

V. ELECTION AND SALVATION

Though Christians might agree that salvation is by grace alone, they disagree when it comes to specifically defining the implications of this grace. The question as to the origin of salvation, specifically as it relates to election and calling, is among the most controversial questions debated among conservative Christians today. While all conservative theological systems recognize the sovereignty of God in salvation, how and when sovereignty is exercised is a basic area of contention. Sooner or later, the debate usually involves what is commonly known as "Calvinism." Perhaps the best expression of Calvinism is seen in the acrostic TULIP. Those who use this rebus express Calvinism in five points and they apply these to their interpretation of Scripture.

T	Total depravity
U	Unconditional election
L	Limited atonement
I	Irresistible grace
P	Perseverance of the saints

As such, those who hold this position believe that man is totally depraved, that he cannot even respond to God. As a result, God elected him for salvation on an unconditional basis; then Christ died for the elect and only the elect. Because God's sovereignty cannot be thwarted, the elect cannot resist the grace of God when it is presented, nor can the elect fall away nor lose salvation, but the elect will persevere to the end. Those who believe in the entire system as identified are "five-point Calvinists."

Some others claim to believe part of the system of Calvinism, but not all. As such, a person might call himself a "four-point Calvinist," or a "two-point Calvinist," depending on how many points agree with his position. The problem is that Calvinism is a system, and as such is a unity. Inasmuch as truth is consistent with itself, one cannot choose part of a system while rejecting other selections and hold to a coherent system. As such he must modify all aspects, hence creating a new system.

In fairness to John Calvin, it should be noted that there is some question as to whether so-called "Calvinism" accurately represents his real position. While the early editions of *The Institutes* appear to emphasize predestination, his later commentaries have a more biblical emphasis. An example of this is seen in his comments on 1 John 2:2.

Christ suffered for the sins of the whole world, and in the goodness of God is offered unto all men without distinction, His blood being shed, not for a part of the world openly, but for the whole human race; for although in the world nothing is found worthy of the favor of God, yet He holds out the propitiation to the whole world, since without exception He summons all to the faith of Christ, which is nothing else than the door unto hope.¹

In spite of the inherent weakness of Calvin, his contribution was scholarly and profound. Within the law of blessability, God blessed him greatly. His leadership in Geneva, Switzerland founded a theological movement that spread around the world. Its contributions for righteousness far outweigh the implied negative tendencies of fatalism and legalism.

The five points of Calvinism came into existence after Calvin's death. They grew out of a protest toward Arminianism through the teachings of Jacob Hermann, who lived from 1560 to 1609. He is best known by the Latin form of his last name—Arminius. In 1618, a national senate of the church of the Netherlands convened in Dort and examined the teaching of Arminius in light of Scripture. This council consisted of one hundred forty-four sessions stretched over at least seven months. They concluded that the points of Arminianism were heresy. At this conference in Dort, they reaffirmed the reformed teaching of John Calvin. They stated their conclusion in five points, expressing it in the form of the acrostic forming the word TULIP.

Some have narrowly divided Christianity into two camps, Calvinist and Arminian. As a result, some are identified as Calvinists because they were not Arminian in doctrine. These could be called Generic Calvinists because they believe in the sovereignty of God, salvation by grace and eternal security. They use this description to tell the world, "I am not an Arminian." (However, a person should not be forced to describe himself theologically by his affinity or proximity to any one church father.) A Definitional

Calvinist usually identifies with the Reformed or Presbyterian Church and is committed to the major tenets of faith usually identified with John Calvin.

A. THE WEAKNESSES OF CALVINISM. The following section examines the weaknesses or inconsistencies of Calvinism. Careful attention should be given to the definition of terms. The way a person defines the terms will determine if he is a Calvinist or not. It will also determine whether or not the system is inconsistent.

1. *Total depravity.* Most Calvinists interpret total depravity to mean that any man in his natural state is incapable or unable to do anything to please or gain merit before God. He is totally depraved of any urging to seek after God. Total depravity means that man is in complete rebellion against God, and by his "free will" he cannot and will never make a decision for Christ. When man is totally depraved, he cannot discern the truth of the gospel or understand it when it is presented to him. The Calvinist qualifies the meaning of "free will," indicating that man is not totally free, but is able to respond to God because of election and irresistible grace.

