

# DECONSTRUCTING CALVINISM

*A Biblical Analysis and Refutation*

Revised Edition

HUTSON SMELLEY



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*Deconstructing Calvinism*  
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by Hutson Smelley

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## CHAPTER 1

# CALVINISM ON TRIAL



Some years ago I was arguing at a federal courthouse, explaining in detail my client's position as to the relevant facts of the case. I started from the very beginning and tried to unfold for the judge as clearly as I could the entire complicated story that gave rise to a multi-million dollar lawsuit. The judge never looked up at me as he allowed me to talk for about five minutes and then interrupted, "Counsel, what's your evidence?" I made reference to some document or another and tried to get my story back on track. "Yes, counsel, I understand that's your client's story. All I am asking for you to do is point me to one piece of evidence." He was blunt, but he was right.

In our system of legal jurisprudence, merely alleging someone has wronged you will get you into the court system. But when the system is working as it is supposed to, you can never get to the jury without at least some evidence. In Texas, for example, if you do not have at least a "scintilla" of evidence, that is, something more than mere possibility or suspicion, your case will eventually get thrown out of court on the other party's "no evidence" motion. Having a mere scintilla of evidence will get you to the jury,

but then you face a much higher burden of proof. In most civil cases, the burden is a “preponderance of the evidence.” Stated another way, your burden is a “more likely than not” standard. But it is a little more complex than that.

When someone is sued each claim has distinct elements, and each element must be proven by a preponderance of the evidence. For example, if you are suing on a breach of contract, you have to prove that you have a contract, that a provision of the contract has been breached, and that the breach caused you damages. And to add another layer to it, there are rules as to how to go about proving your claim. Evidentiary rules determine whether a particular document or the testimony of a witness is admissible so that the jury can consider it as evidence. Rules like the hearsay rule, the best evidence rule, and the spousal privilege may keep documents or testimony from ever being considered by the jury. At the end of the closing arguments, the jury is instructed by the Court to consider only the admissible evidence and to determine whether each element of the claim is established by a preponderance of the evidence. In criminal cases, the standard is the much higher “beyond a reasonable doubt” standard.

You might ask, what does the courtroom have to do with Calvinism? The answer is that it provides a helpful analogy for the process that will be followed in this book for analyzing, evaluating, and ultimately, refuting Calvinism. In recent years, Calvinism has gained increasing popularity, especially finding a foothold in many evangelical seminaries and Bible colleges, which means that it will trickle into the churches as these young people enter the ministry. As I listen to the preaching on the radio and interact with other preachers and teachers of the Word of God, I am bombarded with strong Calvinist views. In many circles, its principles are treated as axiomatic rather than propositional. I intend to demonstrate that Calvinism cannot be established



from the Bible and, in fact, that there is not a single verse in the Bible that provides a scintilla of supporting evidence for Calvinism. This book is about getting beyond mere allegations, the philosophical conjectures, and our predispositions, and holding Calvinism to an evidentiary burden of proof. The reader is invited to sit as a juror and decide whether the Calvinists have met their burden of proof. Let us put Calvinism on trial.

### STARTING AT THE BEGINNING

Before you serve on a jury, both sides of the dispute get to *voir dire* you (the lawyers ask the potential jurors questions) to determine whether you might be biased and you have to take an oath to consider the evidence without bias. When we approach the Scripture, we need to come to it like an unbiased juror. Whether we want to admit it or not, we all have certain theological biases or commitments. Someone once said to me, "I don't care what the Bible says, I have made up my mind." May that not be our hearts.

I should mention here that I was an avid Calvinist for many years. I did not go to Bible college that way, but I came out that way. I made a challenge to myself several years ago to do an exercise lawyers often do before going to an oral argument before the Court. They call it (unfortunately) "playing devil's advocate." We try to make the very best argument we can for the other side's position so that we can uncover the weakness in our own position and sharpen our arguments. One verse at a time, that exercise unravelled Calvinism for me. If you are disposed to Calvinistic leanings, then I would challenge you here at the beginning to simply do the same exercise as we walk through the evidence. All of us, as best we can, need to set aside our predispositions and examine the evidence. We should be satisfied with the verdict of Scripture and accept it as our verdict as well.

