

# Why I Left Calvinism

Having grown up in the Southern Presbyterian tradition, I was taught the five points of Calvinism from my mother's womb. I memorized the children's catechism early on and very nearly finished memorizing the famed Shorter Catechism itself—but one can only take so much. After my college days, I worked for a while within the 'truly reformed' community as a campus minister's assistant, studying everything I could get my hands on related to the glorious 'doctrines of grace.' And yes, to my shame I taught Calvinism as the truth of the gospel. Although rigorously logical and thoroughly biblical, in a curious sort of way, somewhere inside I always knew that fundamental errors loomed at the core of the Calvinist system.

Before I set forward my main points as to why I left Calvinism, I want to make two important comments. First, to this day, I love John Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion and his various biblical commentaries. Apart from his doctrine of reprobation (see Institutes III. XXI), which he got from Augustine, I find the Institutes to be beautifully written, even devotional, and certainly far more moving than the type of theology handed down by his descendants, which often reads more like religious insurance manuals than it does a song of someone who loves God. Calvin is cut from a different piece of cloth than the Calvinists. And, by the way, although the doctrine of "limited atonement" logically follows Calvin's doctrine of double predestination, he never taught it. Second, I believe that the larger Christian community owes a serious debt to Calvinism. Almost single-handedly it has maintained an interest in the stunning, gospel-filled doctrine of election. Granted, that what it gives with the one hand (election is true), it takes away with the other (it is only true for some), but what could be more stunning than the truth that we were known and loved and indeed embraced by the Father, Son and Spirit from all eternity. My beef with the Calvinists here is not with the fact of our election, but with the way they limit it, and thus limit its preaching as the unconditional truth for all. Be that as it may, I am grateful to my own tradition for keeping the heart of the gospel before us, even in its limited form. What the Calvinists think is true for only a few, should be proclaimed to every person on the planet: 'The Father himself set his love upon you before the foundation of the world and predestined you to be adopted into the very Trinitarian life of God. And his own beloved Son, Jesus Christ, has come and accomplished his Father's dreams for you and the human race. And even now the Holy Spirit is bearing witness with your spirit that this is the truth.'

Sorting through the issues of the Calvinists' system is like untangling a box full of loose coat hangers, so I will keep my focus, for now, on the three main reasons that I left Calvinism.

(1) The first concerns the origin of the idea of reprobation. In Calvinism, there are two groups of people, those "elected" to salvation and those "passed by" or "deliberately damned" or "reprobated" before the foundation of the world. My question is, where did such a notion originate? Is reprobation the Father's idea, or the Son's, or perhaps it is the Holy Spirit's?

Many years ago I read Athanasius' treatise Against the Arians, and his statement that there was never a time when the Father was alone, existing without his Son and the Holy Spirit, and was just God, and not Father. Athanasius' point was that the relationship of the Father, Son and Spirit is not a form that the single-personed God assumed for a moment in time. The union of the Father, Son, and Spirit that we see lived out on the pages of the New Testament is not something that came into being with the birth of Jesus. This relationship is the eternal and deepest truth about God. "The Holy Trinity is no created being." God is Father, Son and Spirit—always has been and always will be—and therefore every thought of God, every idea, every dream, and every plan of this God is relational, flowing out of the relationship of the Father, Son and Spirit.

Athanasius, thankfully, rocked my Calvinistic world. He made me see that whatever we say about God (or about God's will) has to be grounded in the relationship of the Father, Son and Spirit, for there is nothing deeper about the being of God than this relationship. The ideas that God would elect some to salvation and pass others by, or outright reject them, or deliberately damn them before even creation came to be must be, theologically speaking, grounded in this relationship. It is obvious how election to adoption would flow out of the Father-Son relationship

in the Spirit, for the Father loves the Son and shares all things with him in the Spirit. So it is not out of character or odd that the blessed Trinity would think of including others in the Trinitarian life. But why would this God think of excluding? What about the life that the Triune God lives would ever lead to the deliberate damning of people? Does such an idea flow out of the way the Father and Son relate? Is there a part or a side of the Father that is disinterested in his Son, neutral, even eager to dismiss, look over, and, indeed, to reject him? And is it this dark side of the Father's relationship with his Son that thus gives natural rise to the rejection of large parts of humanity?

