

Simple Calvinism

This paper is intended to be a very concise, exceedingly simple, summary of what genuine Calvinism is. Discussion and evaluation of topics will be very limited.

Genuine Calvinism is taken here to be the consistent expression of historic Reformation doctrines associated with John Calvin. Thus it is the doctrine expressed by Calvin himself and continued in the school that followed him truly, i.e. Theodore Beza (his successor), Francis Turretin, the Puritans (e.g. William Perkins, William Twisse & William Ames), the decisions of the Synod of Dort,¹ and the chief Reformed confessions and catechisms.²

Very many people have claimed to be Calvinistic and yet have corrupted these doctrines, or even totally opposed them. Many modern Calvinists are really Amyraldians; a heresy that sought to water down the essence of Calvinism about 70 years after Calvin died.³ Any preacher who contradicts what Calvin himself taught as important cannot be a Calvinist!

Compromised Calvinists often attack historic Calvinists by claiming that they are Hyper-Calvinists. This is foolish since this heresy is a completely different set of doctrines held by a small minority of, mostly, Strict Baptists.⁴

What is it? The essence of Calvinism

Calvinism is the doctrine that God is God. Calvinism seeks to uphold the Biblical truth that God is absolutely sovereign over all things, and especially the salvation of men. Calvinism is God-centred, not man-centred.

The source of authority for Calvinists is the word of God, the Bible; properly translated from the safest manuscripts; which is to be interpreted according to its own rules.⁵

¹ Which is where the common expression of TULIP arose from, being a summary of Calvinistic doctrines of grace formulated to counter the apology of the Arminian Remonstrants in Holland. This synod was attended by representatives from many nations who were all in agreement. It condemned as heresy the chief points of the Arminians and established the truth of total depravity; unconditional election; particular redemption (limited atonement); irresistible grace and final perseverance.

² Such as the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism (Continental Presbyterians); the Westminster Confession (British Presbyterians); the 1689 Baptist Confession (British Reformed Baptists); the Savoy Declaration (British Congregationalism) etc.

³ In a nutshell, the doctrine championed by Moises Amyraut in France also called 'Hypothetical Universalism'. It seeks to water down the harshness of election and predestination by claiming that God loves everyone, and that Jesus died for everyone and that anyone can be saved if he chooses to believe (the essence of Arminianism). However, since men do not choose to believe, God chose the elect and saved them (the essence of Calvinism). It is nonsense, self-contradictory and hence is only hypothetical (to say nothing of being unbiblical).

⁴ Hyper-Calvinism teaches that the Gospel can only be preached to the elect who are already under conviction of sin and regenerated (awakened). The Gospel cannot be proclaimed to all and sundry. They deny duty-faith; that is, preaching that men should be commanded to repent and believe (Acts 17:30). It also teaches eternal justification, eternal adoption, a denial of progressive sanctification and rewards. A number of historic Hyper-Calvinists were also Antinomians.

⁵ Such as that the Bible interprets itself (context is vital) according to the principles of the grammar of the original languages and historic and cultural context.

How is this expressed? The ways in which this sovereignty is worked out

God is sovereign over the universe

God is sovereign over the universe and upholds it by his power moment by moment.

The earth *is* the LORD's, and all its fulness, the world and those who dwell therein. Ps 24:1

You who are the confidence of all the ends of the earth, and of the far-off seas; who established the mountains by His strength, *being* clothed with power; you who still the noise of the seas, the noise of their waves, and the tumult of the peoples. They also who dwell in the farthest parts are afraid of Your signs; You make the outgoings of the morning and evening rejoice. You visit the earth and water it, You greatly enrich it. Ps 65:5-9

The whole earth *is* full of His glory! Isa 6:3

For thus says the LORD, who created the heavens, who is God, who formed the earth and made it, who has established it, who did not create it in vain, who formed it to be inhabited: 'I *am* the LORD, and *there is* no other'. Isa 45:18

My hand has laid the foundation of the earth, and My right hand has stretched out the heavens; *when* I call to them, they stand up together. Isa 48:13

He is before all things, and in Him all things consist. Col 1:17

This means that God is sovereign over all that happens in the world, both in nature, man and history. Everything is under God's sovereign control; the world belongs to him.

