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—**Donald S. Whitney**

MERE CALVINISM

Jim Scott Orrick

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To my uncle, Paul A. Orrick

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INTRODUCTION

Early in the 1990s, I was reading a book of literary criticism by C. S. Lewis when I came across an entire page on which Lewis discusses the influence of Calvinism in the sixteenth century. The sentence that caught my attention was this one: “Unless we can imagine the freshness, the audacity, and (soon) the fashionableness of Calvinism, we shall get our whole picture wrong.” I was amazed that there had been a time when Calvinism was fashionable. I had been a Calvinist for virtually all my life, and I assure you that in the late twentieth century it was not fashionable to be a Calvinist. I knew a few older men who were Calvinists, but virtually no young people. Yet Lewis observed that in the writings of the sixteenth century, “Youth is the taunt commonly brought against the puritan leaders by their opponents: youth and coxsureness.”¹ When I first read Lewis’s words, I could barely have imagined that within twenty years I would see the time return when, in some circles, Calvinism would again become fashionable. Like before, many of the new Calvinists

1. C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama*, *The Oxford History of English Literature* 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), 43.

are young and cocksure. In many cases, however, their brash confidence is unfounded. Just because someone calls himself a Calvinist does not mean that he knows what Calvinism is.

For years I have preached in churches and taught in schools where many in my congregations and classrooms would have asserted that they were Calvinists. Or they might have said, “We are Reformed” or “We believe in the doctrines of grace.” In many of those same congregations and classrooms, I have preached and taught through the material found in this book, and here is what I have observed: most of those persons who call themselves Calvinists do not really know much about Calvinism, and most of them are conscious of their ignorance. I tell my students that they are not going to be tested over the lectures, but they furiously take notes as if they have never before heard what I am saying. They ask intelligent but basic questions that reveal that some of them are working through these ideas and these Scriptures for the first time. Perhaps most revealing are the comments that I often get afterward: “I have been in this church/college for years, and I have never understood these doctrines until now.” At the conclusion of the semester, I will sometimes poll my students, asking them, “If there has been a book, a lecture, or a discussion that has been especially helpful to you, I would like to hear about it.” Far and away the most common response has been “The lectures on the Five Points of Calvinism.”

When we first see the fundamental ideas of Calvinistic theology and recognize that the Bible is founded on the principle that God does as he pleases, we may rush to declare ourselves to be Calvinists, but we desperately hope that no one questions us carefully about what we believe. Worse, we get into arguments about the sovereignty of God, and we reveal our insecurity and immaturity by becoming angry with the people who disagree with us. I fear that we pastors and

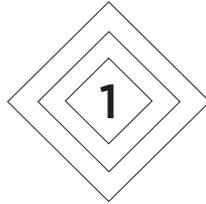
teachers are making a serious mistake when we assume that our people and students understand Calvinism just because they call themselves Calvinists.

I have attempted to write a simple, easy-to-understand explanation of the Five Points of Calvinism. I have tried to write a book that you might hand to a young Calvinist, or to someone who just wants to understand what Calvinism is, with the confidence that he or she will be able to understand the book. I have deliberately used a lot of illustrations that have helped me to understand these truths myself and explain them to others.

Several years ago, I announced to my classes that the following week I planned to lecture on the Five Points of Calvinism. Before the lectures, a student met me on campus, and with a concerned expression she asked, “Dr. Orrick, when you lecture on Calvinism, you *are* going to use the Bible, aren’t you?” She went on to explain her question, observing that most of the discussions she had heard about Calvinism were more philosophical than biblical. I assured her that I would indeed use the Bible as the basis for everything I said, and I assure you of the same. You might read this book and think that I am misinterpreting the Bible, but if you are fair-minded, you will have to admit that I am trying to recognize and interpret what the Bible says. At least, that has been my goal.

Dr. Tom Nettles read the manuscript of this book and made several excellent suggestions, which I incorporated. Thank you. Years ago you told me to stop calling you “Dr. Nettles” and to call you by your first name, so I have. But I want you to know that, on the inside, I still call you “Dr. Nettles.”

