

## Examining Calvinism Part 3

### Unconditional Election and Extreme Calvinism

#### Introduction:

Not all Calvinists agree on the details of this doctrine. Some Calvinists hold to an extreme view of God's sovereignty, election and predestination. And some are not consistent with their own teaching. Even Calvin, at times contradicted himself.

The doctrine of election is scriptural. Yet there is much controversy as to how election actually works.

The Handbook of Evangelical Theology says:

A great division exists in evangelicalism over the doctrine of election. (*True*)

Unconditional election is the belief that God sovereignly ... chose before time individuals on whom he would bestow his saving grace. (*This statement only tells half of the story. It does not say anything about the rest of mankind who are not fortunate enough to be chosen for this saving grace. It says nothing about the vast majority who are damned to spend eternity in hell because they were not chosen.*)

Those who hold this view are Calvinists. Those who reject the teaching are Arminians. (*False—Many who reject Unconditional Election are NOT necessarily Arminians!*)

Unconditional Election is the very heart or essence of Calvinism.

Herman Hanko explains: "If any one of the five points of Calvinism is denied, the Reformed heritage is completely lost. But it is certain that the truth of unconditional election stands at the foundation of them all [five points]. This truth is the touchstone of the Reformed faith. It is the very heart and core of the gospel."

Arthur Custance claims that Unconditional Election "is the Gospel," and that "every departure from the doctrine of election in any degree has been a departure from the Gospel."

If Hanko and Custance are correct, then anyone who rejects Calvinism's Unconditional Election also rejects the gospel. That is a very serious charge!

Since this doctrine is the heart of Calvinism, we will cover this topic in several messages.

What is Unconditional Election?

#### Unconditional Election Defined

The Calvinistic teaching of Unconditional Election naturally proceeds from Total Depravity / Total Inability.

The Canons of Dort defined this doctrine as "the unchangeable purpose of God, whereby, before the foundation of the world, he hath out of mere grace, according to the sovereign good pleasure of his own will, chosen, from the whole human race ... a certain number of persons to redemption in Christ."

#### *Unconditional Election according to reformed.org:*

Unconditional Election is the doctrine which states that God chose those whom he was pleased to bring to a knowledge of himself, not based upon any merit shown by the object of

his grace and not based upon his looking forward to discover who would “accept” the offer of the gospel. God has elected, based solely upon the counsel of his own will, some for glory and others for damnation (Romans 9:15, 21). He has done this act before the foundations of the world (Ephesians 1:4-8).

***David Steele and Curtis Thomas (Romans—An Interpretive Outline):***

God’s choice of certain individuals unto salvation before the foundation of the world rested solely in His own sovereign will. His choice of particular sinners was not based on any foreseen response or obedience on their part, such as faith, repentance, etc. On the contrary, God gives faith and repentance to each individual whom He selected. These acts are the result, not the cause of God’s choice. Election therefore was not determined by or conditioned upon any virtuous quality or act foreseen in man. Those whom God sovereignly elected He brings through the power of the Spirit to a willing acceptance of Christ. Thus God’s choice of the sinner, not the sinner’s choice of Christ, is the ultimate cause of salvation.

***Calvinistic Views on Election***

There are a variety of views on election within Calvinism. We looked at two examples in the first message in this series. Let’s review:

*Unconditional Election—Higher/Extreme Calvinism*

Extreme Calvinism equates predestination and election. God predestines those who will be saved and those who will be lost. This predestination is based exclusively upon the will of God and has nothing to do with the response of man.

*Unconditional Election—Lower Calvinism*

Lower Calvinists agree that salvation is an unconditional gift. The question is not whether there are any conditions for God giving salvation; but whether there are any conditions for man receiving salvation. Election is unconditional from the vantage point of the Giver, but there is one condition for the receiver. Faith is the condition for receiving salvation.

In between those two extremes, there are a number of views.

*Types of Calvinism – A Comprehensive List*

- 1) Total hyper-Calvinism
- 2) Partial hyper-Calvinism
- 3) Ultra-High Calvinism
- 4) Regular High Calvinism
- 5) Moderate Calvinism
- 6) Lower Moderate Calvinism
- 7) Lower Calvinism
- 8) Lowest Calvinism
- 9) Amyraldism (4 point Calvinism)

***Double Predestination***

One issue that Calvinists debate is Double Predestination.

Those on the more extreme side of Calvinism say that God predestines those who will be saved and those who will be lost.

Calvinists who are not as extreme will say that God predestines those who will be saved, but simply passes by those who will be lost. In other words, God did not really elect or choose people for hell.

