

# Reformed Theology

By Philip Ryken (based on James M. Boice's essay "Reformed Theology" and Curt Daniels' booklet "Biblical Calvinism")

Who rules the universe, God or man? That is the basic question of theology. The system of doctrine known as Reformed theology, or Calvinism, answers without any apology or compromise, "God is King." Virtually all other systems of theology may say they agree, but upon closer scrutiny they place man on the throne with God, or even depose God completely to enthrone humanity.

Reformed theology gets its name from the distinct theological emphases of the Sixteenth Century Protestant Reformation, which in reality is nothing more than sound biblical theology. Although believers in the Reformed tradition highly regard the specific contribution of such people as Martin Luther, John Knox and particularly John Calvin, they nevertheless also find their strong distinctives in the giants of the faith before them, in persons such as Anselm and Augustine, and ultimately in the letters of Paul and the teachings of the Lord Jesus.

Obviously, Calvinism is associated with the name of John Calvin, but its theology is much older. It is taught in both testaments of the Bible. Many of the early church fathers taught it, especially the great Augustine. Most of the Protestant Reformers were either Calvinists or in basic agreement with its theology, such as Martin Luther and Ulrich and Zwingli. Then there were the English and American Puritans, such as John Bunyan and Matthew Henry. Later Calvinist preachers and theologians include Jonathan Edwards, Charles Hodge, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, Martin Lloyd-Jones.

Reformed Christians hold to doctrines characteristic of all Christians, including the Trinity, the true deity and true humanity of Jesus Christ, the inspiration of the Bible, the atonement, the new birth, the church as a divinely ordained institution, the requirement for Christians to live moral lives, the Great Commission, the second coming of Christ, the resurrection of the body, the final judgment and eternal life. They hold other doctrines in common with all evangelical Christians, such as the inerrancy of the Bible and justification by faith alone. Since the time of the Reformation, Arminianism has been its chief rival within evangelicalism. Arminianism weakens the Godness of God and exalts the humanity of man, while Reformed theology emphasizes over and over that God is God and man is man.

For most Reformed people the chief and most distinct article of the creed is God's sovereignty. Sovereignty means rule and the sovereignty of God means that God rules over his creation with absolute power and authority. He determines what is going to happen, and it does happen. God is not alarmed, thwarted, frustrated or defeated by circumstances or by the sin or rebellion of his creatures. All evangelical theologies will agree that salvation is solely by God's grace, but Reformed theology alone says that grace is sovereignly given to whomever God chooses to grant it. "The doctrines of grace," or the Five Points of Calvinism, are summarized by the popular acronym TULIP: Total depravity,

Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, and Perseverance of the saints.

We might add that Calvinism stresses the five great doctrines rediscovered in the Protestant Reformation (see the attached Cambridge Declaration): *Sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone), *Sola Gratia* (grace alone), *Sola Fide* (faith alone), *Solo Christo* (Christ alone), and *Soli Deo Gloria* (to God alone be the glory). Since all doctrines must be tested by Scripture, search the Scriptures and see if Calvinism is indeed the teaching of the Word of God.

## The Sovereignty of God

To begin we must go back to eternity past, when God alone existed. "In the beginning, God" (Gen. 1:1). God has always existed and is self-existent (Rev. 1:8). He is therefore totally independent of everything else. He alone is totally free and self-sufficient. He does not need man or anything in all creation (Acts 17:25). In short, God is God (Ex.3:14).

We know that God created all things, but have you ever wondered why God created the universe? Or even more, why does God do everything else that he does? God himself tells us in his Word: "Our God is in the heavens. He does whatever he pleases" (Ps. 115:3; cf. Dan. 4:35). He does as he pleases, always as he pleases, only as he pleases.

God willed to create the universe, but before he created, he formed a "plan," which Scripture calls his "eternal purpose" (Eph. 3:11; cf. Rom. 8:28, Isa. 46:10-1). This purpose is not merely a wish or a command, but a decree that governs everything. He "works all things after the counsel of his own will" (Eph. 1:11). Thus God foreordained everything that will come to pass, down to the smallest detail. "For from him and through him and to him are all things" (Rom. 11:36).