My wife Carol read the manuscript, and she too made valuable suggestions; and I incorporated nearly all of them. Thank you.



CALVINISM

More Than the Five Points

In Two Sentences, What Is a Calvinist?

The old farmer sitting across the table from me at the restaurant was not a troublemaker at church. In fact, he had been a peacemaker. It was he who had contacted me about becoming the interim pastor of the church where he had spent all of his eighty-plus years. The church was without a pastor because they had found it necessary to fire their former pastor, who by all accounts had proven himself to be an imprudent, impatient, pushy young upstart. He had very nearly split the church. He was a Calvinist.

I do not think it was his Calvinism that got him fired. I do not think so because, during the fifteen months that I served as interim pastor of that wonderful little church, I plainly preached the doctrines of God's sovereign grace as I encountered those truths again and again throughout a year-long exposition of Hebrews. During my ministry there, the church healed and grew, and when they called a full-time pastor and

my ministry there concluded, I was deeply sad to leave a church I had come to love profoundly and whose strong love for me I had felt as well.

All those happy months of my ministry there were still future on that day when I sat across the table from the old farmer. In the absence of a pastor, he was the de facto leader of the church. I had preached at a nearby church during much of the preceding summer, and people from that church had recommended me to him. His church did not interview me before asking me to serve as their interim. I suppose they trusted the people who had recommended me. I also suppose that the farmer had only recently learned that I, their newly called interim pastor, was a Calvinist.

I imagine that when that wise, gracious farmer learned that I was a Calvinist, he must have thought, *Oh, no. A Calvinist preacher just came within a hair's breadth of destroying our church, and now, somehow, we have called another Calvinist to be our interim pastor.* I must surmise all this because, if he had these misgivings, he never let a word of it slip out of his mouth that day in the restaurant. Instead, without any prelude, he asked me, "In two sentences, what is a Calvinist?"

I answered something very close to this: "Well, in two sentences . . . First, a Calvinist believes that God always does whatever he pleases. Second, a Calvinist believes that God initiates, sustains, and completes the salvation of everyone who gets saved." The old farmer had a puzzled look, but he said nothing. I continued, "But probably what you want to know is whether Calvinists believe in missions and evangelism. The answer is yes." A big smile spread across his wizened, sunburnt face, and he said, "That's exactly what I wanted to know." That was the end of our conversation on Calvinism. Our food came, we enjoyed the meal, and as far as I remember, that was the only time anyone in that church ever spoke

the word *Calvinist* to me; and I do not remember ever using the word in my preaching.

What Does the Bible Say?

I am not opposed to the word *Calvinism*. It is in the title of this book, and I will use it often. I start off this book on the Five Points of Calvinism with this little story in order that I might make the following preliminary observations about Calvinism.

To start, my aim in this book and in my entire preaching and teaching ministry is to explain what the Bible teaches—not to explain what John Calvin taught. I held to what is called Calvinist doctrine before I had read a single page of the writings of John Calvin.¹ I have since read some of Calvin's writings, and I greatly admire them. Should you ever read his commentaries or his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, you will probably be pleasantly surprised at how readable and pastoral John Calvin is.²

I believe what I believe, however, not because John Calvin taught it, or because C. H. Spurgeon or one of my other heroes preached it, or because my parents reared me that way. I believe it because I am convinced that the Holy Spirit has revealed it in the Holy Bible. When he encounters controversial teaching in the Bible, a Bible teacher ought always to be able to point to the Scriptures and say, "I did not write this. I believe it because I believe the Bible, but I did not write this,

1. In fact, I was a Calvinist before I became a Christian; but I will say more about that later in this chapter.

2. The average person who is willing to put in the effort can understand the great classic books of Christianity, literature, and philosophy. The classics have become classics because average persons have read them for a very long time.

and this idea did not originate with me. We may not like what this text says; but, if Jesus is our teacher and our Lord, then we are bound to listen to what his Holy Spirit has said and are bound to receive it whether we fully understand it or not.”

