

**CALVINISM:  
DETRIMENTAL OR DECISIVE  
TO WORLD MISSIONS?**

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by

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*Excellent paper.  
Good work!*

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*A -*

## **CALVINISM: DETRIMENTAL OR DECISIVE TO WORLD MISSIONS?**

When a Christian takes to himself the title "Calvinist," he opens himself up to indictments of many kinds, inevitable alienation from some (or many) Christian brethren and to confusion on all sides. Of course, this is true of the adoption of all labels and identifying classifications in varying degrees; but these effects are particularly noticeable with those who choose to call themselves Calvinists. In like fashion, the word "Calvinism" breeds much reaction. In fact it is often difficult to attach fully comprehensive definitions to any words suffixed by "ism." However, we understand Calvinism to mean strictly the system of Biblical soteriology outlined by the five famous points of the Synod of Dort: total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement (which might be better termed "particular redemption"), irresistible grace, and the perseverance of the saints. In addition to a distinct soteriology, most Calvinists also hold to varying ecclesiologies, eschatologies, and missiologies, all of which will hopefully be founded solely in Scripture. But we are concerned primarily with the effect of Calvinistic soteriology on missiology. Hence, we ask the question, "Is Calvinism detrimental or decisive to the expansion of Biblically Christian world missions? The question is answered by considering several aspects of Calvinism.

## CALVINISM AS DEVELOPMENTAL

Consider the following logic: The Wright brothers' 1903 Aeroplane was not capable of achieving orbit around the earth. Therefore, the 1903 plane was an invalid beginning for space flight. Finally, space flight cannot possibly be the direct descendent and heir of the Wright brothers' pioneering endeavors. Does there seem to be some flaw in this reasoning? It is simply that this line of thinking gives no place to the evolution of an idea. The Wrights were not looking 200 miles up--only 200 feet up. They worked with basic and heretofore undiscovered aeronautical engineering. Others in later years would increase the altitude, velocity, acceleration and longevity of mechanical flight, but without the 1903 Wright Aeroplane, there would probably have not been a 1969 Apollo proper on the moon.

And so why do we expect the full and immediate flowering of practical application among 16th and 17th century Reformation Theologians? Is it any more reasonable than to expect space flight from the first infant aeroplane? The early Calvinists had only recently rediscovered even justification by faith. They had not time to correctly systematize all truth and all Scripture. They had their hands full just trying to return the Church to the authority of the Bible (a feat most American evangelicals today seem to take for granted). So when in 1600, Calvinists perhaps didn't take their theology and with it row their ships to all islands of the earth, let us understand that their burden in

those days was the defense of the pure gospel in the face of Romanism, English ritualism, and dead orthodoxy on all sides--and all within the camp of "Christendom." This is not to defend fatalism nor complacency, however. They are obviously unbiblical, and are the fruit of the flesh. Let us simply give Calvinism time to develop, to be received as correct doctrine, and then to evaluate it. In his book The Puritan Hope, Iain Murray shows that there were in fact many evangelicals in the period 1500-1900 who had great zeal for evangelism and missions and were strict Calvinists. It is hard to ignore these men and the impact they made.

#### **CALVINISM AS BIBLICAL**

Theology seems to be one of the more dialogically volatile of the sciences. And within theology, the locus of soteriology appears to be surrounded by discussion which runs particularly hot. There just simply don't seem to be informed theologians who really have no opinion one way or the other when it comes to the matter of how a man can be rescued from his sinful state. In history, prominent figures have poked their heads above the clouds and been noted and remembered for their views and controversies over soteriology: Paul and the Judaizers, Augustine and Pelagius, Luther and Eck, Perkins and Arminius, Whitefield and Wesley. It seems especially hard to award the victor's wreath in the debates in history over soteriology. Perhaps that, among

other reasons, is why it is hard to answer the question, "is Calvinism detrimental or decisive to world missions?" It is in one sense a highly subjective question (though by no means impractical or irrelevant) since we can turn to no comprehensive council or final reckoning on the matter. Indeed, there still continues lively discussion within evangelicalism as to what "correct" or "reasonably Biblical" Calvinism really is. There are both hard-line and more passively committed "four-pointers;" there are issue-centered, argumentative "five-pointers" (who seem more interested in the "physics" of Calvinism, rather than the "nuclear power" it generates), and those whose sovereignty of God grounded ministry activity is so furious that the "five points" are rarely articulated from their lips. And there are those (shall we call them "six-pointers?"), who seem to practice a distinctively noxious form of fatalism. The spectrum on which to take a stand seems to make Dortian Calvinism in its pure form seem rather middle of the road--and we in fact are considering this form to be the most closely derived soteriology from Scripture.