Moreover, God will never change his mind on this eternal plan. God's purpose will stand forever because he himself never changes (Jer. 23:20; 1 Sam. 15:29). Therefore, his purpose shall most certainly come to pass exactly as he planned it. Neither man nor demon nor angel can frustrate God's eternal purpose from being accomplished, for all of their thoughts and actions are included in that purpose. There are no coincidences, only providence, for God has even determined in advance the flipping of a coin (Prov. 16:33).

"The Lord God omnipotent reigns" (Rev. 19:6). God is king over everything that is, was, or ever shall be (Ps. 93:1-2; 103:19). He is the absolute monarch, the King of kings (Rev. 19:16). This is what we mean by the sovereignty of God. He has total authority over everything. Not only did he decree everything that happens in time, but he sovereignly guides all things by his providence (Rom. 8:28). "He works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will" (Eph. 1:11).

The question then arises, "What is the final purpose for which God does all things?" Jonathan Edwards wrote, "The great end of God's works, which is so variously expressed in Scripture, is indeed by one; and this one end is most properly and comprehensively called the glory of God." The final goal of the whole universe is the glory of God. "For from

him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen.” (Rom. 11:36). He foreordained all things to display his glory, and everything will give him glory and praise to the end of time (Phil. 2:11). We exist to give God glory.

## **Total Depravity**

The sovereign God made humans responsible beings. This is a paradox. We must believe both truths for they are both taught in Scripture. Every person is accountable to God (Rom. 14:12). God created Adam and Eve as morally responsible persons. But they fell into sin (Gen. 3). Since Adam was the representative of the human race, and since we all descended from him, his sin affected the whole human race (Rom. 5:12-19). Human nature is flawed by sin, and every human being except Jesus Christ has inherited original sin (Ps. 51:5; Rom. 3). Thus we are born with an evil and wicked nature (Eph. 2:3). We sin because it is our nature to sin. “I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature” (Rom. 7:18). Our hearts (Eccl. 9:3; Jer. 17:9) and minds are filled with sin (Eph. 4:17-18). Human beings are essentially evil, not basically good.

Total depravity does not mean that all persons are as bad as they could possibly be. It means rather that all human beings are affected by sin in every area of their thought and conduct so that nothing that comes out of anyone apart from the regenerating grace of God can please God. As far as our relationships to God are concerned, we are all so ruined by sin that no one can properly understand either God or God's ways. Nor do we seek God, unless he is at first at work within us to lead us to do so.

Even our wills are sinful. Our hearts are as hard as stone (Ezek. 11:19; Jer. 23:29). By nature we are slaves of sin (2 Pet. 12:19; John 8:34; Rom. 6:16, 20) and thus Calvinists deny that man has a free will, if by “free will” we mean the capacity to choose to follow God. In our sinful nature, we would rather be slaves to sin than to serve God as king.

Because of the utter sinfulness of our fallen condition, we do not have the moral ability to change our nature (Jer. 13:23). Everything we do has a sinful motive behind it, even when outwardly it appears to be good. “The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time” (Gen. 6:5; Rom. 8:7-8; Matt. 7:18). We do not seek God (Rom. 3:11), and we are unwilling to come to God for help (John 5:40 because we are unable (John 6:44).

Reformed theology also denies that man is ever morally neutral (Matt. 12:30). Man is always set against God. But this moral inability does not annul his responsibility. Quite the contrary— it compounds his guilt. Man is guilty and deserves to go to hell (Rom 6:23). Granted, some sins and some sinners are worse than others (John 19:11). But even the least sinner is totally depraved. Reformed theology teaches the full truth about human depravity. We are without hope (Eph. 2:12), without strength to obey (Rom. 5:6) and without excuse (Rom. 2:1).

## Unconditional Election

"U" stands for unconditional election. If sinners are as helpless in their depravity as the Bible says they are, unable to know and unwilling to seek God, then the only way they could possibly be saved is if God takes the initiative to change and save them. This is what election means. It is God choosing to save those who apart from his sovereign choice and subsequent action certainly would perish.

Man cannot save himself in whole or in part. Only God can save man. The good news of the gospel is that God has provided a way of salvation through Christ. But to understand God's way of salvation, we again have to go back to the eternal mind of God in predestination.