However, the Bible teaches that man is made in the image and likeness of God. Since God is Person (personality), man reflects the personhood of God through his human personality, made up of intellect, emotion, will, and moral awareness. Because man's will is reflective of God's will, man has the duty and ability to make moral choices based on his understanding and motivations. Man is given an opportunity to make a moral choice for God—as reflected in repenting, turning, believing, and receiving salvation—and is condemned if he rejects. God, in the integrity of His nature, could not ask man to do what he was incapable of doing nor could He hold man responsible for all choices, whether good or evil, if the choices were not indigenous to man. Since man will be judged by God for his decision, it would be immoral for God to punish man for his lack of response to that which he could not do.

There are illustrations of men in Scripture who have made decisions against the purpose of God (Pharaoh, Esau, Lot, and Balaam). Also, there are some who have made difficult decisions, and God honored them (Abraham, Elijah, and those mentioned in Hebrews 11). Accountability follows responsibility.

2. *Unconditional election.* The second principle held by the Calvinist is based on the doctrine of predestination. Calvinists believe a man obtains salvation because God began the process by choosing him without any outside influence.

Those of mankind who are predestinated unto Life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to His eternal and immutable Purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of His will, hath chosen in Christ to everlasting glory, out of His mere free grace and love, without any other thing in the creature as a condition or cause moving Him thereunto.ⁱⁱ

The Calvinist bases election upon the divine plan (according to God's purpose), so that the ground of election is in God himself, which is to say salvation begins in God's will and purpose and not in an act of faith or some other condition in the responder. As a result, man has no part in it. Calvinists teach that God never elects anyone to salvation because of his goodness or potential merit. The choice is from Himself; hence, election is unconditional.

Conservative theologians appear to have some degree of disagreement among themselves as to the nature of this election. Some, like Strong, define "election" exclusively in terms of an independent decision of God. He claims,

Election is that eternal act of God, by which in his sovereign pleasure, and on account of no foreseen merit in them, he chooses certain out of the number of sinful men to be the recipients of the special grace of his Spirit, and so to be made voluntary partakers of Christ's salvation.ⁱⁱⁱ

Others, like Thiessen, tend to modify the severity of this election by introducing such things as the foreknowledge of God. His attempt at defining election suggests, "By election we mean that sovereign act of God in grace whereby He chose in Christ Jesus for salvation all those whom He foreknew would

accept Him.”^{iv} Both of the above noted theologians would probably define themselves to some degree as Calvinists.

The Bible uses such phrases as “chosen in Him,” and “predestinated us unto the adoption of children,” and “elect according to the foreknowledge of God.” But because these phrases are used by the Calvinist does not mean the terms reinforce the Calvinists position to the exclusion of another position. These are Bible terms that must be carefully interpreted.

First, election in the Bible is applied broadly. Election must always be interpreted within its context. The term “elect” is related to the church or to all believers, or those who have already accepted Christ. It is not applied to an unsaved, even if he is a candidate for salvation. As such, it relates to God’s plan of salvation, because He has elected salvation and those in salvation are identified as elect. When taken in light of the nature of salvation, we understand that Jesus Christ made atonement for all. Those who respond to His plan of salvation are characterized as elect.

Second, to say that God has chosen some and passed over others is to breach the nature of God. God is One, which means He is Unity and acts in perfect harmony with His nature. Every part of God influences every other attribute of God. One attribute can never act in isolation from the others, hence God cannot be guilty of acting ignorantly or with a double mind. The nature of God expresses His love, as well as His justice. The Bible teaches that God so loves the world, hence this emotion is constant to all creatures at all times. Unconditional election implies that God chooses some out of His nature, but since others are not chosen, then the unity of God is breached. Also the love of God is breached because He is not able to love all equally. If God chooses (elects) some, it must proceed out of pure motives from His total Person. But the election of some and passing over of others divides the unity of God, implying duplicity, ignorance, or partiality in God.

3. *Limited atonement.* Calvinists indicate that this aspect of their system is the most difficult of their five points to communicate. They teach that if man is totally depraved so that he cannot respond, and God is sovereign in His unconditional choice, then when Jesus died, He died for those that were chosen by God. To keep their system intact, they must deny that Christ died for anyone else, for if He had, then they must also be saved. Since they are not, atonement is limited.