One unfortunate facet of the present trend toward Calvinism is that there is often confusion about what it means to be a Calvinist. This book is about bringing clarity to the issues. This means that we must start with a clear understanding of precisely what Calvinism is. In legal terms, we must know each element of the claim. The approach will be very simple. I will first explain the basic principles commonly referred to as *Calvinism* with ample quotations from Calvinist writers so that the reader (juror) can be sure that what is presented is a balanced, fair view of the traditional Calvinist doctrines. I will then demonstrate that the most popular proof texts (i.e., Bible passages offered to establish a point) for this belief system do not actually provide evidentiary support for it, not even a scintilla. I will further demonstrate that the Calvinist doctrines are contradicted by the plain teaching of the Bible. I will strive to avoid being overly lengthy or technical, but the most important proof texts for Calvinism—what we might call the pillar or foundation verses that support the system—will be given a thorough consideration.

#### WHAT MATTERS MOST

The subject is vast and this book could indeed cover numerous points concerning Calvinism. For example, there could be additional chapters on the history of Calvinism and the history and tenets of Arminianism.<sup>1</sup> All of these issues are more than adequately addressed in other excellent books and it is simply not the purpose of this book to address them in any detail.<sup>2</sup> At the end of the day, whether Calvinism is Biblical is what matters most. If the Bible teaches Calvinism, then we should readily embrace it without question. As the authors of one Calvinist text have rightly observed:



The question of supreme importance is not how [Calvinism] came to be formulated in five points, or why it was named Calvinism, but rather *whether it is supported by Scripture*. The final court of appeal for determining the validity of any theological system is the inspired, authoritative Word of God. If Calvinism can be verified by clear and explicit declarations of Scripture, then it must be received by Christians; if not, it must be rejected.<sup>3</sup>



And if it is not Biblically supported, then Calvinism is no more than another philosophical system in the arena of human wisdom and ideas and we must reject it. Having explained the general approach and purpose of this book, several preliminary observations are in order.

#### PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS

First, we need to consider something about words. I remember during my criminal law course in the first semester of law school, when speaking to the professor after class, I said, “Professor, I read hundreds of pages of case law each day and then in class it seems like all we do is debate the meanings of certain words.” He answered, “Welcome to the practice of law.” Our system of jurisprudence turns on the meanings of the words we use to explain what the law is. Theology does also.

Is God sovereign? Most evangelicals would give a resounding “yes.” Are unsaved people depraved? Again, a resounding “yes.” Is there a group of redeemed people described as *elect*? And once again, “yes.” Probably most

Christians would agree with these basic principles, but that does not settle anything. Two people can affirm God's sovereignty, but they may mean different things by their common use of the word. Likewise, two people could agree that unsaved people are depraved, but do they mean the same thing by depraved? Man's definitions of terms like these are irrelevant and invalid unless they are in agreement with God's definitions. The following episode illustrates the point.

Two young ladies, about 15 years old, knocked on my door. They were very friendly, introduced themselves, and asked whether I had ever considered whether there might be further written revelation from God beyond the Old and New Testaments. We discussed that issue and then I asked them whether they believed Jesus Christ was deity, knowing that they did not. Of course, they quickly replied, "We do believe that Jesus is deity." Then I said, "Are you deity?" They were surprised I pressed the point. "Yes, we are deity," they said. And therein is the point. When I say Jesus is deity, I mean that Jesus is the "I am" of the Old Testament, Jehovah. (John 8:58) When they said Jesus was deity, they most certainly did not mean that he was Emmanuel, God with us.

So you see, the importance of how we define the words we use cannot be overstated. Those who are Calvinists, and those who are not, employ many of the same words to talk about theology, but do not mean the same thing. Calvinists often accuse non-Calvinists of not holding to the sovereignty of God. What they are actually saying is that non-Calvinists do not hold to the Calvinists' definition of the sovereignty of God. It remains to be seen whether their definition is in accord with the Holy Scriptures, but a further point should be made here. It is not enough to simply say that a word has a certain meaning—you have to be able to defend it from

the Bible. The following conversation from Lewis Carroll's classic *Through The Looking Glass* illustrates the point:



"I don't know what you mean by 'glory'," Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. "Of course you don't — till I tell you. I meant 'there's a nice knock-down argument for you!'"