My goal in this book is to demonstrate to you, the reader, that the Bible teaches that God always does as he pleases, and that he initiates, sustains, and completes the salvation of everyone who goes to heaven. If after reading this book you honestly do not believe that what I write is taught in the Bible, then reject what I write. I hope you will prayerfully determine right now that you will carefully consider the biblical case I make for what I write, and that if you find that it is taught in the Bible, then you will embrace it as true. “To the teaching and to the testimony! If they will not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn” (Isa. 8:20).

I do not think that you must be a Calvinist to be a genuine Christian, but I do believe that you must submit to Christ as your trustworthy teacher and as your Lord. The teachings of the Lord have been given to us in the Bible, and if you see that an idea is clearly taught in the Bible, you are under obligation to receive it. You must never say, “I know that it is taught in the Bible, *but . . .*” When you see that the Lord has revealed something about himself and the way he acts, even if it is something that contradicts or challenges your long-cherished ideas about who God is, do not deflect the truth by saying, “My God is not like that” or “My God would never do that.” If the Bible asserts something about God to be true, and it could not possibly be true of *your* God, then you have the wrong god.

A persistent reluctance to submit to the plain teaching of the Scripture is a sure indication that you have not repented of your sinful resolve to determine for yourself what is good and evil. You still have the forbidden fruit in your mouth. Spit it out and receive the words of Jesus: “Whoever hears my

word and believes him who sent me has eternal life” (John 5:24). The focus of this book, then, is not to explain what John Calvin taught but to explain what the Bible teaches.

Calvinism Is More Than Five Points

Another point that my introductory story allows me to make is that Calvinism is more than the Five Points. Before we can make any significant progress toward determining the truthfulness of the Five Points, we need to understand that God always does as he pleases. Nearly every professing Christian who bases his faith on the Bible will acknowledge that God *may* do as he pleases—but the Bible asserts that God *does* do as he pleases. “His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation; all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, ‘What have you done?’” (Dan. 4:34–35). While sinners may try to resist him, no one successfully resists him. God is the one “who works all things according to the counsel of his will” (Eph. 1:11).

As we are conformed to the likeness of Jesus and gain the mind of Christ, we learn not only to submit to God’s sovereign rule in all things but also to submit cheerfully. We learn to say with our Savior, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father”—why?—“for such was your gracious will” (Matt. 11:25–26). No one but a true believer ever honestly tells God, “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Every true believer does say that to God. Cheerful, unconditional submission to the will of God is a condition of our admittance

into his kingdom. We must be willing to say “Thy will be done,” even when it comes to difficult teachings that may initially be unsettling.

Two simple statements in the Bible pave the way for everything else that the Bible says. If we believe these two statements, everything else is relatively easy to accept. The first one is the first verse of Genesis: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” If we believe this, then we believe that God made everything, and this gives him the power and the right to do anything he pleases. The second statement is Psalm 115:3: “Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases.” What God is pleased to do, he does do. Our main job is to learn to be pleased with what pleases God—to conform our will to his.

Since God is good, it is reasonable that his will is best; and since he is all wise, it also is reasonable that his will may sometimes be inscrutable to us. He reveals truths about himself that we could never figure out through our own wisdom. “In the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom” (1 Cor. 1:21). If we embrace only those doctrines of the Bible that accord with our unaided reason, we have not yet begun to exercise the kind of faith that the Holy Spirit identifies as the faith that results in salvation. For “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1). Saving faith engages the truth that is above the grasp of mere human reason—the truth that God must reveal. When we receive this super-reasonable truth (this revealed truth that is above reason) and we receive the Christ who reveals it to us, we are “seeing him who is invisible” (Heb. 11:27) and can “know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge” (Eph. 3:19).

We will encounter ideas about him that we cannot understand, for he is vastly superior to us. He says,

For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isa. 55:8–9)

We ought to expect that such a wise and powerful God will have ways that are far above our ways. When we cannot understand why he does what he does, we must learn to reply,

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

“For who has known the mind of the Lord,
or who has been his counselor?”
“Or who has given a gift to him
that he might be repaid?”