Atonement is for the Elect only, since Christ died only for those whom the Father gave Him to be His Bride. Only the saints or elect ones are ever said to be “beloved of God,” for they alone are the objects of His saving grace. The Calvinist reasons that if Christ died for all, then all will be saved. If only the elect are to be saved, then Christ died for them, and them alone. Although it is true that the blood of Christ is surely *sufficient* in value to atone for all, still it is obviously *efficient* only for those who are saved by His unmerited favor.^v

In contrast to Limited atonement, the Bible teaches that the death of Jesus Christ was for all people of all time. This does not mean that all the world will be saved. The New Testament teaches that only those who receive Jesus Christ will enter into eternal life. There are at least five arguments against limited atonement. These are argued from the accomplishments of Christ on Calvary.

The first argument against limited atonement is the doctrine of substitution. The Bible teaches that Christ has given Himself for the sins of the world (John 1:29; 1 Tim. 2:6; Titus 2:11), that Christ was the Substitute for the church (Eph. 5:25), and that He gave Himself for individual Christians (Gal. 2:20). The Calvinist only uses the last group of verses to prove limited atonement, but overlooks the verses that teach Christ was the Substitute for every man (Heb. 2:9).

The second argument against limited atonement is that redemption is adequate, for Christ gave His blood a ransom for sin, hence redeemed the lost (1 Pet. 1:18-20). The price of redemption is blood. The Greek words for redeemed are applied to purchasing servants in the ancient slave market. The illustration reveals the extent of redemption to all men. First, the Bible teaches that He purchased the sinner in the marketplace—*agorazo*—that those who were “sold under sin” are redeemed (Gal. 3:10). But *agorazo* also applies to false teachers (2 Pet. 2:1); he died for these who obviously were not saved. Second, Christ paid the price with His blood and bought the slave out of the market place—*ekagorazo*; this person was never again exposed to sale (Gal. 3:13). This refers to those who were saved. In the third place, *lutroo* means to pay the price for the

slave and release him (Gal. 4:5). This probably refers to the Christian who has learned to walk in grace and was not living by the law.

The third argument against limited atonement is that propitiation, which means "satisfaction," was made for the sin penalty of the world. The justice of God had been offended by the sin of mankind. The sin penalty of death could not be retracted and the nature of God could not forgive the sinner without satisfaction. The price of satisfaction was the blood of Jesus Christ, and the act of satisfaction is propitiation. The Bible teaches that Jesus is the propitiation for the world. "He is the propitiation for our sin, and not for our's only, but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:2). Since Christ is the propitiation for the world, the atonement cannot be limited.

The fourth argument against limited atonement is the fact that Jesus has satisfied all the demands of the law by nailing it to His cross (Col. 2:14). God's moral nature was offended when man broke the law and partook of the fruit of the garden. Everyone sinned in Adam, the head of the human race, and was guilty before God. The law not only condemned Adam, but every man who sinned, and would continue condemning them because of the demands of the law. The law could not be abrogated because it was an extension of the nature of God. The law was a unit, and to break one law was to break all the law (Jas. 2:10). Like sin, which is the sin-principle, the law is the law-unit. God did not deal with sins or the law on a "commercial" basis, meaning if there were more individual sins, Christ would have had to suffer more. Rather Christ dealt with the sin-principle and satisfied the law-unit. He satisfied the law-unit for the saved and unsaved. Jesus nailed the demands of the law to the cross and made an end of the law (Col. 2:14-15; Eph. 2:15-16; Matt. 5:17). The end of the law does not mean Christ put the law out of existence just for the elect, but that the law is no longer in effect as a moral judge to condemn mankind. Christ satisfied the law-principle, for both saved and unsaved, hence denying limited atonement.

The fifth argument against limited atonement is the fact that Jesus Christ reconciled the world unto Himself by His death. Reconciliation is God making man savable by placing him in a favorable light of God's mercy. The Bible teaches, "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them;" (2 Cor. 5:19; Eph. 2:16). This does not mean the world is saved, but man is now in a place where he can be saved when he meets the conditions of God's plan of salvation. Since the world is reconciled, surely the atonement is not limited to the elect.

The arguments against limited atonement are also powerful arguments for evangelism. Since Christ was the Substitute for the lost, and since Christ has paid the redemption for them, and since Christ fulfilled the demands of the law against them, and since Christ is their satisfaction (propitiation), and since Christ has reconciled them to God, the lost have an obligation to accept salvation, and Christians have an obligation to tell them the "good news."

One of the chief problems with this teaching of a limited atonement is rooted in one's understanding of some basic theological terms. Calvinists argue the atonement is somehow deficient if any of those for whom Christ died are not finally saved. This basic presupposition results in the belief that those who deny a particular aspect of limited atonement must necessarily teach the salvation of all men. This attitude is evident in Murray's discussion of the extent of the atonement.