"But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knock-down argument'," Alice objected.

"When *I* use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master — that's all."



Calvinists often give definitions to certain words rather dogmatically. Since the correct meanings of words are at the heart of the issues under consideration, I will quote from several representative Calvinist sources in the chapters that follow so that the reader can understand what the Calvinists mean by the words they use, and where appropriate, we will take a close examination of the Biblical use of key terms like *elect* to determine whether the Calvinists

have rightly defined the terms or, instead, have simply employed a “Humpty Dumpty” argument.

One of my very best Bible college professors was fond of saying that theology is about words and names. I addressed the issue of words above, but some comments about names are also appropriate. The issue at hand is what saith God, not what saith Calvin or anyone else. This is not to take away from the value of learning from the Christians that came before us, but my observation is that culturally in the United States we too often allow our thinking to be personality driven and this problem has surfaced in evangelicalism as well. Through books, radio, television, and conferences, certain people have achieved a sort of elevated “hero” status among many evangelicals. They are inseparably identified with certain theological viewpoints and for many people these heros are the final authority. I would further point out that we travel a foolish road when we listen primarily to one voice. This book is not about vindicating any particular historical perspective or any particular person’s viewpoint, but seeking to understand whether the Calvinists’ truth claims are scriptural or not.

A third preliminary observation is that not all Calvinists hold identical beliefs. Just as the word Baptist is worn by a diversity of groups, with some similarities but many differences, so too it is the case that not all Calvinists believe exactly the same things. Because it is beyond the scope of this book to try to address all of these differences, this book focuses on those principles that would be considered by most Calvinists to be the primary, traditional tenets of the system, even if they do not individually accept all of these traditional tenets. For this reason, this book footnotes references to several Calvinist texts. There will be no attempt at being exhaustive. Rather, the goal is to review representative examples of sources explaining the traditional tenets of Calvinism so that the definitions and principles can be

provided from the pens of the Calvinists themselves. The reader is encouraged to independently review the cited texts.

A fourth point, which needs to be stressed here at the outset, is that the author will strive to maintain a Christian tone throughout this book. This book is written for edification. Christians should be able to discuss these points, write about them, and even constructively disagree about them, without engaging in sinful (unloving or prideful) conduct or *ad hominem* arguments.

Fifthly, the author holds without apology to the following orthodox Christian beliefs about the Bible: (1) The Bible was superintended by God through the pens of human authors and is inerrant in the original autographs; (2) The canon of Scriptures was completed with the Revelation, God having started in Genesis and finished in the Revelation with God and man dwelling together; (3) The Bible alone is our authoritative guide for all issues of life and godliness, and is wholly sufficient for this purpose; (4) The Bible should be interpreted in its plain, normal sense; (5) In the Bible, God has spoken with clarity. The clarity of Scripture is that quality of the Biblical text that, as God's communicative act, ensures its meaning is accessible to all who come to it in faith.<sup>4</sup> For all of these reasons, the answers to the questions raised by Calvinism are knowable and they are to be found in the Bible.

And sixth is the idea that one is either a Calvinist or an Arminian. That is simply not the case. This book is not about vindicating Arminianism. Many people have the misconception that there are only two camps. Moreover, some Calvinist texts foster this idea by offering and refuting the Arminian responses to the various points of Calvinism without mentioning other alternatives. As I will endeavor to demonstrate, it is possible to reject both extremes and take something of a middle ground approach between the two.