Or perhaps there is a second Son, banished from the Father's love and presence from all eternity, and thus in the Father's rejection of the second Son originates the idea of the Father rejecting part of his creation? If you cannot ground God's decision to pass by or to reject parts of his own creation in the relationship of the Father, Son and Spirit itself—in God's very being—what is its ground? Is there something deeper about God than the love and fellowship of the Father, Son and Spirit? Is there a god behind the back of the Trinity who ultimately calls the shots? While I have actually had Calvinists contend that the New Testament never teaches that fellowship is at the core of God's being, for me it is a scriptural, historical and theological no-brainer. So for me, the doctrine of double predestination (of electing some and damning others) is patently non-Christian, because it cannot be grounded in the blessed life and way of relating of the Father, Son and Spirit. And if you cannot say that there is a part of the Father that eternally rejects his beloved Son (and who would dare think of such a thing), then there is no theological basis—in the being of God—for positing why God would think of passing by or rejecting large parts of his creation, or even conceive of such madness. For me, the reprobating part of the Calvinists' doctrine of double-predestination both denies that the Trinity is the ultimate and eternal truth about God, and supposes that there is something deeper about God than the fellowship of the Father, Son and Spirit that ultimately calls the shots for creation.

(2) The second reason I left Calvinism is the doctrine of limited atonement. The Calvinists prefer the phrases "definite atonement" or "particular redemption" to the phrase "limited atonement" because they are trying, rightly so, to maintain that the death of Jesus actually accomplished something. I am with them here. But in their system, "accomplishing something" leads to the idea that Jesus never intended to and never did die for the whole human race. He came to die for and to save only the elect (and here I can only say, tongue in cheek, "of course"). Their system of God's election of some and reprobation of others logically carries them away into such a grotesque notion that Jesus gave himself only for a limited number of people. They honestly don't think that there is anything wrong with such an idea. In the end, the doctrine that Jesus died only for some and not for the whole human race is a theological denial of the deity of Jesus Christ, and that, to me, was and is as scary as denying that the relationship of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is the deepest truth about God's being.

The apostles are crystal clear that it was in and through and by and for Jesus that all things came into being and are sustained. Let me cite a few verses.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being by Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. In Him was life; and the life was the light of men. (John 1:1-4).

For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created by Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together (Colossians 1:16-17).

And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power (Hebrews 1:3).

John and Paul and the author of Hebrews are emphatic that Jesus is the Creator and that not one thing that was created came into being in any way other than through Jesus Christ. And note that this point is not relegated to obscure footnotes in the latter chapters of their writings. This is the first point. As a side note, when is the last time you heard a sermon on the fact that Jesus is the Creator, the one in and through and by and for whom all things were created? Why isn't such an obvious apostolic emphasis prominent in our preaching today?

My point here is to say that in the apostolic mind there is a definite and clear connection between Jesus Christ and all creation. Unless we are prepared to posit that the Father created and sustains creation's existence behind the back of his Son, then, with the apostles, and with Calvin, we affirm that everything came into being through the Father's Son, and we affirm that everything continues to live and move and have its being through him (see Acts 17:28 and I Corinthians 8:6-7). Everything, including every human being, derives existence through Christ and breathes Christological air. Let me quote Calvin himself here and his comments on John's phrase, "in Him was life" (John 1:4).

So far, he has taught us that all things were created by the Word of God. He now likewise attributes to Him the preservation of what had been created; as if he were saying that in the creation of the world His power did not simply suddenly appear only to pass away, but that it is visible in the permanence of the stable and settled order of nature—just as Heb. 1.3 says that He upholds all things by the Word or command of His power. Moreover, this life can either be referred at large to inanimate creatures, which do live in their own way though they lack feeling, or expounded only of the animate. It matters little which you choose, for the simple meaning is that the Word of God was not only the fount of life to all creation, so that those which had not yet existed began to be, but that His life-giving power makes them remain in their state. For did not His continued inspiration quicken the world, whatsoever flourishes would without doubt immediately decay or be reduced to nothing. In short, what Paul ascribes to God, that in Him we have our being and move and live (Acts 17.28), John declares to be accomplished by the blessing of the Word. It is God, therefore, who gives us life; but He does so by the eternal Word. (John Calvin, *The Gospel According to John*, translated by T. H. L. Parker, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), 1988, pp. 10-11.0).

Following the apostles, Calvin is at pains to point out that the creation and the continued existence of all things are completely dependent upon the Son of God. The critical question here, for me, was what happened to the connection that the Father's Son has with all things when he became a human being? Does the incarnation mean that he ceases to be the one in and through and by and for whom all things were created and are sustained? Did he break ties with his creation? Of course not. The incarnation is the coming of the One who is already the source and sustenance of all things. He brings his prior relationship with the cosmos and every human being within it with him as he becomes human.

