

What is a True Calvinist?



Basics of
the Faith

S E R I E S

Philip Graham Ryken

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Calvinist?

Basics of the Faith

- How Do We Glorify God?*
- How Our Children Come to Faith*
- What Are Election and Predestination?*
- What Are Spiritual Gifts?*
- What Is a Reformed Church?*
- What Is a True Calvinist?*
- What Is Biblical Preaching?*
- What Is Church Government?*
- What Is Hell?*
- What Is Justification by Faith Alone?*
- What Is Perseverance of the Saints?*
- What Is Providence?*
- What Is Spiritual Warfare?*
- What Is the Atonement?*
- What Is the Christian Worldview?*
- What Is the Lord's Supper?*
- What Is True Conversion?*
- What Is Vocation?*
- What Is Worship Music?*
- Why Do We Baptize Infants?*

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P U B L I S H I N G

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▣ Sinclair B. Ferguson has served as the pastor of St. George’s Tron Church in Glasgow, Scotland, and also as professor of systematic theology at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. His students well remember how he would begin his course on the Holy Spirit: “The goal of theology is the worship of God. The posture of theology is on one’s knees. The mode of theology is repentance.”

This is a good set of guidelines to remember because so many of those who have discovered the beauty of Reformed theology are anything but beautiful themselves. People sometimes speak of “TRs,” meaning those who are “Truly Reformed.” But what this term brings to mind is usually not very nice (some people have the same instinctive response to the term “Calvinist”). The “Truly Reformed” are considered narrow in their thinking, parochial in their outlook, and uncharitable in their attitude toward those who disagree. They have a bad reputation—and, sadly, perhaps some of it is deserved.

There is a combative streak in Calvinism, and whenever the doctrines of grace¹ (most accurately identified as radical depravity, unconditional election, particular redemption, efficacious grace, and perseverance) are divorced from warm Christian piety, people tend to get ornery. Some Christians who identify themselves as Calvinists seem to be in a perpetual state of discontent with their pastors, often making unin-

vited suggestions for their personal improvement. Others seem overly concerned with converting people to their ecclesiastical denomination. Still others have memorized TULIP (the acronym for the traditional five points of Calvinism: Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, and the Perseverance of the saints) but somehow seem to be missing the heart of the gospel. Thus we have sympathy for the man who wrote: “Nothing will deaden a church or put a young man out of the ministry any more than an adherence to Calvinism. Nothing will foster pride and indifference as will an affection for Calvinism. Nothing will destroy holiness and spirituality as an attachment to Calvinism. . . . The doctrines of Calvinism will deaden and kill anything: prayer, faith, zeal, holiness.”²

This ought not to be. In fact, it *cannot* be, provided that Calvinism is rightly understood. The doctrines of grace help to preserve all that is right and good in the Christian life: humility, holiness, and thankfulness, with a passion for prayer and evangelism. The true Calvinist ought to be the most outstanding Christian—not narrow and unkind, but grounded in God’s grace and therefore generous of spirit. Toward that end, this booklet is a practical introduction to Reformed spirituality. We will consider what the doctrines of grace mean for personal growth in godliness, seeking to answer the question, What should a true Calvinist be like?

A GOD-CENTERED MIND

Calvinism has implications for the whole person, but we begin with the mind because this is where the Scripture begins: “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom. 12:2a). While Calvinism is much more than a mind-set, it

nevertheless begins with a mind that is enlightened by the truth of the gospel.

What is most on the Calvinist's mind is the glory of God. The old Princeton theologian B. B. Warfield claimed, "Evangelicalism stands or falls with Calvinism" (that is, the gospel of grace stands or falls with the doctrines of grace). What Warfield himself meant by "Calvinism" is "that sight of the majesty of God that pervades all of life and all of experience." Or, to quote him at greater length, it is

a profound apprehension of God in His majesty, with the poignant realization which inevitably accompanies this apprehension, of the relation sustained to God by the creature as such, and particularly by the sinful creature. The Calvinist is the man who has seen God, and who, having seen God in His glory, is filled on the one hand with a sense of his own unworthiness to stand in God's sight as a creature, and much more as a sinner, and on the other hand, with adoring wonder that nevertheless this God is a God who receives sinners. He who believes in God without reserve and is determined that God shall be God to him in all his thinking, feeling and willing—in the entire compass of his life activities, intellectual, moral and spiritual—throughout all his individual social and religious relations, is, by force of that strictest of all logic which presides over the outworking of principles into thought and life, by the very necessity of the case, a Calvinist.³

If the true Calvinist is a sinner who has received God's grace and seeks to live for God's glory, then the prophet Isaiah is the perfect example. In *The Practical Implications of Calvin-*