Let us be Biblicists first. “If the Bible is God’s Word, and the evidence says it is, then once we line our thinking up with the thinking of the Bible, our positions become Bible positions and not opinions.”<sup>5</sup>

#### THEOLOGY, REASON AND THE HERMENEUTICAL CIRCLE

The Bible not only provides information about God, but is absolute truth and repeatedly emphasizes the “truth” nature of its information over against all competing claims. In Psalm 25:5, David wrote: “Lead me in thy *truth*, and teach me: for thou *art* the God of my salvation; on thee do I wait all the day.” And again in the tenth verse of the same Psalm: “All the paths of the LORD are mercy and *truth* unto such as keep his covenant and his testimonies.” Our God is called the “Lord God of *truth*” in Psalm 31:5. And in Psalm 33:4, we read that “all his works are done in *truth*.” God is said in Psalm 51:6 to “desire *truth* in the inward parts” of man. Moreover, God’s “law is the *truth*” (Psalm 119:142), God’s “commandments are *truth*” (Psalm 119:151), and “his *truth* endureth to all generations.” (Psalm 100:5) Paul would write in his letter to Timothy that God “will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the *truth*.” (1 Timothy 2:4) Paul described certain corrupt men as being “destitute of the *truth*.” (1 Timothy 6:5) It is not surprising that the Son of God claimed to be “the *truth*.” (John 14:6) And what we know about “the *truth*,” we learn by “rightly dividing the word of *truth*.” (2 Timothy 2:15)

In view of this, the rules of logic and sound deductive reasoning apply to truth claims about God.<sup>6</sup> As I already indicated, I take it as axiomatic that in the Bible God intended to communicate with clarity. God intended that we be able to understand that which He communicated about Himself, and that means that He intended that we be able to determine the truth as He revealed it. This does not mean that God has



answered all of our questions in the Bible or that we can fully comprehend God or even that we will not grapple with certain passages, but it does mean that where He has spoken, He has not done so in logically irreconcilable contradictions.

Sound deductive reasoning is particularly important when we talk about the *inferences* we draw from the Bible that are not explicitly stated. Let me clarify about the distinction I am drawing here. Many truths are Scripturally explicit. For instance, we do not merely infer that God is love; we have the explicit statements in 1 John that “God is love.” On the other hand, many evangelicals *infer* that certain Old Testament references to the “angel of the Lord” are, in fact, references to the pre-incarnate Christ, but we do not have an *explicit* passage that says something like “the angel of the Lord is Jesus.” When we make our inferences, our footing relies upon the validity and soundness of our deductive reasoning.<sup>7</sup> Something I intend to demonstrate in this book is that Calvinism is completely inferential.

When it comes to systematizing theology, we are not only tasked with scrutinizing our deductive reasoning, but we must test our inferences against the balance of Scripture. As the authors of *Living By the Book* explain: “By comparison we compare Scripture with Scripture. And that offers a great safety net, because the greatest interpreter of Scripture is Scripture itself... Remember, although we have about forty different human authors, the sixty-six books are ultimately the result of one primary Author, the Holy Spirit, who coordinated the entire message. His Book is integrated. It hangs together.”<sup>8</sup> Invalid and unsound deductive arguments typically result in a truth claim that contradicts a clear passage of Scripture. When we find that our inferences have led us to a logical contradiction within the Bible, then we are compelled to set aside our thinking and accept the witness of the Bible.

To maintain as true a theological system that irreconcilably contradicts any verse of Scripture calls into question

(1) the inerrancy of the Bible because now the Bible contradicts itself and (2) the clarity of the Bible because the rules of logic must be abandoned in order to “comprehend” the truths taught in the Bible. And we cannot gloss over contradictions by simply calling them a “tension” or “two horns of a dilemma” and citing the incomprehensibility of God since we are talking about a Bible that God says is comprehensible. While it is certainly the case that we cannot expect to fully comprehend God (or even come close), we can and should seek to understand what God has intentionally revealed about Himself in His Word. And if our theology leads us to conclude that the Bible contains logically irreconcilable contradictions, we need to re-examine our theology and not play games with His Word.