Contrary positions

- Deism.⁶
- Mechanistic theories ('determinism'; everything is controlled by merely physical laws).
- Evolutionary theory (the universe evolved from nothing by accident).
- Satan is controller of the world (claimed by many Charismatics and others).
- Existentialism - the philosophical theory which emphasises that the individual person is a free and responsible agent determining his own development through acts of the will.⁷

God is sovereign in salvation

God is controller of every aspect of salvation. The Father initiates it in eternity, the Son activates it in time and the Holy Spirit applies it to chosen individuals. There is no salvation for those not chosen.

Look to me, and be saved, all you ends of the earth! For I *am* God, and *there is* no other. Isa 45:22

I have waited for your salvation, O LORD! Gen 49:18

Salvation *belongs* to the LORD. Ps 3:8

The salvation of the righteous *is* from the LORD. Ps 37:39

⁶ In very simple terms, Deism claims that God established the universe with laws and then left it to its own devices. It has been likened to a watchmaker that made a clock, wound it up and then left it to run down. It accepts God as the creator but not the lawgiver and judge.

⁷ Existentialism tends to be atheistic, to disparage scientific knowledge, and to deny the existence of objective values, stressing instead the reality and significance of human freedom and experience. *The New Oxford Dictionary of English*.

Behold, God *is* my salvation, I will trust and not be afraid; 'For YAH, the LORD, *is* my strength and song; He also has become my salvation.' Isa 12:2

Salvation *is* of the LORD. Jonah 2:9

If God is sovereign in salvation, then man is not the determiner of it; it is not initiated by man (as Arminianism) but by God.

Contrary position

- Pelagianism: man determines his own salvation by doing good and obeying the law. What God prescribes, man is able to do.
- Arminianism: salvation is determined by man's free will, his choice to believe, to initiate a global salvation offered to all. (This is a form of Semi-Pelagianism; man co-operates with God in achieving salvation.)
- Amyraldism: man is hypothetically able to choose salvation but doesn't in the end.
- Universalism: everybody gets saved in the end; there is no hell.

God has predestined all things

God predestines all things from eternity according to his decree.⁸ God not only chooses the elect in eternity for salvation but he also predetermines the actions of all men so that he can control history according to his divine plan for the end.

My times *are* in your hand. Ps 31:15

Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed. And in Your book they all were written, the days fashioned for me, when *as yet there were* none of them. Ps 139:16

And who can proclaim as I do? Then let him declare it and set it in order for me, since I appointed the ancient people. And the things that are coming and shall come. Isa 44:7

For I *am* God, and *there is* no other; *I am* God, and *there is* none like me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times *things* that are not *yet* done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure,' Isa 46:9-10

The kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. Matt 25:34

He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world. Eph 1:4

Being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will. Eph 1:11

Known to God from eternity are all His works. Acts 15:18

God from the beginning chose you for salvation. 2 Thess 2:13

He indeed was foreordained before the foundation of the world. 1 Pt 1:20

Contrary position

- Four-Point Calvinists; compromised Calvinists who deny double predestination (and Limited Atonement).⁹
- Arminianism denies God's predestination of all men.
- Socinianism denies God's predestination of all men.

⁸ God's decree is the expression of his will; the counsel of his will. It is the executive order of God's plan and purpose for salvation. It is manifest in time according to his sovereign predestination of all things to comply to that plan.

⁹ They accept election but deny reprobation. This is an irrational position to take and contrary to logic. If God selects some for life, then by definition, he has also not selected others, who will be damned.