R. C. Sproul was a defender of double predestination. He wrote:

The question then is not if predestination is double, but how it is double. Some advocates of predestination argue for *single* predestination. They maintain that, though some are predestined to election, no one is predestined to damnation or reprobation.... This view is based more on sentiment than on logic or exegesis. It is manifestly obvious that if some people are elect and some are not elect, then predestination has two sides to it. It must be double in some sense.

I disagree with Sproul's view of election. But I do agree with his argument in this statement. If Calvinists are going to be logically consistent, they cannot simply play word games saying that God simply passes by the lost rather than predestines them to hell.

Example: If we are choosing teams, I might choose Bill who is a great player. I might decide not to choose Ben who is athletically challenged. Nevertheless my decision "not to choose" is still a choice no matter what kind of word games a person plays to "soften the blow."

Sproul has a point with regard to Calvinism's concept of predestination. "The question then is not if predestination is double, but how it is double."

### ***Summary of the Calvinistic view of Unconditional Election:***

It is difficult to define all the different views of election there are in the broad spectrum of Calvinism. However, we can make a few generalizations that apply to most forms of Calvinism regarding election.

- 1) God selected certain individuals for salvation apart from anything that they might do including believing the gospel.
- 2) The election of certain individuals for salvation and not others was based on God's sovereign will. It was not based on anything God foresaw in man.
- 3) Faith and repentance are gifts of God. They are a result of His election and regeneration. The elect believe because God chose them and regenerated them. After the elect have been regenerated (been born again) then they believe or trust Christ for salvation.
- 4) The power of God's regenerating Spirit creates a willing acceptance of Christ only in individuals who are elect.
- 5) The ultimate cause of salvation is God's choice of the sinner, and not the sinner's choice of God. This is because man is dead in sin and cannot believe the gospel.
- 6) God's election took place before creation.

Some milder forms of Calvinism might not agree with every point of this summary. But this is a fairly accurate representation of most forms of Calvinism.

### ***Regeneration Before Faith***

Many Calvinists teach that a person must be regenerated before they can believe the gospel. In other words, a person has to be born again before they can put their faith in Christ for salvation.

R.C. Sproul: “The term election refers specifically to one aspect of divine predestination. God’s choosing of certain individuals to be saved. By making election conditional upon something that man does, even if what he does is simply to repent and believe the gospel, God’s grace is seriously compromised.”

For Calvinists such as Sproul, regeneration must come before faith. If faith came before regeneration, then believing the gospel would be a condition for election. Election would no longer be unconditional.

Calvinists also insist salvation is not a result of believing the gospel. They claim that “faith” is a “work.” Therefore to teach that “faith” comes before “regeneration” is to teach salvation by works.

Carl Morton: “To reject [Calvinistic] election is to reject salvation by grace and promote salvation by works.”

However, Scripture makes it clear that faith is not a work. In fact, faith is the very opposite of works.

Eph. 2:8-9 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.

Rom. 4:5 But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness.

Paul clearly contrasts faith and works. So, how can faith possibly be works? It cannot!

### **Unconditional Election and God’s Sovereignty**

In Extreme Calvinism, Unconditional Election is based on Augustine’s distorted view of divine determinism. Calvinists claim that the divine determinism of Augustine is simply the scriptural teaching of God’s sovereignty. But that is not the case. As we have seen, Augustine’s concept of God’s sovereignty is nothing more than the determinism he borrowed from the Gnostic Manicheans. That Manichean teaching was rejected by the Early Church Fathers.

Leonard Coppes claims that: “Only the Calvinist ... recognizes God’s absolute sovereignty.”

This claim is baseless. We believe that God is absolutely sovereign. But we reject the unbiblical idea of divine determinism that Calvinism attempts to force on us.

What do we mean when we say that God is Sovereign?

The American Heritage Dictionary (Sovereignty; noun):

- Supremacy of authority or rule as exercised by a sovereign or sovereign state.
- Royal rank, authority, or power.
- Complete independence and self-government.

Charles Ryrie (Basic Theology):

The word [sovereign] means principal, chief, supreme. It speaks first of position (God is the chief Being in the universe), then of power (God is supreme in power in the universe). How He exercises that power is revealed in the Scriptures. A sovereign could be a dictator (God is

not), or a sovereign could abdicate the use of his powers (God has not). Ultimately God is in complete control of all things, though He may choose to **let** certain events happen according to natural laws that He has ordained.