In his soteriology treatise, David Anderson articulates how our systematic theology must be consistent with our Biblical theology in what he calls the *hermeneutical circle*:



It is very important in our study of “salvation” to use our biblical theology to undergird our systematic theology. If we do not, we will be guilty of imposing our theological views upon the text or letting our systematic theology override our biblical theology. In good exegesis, the parts must add up to the whole, and then the whole will help us understand the parts (this is called the hermeneutical circle). But if one part is out of sync with the whole, then our understanding of the whole is faulty. We must be ever ready to adjust our understanding of the whole to correspond and complement our understanding of the parts, not vice-versa.<sup>9</sup>



Deductive reasoning should undergird our attempts to systematize theology, but we must always check ourselves against the hermeneutical circle. Jesus admonished those who tested him on issues like divorce or plucking an ear of corn on the Sabbath to consider whether their theological position comported logically with other Scriptures. Jesus would say, “have ye not read....” Jesus affirmed that what was written in the Old Testament was comprehensible and that their truth claims should be tested against it for logical consistency. I intend to demonstrate in this book that Calvinism sweeps aside valid, sound deductive reasoning to prop up a theological system that does not “correspond and complement our understanding of the parts.” Indeed, if we scrutinize the proof texts as unbiased jurors, we will find that they do not even amount to a scintilla of evidence.

## CHAPTER 2

# SEEING THE BIG PICTURE



I majored in mathematics as an undergraduate at the University of Houston. As it turns out, there are numerous different fields of study within mathematics such as algebra, geometry, calculus, number theory, game theory, numerical analysis, and so forth. I always excelled at mathematics, but for a long time, each of these different areas seemed separate and distinct in my mind from the others. At some point just before my senior year in the program, it was as if the light bulb finally turned on. I quickly began to see the big picture, that is, how the various parts all fit together on one canvas. To come to a deeper appreciation of mathematics requires the big picture view of how it all fits together.

Of course, seeing the big picture—how all the various parts fit together and relate—goes far beyond mathematics. In so many areas of life, it is not until we see the big picture that we begin to really understand. Studying theology is the same way. Calvinism is not just about election or depravity, but is a system of thought with five core intertwined principles, and they relate to many of the other parts, that is, the other truths of Scripture. Before I attempt to analyze and refute any of the five principles, it is important to first

get a big picture snapshot. I will also introduce the notion of the decrees of God, a doctrine that is related to Calvinism and will serve to further enlarge our big picture view of Calvinism. Once we have the forest in view, we will be able to more effectively study the trees.

#### FIVE TULIP PRINCIPLES

Often the traditional core principles of Calvinism are referred to with the acronym, TULIP. Some Calvinists take issue with the use of TULIP, but the terminology is so popular that most people embrace it, at least for discussion purposes. And because the use of the acronym is so widespread, it will also be used here for discussion purposes. The “T” stands for *total depravity*, the “U” for *unconditional election*, the “L” for *limited atonement*, the “I” for *irresistible grace*, and the “P” for *perseverance of the saints*. Our analysis of whether the Calvinist teachings are Biblically sound can only be as good as the definitions we begin with. In this introductory chapter, we will only quote selected representative examples from Calvinists as to what they mean by the use of these phrases. The purpose at this point is only to introduce the principles. In the subsequent chapters, we shall quote additional Calvinist sources and consider their primary proof texts, and ultimately, whether the principles are Biblically supported.

#### TOTAL DEPRAVITY

Of *total depravity*, the Westminster Confession of Faith states as follows: “Man, by his fall into a state of sin, hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation: so as, a natural man, being altogether averse from that good, and dead in sin, is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself

thereunto.”<sup>10</sup> One modern Calvinist text explains what is meant by total depravity:



When Calvinists speak of man as being totally depraved, they mean that man’s nature is corrupt, perverse, and sinful throughout. The adjective “total” does not mean that each sinner is as totally or completely corrupt in his actions and thoughts as it is possible for him to be. Instead, the word “total” is used to indicate that the *whole* of man’s being has been affected by sin. The corruption extends to *every part* of man, his body and soul; sin has affected all (the totality) of man’s faculties—his mind, his will, etc.