For from him and through him and to him are all things.
To him be glory forever. Amen. (Rom. 11:33–36)

True peace and happiness come to the person who learns to say with all his heart, “It is the LORD. Let him do what seems good to him” (1 Sam. 3:18).

A person who persistently rejects the plain teaching of Scripture is not a believer—but it is also possible to believe many things that Scripture teaches and nevertheless be unconverted. True saving faith transforms those who have it. A faith without works is a dead, useless faith; it is the sort of faith that demons have. “You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!” (James 2:19). It is certainly possible to believe the Five Points of Calvinism and

still be lost. I have known staunch Calvinists who have totally abandoned the Christian faith. I myself was a convinced Calvinist before I was converted. I remember debating Calvinistic doctrine with my classmates when I was in grade school and junior high school, and I was right—that is, my doctrine was right. I was wrong because I was in rebellion against God. I had submitted to the doctrine of the Scriptures, but I had not yet submitted to the Christ of the Scriptures.

Salvation is granted to those who receive a *person*—it is not promised to those who merely embrace a theological system, even if it is the right system. I am not, therefore, under the delusion that being a five-point Calvinist is an infallible certificate of Christian authenticity. I have known earnest, Christ-loving Christians who could not have told you what Calvinism was if their life depended on it. I believe the old farmer who sat across the table from me is an example.

It Encourages Missions and Evangelism

That leads me to another preliminary observation. Most people—even most Christians—do not know what Calvinism is. My farmer friend did not, and he still did not even after my two-sentence summary. Because most people do not know what Calvinism is, had he asked me point-blank, “Are you a Calvinist?” I would have said, “I honestly do not know what you are asking me. Could you please ask me what you want to know without using the word *Calvinist*?” That is not an evasive answer because, until he tells me, I do not know what the average person understands by the word *Calvinist*. Regrettably, if he has heard anything about Calvinism, it has probably been entirely negative and grossly misrepresented. I accurately anticipated the misinformation that my farmer friend had heard. He had heard that Calvinists do not believe in missions and evangelism. That is false, and it is perhaps the

most widespread misconception about Calvinism. Since it is such a common misconception, I will address it briefly now and more fully later.

Some of the most ardent, zealous evangelists have been, and still are, Calvinists. Some of the greatest, most self-sacrificing missionaries throughout history and today were and are five-point Calvinists. The modern missions movement was commenced by William Carey, who spent his life ministering in India. He translated the Scriptures into multiple languages. He was a Calvinist. Adoniram Judson was the first American missionary. He labored for years in Burma before he saw his first convert. Now, two hundred years later, God has used his faithfulness to bring millions of people into Christ's kingdom. Judson was a Calvinist. David Brainerd was a missionary to the Native Americans in the 1700s. There was a great movement of God's Spirit among the Native Americans under Brainerd's ministry, and many were converted to follow Christ. Jonathan Edwards edited Brainerd's diary, and for many years God has used *The Life and Diary of David Brainerd* to lead countless other Christians to devote themselves to mission work. Brainerd was a Calvinist. And so was Edwards. George Whitefield, the mighty man of God whose preaching shook the world, was a Calvinist. C. H. Spurgeon, the Prince of Preachers, was an outspoken, ardent, five-point Calvinist.

In the face of such ample historical evidence, I am sometimes shocked to hear men who ought to know better make the unfounded assertion that Calvinism kills missions and evangelism. It might kill unbiblical, manipulative evangelistic methodologies, but it does not kill missions and evangelism. In fact, as I will attempt to make clear throughout this book, when properly understood, the Five Points of Calvinism ought to provide us with great motivation to be evangelistic, and they afford great encouragement to those who are evangelizing.

The Five Points teach that God has planned in advance for the success of the gospel, and this is greatly encouraging. It was encouraging to Jesus when he was surrounded by the hateful, disapproving faces of his countrymen who were rejecting him and plotting violence against him. When it appeared that all were rejecting him, he was surely comforted by the thought of God's sovereign plan when he said, "All that the Father gives me will come to me" (John 6:37). Jesus was encouraged knowing that his work would not be in vain.

