

# Calvinism and Evangelism

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Many people think that "Calvinist evangelist" is an oxymoron. What do you think? Can someone be seriously Calvinistic and at the same time seriously evangelistic? Does a belief in the absolute sovereignty of God take the wind out of the sails of evangelism?

We live in a day of gross ignorance with regard to sound theology. We should continually yearn for sound (wholesome, healthy) doctrine (1 Pet. 2:2; 2 Pet. 3:18). As we Christians learn and respond rightly to sound doctrine, we begin to think correctly, and our lives begin to demonstrate the resulting godly fruit. So how should a belief in Calvinism affect our belief in evangelism?

## What Is a Calvinist?

Well, what is a Calvinist? A Calvinist believes in *sola Scriptura*. That is to say, he believes that the Bible, exclusively, is God's very word. Therefore, to him the Bible alone is the final court of appeal on all matters of faith and practice.

Additionally, a Calvinist believes that fallen humans can be forgiven of sin and receive a just standing before a holy God, only through faith alone in the Son of God, Jesus Christ, alone. This saving faith comes as a gift of God's grace (Eph. 2:8-9). The Calvinist believes that since fallen humans are dead in their trespasses and sins, they will never have God's life in them unless he takes the initiative and quickens these spiritually dead persons. When God does sovereignly quicken (regenerate) an individual, he will respond to the gospel in repentance and faith and be saved (Eph. 2:1-10). A Calvinist realizes that the only thing he contributes to his salvation is his sin. Salvation is of the Lord from first to last.

These events all take place in time and space. But preceding them all is what God determined in eternity past. Ephesians 1:4 tells us that God chose (elected) certain ones in Christ before the foundation of the world.

The Calvinist believes that God's election is unconditional. That means that almighty God did not base his election upon any good thing (such as faith, good works, etc.) that he foresaw in those he chose. His election could never be based upon anything inherently attractive or good in fallen man. Every last person that the omniscient God foresaw had inherited Adam's guilt and corruption, was totally depraved, and was choosing to sin. Hence, every last one of them justly deserved God's holy wrath.

God's election is based solely upon his own grace, love, and good pleasure (Eph. 1:4-5; Matt. 11:21-27). If God chooses to show mercy to *some* members of the human race, all of whom justly deserve his judgment, that is *grace*, and that is his prerogative (Rom. 9:10-23)! Because it depends completely on God, the number of God's elect is certain, definite, and cannot be increased or decreased.

The elect are the Father's gift to Christ. Jesus himself vows that of all the Father gives to him, he will not lose any (John 6:39). Since the elect are sinners both by nature and by choice, and since God is a holy God who will not tolerate sin, but must judge it, a substitutionary atonement needed to be made in order to reconcile God to his elect. And so, the Calvinist does not believe that Jesus Christ died for all men indiscriminately, but that he laid down his life for the elect, his sheep, his church (John 10:11; 14-16; Eph. 5:25).

This explains why the Holy Spirit must do his regenerating work in a person before he is able to repent and believe in Christ. In his natural, fallen mind, man is hostile toward God (Rom. 8:7). Until the Holy Spirit sovereignly replaces a sinner's heart of stone with a heart of flesh, he will continue to be spiritually impervious to the gospel (Rom. 8:7; Eph. 2:1; Ezek. 36:24-27). The Calvinist believes that every last one of

those who were chosen in Christ before time will by the end of time be brought to saving faith and a vital relationship with God through the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ!

## **Does Calvinism Nullify Evangelism?**

At this point, the non-Calvinist infers that the impetus and urgency to proclaim the gospel is gone, or diminished at best. After all, if God knows who is going to be saved, and if he will save his elect no matter what, why waste our time evangelizing?

But it is important to recognize that the God of the Bible ordains not only the *end* (salvation) but also the *means* to the end (the proclamation of the gospel).

Jesus is the Good Shepherd. And through evangelism, he is calling his sheep to himself. He calls his own sheep by name, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice (John 10:3-4). They know his voice because, at God's appointed time, the Holy Spirit gives the elect ears to hear and hearts to understand (Matt. 13:23).

The ordinary means by which God gathers his people is through their hearing and believing the gospel message. In Romans 1:16, Paul declares that he is not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. In Romans 10:13, he states that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." Then he adds, "How then shall they call upon Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring glad tidings of good things!' " (Rom. 10:14-15 nasb).

Paul saw that it is the task of the church to proclaim the gospel. The exhortation Paul gives in Romans 10 is sandwiched between chapters 8-9 and 11. Take some time and reread those chapters. Note especially all they have to say about God's sovereign purposes in election.

Why am I, a Calvinist, so passionate about evangelism? Several reasons immediately spring to mind. First, my Lord Jesus Christ commands me to do so (Mark 16:15). Second, given that my chief duty (and delight) is to glorify God, I am moved by the fact that the Father is honored whenever the Son is honored. The supreme means of honoring the Father is preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ (John 5:22-23)! Third, I know that when the nonelect reject the gospel, as they are wont to do, preaching leaves them all the more without excuse when they receive the condemnation they justly deserve. And last, I know that God brings his elect to himself through the preaching of the gospel.

The apostle Paul said in 2 Timothy 2:10, "Therefore, I endure everything for the sake of the elect that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory." It is only when we recognize God's absolute sovereignty that we can be assured of results. God blesses the faithful dissemination of his word. He promises that his word will never return to him void or empty, but will accomplish the purpose for which he sent it (Isa. 55:11).

Does Calvinism take the wind out of the sails of evangelism? Properly understood and sincerely believed, it does exactly the opposite. Believing that God has a sovereign plan to bring all his elect to himself actually encourages evangelism. It gives confidence to us, God's people, to fulfill our God-given responsibility to spread his gospel. We know that our labor in the Lord is never in vain (1 Cor. 15:58)!

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