While the Son incarnate is certainly a real man, an individual person, he is much more. His humanity is, as J. B. Torrance insisted, "vicarious humanity." What becomes of him is not small-print, back-page news, which may or may not be relevant to us. He is the one in whom all things came into being and are continually upheld, thus what becomes of him has immediate implications for the whole creation. This fact should lead us to see with Paul that when Christ died, we died. When he rose, we rose. When he ascended, we were lifted up in him to the Father's arms (see Ephesians 2:4-6; 2 Corinthians 5:14ff). But this is a subject for another day (see my books, *The Great Dance*, and *Jesus and the Undoing of Adam*, and the lecture series, "The Big Picture: From the Trinity to Our Adoption in Christ"). For now, the point is that it was Jesus' relationship with the entire cosmos and with the whole human race that called a halt to any notion of limited atonement that I had running through my brain. The life, death, resurrection and ascension of the incarnate Son/Creator was as wide and deep and large as creation itself. To deny this simply was to deny that Jesus was the incarnate Son of God and the Creator in and through and by and for whom all things were created and are sustained.

I remember standing on Canal Street in New Orleans arguing with a Calvinist about this very point. He did not like my questioning the doctrine of limited atonement. We were both attending an American Academy of Religion conference and happened to bump into one another on our way to get something to eat. He started firing questions at me. There were hundreds, if not thousands, of people on Canal Street at that moment, and I asked him: "Where did these people come from?" He answered: "God made them." I asked: "Which God?" He tried to look perplexed, but he knew where I was going. So I asked again: "Which God?" And he said: "You know, the Christian God." Notice that he did not say, "the Father, Son and Spirit," for that would mean that all of these people had come into being through Jesus, and thus that Jesus already had a relationship with them. So I just stared at him waiting for more. So he qualified his remarks, by adding, "God created them through common grace." "You are hiding," I said, which he did not like at all. "Hiding from what?" he retorted. "Behind the

smoke screen of God's common grace, you are hiding the plain biblical fact that all of these people came into being and continue to live through Jesus Christ." He acted like he could not understand what I meant. For the deity of Christ, the fact that Jesus is the one in and through and by and for whom all things were created and are sustained is the end of the doctrine of limited atonement, and he knew it. The fact that Jesus is God means that the entire cosmos, and the whole human race within it, are implicated in his incarnate existence, and in what becomes of him. If he dies, we die. If he rises, we rise. If he ascends to the Father, we ascend to the Father. And that is what happened.

(3) My third reason for leaving Calvinism is more pastoral and has to do with the way Calvinism gave me nothing objectively real to proclaim as divine fact, and thus leaves us with no basis for real assurance. For me, the very heart of Christian living is *parrhesia*—assurance, confidence, freedom, security—which is rooted in the Father's eternal and unyielding love, which Jesus himself reveals to us in the Spirit. But how could I hope that Jesus would reveal the Father's love to a person, in the power of the Spirit, when I could not declare to them that it was absolutely true. Let me cite Calvin again.

Now we shall possess a right definition of faith if we call it a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit (Institutes, III.2.7).

For Calvin, the very center of Christian faith is the certain knowledge that God is for us. Without knowing that we belong to the Father himself, and without experiencing the unearthly assurance that baptizes our souls as we do, our souls are left simmering in the poisonous roux of fear. And here we should note Louis Berkhof's lament: "There are comparatively few Christians to-day, who really glory in the assurance of salvation. The note of heavenly joy seems to have died away out of the life of God's people" (Louis Berkhof, *Assurance of Faith*, p. 16). Berkhof was a Calvinist theologian of the last century. So we have Calvin defining faith as a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward us, and Berkhof lamenting the fact that few Christians experience real assurance. Wonder why?

Is there is way to experience real assurance of the Father's love and of our salvation in Christ when are told that before the foundation of the world God elected some to be saved in grace and others to be damned for the glorification of divine justice? Calvin himself recognized the problem and pointed us in the right direction, only to fall at the last hurdle. Calvin directs us to Christ as the mirror of our election (Institutes III.xxiv.5), so if we struggle with whether or not we are one of the chosen, we are to look to Christ. But, and this is the problem, the mirror of Christ reflects two groups of people, the one's loved by Jesus' Father, and the others who are eternally not loved and doomed by the same Father.

