and so he pressed forward. In the meantime, he recognized that he was to keep control of his body, lest he himself should be disqualified (1 Cor. 9:27).

Final salvation is conditioned upon continuing in the way of faith and bringing forth the "fruit" of Christian living. Jesus said, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man *remains in me* and I in him, he will bear much fruit" (John 15:5). Those unfruitful ones who do not remain in Christ (presented here as a real possibility, if words have meaning) are "picked up, thrown into the fire and burned" (15:6).

Paul told the Colossians they were reconciled by Christ "holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation" (Col. 1:22). But he was careful to qualify that statement: "If you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel" (v.23).

Conditional Promises

The glorious promises of the Scripture are always conditioned upon perseverance in the faith, even when this is not expressly stated. We believe perseverance is an *unspoken condition* in all the passages adduced to prove a rigid notion of "once-saved-always-saved." This includes John 10:27,28. Here Jesus says, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand."

Calvinists and other believers in "eternal security" argue that real apostasy of a born-again person is an impossibility because Christ said that his sheep "shall never perish." This does not follow. God makes promises both with and without expressly mentioning conditions. In Deuteronomy 33:27,28, God says to the people of Asher, "The eternal God...will drive out your enemy before you, saying, Destroy him! So Israel will live in safety alone; Jacob's spring is secure in a land of grain and new wine where the heavens drop dew." The promise is presented as if there were no strings attached. Earlier in the book, however, God lays down stringent conditions for receiving such blessing and protection (28:15-68). There is no contradiction here. The promises are to be understood in the light of conditions, *even in those places where the conditions go unmentioned.*

Apostasy Texts

The passages that warn Christians against falling away give no end of trouble to Calvinists. On the one hand, they must affirm the threats are real and to be taken seriously. On the other, they are forced to confess that there is something hypothetical about them - that they will never truly come to pass for the "saved" person.

"It is impossible," wrote the author of Hebrews, "for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace" (Heb. 6:4-6).

The usual way out of this knotty problem is to say that these are not truly born-again disciples. They are false professors, tares among the wheat. J. C. Ryle, for example, writes, "The person here described as falling away has no characteristics which may not be discovered in unconverted men, while it is

not said that he possesses saving faith and charity, and is elect."¹⁹ But the text does say these people have "shared in the Holy Spirit," which certainly sounds as if they were Christians. Besides that, these warnings are against "falling away," a misnomer if they never attained the position from which to fall.

In chapter 10 of Hebrews, we read a similar warning: "Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace?" (vv.28,29).

For years, I tried to read this passage in a way that would make these people false Christians who never experienced regenerating grace. That is a difficult task, however. The text declares that someone can be "sanctified" by "the blood of the covenant" and still fall from the faith.

This does not mean I believe that Christians are in constant peril of apostasy. While we are called to vigilance, we ought not to go through the life of faith in a fearful state. We have been delivered from that (Rom. 8:15). God is faithful. The Hebrew Christians to whom these warnings were written were in danger of *giving up the faith utterly* and retreating back into Judaism.

For the most part, it seems likely that Christians will persevere in their faith until the end. But that does not preclude the possibility of forsaking that narrow way leading to life. We must be on guard, as the Scriptures warn us repeatedly, but we have ample reason to be hopeful if we are following Christ. Dewey writes;

"We believe, that a man, who has become thoroughly and heartily interested in the true gospel, doctrine and character and glory of Jesus Christ, is *very* likely to persevere and grow in that interest....I can hardly conceive, how a man, who has once fully opened his eyes upon that Light, should ever be willing to close them. And I believe that in proportion as the Gospel is understood and felt, felt in all its deep fountains of peace and consolation, understood in all its revelations and unfoldings of purity and moral beauty; that in proportion to this, the instances of falling away, whether into infidelity or worldliness, will be more and more rare."²⁰

Conclusion

Calvinism is one more illustration of the futility of systematic theology. God's truths, particularly relating to soteriology, are too lofty to be put into concise formulae. The Five Points of Calvinism oversimplify the profound truths of God. They derive their force from proof-texts rather than the general tenor of Scripture.

More than that, the doctrines frequently create a spirit of division, elitism and theological snobbery. The system erects walls between believers. It creates a class of Christians within the church general who are supposedly part of a worthy "inner circle."

Many Calvinists read nothing but Reformed titles, hence these brethren seldom learn new perspectives. On the contrary, they are continually reaffirming their own "theological correctness." Such authors such as A. W. Pink, the Puritans, John Murray and such publishing companies as Banner of Truth become the sole staple for many. I say without intending offense that such exclusiveness differs little from that of Jehovah's Witnesses or other authoritarian groups.

Of course, I do not intend to paint all Calvinists with this brush. Many are thinkers who read outside literature, even Arminian literature. But the overarching trend in this tradition - a tradition of which I was once a part - is often one of narrow-mindedness and doctrinal superiority. As we have seen, the Scriptures give no warrant for such bigotry. The average Calvinist may be amazed at just how weak his system is when scrutinized in the light of revealed truth.

May our brethren see fit to adopt a Berean spirit (Acts 17:11) and honestly rethink their Calvinism. We would urge them to, for a time, lay aside the commentaries of Calvin and Gill, the theology of Warfield and Hodge. With an open Bible and mind, may they take a second look at the so-called "doctrines of grace" to see if they truly are the doctrines of Christ.

Notes

¹Clark Pinnock, *The Grace of God, The Will of Man* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 1989, p. 17.

2John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, translated by Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), reprinted 1983, vol. I, p. 291.

3*Ibid.*, p. 273.

4Augustus Strong. *Systematic Theology* (New York: A. C. Armstrong and Son), 1890, p. 343.

5Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 1957, p. 62.

6George W. Burnap, *Lectures on the Doctrines of Christianity* (Boston and Cambridge: James Munroe and Co.), 1848, pp. 131-132.

7George Hunston Williams, *The Polish Brethren, Part* , (Missoula, MT:Scholars Press), 1980, pp. 102-103.

8*The Racovian Catechism* (Republished London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, Paternoster Row), 1818, pp. 327-328.

9Orville Dewey. *Discourses and Reviews Upon Questions in Controversial Theology and Practical Religion* (New York: Charles S. Francis), 1873, Vol. III, p. 97.

10William Barclay, *The Letters to the Corinthians* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press), Revised 1975, p. 28.

11Warburton, quoted by Boettner in *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, pp. 65,66.

12Edward White, *Life in Christ* (London: Elliot Stock), 1878, p. 281.

13*The Works of William E. Channing*, "The Moral Argument Against Calvinism," (Boston: American Unitarian Association), 1889, p. 461.

14Dewey, p. 99.

15L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 1949, p. 393.

16Boettner, p. 160.

17*Ibid.*, p. 165.

18*Ibid.*

19John Charles Ryle, *Never Perish* (Choteau, Montana: Gospel Mission Press), reprinted 1980, p. 16.