
Hearing About Calvinism— God in Control

P S A L M 1 3 9

As a junior in high school (1961–1962), I met my first Calvinist in a swimming pool. Paul Hoekenga and I were both on our high school swimming team in Alameda, California. Alameda was then a city of about 50,000, built on a flat island across the bay from San Francisco. Both Paul and I were from families with deep roots in Alameda. Several of my high school teachers had also taught my parents when they were students there.

Alameda High School was a large public school, and Paul was a year ahead of me—we would probably never have met except for the swimming team. It turned out that we lived rather close to each other at some distance from the school. So often after workout we had a long walk home together. We spoke of many things, from swimming to studies to politics.

Both of us were really better at studying than swimming. In time, our conversation turned to religion.

Paul was a member of the Christian Reformed Church in town. I knew nothing about that congregation or denomination. I was a Methodist, but I did not know much about that either. My grandparents and great-grandparents had been active in the Methodist Church, but my parents attended only very occasionally. I had been baptized, gone for several years to Sunday school, and been confirmed in the church, but I had learned very little. I do not remember the Bible's ever being opened in my home, but I know that I had been told (by my grandmother) and believed that the Bible was the Word of God.

My discussions about religion with Paul really piqued my interest; I realized how little I knew. In retrospect, I am amazed at how readily I accepted what I was hearing. It all seemed perfectly sensible and true. What I heard about God and Christ, about sin and grace, about judgment and redemption resonated with me.

Being a lover of books, I wanted to read about this Calvinism. I went to the public library to try to find out more. There I found a book by Ben Warburton, entitled Calvinism. It was not a comprehensive presentation of the Reformed faith, but rather a vigorous defense of what are often called the five points of Calvinism (total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and the perseverance of the saints). The book, I learned later, had been given to the library by the Christian Reformed Church.

Starting with the doctrine of sin and man's complete helplessness to find salvation, the book showed from the Bible and by good theological reflection that God and God alone was the author of the plan of salvation. Christ fulfilled that plan by his righteous life and atoning death, and the Holy Spirit applied

the work of Christ to sinners, who could in no way help themselves. This message seemed obviously right to me. The book began with total depravity, and from that beginning it was clear that all of salvation must come from God—the God who had planned that salvation from all eternity.

Because I loved to read, I later borrowed from the pastor of the Christian Reformed Church, the Rev. Harold Petroelje, a copy of John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. He told me years later that he had not had many requests for that book from high school students. I cannot really remember now how much of it I read at the time. But that early acquaintance with Calvin has grown and deepened over the years, and I continue to believe that Calvin was the most balanced and biblical theologian that the church has ever seen.

Looking back on that time, I believe that one particular part of Calvinism's message appealed to me. It was the teaching of a great and sovereign God who was truly in charge of all things. That teaching connected with thoughts and feelings that I had had while still quite young. For a time, years before I was a junior, as I lay in bed at night I would sense a great pointlessness to life, a great emptiness in the center of my being. The reality of death seemed to render all of life gray and hopeless—at least at moments when I lay in bed about to go to sleep. What meaning could life have? I wondered. Those sentiments may seem strange in a youngster, and they probably are unusual, especially for one raised in a happy family and pleasant circumstances. I suppose that I am expressing them now in words that I could not have found then. But the feelings themselves were real and intense.

Only years later would I come to a theological explanation for those early feelings. Ecclesiastes tells us, "He has also set eternity in the hearts of men" (3:11). Perhaps with that verse

in his mind Augustine wrote, right at the beginning of his Confessions, “You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” Because human beings are creatures, they cannot feel complete or whole except in a proper relationship with their Creator. Separated from their Creator, their restlessness can take many forms, and they can seek rest in many false sources. For me, a fear of death and meaninglessness had been my restlessness. By the grace of the Holy Spirit, the message of Calvinism would in time give me rest.

I was drawn to the God of the Bible, the God presented in Calvinism, because of his essential nature and character. I began to learn that the true God is self-sufficient. He does not need me. That humbling thought is critical if humans are to achieve a proper vision of their own worth. God is not dependent on us, but we are dependent on him. And that self-sufficient God is unchanging. He is so complete and full in himself that he does not need to improve or develop. From everlasting to everlasting, he is God. He is not determined by outside influences. He does not age or decay.

Psalms 102 declares of the heavens and the earth in relation to God: “They will perish, but you remain” (v. 26). The most apparently stable elements of creation will change and fade, but God remains the same. What a remarkable thought! At the center of all the whirl that we experience, God is steady and stable and completely reliable. When we remember with the psalmist, “For my days vanish like smoke; my bones burn like glowing embers,” we need not despair (v. 3). God continues as the immovable foundation of our lives.

David elaborates on the character of God in Psalm 139. He celebrates a God who knows everything about me (vv. 1–6). (And by implication, if he knows everything about one little person, then he knows everything about everything.) He knows

where I am and what I am doing. He knows what I am thinking and the words that I will speak even before I know them. I am surrounded by him and by his knowledge of me as the mountains surround Jerusalem and as the angel of the Lord surrounded the camp of Israel in the wilderness (Ps. 125:2; Ps. 34:7). He knows me completely.

God is also always present with me (Ps. 139:7–12). Whether I go to the highest heavens or the deepest sea or travel to a distant point on the earth, God is as fully present there as anywhere else. Even the most profound darkness cannot hide me from God for he is there as well, present with me and knowing me completely. Whether I was in the swimming pool, the classroom, or the bedroom at night, God was there.