- Middle-Knowledge, scientia media, - an attempt to fudge sovereign predestination by positing mediate knowledge in God. It is knowledge dependent upon means and conditions; i.e. knowing what men will do in circumstances but not actually determining that action.
- Rationalism denies any God controlling anything.
- Open Theism. This is a sort of hyper-Arminianism which denies God's predestination and denies that God can even know the future. Man's free will is lord.

God is sovereign in human affairs

God is sovereign in human affairs, over all good and all evil. Nothing is outside God's control. If events were to occur without God's permission, then he would cease to be a sovereign God.

God *is* the King of all the earth. Ps 47:7

A man's heart plans his way, but the LORD directs his steps. Prov 16:9

I make peace and create calamity; I, the LORD, do all these *things*. 'Isa 45:7

Is it not from the mouth of the Most High That woe and well-being proceed? Lam 3:38

All the inhabitants of the earth *are* reputed as nothing; He does according to His will in the army of heaven and *among* the inhabitants of the earth. No one can restrain His hand or say to Him, 'What have you done?' Dan 4:35

If there is calamity in a city, will not the LORD have done *it*? Amos 3:6

Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father's will. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Matt 10:29-30

Thus God is sovereign over kings, rulers, governments and the fortune of nations.

The LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying: 'To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates.' Gen 15:18

When the Most High divided their inheritance to the nations, when He separated the sons of Adam, He set the boundaries of the peoples. Deut 32:8

Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel, and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: 'I *am* the First and I *am* the Last; besides Me *there is* no God. And who can proclaim as I do? Then let him declare it and set it in order for Me, Since I appointed the ancient people. And the things that are coming and shall come.' Isa 44:6-7

Who says of [Emperor] Cyrus, '*He is* my shepherd, and he shall perform all my pleasure, saying to Jerusalem, "You shall be built," and to the temple, "Your foundation shall be laid."' Isa 44:28

For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: 'I have put a yoke of iron on the neck of all these nations, that they may serve Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon; and they shall serve him.' Jer 28:14

He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their pre-appointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings. Acts 17:26

Both these kings' hearts *shall be* bent on evil, and they shall speak lies at the same table; but it shall not prosper, for the end *will still be* at the appointed time. Dan 11:27

The king's heart *is* in the hand of the LORD, *like* the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes. Prov 21:1

God was with him and delivered him out of all his troubles, and gave him favour and wisdom in the presence of Pharaoh, king of Egypt; and he made him governor over Egypt and all his house. Acts 7:10

Contrary position

- Satanic control of world systems.
- The facile idea that God controls the good things in life but Satan controls the bad things. [Thus God doesn't control anything.]
- Men are in control of human affairs, politics and history.
- Anarchy – no one is in control. Society is left to run itself naturally.
- The Illuminati (a few powerful men are in control of the world).
- Movements control the world (such as Communism or Capitalism).

God is sovereign over the natural world

God is sovereign over the natural world, including natural disasters.

God made a wind to pass over the earth. Gen 8:1

Behold, the LORD makes the earth empty and makes it waste, distorts its surface and scatters abroad its inhabitants. Isa 24:1

The grass withers, the flower fades, because the breath of the LORD blows upon it. Isa 40:7

You break the ships of Tarshish with an east wind. Ps 48:7

He caused an east wind to blow in the heavens; and by His power He brought in the south wind. Ps 78:26

Whatever the LORD pleases He does, in heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deep places. He causes the vapours to ascend from the ends of the earth; He makes lightning for the rain; He brings the wind out of His treasures. Ps 135:6-7

He who builds His layers in the sky, and has founded His strata in the earth; who calls for the waters of the sea, and pours them out on the face of the earth -- The LORD *is* His name. Amos 9:6

The LORD has His way in the whirlwind and in the storm, and the clouds *are* the dust of His feet. He rebukes the sea and makes it dry, and dries up all the rivers. Bashan and Carmel wither, and the flower of Lebanon wilts. Nahum 1:3-4

And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, 'All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.' Matt 28:18

Contrary position

- Satanic control of natural forces.
- Good things come from God but bad things come from the devil.
- Fatalism: there is no sovereign God, all is left to chance.
- Deism and Determinism: what happens, happens; the physical laws decide on their own.
- Man is in control (e.g. over climate change).
- Gaia: the earth is a personality and is in control.