As a result of this inborn corruption, the natural man is totally unable to do anything spiritually good; thus, Calvinists speak of man’s “total inability.” The inability intended by this terminology is *spiritual inability*; it means that the sinner is so spiritually bankrupt that *he can do nothing pertaining to his salvation*.<sup>11</sup>



This means that a lost person is not capable, in and of himself, of placing faith in Jesus Christ, which is further clarified by the statement below:



Man is *totally depraved* in the sense that everything about his nature is in rebellion against God. Man

is loyal to the god of darkness and loves darkness rather than The Light. His will is, therefore, not at all “free.” It is bound by the flesh to the prince of darkness grim. *Total depravity* means that man, of his own “free will,” will never make a decision for Christ.<sup>12</sup>



Indeed, we will see in chapter 4 that Calvinists teach that an unsaved man is incapable of doing anything pleasing to God, cannot understand anything about God, and cannot receive the gift of salvation apart from God first changing him (through regeneration) and gifting him with faith.

Another term used in connection with the human condition of *total depravity* is *reprobation*; a person that is totally depraved could also be called *reprobate* if that person is not predetermined by God to be saved. “Reprobation is the sovereign decision of God before creation to pass over some persons, in sorrow deciding not to save them, and to punish them for their sins, and thereby manifest his justice.”<sup>13</sup> This last definition relates *total depravity* to *unconditional election*, and will be clarified as we consider the latter concept. In summary, that lost man is *totally depraved* means that his spiritual condition is such that he lacks the capacity to believe the gospel until God first enables him to believe. This raises several questions about TULIP such as how and when God enables a person to believe, and whether God does so for all people, or only a sub-part of humanity, and if only for a sub-part of humanity, then why.

#### UNCONDITIONAL ELECTION

The “U” in TULIP stands for *unconditional election*. Grudem explains: “Election is an act of God before cre-

ation in which he chooses some people to be saved, not on account of any foreseen merit in them, but only because of his sovereign good pleasure.”<sup>14</sup> “The doctrine of election declares that God, before the foundation of the world, chose certain individuals from among the fallen members of Adam’s race to be the objects of His undeserved favor. These, and these only, He purposed to save.”<sup>15</sup> Similarly, the Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689 states: “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.” Because of their *total depravity*, men need to be regenerated in order to believe, and God has unconditionally elected those He will regenerate:



Election is grounded entirely in the free will of God and in His purpose for those whom He chose “in Christ Jesus” before the foundation of the world. His foreknowledge is based upon His purpose, for His purpose is the manifestation of His sovereign will. Since man is incapable of giving himself life, opening his own eyes, or teaching himself spiritual truth, God must elect to act on a man’s behalf. The work of regeneration, therefore, must precede faith and repentance and is the work of God. He must “open the heart” and cause His elect “to will and do” that which is pleasing to Him, otherwise none would believe.<sup>16</sup>





As Sproul explains, in the Calvinist system, the related term *predestination* refers to both *unconditional election* and *reprobation* together:



In summary we may define *predestination* broadly as follows: From all eternity God decided to save some members of the human race and to let the rest of the human race perish. God made a choice—he chose some individuals to be saved unto everlasting blessedness in heaven, and he chose others to pass over, allowing them to suffer the consequences of their sins, eternal punishment in hell.<sup>17</sup>



Thus, traditional Calvinism teaches that all men are in a fallen condition such that they are not capable of believing the gospel. However, before creation and for His own purposes and out of His love, God chose some for salvation, enabling them to believe the gospel and passing over everyone else (i.e., not enabling them, leaving them totally depraved forever). Those God chose for salvation are called the *elect*.

#### LIMITED ATONEMENT

The “L” in TULIP stands for *limited atonement* and sometimes goes by other names such as *particular redemption*. By this term, the Calvinists mean that Christ’s shed blood on the cross was only for the elect and fully secured their salvation:



Historical or mainline Calvinism has consistently maintained that Christ's redeeming work was definite in *design* and *accomplishment*—that it was intended to render complete satisfaction for certain specified sinners, and that it actually secured salvation for these individuals and no one else. The salvation which Christ earned for His people includes everything involved in bringing them into a right relationship with God, including the gifts of faith and repentance. Christ did not die simply to make it possible for God to pardon sinners. Neither does God leave it up to sinners to decide whether or not Christ's work will be effective. On the contrary, all for whom Christ sacrificed Himself will be saved infallibly. Redemption, therefore, was designed to bring to pass God's purpose of election.<sup>18</sup>