Notice that Dr. Ryrie says that God “may choose to **let** certain events happen according to natural laws that He has ordained.” That is what God’s Word teaches. God does permit evil at times. However, God does not cause, or decree evil events. In contrast, many extreme Calvinist teach that God **DOES** cause, ordain, or decree evil events.

Charles Ryrie concludes by saying:

Sovereignty must not obliterate free will, and free will must never dilute sovereignty.

Here is the Problem: In the more extreme forms of Calvinism, the concept of sovereignty does indeed obliterate the free will of mankind!

Illustration:

A king is sovereign over his kingdom. But that does not mean that the king controls every minute detail of his kingdom.

But according to extreme Calvinism, if God does not control or micromanage every minute detail in His kingdom, then He is not “sovereign.” To Augustine, John Calvin and the Calvinists who follow them, the word “sovereign” is equal to “Divine determinism.”

What is Divine Determinism?

### **Divine Determinism**

We might call it Divine Micromanagement whereby God causes even the smallest details to occur within the universe. This unbiblical view has also been called *specific sovereignty* or *meticulous providence*.

**The Early Church Fathers** taught that God is Sovereign and yet man has a free will. They argued against the heretical claims of the pagan Stoics, Gnostics, and Manichaeans who denied that man has a free will.

Dr. Ken Wilson wrote:

For the first 400 years of church history there was complete agreement among the early church fathers that man possesses “free will.” They taught that God is sovereign in a general sense. However, they did not teach that God micromanaged people’s lives. The only ones who pictured God as a dictatorial micromanager of the destinies of mankind and taught against free will were the Stoics, Gnostics and Manicheans. Church historians tell us that there was no debate among the church fathers regarding Divine sovereignty and human free will until the time of Augustine.

Notice that last sentence: “Church historians tell us that **there was no debate among the church fathers regarding Divine sovereignty and human free will** until the time of Augustine.” It is difficult to get theologians to agree to even minor points of doctrine. We know that God’s sovereignty and man’s free will has been an extremely controversial issue in church history. There is one exception. For the first 400 years of church history this issue was not controversial. It was not until Augustine came on the scene, that this became a controversy.

**Augustine** abandoned the teaching of the Early Church Fathers regarding God's sovereignty and man's free will. Around 400 A. D., Augustine adopted the pagan view of Divine Determinism. But he needed to make this radical change without violating centuries of Christian teaching about free will. Augustine did that by simply redefining the term "free will." He concluded that God must micromanage and manipulate the circumstances that guarantees a person would "freely" respond to the invitation of God's calling to eternal life.

Here's the problem. If a person is forced to make a choice by circumstances that are beyond his control, can it be said that he is "freely choosing?" If a thief robs you at gun point, are you "freely choosing" to hand over your money to him?

**John Calvin** followed Augustine's Divine Determinism. He wrote: "Men can deliberately do nothing unless He inspire it." (*Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*)

Many moderate Calvinists say that God permits evil, but that He does not cause or ordain evil. That is not what Calvin taught. In Calvin's view, the idea that God simply permits evil is nonsense. Calvin ridiculed such an idea saying, "they babble and talk absurdly who, in place of God's providence, substitute bare permission—as if God sat in a watchtower awaiting chance events, and his judgment thus depended upon human will (*Institutes, I.xvi.3; I.xviii.1*)."

**The Westminster Confession of Faith** advocated Divine Determinism, but tried to soften Calvin's position: "God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass; yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin."

This statement contains a logical fallacy. It is self-contradictory. The first part states that God ordains every action or event that has ever or will ever take place. The second part states that in doing so God is not the author of sin. In other words, even though God causes evil or sin to take place, He is not responsible for the sins of mankind even though He brought about those sins through His sovereign decree. That begs the question: "How can God bring about every sinful or evil event without being the author of sin?"

**Contemporary Calvinists** also teach Divine Determinism.

R. C. Sproul: "If there is one single molecule in this universe running around loose, God is not God".

Paul Helm: "Not only is every atom and molecule, EVERY THOUGHT AND DESIRE, kept in being by God, but every twist and turn of each of these is UNDER THE DIRECT CONTROL OF GOD".

John Piper:

Q: Has God predetermined every tiny detail in the universe such as dust particles in the air ... including all our besetting sins.

A: Yes. ... God is not the least taxed by keeping every sub-nuclear particle in its place. ... The macro-world and the micro-world are all managed by God. Which means, yes. Every horrible thing and every sinful thing is ultimately governed by God. ... Yes. He controls everything.

I do not have a problem with God controlling molecules, atoms, or sub-nuclear particles. If the Calvinists would stop right there, I would be okay with that version of sovereignty. But they don't stop there.