God's sovereign choice of a people in Corinth was encouraging to the apostle Paul when the Jews of Corinth "opposed and reviled him" (Acts 18:6). He began preaching to the Gentiles in Corinth, and his life was in danger, but "the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, 'Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people'" (Acts 18:9–10). Where is the encouragement here? Was the Lord assuring Paul by telling him that there were enough Christians in Corinth to protect him if a fight should erupt? No. The many in the city who Jesus described as *my people* were not yet converted, but they certainly would be. The Lord had planned for the success of the gospel in Corinth, and he was saying to Paul, "Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain" (1 Cor. 15:58). Paul was so encouraged by this vision from the Lord that "he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them" (Acts 18:11).

Some other common misunderstandings about Calvinism include the false assertion that Calvinists do not believe the Scripture "Whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely" (Rev. 22:17 KJV). We do. Others wrongly say that Calvinists believe that God will save people even if they do not want to be saved. We do not believe that. Others say that

Calvinists think that people will be saved without hearing and believing the gospel. We do not think that. There are numerous other misunderstandings and false accusations that demonstrate that the average person does not know much about Calvinism. I will discuss many of these misunderstandings in their proper place.

It Is a Worldview

Calvinism, then, is more than the Five Points. It is a way of looking at everything in the world. It is a way of thinking about everything. The Calvinistic way of thinking is rooted in the confidence that God is in control of everything and everyone and that he is controlling everything according to his good and perfect purpose. He does not force sinners to rebel against him, and he does not force saints to love and obey him; but all the while “he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth” (Dan. 4:35). Admittedly, this is a great mystery. All persons think and act freely, yet all the while God is sovereignly superintending all things so that his eternal purpose is infallibly accomplished. The Reverend William Jay asserted that “all parties act freely, yet necessarily too. . . . Ask me not for a solution. I only know the fact. I see the two ends of the chain, but the middle is under water; yet the connection is as real as it is invisible. By and by it will be drawn up.”³

TULIP

In this book we will explore how God exercises his sovereign will in the salvation of sinners. That is the focus of the

3. William Jay, *Evening Exercises for Every Day in the Year* (repr., Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1999), 93.

Five Points. The Five Points may easily be remembered with the acrostic word *TULIP*. This mnemonic device helps us not only to remember the Five Points but also to remember them in their logical order.

- T: *Total depravity*. This doctrine establishes the human need for divine grace.
- U: *Unconditional election*. This shows that God the Father planned to save certain humans.
- L: *Limited atonement*. This explains what God the Son did to accomplish God's plan.
- I: *Irresistible grace*. This explains what God the Holy Spirit does to apply Christ's work to sinners.
- P: *Perseverance of the saints*. This explains that sinners are permanently changed by God's work in them.

In each of the following chapters I will plainly describe the doctrine under consideration, examine the Bible to see whether the doctrine is taught there, answer the most common objections to it, and show how the doctrine ought to influence the way we think and live.

One final word: as noted above, *TULIP* presents the doctrines in their logical order. It is very helpful to read the following chapters in the order in which they appear. It is easier to understand and appreciate unconditional election if you have first understood what the Bible teaches about total depravity.

Questions for Contemplation and Discussion

1. Can you identify misunderstandings that you once had about Calvinism? What was the source of your misunderstanding?

2. If you once misunderstood Calvinism but are now a Calvinist, what changed your mind?
3. Have there been instances of your being falsely accused of believing something that you did not believe? Were you able to clear up the misunderstanding?
4. Both Calvinists and non-Calvinists tend to become angry when discussing Calvinistic doctrine. Why do you suppose this is the case?
5. What are some reasons why Calvinism has been so controversial? Which of these reasons are inevitable and which are avoidable?
6. What are some steps that Calvinists might take to make Calvinism less offensive to those who either are opposed to the doctrines or are hearing them for the first time?
7. Since Calvinism is so controversial, is it wise to simply keep quiet about it?