
Protestant Reformation

Part 5: Calvinism

As Narrated by Denver C. Snuffer, Jr.

John Calvin was a contemporary of Martin Luther.

Calvin's teachings developed into Five Calvinist principles to summarize the core of Christian theology. These 5 principles are:

First, the total depravity of man.

Second, God's unconditional election.

Third, a limited atonement.

Fourth, irresistible grace.

And, Fifth, the perseverance of the Saints.

The meaning of these principles can be briefly summarized:

The total depravity of man means that man is in need of salvation. Because of the fall of Adam, men are separated from God, and we are totally so. That is, without some outside source redeeming us, we have nothing but depravity because we are fallen, and require a Savior.

Unconditional election means that God will decide who will be saved, and that decision is unconditional. If God intends to save, He has the power to save despite the shortcomings of any person. Salvation comes from God, and when God elects someone they are saved without any condition apart from God's grace.

The limited atonement does not mean that Christ's atonement was not fulsome enough to save everyone, but instead that the atonement Christ has provided is limited in its application. Christ's atonement is applied fully to

those that are elect, and not applied fully to those who are not elect. Therefore, the limitation was based upon the election of the individual, or limited in application, but not in its potential effect.

Irresistible grace means that when God elects someone and bestows upon them His grace, they cannot choose to reject it. They are unable to walk away from it. God's grace, once it takes hold of an elect person, guarantees that elect person will be saved.

Calvin's final principle, the perseverance of the Saints, restores some measure of balance to the foregoing four principles. The perseverance of the Saints means if a person is actually elect, they will persevere to the end. Correspondingly, if a person fails to persevere to the end, then they were never elect in the first place. Which implies that they resisted God's grace, managed to reject God's election, and failed to secure part of Christ's atonement—remaining depraved despite all God might have done to save them, had they been willing.

This bundle of principles was based on Calvin's understanding of the writings of Paul and Paul's exposition concerning grace.

I think John Calvin's recognition of his own failures, his realistic assessment of his limitations, and his sincere desire to be saved all led him to conclude that men were totally depraved, God's election was irresistible, and Christ's atonement was unconditionally applied to the elect, because if it were otherwise Calvin could not be saved. His own sin and failure, like every other believer, was enough to forever separate him from the grace of God. Therefore, these core principles gave Calvin, and every other earnest seeker, the pathway for God's grace to save them.

John Calvin and Martin Luther met and agreed on many things, but ultimately split on these principles because Martin Luther had a more benign view of how God's grace worked.

Despite their disagreement on how God saved His sheep, both men were certain salvation could be obtained independent of the corrupt and abusive Catholic Church. Therefore, they both contributed to the Protestant Reformation while disagreeing on how salvation was provided to mankind by Christ.