If it can be shown (and many feel it has been countless times, while many others feel that the proofs offered are merely "synthetic" rather than "organic") that Dortian Calvinism represents most closely what the Holy Spirit has revealed in Scripture, then it of necessity must be conducive to, binding upon, and

resultant in a Biblical missiology. While antinomies do exist in Scripture, contradictions do not. The question at hand would be answered. To adequately answer our "detrimental or decisive" inquiry would entail, therefore, a full exploration of whether the Bible supports the five point of Calvinism. This, unfortunately, is a task in itself beyond the scope of this paper and of the class to which it is presented. However, the following references are submitted for reflection by the reader in the hope that they might at least show the reasonableness of considering Calvinism:

Mark 7:21-23  
Colossians 2:13  
Philippians 2:13  
Acts 13:48  
John 10:11, 14, 15  
John 5:21  
Romans 9:16  
I Thessalonians 5:23, 24  
Jude 1

I have heard the practice of proof-texting sneered at by some opponents of Calvinism. I do not know why. How else can something be shown to be Biblical without referring to contextual Bible verses which teach it? Again, perhaps at least these few of the many references available make Calvinism worthy of some positive consideration. Now, what about the methodologies and practices carried on by, let's say, modern Calvinists? Are they Biblical, assuming the soteriology underpinning them is? It is not difficult to prove the Biblical validity of a zealous, bold

and sober evangelism and expansion of the church. Does Dortian Calvinism make one excited or complacent towards the spread of Christianity? Do these Calvinists sit in their churches and entertain themselves with beautiful theological engineering, or do they spend precious time witnessing for Christ, praying for the planting of new churches, and in fact going to other lands for Christ? Are these not the bottom-line questions? Beyond the question of Biblicity (which we accept) what do history, observation, and personal testimony tell us? They seem to all agree that there have been and are many Dortian Calvinists who practice the latter of the above options. Sure there are exceptions, although again, final evaluation of performance in spiritual matters is difficult and ultimately belongs to the Lord himself.

An examination is now needed of some of the professed practical implications of Calvinism.

#### **CALVINISM AS PERSPECTIVE**

Al Martin, a pastor from Essex Fells, New Jersey, has written a delightful little book entitled The Practical Implications of Calvinism. He is himself a Dortian Calvinist and practices a full schedule of pastoral activity. In the book, Martin relates two emphases of Calvinism as profoundly practical, apparently Biblical, and therefore, seemingly conducive to a Biblical view of missions. The experience of God, and the power of saving

religion are said here to be the heart of Biblical Calvinism. Martin says (p.23),

What is the personal practical effect of the confession of Calvinism in the life of a man? If he sees God it will break him, and if he understands that God saves sinners, it will make him a trustful, prayerful, watchful person pursuing practical godliness. Is that what these doctrines are doing for you right where you sit . . .? Some perhaps, to whom these things are new have feared them and said, "Oh that stuff will just lead to spiritual barrenness and dryness." It is not so! For these are the truths of God's word; I am convinced they are. In their totality, they are the truth which is according to godliness, the truth that sanctifies us in answer to the prayer of our great High Priest. May God grant that the truth will do that in you and in me!

Martin has well summarized the Calvinist view of the Christian life and, therefore, laid the basis for a Calvinistic philosophy of ministry. Of first importance is the Calvinist's view of the experience of God. Experiencing the purely sovereign grace of God and the "display of the Lord as the king," will bring first a deep experiential acquaintance with grace and forgiveness as necessary. Finally the experience of God from the Calvinist's view emphasizes utter resignation before God. According to Martin, the Biblical Calvinist sees the conversion experience as something a bit more than just saying "I'm sorry, Jesus, I 'accept' you." Salvation entails nothing short of a Holy Spirit-produced clear perception of the God of Scripture and man's total sinfulness before Him. Again, Martin says (p. 9),

I say by way of application, do not talk about being a Calvinist simply because your itch for logical consistency has been relieved by Calvinism's theological



system. Have you seen God? Have you been brought near to Him? That is the issue. I remind you of the words of B. B. Warfield: "A Calvinist is a man who has seen God." The expression [therefore], a proud Calvinist, is a misnomer.

