
John Calvin

1509-1564

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John Calvin was an early convert to the Reformation movement. Like others he began as a Roman Catholic, but broke with them because of his conviction that they erred in doctrine and practice. He was influenced by Luther, but broke from them also.

He consolidated a number of beliefs which originated from others, but gave a clarity and defense of a body of beliefs which resulted in “Calvinism” as a religious system of belief. His influence on John Knox took many of his theological ideas into Presbyterianism. He split from Catholicism and then from Luther, forging his own body of stern beliefs. However certain his teachings may seem, he had an underlying humility about his certitude. He said, “A perfect faith is nowhere to be found, so it follows that all of us are partly unbelievers.”

Calvin is given credit for five principle doctrines which are viewed as his. These center on the proposition that God has the ability to save every individual upon whom He chooses to show mercy, despite the failure or inability of the object of God’s grace. The principles are:

The total depravity of man: This circumstance exists as a consequence of the Fall of Adam, and the result is that every person is a slave to a sinful nature. Therefore men seek their own best interests, and are prone to be not only in a state of rebellion against God, but also disinclined to love God. The extent of this human failure is “total” or as widespread as humanity itself; hence the “total depravity” of mankind.

Unconditional election: God chooses whom He will save. His choice is independent of the faith of those saved, and the decision is made from eternity to either extend or withhold saving mercy thereby producing salvation or damnation according to God’s choice. Salvation is through

Christ, and God's wrath is justified toward the damned because of their sins against God.

Limited atonement: Christ provided a definite atonement in which He substituted Himself to receive the punishment on behalf of His elect. Christ suffered and died for an intended group of the saved, and the rest are left to be punished for sins. This has been described by Calvinists: "The atonement is sufficient for all and efficient for the elect." While all could be saved (because Christ's suffering was sufficient for all) God intends only to save some.

Irresistible grace: Saving grace is effectually directed on behalf of those whom God intends to save who are His elect. For those this grace of God overcomes any resistance caused by the Fall of Adam, and secures for the elect saving faith. When God intends to save an individual, that person will be saved. The mechanism for infusing this irresistible grace is the Holy Spirit which cannot be refused by the elect. While preaching the Gospel may be resisted by sinners, the elect cannot resist it.

Perseverance of the saints: Those who are the elect or saints cannot frustrate God's election by allowing their faith to fail. Those who are brought into communion with God will continue to be His elect until the end. Accordingly, those who fall away were never part of the saved elect in the first place.

Calvin declared, "We should ask God to increase our hope when it is small, awaken it when it is dormant, confirm it when it is wavering, strengthen it when it is weak, and raise it up when it is overthrown."

Calvin's statement in opposition to abortion seems as timely now as when he first framed it: "If it seems more horrible to kill a man in his own house, then in a field,...it ought surely to be deemed more atrocious to destroy a fetus in the womb before it has come to light."