Similarly, Spencer summarizes this doctrine, distinguishing between the *efficiency* and *sufficiency* of the death Christ died:



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.<sup>19</sup>



Putting together what we have seen so far from the Calvinists' point of view, apart from God, mankind is totally depraved, unable to do any spiritual good, including trusting Jesus. To remedy this, before the foundation of the world, certain individuals (i.e., the elect) were chosen by God to be enabled to believe, and for these and only these persons, Jesus died on the cross.

We should note that it is quite common for people to identify themselves as Calvinists but not hold to *limited atonement*. Such individuals are often referred to as *four point Calvinists*—they hold to TUIP, not TULIP, although anyone who only believes three or four points of TULIP Calvinism could be referred to as a three point Calvinist or four point Calvinist, as the case may be. In his book on limited atonement, four point Calvinist Robert Lightner explains the practical importance of this doctrine on our personal evangelism and whether we can preach with integrity to people that Christ died for their sins:



This subject is of paramount importance to the ambassador for Christ. Unless Christ died for all men, the message of God's love and Christ's death must be given with tongue in cheek and with some reservation, because some may hear who are really not to be numbered among those whom God loved and for whom Christ died. Consistency and honesty would demand that the one who believes in limited

atonement refrain from proclaiming God's universal offer of the good news of God's love and grace in Christ to all men indiscriminately, since in that view God did not extend grace to all nor did Christ die for all. Therefore, to tell all men that these things are true and that salvation is available for them is to speak that which is not true if the limited view be accepted.<sup>20</sup>



Obviously, Calvinism raises all kinds of practical and relevant questions that should not be casually ignored.

In fairness, the author would further point out that, notwithstanding the quote above, many Calvinists holding to *limited atonement* do evangelize, although it can also be said that others do not. Non-Calvinists often raise the question in response to Calvinism, "Why evangelize?" The question is a good one. Most Calvinists would say that they evangelize because God commands them to, and it is not their place to be concerned with who in their audience is elect or not. At the other extreme, some Calvinists, often referred as hyper-Calvinists, refuse to evangelize, participate in missions, or in extreme cases, even invite people to church. Obviously, it makes a difference what you believe.

#### IRRESISTIBLE GRACE

The fourth tenet of TULIP Calvinism, represented by the "I," is *irresistible grace*. Grudem defines *regeneration* as "a secret act of God in which he imparts new spiritual life to us. This is sometimes called 'being born again' (using language from John 3:3-8)."<sup>21</sup> In turn, the regenerated or born again person will be irresistibly drawn to God:



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.<sup>22</sup>



Thus, for God's elect, there is a point in time when He regenerates them so that they are enabled to believe and are irresistibly drawn to Christ. By this means, God overcomes their total depravity for them in order to fulfill His purpose that they would be saved; God issues an inward call so that they can and will respond to the outward call, the gospel:



The *gospel invitation extends a call* to salvation to every one who hears its message. It invites all men without distinction to drink freely of the water of life and live. It promises salvation to all who repent and believe. But this outward general call, extended to the elect and nonelect alike, will not bring sinners to Christ. Why? Because men are by nature dead in sin and are under its power. They are of themselves unable and unwilling to forsake their evil ways and to turn to Christ for mercy. Consequently, the unregenerate will not respond to the gospel call to repen-

tance and faith. No amount of external threatenings or promises will cause blind, deaf, dead, rebellious sinners to bow before Christ as Lord and to look to Him alone for salvation. Such an act of faith and submission is contrary to the lost man's nature.<sup>23</sup>



Because the sinner is totally helpless to contribute anything to his salvation, God must do it all. God the Holy Spirit enables faith by changing a person's heart condition before salvation and the changed sinner will believe the gospel:



Therefore, the *Holy Spirit*, in order to bring God's elect to salvation, extends to them *a special inward call* in addition to the outward call contained in the gospel message. Through this special call, the Holy Spirit performs a work of grace within the sinner, which inevitably brings him to faith in Christ. The inward change wrought in the elect sinner enables him to understand and believe spiritual truth; in the spiritual realm, he is given the seeing eye and the hearing ear. The Spirit creates within him a new heart or a new nature. This is accomplished through regeneration or the new birth by which the sinner is made a child of God and is given spiritual life. His will is renewed through this process, so that the sinner spontaneously comes to Christ of his own free choice. Because he is given a new nature so that he loves righteousness, and because his mind is enlightened so that he understands and believes the biblical gospel, the renewed sinner freely and willingly turns to Christ as Lord and Savior. Thus, the

once dead sinner is drawn to Christ by the inward, supernatural call of the Spirit, who through regeneration makes him alive and creates faith and repentance within him.<sup>24</sup>



Because this special “inward call of the Spirit never fails to result in the conversion of those to whom it is made” it is often referred to by Calvinists as being “efficacious,” “invincible,” or “irresistible.”<sup>25</sup>

#### PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS

Finally, the “P” in TULIP stands for the *perseverance of the saints*, typically seen as a natural conclusion of the other four principles:



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!<sup>26</sup>



Similarly, Grudem defines *perseverance*: “The perseverance of the saints means that all those who are truly born

again will be kept by God's power and will persevere as Christians until the end of their lives, and that only those who persevere until the end have been truly born again."<sup>27</sup> While some Calvinists simply define this doctrine in terms of eternal security, for others the doctrine means much more, namely a life of fruitfulness and works consistent with one's position in Christ. Sproul says it is eternal security but his explanation reveals there is more to it than that since the believer cannot experience a "final apostasy":



A simple way to remember the essence of the doctrine of perseverance is to learn this ditty: "If we have it, we never lose it. If we lose it, we never had it." This is a "cute" way of affirming that full and final apostasy is never the lot of the Christian. Another shorthand expression of this doctrine is the aphorism "Once saved, always saved." This is sometimes called eternal security, since it calls attention to the enduring power of the salvation wrought for us and in us by the work of Christ.<sup>28</sup>



The proof of whether one has stayed in the faith or fallen into a full and final apostasy typically comes down to a life of works vindicating one's position in Christ. Strong explains the doctrine in terms of "well-doing" and "constant activity":



The Scriptures declare that, in virtue of the original purpose and continuous operation of God, all who



are united to Christ by faith will infallibly continue in a state of grace and will finally attain to everlasting life. This voluntary continuance, on the part of the Christian, in faith and well-doing we call perseverance. Perseverance is, therefore, the human side or aspect of that spiritual process which, as viewed from the divine side, we call sanctification. It is not a mere natural consequence of conversion, but involves a constant activity of the human will from the moment of conversion to the end of life.<sup>29</sup>



Accordingly, the perceived absence of works or presence of continued sin might call a person's salvation into question. To be absolutely clear, this author is in full agreement with eternal security, but for many Calvinists the doctrine of perseverance of the saints goes beyond eternal security and encompasses what often goes under the phrase *lordship salvation*.

#### ETERNAL DECREES OF GOD

In the pages that follow, I will devote a chapter to each of the foregoing TULIP principles, expanding the discussion of how Calvinists define these principles and inquiring whether their proof texts actually support the principles. In addition, we will also consider the doctrine often referred to as the *eternal decrees of God*. Spencer summarizes the doctrine this way: "Therefore, whatever comes to pass in any part of creation, at any time in history, does so because the omniscient God knew it as a possibility, willed it as a reality by His omnipotence, and established it in His divine plan or purpose."<sup>30</sup> Simply put, God predetermined every event without exception, including every persons' thoughts,

words, and actions. Obviously, if this is true, then our eternal destinies were determined before time began. For this reason, and because many Calvinist writers reference or rely upon the *eternal decrees of God*, we will begin by exploring what Reformed theologians call the *eternal decrees of God* and whether the doctrine is Biblically supported, and then move on to addressing TULIP.