God is sovereign in the church

God is sovereign in the church. It is the body of Christ and he is Lord over the church. The church is God's own household and family.

And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all. Eph 1:22-23

Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. Acts 20:28

The house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth. 1 Tim 3:15

Leadership is by elders who are God's delegates as under-shepherds. They are a team of equal leaders responsible for the health, preservation, growth and protection of the flock. Elders have multiple names (elder, bishop, overseer, teacher, shepherd, pastor etc.) but they are all the same ministry. Leaders are servants not lords over the flock.

From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church. Acts 20:17

Appoint elders in every city as I commanded you. Titus 1:5

We were gentle among you, just as a nursing *mother* cherishes her own children. 1 Thess 2:7

Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. 1 Pt 5:2-3

There are some itinerant, inter-church, leaders who have no authority in the local church above elders, but they are welcomed for their input (prophets, evangelists).

He Himself gave some *to be* apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ. Eph 4:11-12

There are leaders who are sent by the church to plant new ones and have authority in newly planted works but not at home (apostles or missionaries).

He Himself gave some *to be* apostles ... for the edifying of the body of Christ. Eph 4:11-12

Greet Andronicus and Junia, my countrymen and my fellow prisoners, who are of note among the apostles, who also were in Christ before me. Rm 16:7

Epaphroditus, my brother, fellow worker, and fellow soldier, but your messenger [lit. 'apostle']. Phil 2:25

Strategies adopted by the local church can only be determined by Scripture and nothing else (the 'regulative principle'). God's truth rules.

And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine. Acts 2:42

Keep the traditions just as I delivered *them* to you. 1 Cor 11:2

But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned *them*. 2 Tim 3:14

Be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us, the apostles of the Lord and Saviour. 2 Pt 3:2

Beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked; but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. 2 Pt 3:17-18

Contrary position

- Pragmatism: everyone does what gives the best desired result, whether it is Biblical or not.
- Authoritarianism: Apostles and prophets rule the church in practice; they hear from God and then tell the people what to do – as in Restoration Charismaticism. This is neo-episcopacy without the safety of a synod, or a neo-papacy.
- Men rule in practice: lip service is given to God's ownership of the church but in reality leaders do what they think best. This is common where there is a senior minister and only token (or no) eldership.
- Democracy: all the people vote to determine strategies. This occurs in some Baptist and Free Church circles.

God is sovereign over you

God is your creator and master and you owe allegiance and worship to him. This means that you must obey his commands, which are recorded in his word, the Bible. Failure to obey God results in punishment; obedience to God results in blessing.

Who gives breath to the people on it, and spirit to those who walk on it. Isa 42:5

I *am* the LORD, who makes all *things*, who stretches out the heavens all alone, who spreads abroad the earth by myself. Isa 44:24

I have made the earth, and created man on it. I -- my hands -- stretched out the heavens, and all their host I have commanded. Isa 45:12

God ... 'will render to each one according to his deeds': eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honour, and immortality; but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness -- indignation and wrath. Rm 2:6-8

Conclusion

Calvinism is normally envisaged solely as the doctrines of grace;¹⁰ that is that God is sovereign in salvation. However, Calvinism is really about glorifying God as sovereign - full stop. Of course he is sovereign in grace, but God is also sovereign over all things; from the sparrows on the tree to the hairs on your head.

The chief difference between Calvinism and other doctrines is that it seeks to honour God as sovereign Lord.

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¹⁰ Total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace and final perseverance.