The very nature of Christ's mission and accomplishment is involved in this question . . . Did he come to make men redeemable? Or did he come effectually and infallibly to redeem? The doctrine of the atonement must be radically revised if, as atonement, it applies to those who finally perish as well as to those who are the heirs of eternal life. If we universalize the extent we limit the efficacy. If some of those for whom atonement was made and redemption wrought perish eternally, then the atonement is not itself efficacious.^{vi}

A closer look at the biblical concepts of redemption, reconciliation, propitiation and substitution, however, demonstrate a wider view of the atoning death of Christ (see above). As Chafer notes,

The question at issue between the limited redemptionists and unlimited redemptionists is as much a question of limited or unlimited reconciliation, and limited or unlimited propitiation, as it is one of limited or unlimited redemption. Having made a careful study of these three words and the group of words which must be included with each, one can hardly deny that there is a twofold application of the truth represented by each.^{vii}

The Calvinist has misunderstood the separation between the historic accomplishments of salvation and how an individual obtains salvation. First, to teach that Christ died for all does not mean all will be saved, nor does it mean God has failed if some are lost. This does not question the sovereignty of God (obviously none can be lost if they are saved), but it shows a misunderstanding of the purposes of God by those who hold to limited atonement. Since God's desire is that none be lost (2 Pet. 3:9), He created a plan that provided for all, He offered it to all, and He wants all to participate in it. To say that God did not provide a universal salvation is to question His attribute of love. To say God saved all apart from their appropriate discharge of human responsibility is to question His integrity. To say God elected some to salvation, but not all is to question His justice. The necessity of human response fulfills our understanding of God's relationship to His creatures.

4. *Irresistible grace.* Calvinists teach that the grace of God is as immutable as the power of God so that man cannot resist it. They teach that since God of His own free will has chosen (elected) man and Christ has died for him, then man cannot resist the power of God that brings him to salvation. Accordingly, the *Westminster Larger Catechism* asks and answers,

Q. 67. *What is effectual calling?*

A. Effectual calling is the work of God's almighty power and grace, whereby (out of his free and especial love to his elect, and from nothing in them moving him thereunto) he doth in his accepted time invite and draw them to Jesus Christ, by his word and Spirit: savingly enlightening their minds, renewing and powerfully determining their wills, so as they (although in themselves dead in sin) are hereby made willing and able, freely to answer his call, and to accept and embrace the grace offered and conveyed therein.^{viii}

Since the Calvinists teach that salvation is the gift of God and man can do nothing to get it, he also can do nothing to resist it. However, the Calvinists claim it is not a passive human agent who involuntarily receives Christ. They teach that humans find Christ irresistible, i.e., they want to receive Him. But if the human is unable to resist, then human responsibility is taken away and man is but a passive agent. They claim,

Since it is the will of God that those whom He gave to His dear Son in eternity past should be saved, He will surely act in sovereign grace in such a way that the elect will find Christ irresistible. God does not *force* the elect to trust in His Son but rather, gives them life. The *dead* human spirit finds the dead spirit of Satan irresistible, and all *living* human spirits find the God of the living irresistible. Regeneration (the work of God) must precede true repentance and faith.^{ix}

The Calvinistic doctrine of irresistible grace is built on a misunderstanding of the doctrine of man. First, irresistible grace takes away initiative from man. The doctrine of conversion stands against irresistible grace. Salvation provided by Christ is obtained by both regeneration and conversion. To deny any human role in salvation is to formulate a doctrine which denies a substantial part of the biblical teaching on this matter. As Hodge notes,

The question whether man is active or passive in regeneration and whether regeneration is effected by the mediate or immediate influence of the Spirit must be answered in one way if regeneration includes conversion, and in another way if it be taken in its restricted sense. In the Bible, the distinction is generally preserved; *μετνοια* "repentance, change of mind, turning to God," i.e., conversion, is what man is called upon to do; *αναγεννησις*, regeneration is the act of God. God regenerates; the soul is regenerated.^x

The second argument against irresistible grace is a correct understanding of the means of obtaining salvation. The Bible is the instrument of Salvation and the Holy Spirit is the Agent of Salvation. Before a person comes to Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit is the Agent who works in his heart first by "common grace."