I do not have a problem with saying that everything is ultimately **governed** by God. In the human realm, a governor of a state is ultimately responsible for the actions and decisions of those who are in his administration. But that does not mean that a state governor causes every action of his subordinates.

But I do have a problem saying that every sinful action is caused, ordained or decreed by God. Unfortunately, Piper goes beyond the idea of God simply **governing** the world.

**John Piper:** “Nothing that exists or occurs falls outside **God’s ordaining will**. Nothing, including no evil person or thing or event or deed. God’s **foreordination** is the ultimate reason why everything comes about, including the existence of all evil persons and things and the occurrence of any evil acts or events. And so it is not inappropriate to take God to be the creator, the sender, the permitter, and sometimes even the instigator of evil... Nothing — no evil thing or person or event or deed — falls outside God’s ordaining will. Nothing arises, exists, or endures independently of God’s will. So when even the worst of evils befall us, they do not ultimately come from anywhere other than God’s hand.”

**Mark Talbot** (wrote *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God*; edited by John Piper & Justin Taylor): “God . . . brings about all things in accordance with his will. In other words, it isn’t just that God manages to turn the evil aspects of our world to good for those who love him; it is rather that he himself brings about these evil aspects for his glory and his people’s good. This includes—as incredible and as unacceptable as it may currently seem—God’s having even brought about the Nazis’ brutality at Birkenau and Auschwitz as well as the terrible killings of Dennis Rader and even the sexual abuse of a young child...” (Source: <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/all-the-good-that-is-ours-in-christ-seeing-gods-gracious-hand-in-the-hurts-others-do-to-us>)

It is one thing to say that God permits or allows evil which is the scriptural view. But it is another thing to say that God causes/ordains/decrees evil which is the teaching of extreme Calvinists.

Scripture teaches that God works to bring about good from the evil actions of individuals who freely choose to commit acts of evil.

Calvinists (such as John Piper) claim that God “isn’t just managing to turn the evil aspects of our world to good; it is rather that He Himself brings about these evil aspects for His glory.”

Allegedly, by His eternal decree God has predestined man’s every thought, word and deed, including the most atrocious vile acts committed by the world’s worst criminals. According to extreme Calvinism, man’s acts of sinful rebellion are simply the result of what God has predetermined sinners to do through a sovereign decree that He made in eternity past. But is that what Scripture teaches?

Jer. 19:5 [they] have built the high places of Baal to burn their sons in the fire as burnt offerings to Baal, **which I did not command or decree, nor did it come into my mind** (ESV).

God does not decree evil. He did not decree people to burn their sons as a burnt offering to Baal. He did not predestine every thought, word or deed of sinful men. Such a doctrine maligns the God of love and justice. And it turns man into a puppet with “God” pulling the strings.

Many Calvinists place an over-emphasis upon God's sovereignty. In doing so, they minimize man's responsibility and freedom to believe. They claim that man is unable to believe because of his Total Depravity or Total Inability. They say that the lost sinner is in a spiritually dead condition and cannot respond to the call to believe the gospel. Some Calvinists try to soften their position by saying that the lost sinner has the freedom to choose, but because of Total Depravity they cannot choose to believe the gospel.

Here is the problem. Total Depravity is a result of the fall of Adam and Eve. As a result of their fall, all mankind has inherited their sin nature. That inherited sin nature certainly has an effect on all human beings born AFTER the fall of Adam and Eve. But BEFORE the fall, Adam and Eve had no sin nature. They did not have an evil inclination which would cause them to disobey God prior to the fall. Either they chose to sin of their own free will or God made them sin.

Calvinists who attempt to soften their position by blaming Total Depravity have no explanation for the sin of Adam and Eve. On the other hand, extreme Calvinists teach that God decreed that Adam and Eve would rebel against their Creator.

A. W. Pink wrote: "... not only ... did His omniscient eye see Adam eating of the forbidden fruit, but He *decreed* beforehand that he *should* do so."

That is wrong on so many levels. Extreme Calvinism reasons that God foreordained Adam and Eve to eat from the forbidden tree. He did this so that He could punish them for doing what He foreordained and caused them to do! Then by Unconditional Election God saves a select few of their descendants to show His grace.

First, Adam did not have a Totally Depraved sin nature before the Fall. Yet according to Pink, God decreed that Adam would fall into sin.

Second, God does not decree people to sin. In fact, God does not even tempt people to sin, let alone cause them to sin.

James 1:13 Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone.