What does this perspective do for and to missionaries? First, let's mention the second of Calvinism's proper emphases, the true power of saving religion. Calvinistic soteriology in concept is very simple: God saves sinners. The man who truly believes this, says Martin, will be led to regular, honest self-examination. There is no playing hide-and-seek games with a sovereign God. The ever-present remembrance of the total need of grace from God, as well as mercy, compels the saint to watch his heart, and to be honest with God of his own state, both at salvation and after.

The power of saving religion also will lead to the "sane, biblical pursuit of practical godliness." This involves in general, a "holy watchfulness, and distrust of oneself, a consistent prayerfulness, and a trustful dependence on God to fulfill all that He has purposed." Without these things, a man isn't really a Calvinist, regardless of his official doctrinal stand.

Do these emphases have effect on a missions philosophy? They certainly should! If the missionary "loses" his burden or it is defeated in discouragement, it cannot be the fault of Calvinism or any of its points. If the Christian is complacent about evangelism, much less world missions, it is not the fault of Calvinism. Calvinism should naturally be spanning evangelism

and missions. The fact that Christ has secured an elect, a beloved flock for Himself out of the dying (and dead) masses, should motivate people to proclaim salvation as much as possible, and to reach as many for Christ as they can in their lifetimes. If Christ has legally paid for and vicariously suffered for the sins of a specific number less than that of the whole world, does this inhibit universal proclamation of the good news? Who knows whom that number includes? More encouraging, in fact, is the knowledge that God does have a specific elect in the world (I Kings 19:9-21), and that missionary efforts will discover God's elect, and their success is not left to chance, or to the fleeting choice of man (or dependent on some decision of man to cooperate with God on a proposition basis).

When discouragement for missionaries (and all witnessing Christians) and for churches comes, what can be of greater encouragement than the simple maxim that our loving God and Christ is in control, and is in fact guiding all events to His appointed end? When Christ was commissioning the twelve for gospel ministry (Mark 6:7-11; Matthew 10:1, 9-14; Luke 9:1, 3-5), He told them that if any place would not receive them or listen to them, they were to "shake off the dust from the soles of your feet for a testimony against them." Rejection of the gospel by many is inevitable, but not by chance. It too is in the plan of the Calvinists' God.

## CALVINISM AS DECISIVE TO WORLD MISSIONS

Why were Brainerd, Livingston, Carey, Spurgeon, Whitefield, and many other missionary/evangelists Calvinists? Was it just their environment? Their mutual testimonies speak otherwise. Then why does it seem that so many Reformed churches today are not very committed to world missions. Most modern-day Reformed churches do little to support the major evangelical mission boards, Wycliffe, SIM, Navigators, CAM, TEAM, GEM, etc. But if that statement is true, is it because of their doctrines? Or is it perhaps because of a fleshly separatism, not supported by Scripture? It is <sup>more often</sup> the latter. Bible doctrine and experience does not lead one to complacency or to an opiated stagnation. Rather, if Reformed churches do fall into that, it is a great contradiction (and shame) to the doctrine they profess. That we might return to the zeal for being used of the sovereign God in saving lost sinners!

If Dortian Calvinism is Biblical, then we know that it should result in a dynamic practical missiology. But if the question remains unanswered, we must turn also to other guages of validity. Do Calvinistic missionaries accomplish anything for Christ? Their hope is founded only in a Sovereign Commissioner, and one missionary wrote:

When I left England, my hope of India's conversion was very strong; but amongst so many obstacles, it would die unless upheld by God. Well, I have God, and His Word is true. Though the superstitions of the heathen

were a thousand times stronger than they are, and the examples of the Europeans a thousand times worse; though I were deserted by all and persecuted by all, yet my faith, fixed on that same Word would rise above all obstructions and overcome every trial. God's cause will triumph.

I would not abandon the Mission for all the fellowships and finest spheres in England . . . The work, to which God has set His hands, will infallibly prosper. Christ has begun to besiege this ancient and strong fortress, and will assuredly carry it.\*

For William Carey, at least, Calvinism was decisive.

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\*William Carey, quoted by Iain Murray in The Puritan Hope, p.140.

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