This means the Holy Spirit works in the heart of all men to give them an awareness of God. The Holy Spirit works through the conscience (Rom. 2:1) and through the revelation of God in nature (Rom. 1:18-28). When the sinner comes under the influence of the Word of God, the Holy Spirit is the Agent of "special grace." The Bible is the instrument that God uses to bring salvation to individuals. The Word of God is pictured as seed which is planted in the human heart. As the Word of God germinates, it enlightens him, and convicts him of his sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8).

The work of the Holy Spirit upon the Word of God in the human heart produces faith. Faith is not a gift through unconditional election. It comes in response to, and is produced by, the Word of God as a soul-winner implants the Scriptures into the human heart. This instrument becomes the basis of conviction and the impartation of a new nature (2 Pet. 1:4). As faith germinates, the person is able to reach out in the act of belief and receive Jesus Christ as his Saviour; hence, the whole process is a gift of God (Eph. 2:8-9).

The third argument against irresistible grace is that it is inconsistent with the nature of a man as reflected from the image and likeness of God. God cannot deny Himself by going contrary to the human nature in man which He created. A consistent God will not force salvation on a man against his will.

The fact that some individuals in Scripture turned their back on Christ is the fourth argument against irresistible grace. Israel resisted and Paul wept for them (Rom. 9:1; 10:1). The rich young ruler turned his back on Jesus Christ, and the book of Acts is filled with illustrations of those who rejected. Perhaps the most heartbreaking scene is King Agrippa, who said, "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian" (Acts 26:28). The Calvinist would say he was not among the elect. Yet the child of God would examine his heart to find out how he could get such a one saved.

This does not mean that God does not call certain people to salvation, but only that man may, for whatever reason, choose to resist the invitation of the Holy Spirit. A more accurate definition of the call of God as it relates to salvation is that of Mullins. He suggests,

Calling is the invitation of God to men to accept by faith the salvation in Christ. It is sent forth through the Bible, the preaching of the Gospel, and in many other ways. Nothing can be clearer from the teaching of Scripture than the fact that the call and invitation are universal and that there is a free offer of salvation to all who hear and repent and believe.^{xi}

5. *Perseverance of the saints.* Calvinists teach that the saints will persevere because their salvation is dependent upon God's irresistible grace which was granted to them because Christ died in atonement limited to the elect. They teach that since man has absolutely nothing to do with his salvation, he will "persevere" because the Saviour has declared that he has eternal life. As Spencer notes,

The logical conclusion of Calvinism is that since "salvation is of the LORD" and absolutely no part of it is dependent upon any *condition* found in the elect, but is wholly dependent upon the God who has *willed to save those whom He gave to His dear Son*, salvation can never be lost. The saints of God will surely persevere because He has given them His promise that no creature can take them away from Him (including themselves). We shall persevere because He wills to persevere!^{xii}

Most Bible believers who reject Calvinism claim to hold the fifth point which is the perseverance of the saints. They claim perseverance is eternal security. However, the doctrine of eternal security is not the same as the perseverance of the saints. Calvin implies in his doctrine that if one is saved, he will persevere because of the election of God. It is rooted in the nature of God.

The occasions of believers in Scripture who died outside of the fellowship of God questions the perseverance of the saints, i.e., they persevered until death. Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11) died in a state of rebellion. Other Christians who came to the Lord's table in Corinth with sin are described as, "many sleep" (1 Cor. 11:30). Also, there was a "sin unto death" (1 John 5:17-18), where certain sins led to the premature death of saints. The death of these believers outside of fellowship with Christ certainly does not take away eternal security, but it does question perseverance.

The Bible teaches that when believers are given eternal life, they have it forever. Rather than calling the doctrine the "perseverance of the saints," it should be called the doctrine of "preservation" or eternal security."

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- i. John Calvin, *Commentary on 1 John*, s. v.*
 - ii. Duane Edward Spencer, *TULIP: The Five Points of Calvinism in the Light of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 59.
 - iii. Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology: A Compendium Designed for the Use of Theological Students* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1970), 779.
 - iv. Henry Clarence Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 344.
 - v. Spencer, 71.
 - vi. John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 344.*
 - vii. Lewis Sperry Chafer, "For Whom Did Christ Die?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 137:548 (October-December 1980), 312.
 - viii. *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Question 67 (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, n.d.), 225-226.
 - ix. Spencer, 73.
 - x. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3: 4.
 - xi. Edgar Young Mullins, *The Christian Religion in Its Doctrinal Expression* (Philadelphia: Roger Williams Press, 1917), 365.
 - xii. Spencer, 75.