This is a serious problem. The human soul is fragile. It is designed by God to live out of the baptism of unearthly assurance that comes from a firm and certain knowledge of the Father's love. But how can we know that the Father loves us when he may have rejected us before the foundation of the world? Calvinism gives us nothing objective to say to the world, no unconditional word of God to proclaim openly to everyone—except that we are all sinners. What is the gospel to be proclaimed according to Calvinism? For me, the gospel is the good news of Jesus Christ and of what became of the cosmos and of the human race in him. When he died, we died. When he rose, we rose. When he ascended, we ascended into the Father's embrace, and there accepted forever as his adopted children. Our adoption in Christ is objectively true for everyone, a divine fact, established in Jesus Christ's own existence forever, whether anyone believes it or not. To believe the truth, to believe that you are so loved and accepted is to experience the unearthly assurance of the Father's love, and thus to begin the journey of learning how to live life in the Holy Spirit, and in the security and freedom of Jesus himself.

A Calvinist could only hear what I am saying and conclude that I am teaching universalism. While I am not a universalist, I am saying that before the foundation of the world, the Father, Son and Spirit set their love upon us all, determining to give us a place in the very Trinitarian life itself. And, I am saying that Jesus has fulfilled the Father's dreams of our adoption. In his incarnate life, death, resurrection and ascension he cleansed us of sin, recreated us in his resurrection, and lifted us all into the Father's arms in his ascension. The Holy Spirit himself

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was poured out on all flesh to bring us to know the truth so that we could be set free from the great darkness and its terrible, life-canceling fear.

The fact that we are all included in Christ—and in him ~~adopted children of the Father~~—and the fact that the Holy Spirit has been sent to lead us to know the truth does not mean universalism; it means that we have something real to preach, namely that we all have a beautiful life to live, and that we are all called to live it, called to believe in Jesus and his Father, called to let go of our hellish anxiety and to receive the Father's love and live. The ones who believe in the witness of the Spirit to our ~~adoption~~ by the Father in his Son, experience the baptism of unearthly assurance (the firm and certain knowledge that the Father himself loves us). Those who don't believe the Spirit's witness do not experience the baptism, and continue to live in the doom of the darkness and its ~~anxious hell~~. Let me put this another way. The human race has been ~~justified~~ by the Father, Son and Spirit. Those who believe that God has ~~justified~~ them, experience the freedom of their justification—rest, peace, hope, assurance. Those who don't believe that God has ~~justified~~ them, continue to experience a life of striving and self-justification, anxiety and insecurity—religious death.

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reconciled

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It is critical, to my mind, not to confuse the divine fact with our experience. People can be loved, ~~adopted and justified~~, and yet not experience the Father's love, or the freedom of his adoption, or the peace of his justification because they do not believe these realities to be true. What they believe does not have the power to change the facts, but our faith or lack of it does affect our experience of the facts. To believe that the Father loves you does not make it true, (for it is true whether you believe it or not), but believing the Father's love to be true means his love becomes a real experience for you.

reconciled

Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:13).

Giving us no objective gospel or absolute truth to proclaim to the human race, no absolute fact of the Father's love and the finished work of Christ to shout to the world, Calvinism gives us nothing to say to humanity, and gives the human race nothing real to believe, no concrete, objective basis for faith, and thus no possibility for unearthly assurance. What do the Calvinists call people to believe, and to believe in? "Jesus" would seem the obvious answer, but how can you really believe in Jesus when you have no basis for believing that he even died for you at all? Are we supposed to believe that we may be loved by the Father, and that we may be included in Jesus? What basis, what ground is given by Calvinism to anyone to believe that they are loved by God? How is one to know for sure? In the Calvinists' system, we cannot even look to Jesus himself, for their Jesus embodies and reveals the Father's divided heart. In the end, and at all points in between, Calvinism leaves us with maybe as the object of our faith, and with no option but to look to ourselves to find proof that the maybe is actually true and we are of the chosen. Being left to ourselves to move from maybe to firm and certain knowledge of the Father's love is simply not a recipe for Christian faith and assurance, not to speak of peace and rest.