Third, Calvinists speak much about God's Divine decree in eternity past by which He ordained men to be saved or to be lost. That being the case, then you would think that Scripture would also have much to say about this so-called Divine decree. Not so! There are 7 decrees of God recorded in Scripture:

- Concerning the rain (Job 28:26)
- Concerning the sea (Job 38:10; Prov. 8:29)
- Concerning Jesus Christ (Ps. 2:7)
- Concerning the heavens (Ps. 148:6)
- Concerning a destruction (Is. 10:22)
- Concerning the sand (Jer. 5:22)
- Concerning Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 4:24)

None of these decrees are said to be "eternal" as Calvinism claims. None of these decrees involve election or predestination.

Where do we find the Divine decree of election in God's Word? It is nowhere to be found!



Since this so-called decree of election cannot be found in Scripture, the Calvinist will call them God's secret decrees. Or they will explain them as being a mystery.

The doctrine of Unconditional Election makes a mockery of all of God's pleadings through His prophets for man to repent and renders the gospel itself redundant. Why plead with or warn or preach to those whose response has been foreordained from eternity past?

According to Calvinism's Divine Determinism, God the Father chose a select number of individuals to be saved. The Son died only for those chosen by the Father. The Holy Spirit first regenerates those chosen individuals and then gives them faith to believe the gospel.

A. W. Pink: "Faith is God's gift, and apart from this gift none would believe."

This teaching goes along with the Extreme Calvinist's understanding of Total Depravity (Inability). Because man is "spiritually dead" he needs to be regenerated before God can give him the gift of faith in order to believe the gospel.

They use Ephesians 2:8-9 to prove their point. They claim that this text proves that faith is a gift from God.

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast (Eph. 2:8-9).

R. C. Sproul: "This passage (Eph. 2:8-9) should seal the matter forever. The faith by which we are saved is a gift of God."

But does Eph. 2:8-9 teach that faith is a gift of God? No!

Barnes Notes: The word rendered "that" is in the neuter gender, and the word "faith" is in the feminine. The word "that," therefore, does not refer particularly to faith, as being the gift of God, but to "the salvation by grace" of which he had been speaking. This is the interpretation of the passage which is the most obvious, and which is now generally conceded to be the true one. ... it accords better with the obvious grammatical construction, and with the design of the passage to understand the word "that" as referring not to "faith" only, but to "salvation by grace."

A. T. Robertson says the Greek word translated *that* (*touto*; neuter) refers **NOT** to *faith* (*pistis*; feminine) or to *grace* (*charis*; feminine), but to the act of being saved by grace conditioned on faith on our part."

John Calvin: "[Paul] does not mean that faith is a gift of God, but that salvation is given to us by God, or, that we obtain it by the gift of God."

Sir Robert Anderson: "Salvation is the gift of God, bestowed on the principle of grace, and received on the principle of faith."

The principle of faith is the means for appropriating salvation, not its cause.

### **Conclusion:**

Scripture teaches that God is love.

1 John 4:8b "...God is love."

If God is love and Calvinism is correct, then one has to ask, "Why is it that so few are chosen for salvation and so many are damned to hell, based solely on the desire of God?"

That is a major problem which Calvin himself recognized. Yet throughout his *Institutes* he offered no satisfactory explanation.

Extreme Calvinists do not see the injustice or inconsistency in God foreordaining man's sin and then punishing him for what he could not avoid doing. This extreme view of sovereignty and predestination is based upon the Calvinistic doctrine of Unconditional Election.

England's King James was not an Arminian. Yet, he expressed his disgust for this doctrine which was announced at the Synod of Dort:

This doctrine is so horrible, that I am persuaded, if there were a council of unclean spirits assembled in hell, and their prince the devil were to [ask] their opinion about the most likely means of stirring up the hatred of men against God their Maker; nothing could be invented by them that would be more efficacious for this purpose, or that could put a greater affront upon God's love for mankind than that infamous decree of the late Synod.

That God would impose "the necessity of sinning" upon man, then condemn him for sinning, cannot be called just by any semantic maneuver. Yet this is exactly what extreme Calvinists teach.

Wesley argued that to punish for failure to do what is impossible to do, or for doing what one is forced to do, is the opposite of justice.

Abraham asked, "... Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen. 18:25)

Deut. 32:4 He is the Rock, His work is perfect; For all His ways are justice, A God of truth and without injustice; Righteous and upright is He.

Next week we will consider how election is related to God's foreknowledge. Peter tells us that we are "elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father" (1 Pet. 1:2). What does that mean?