The God who knows me and is with me is the God who created me. From my first beginning in the womb, it was God who gave me life and formed my growth and development. Here we see the personal character of the God of the Bible. God is not an impersonal force. Nor is he a splendid being so exalted and remote as to be indifferent and removed from the lives of individual humans. Rather, he is personally related to us and involved with us from the first moment of our existence.

We also see his amazing power. He formed me as a new creature coming into being just as he originally formed everything else that was created. As he forms the baby in the womb, so he formed the universe and everything in it in the beginning. The personal care of God in no way reduces the grandeur of his power displayed in all of creation. “Your works are wonderful, I know that full well” (Ps. 139:14).

Finally, we should notice that the Bible knows no separation between what we call the processes of nature and the personal work of God. The growth of a baby in the womb is natural, but it is at the same time at each moment the very

activity of God. God usually uses natural means to accomplish his purposes, but those means are never separate from his personal care and action.

God, the personal and powerful Creator, acts according to his eternal plan: “All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be” (v. 16). He governs the world absolutely according to the wisdom of his eternal plan. God is not a quarterback, ducking and weaving and improvising in the face of the enemy. God always knows the end from the beginning and accomplishes all things according to his will. And that will is absolutely wise and profound—often beyond our ability to comprehend. “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain” (v. 6). As the apostle Paul said, “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!” (Rom. 11:33).

In my early days as a Calvinist, I thought more about God’s power in history than about his power in creation. I had always been very interested in history. From my earliest days of reading, I had enjoyed learning about other times and places and people. I liked the heroism of the stories, but I also appreciated that the historical accounts implied an order and meaning and purpose in history. As I learned to know God, I especially appreciated that he was the one who was behind all the movement in history. He ensured that history would fulfill his purpose and that it therefore had meaning—even if I could not see it.

We call the way in which God governs history and all things by his great plan the doctrine of providence. For Calvinists, it is a foundational expression of the greatness of God. One of the fine Reformed statements of faith, the Heidelberg Catechism, defines providence as “the almighty and every-

where present power of God, whereby, as it were by his hand, he still upholds heaven and earth, with all creatures, and so governs them that herbs and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, meat and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, yea, all things, come not by chance, but by his fatherly hand” (Q and A 27). The catechism, to which I was first introduced at the Alameda CRC, reminds us that such a truth is important and profitable for us so that “we may be patient in adversity, thankful in prosperity, and for what is future have good confidence in our faithful God and Father that no creature shall separate us from his love, since all creatures are so in his hand that without his will they cannot so much as move” (Q and A 28).

This powerful and personal God of providence is also a God of justice and mercy (Ps. 139:19–24). In strong terms, the psalmist identifies with the justice of God that will judge the wicked. He also rejoices in the mercy of God that will forgive him and lead him in the way everlasting. The universe that God has created and now governs is at its deepest level a moral universe because God is a moral being. This great God about whom Calvinists taught me was the God I found in the Bible and the God who met the restlessness of my heart.

I know that for some people, the idea of a God who is so fully in charge raises serious questions. If God is sovereign, how do we explain evil? If God is sovereign, how can I be responsible? Am I just a robot in his plan? If God is unchanging and all-powerful, can he be personal and caring? These are important questions that deserve careful answers. I can only say at this point that as I began to embrace Calvinism, they were not questions that really troubled me. I felt responsible and knew that God said I was responsible. That was enough for me. I also experienced the care of God in the Christian

community that I came to know in the Alameda Christian Reformed Church. In time I would come to understand much more clearly than I did in the beginning that the mercy and care of God is seen fully only in Jesus.

The beginning of my pilgrimage to Calvinism began with thinking about God. It amazes me how many people do not really think about God. Some just ignore him and resist all efforts to discuss him. They seem able to face life and death without dealing with probing questions: Where did I come from? Who or what gives meaning and moral direction to life? What happens after I die? Others seem to think of God only in relation to some problem of their own that they hope he will solve. Often they create a god that pleases them—usually a god created in their own image. They seem to want a god that will serve them rather than the true God whom they should serve.

In American culture today, many people seem to feel a special need for affirmation and attention. Some have called this a therapeutic culture in which we are looking for a remedy for our problems. In this culture, we see efforts to turn God into the great therapist. We are told that he feels our pain and understands our struggles because he struggles too. He too is surprised and hurt by the course of history and of our lives. But he cares so much that he finds ways of solving our problems, at least until the next surprising problem comes along.

This new view of God as one who feels, suffers, and changes claims to be biblical. But in fact, this view rejects the Christian God as understood in all ages of the church by Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestants. More importantly, this view flies in the face of what the Bible says over and over again about God as the one who does not change and who knows the end from the beginning. This new god is more like the Zeus of ancient paganism than the God of the

Bible. We must beware of these convenient gods that we invent for ourselves and believe only in the God revealed in the Bible.

In light of my fearfulness about change as a child, I need to ask: did I simply create a God in my mind to meet my needs? I do not think so. For years I have compared my understanding of God with what I find in the Bible. And I find in the Bible a revelation of precisely that God about whom the Calvinists taught me in the beginning. This God does indeed meet the real needs of my heart. That is because he made me, and my heart was restless until it rested in him. I had within me what Calvin called a sense of divinity; by God's grace, that sense grew not into idolatry, but into a love for what the Bible says about God.