So, for me the Calvinists' doctrines of double predestination and limited atonement form a tag team that not only gut-punches our already anxious souls, but fuels our profound anxiety, because it gives us no objective truth to proclaim or to believe. Without objective truth, we can never have unearthly assurance, and we are doomed to live with an assurance that is of our own making. Calvinism leaves us either in denial of our waywardness, for to acknowledge it would be to face "proof" that we are not of the elect, or it leaves us inventing a religious form that we can follow to prove that we are—and self-righteously proud that we are doing so. No thank you.

Is the gospel a theory or a declaration? Is the gospel the news that the Father may have embraced you in Jesus, or is it the news that the Father has embraced you in Jesus forever? Thank God, the gospel is a declaration of a divine fact—you are embraced, included in the Trinitarian life of God. And this divine fact carries with it both a promise and a warning. Its promise is this: if you believe that you are included, you will experience the Father's love. The warning is this: if you do not believe that you are included, you will continue to experience striving, insecurity and fear. In which world do you want to live, the world of the Father's embrace, or the world of maybe?

A great treatment of the problem of assurance from a Calvinist's perspective is Louis Berkhof's, The Assurance of Faith (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1939). He sees the issue and has some very helpful

things to say, but in the end he leaves us with ourselves and the hope that the Holy Spirit can take the vague, even deceptive message that “God loves sinners” (for the Calvinist’s God loves some sinners) and use it to give an individual firm and certain knowledge that the Father loves them in particular. Thomas Erskine’s, *The Unconditional Freeness of the Gospel*, written in the land of Calvinism, is a great book to read if you want to understand the gospel and to experience real assurance (available on our web site).

A great book on Calvin’s theology is Victor A. Shepherd’s, *The Nature and Function of Faith in the Theology of John Calvin*, (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1983).

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#### Justification

- (1) A legal term meaning “To declare someone righteous” (not make them righteous)
- (2) This declared righteousness is “imputed” to sinners and is an accounting term meaning to credit to one’s account.
- (3) An act of “divine reckoning” and does not mean to make a person righteous, but rather it treats a person as righteous.
- (4) Originates in grace; it is freely given.
- (5) Is through the redemptive and atoning work of Christ alone
- (6) It is received by faith not by works of law. (Imagine an orphaned and homeless person being told they were an heir to a million dollars inheritance and it has been deposited into their account. Until they go to the bank and formally ask for it and make a withdrawal, they are not “justified” and remain a poor beggar even though the inheritance is there.)
- (7) Summary: It is the judicial act of God whereby he justly declares and treats as righteous the one who believes in Jesus Christ. The justified believer has been declared by God to have nothing laid to his charge (Rom. 8:1, 31-34)  
(List modified from CI Scofield Reference Notes)

Reconciliation- (katá, "down to an exact point," intensifying /alláss, "to change")- means to change completely. This is the manward aspect of Christ's work on the cross.

- (1) Though this term is not used here in this section of Romans it is important to define it as part of the “trilogy” of the “completed work of Christ” alongside redemption and propitiation.
- (2) God has “changed completely” the situation between us and him in Christ. It is the removal of enmity between condemned sinners and God. It must be remembered that it is man who is reconciled to God not God who is reconciled to man. In our sin we made God our enemy in our minds. God has always been for us even to the point of providing condemned sinners with his own righteousness. Reconciliation is the removal of that enmity for us.
- (3) 2 Cor. 5:17-21 illustrate this reconciliation most clearly:
  - (a) It is universal in scope and already accomplished
  - (b) It requires an individual response of belief to activate it
  - (c) When Paul says “Be ye reconciled”, “...what is it men are implored to do? Simply this: God is satisfied with the solution of the sin question as consummated by Christ in His death, and the sinner is petitioned to be satisfied himself with that which satisfies God.” (Lewis Sperry Chafer, ST Vol 3 p.92)
- (4) This “trilogy” of Redemption, Propitiation and Reconciliation refer in particular to that which Christ Jesus accomplished for the unsaved.
- (i) Four other great words belong only the saved: Forgiveness, Regeneration, Justification, Sanctification and Glorification.

Men are not saved by coaxing mercy out of God; they are saved when they dare to believe God has been merciful enough to provide a Saviour and that He IS propitious.” (Lewis Sperry Chafer, ST Vol 3 p.95)

- (7) “No more transforming message could be uttered than the proclamation that God IS propitious...not when faith or confession made Him so, but because of the death of His Son. Neither sinners nor sinning saints are appointed the task of propitiating God. Christ has accomplished that perfectly, and the door into the grace of God is open wide” (Lewis Sperry Chafer, ST Vol 3 p.96)