Before all things were created, God foreordained to separate his people from the rest of humanity, who would be left in their sins (Rom. 9:4-24). First, let us look at what the Bible teaches concerning the doctrine of election. In its simplest form, it is this: "He chose us in him [Christ] before the creation of the world" (Eph. 1:4). He did this in eternity past: "this grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time" (2 Tim. 1:9b). Those whom he chose are called "the elect" (Matt. 24:22) or "the chosen ones" (Luke 18:7). They are sinners who have been chosen from the beginning to receive salvation in Christ (2 Thess. 2:13). What moved God to choose them in the first place? God chose them by sovereign grace alone (Deut. 7:7-8) to receive mercy (Rom. 9:23), to go to heaven (Matt. 25:34), to be made perfectly holy (Eph. 1:4), and to be totally glorified (Rom. 8:29-30).

In a general sense, God wills all nations to be saved (1 Tim. 2:4). But in a fuller sense, God chose only some sinners to be saved. When he chose them, he wrote their names "in the book of life from the creation of the world" (Rev. 17:8). The Father chose them and gave them to Jesus (John 17:2). Jesus also had a vital part in this choice. He said, "You did not choose me, but I chose you" (John 15:16). Nor did he choose the elect on the basis of anything in them; he "foreknew" the elect in the sense of knowing them in love from all eternity (Rom. 8:29; 1 Pet. 1:2). He did not choose us because he foresaw that we would choose him; rather, he chose us solely out of free grace.

This election is personal. When the Christian comes to believe in Christ unto salvation, he then has the privilege of knowing that he is one of the elect (2 Pet. 1:10). God chose the elect by name. And since election does not depend upon anything in us, it is absolutely certain that all the elect will be saved. Therefore, we have Unconditional Election.

God did not choose everyone. He did not choose Satan or any of the demons, and he did not choose all sinful human beings. Some are elected, the rest were left in their sins (Rom. 9:22-24). This is the doctrine of reprobation. Since they were not chosen to salvation but left in their sins, they were foreordained to receive the due penalty for their sins— eternal wrath (Prov. 16:4). Their names were not written in the book of life in eternity past (Rev. 13:8), nor were they ever known by Christ in the election of grace (Matt. 7:23). But lest anyone think this is unfair, God replies, "Who are you, O man, that answers back to God?" (Rom. 9:20). No one can blame God, for no one deserves to be

elected; all deserve to be rejected. The wonder is not that God rejected some; the wonder is that he chose to save any at all.

## Limited Atonement

God chose some sinners to save. This did not make them saved at that time; it only guaranteed that they certainly would be saved in the end. Two more things needed to be done: prepare the means for their salvation and apply it to them. First, we read in Scripture that God foreordained that Jesus Christ would become a man and would die on the cross as the means of salvation (Acts 2:23; 4:28). Christ died as a substitute for others (1 Cor. 15:3; Rom.5:8). He suffered the infinite wrath of God for sin, and satisfied that wrath. This is called propitiation (1 John 2:2, 4:10). Because Jesus was a perfect man and God in the flesh, his sacrifice had infinite value. He did not pay an exact equivalent for our sins; he paid a superabundant payment infinitely above what we owed. All that he did would have been necessary had only one sinner been chosen, but he would not have had to do any more had all sinners been chosen.

Historic Calvinists teach that there are two aspects to this one atonement. There is a sense in which Christ died for all men everywhere (John 3:16, 2 Cor. 5:14, 1 Tim. 2:4-6). By his death on the cross, he removed all legal barriers for any man who believes. His death also secured a delay of judgment for them. The fact that all men are not already in hell is due to the atonement of Christ. Moreover, on the basis of this universal aspect of the atonement, salvation is offered freely to all. Christ died for all in this sense in order to be Lord of all, whether alive or dead, elect or non-elect (Rom. 14:9; Phil. 2:10-11).

Most evangelicals will agree with this analysis so far, but Calvinists go yet further. We teach that while the death of Christ is sufficient for all, it is efficient only for his people. He died for all, but especially for the elect (1 Tim. 4:10). He purchased some blessings for all, but all blessings for some. Since the elect are scattered throughout the world and mingled together with the non-elect, Christ purchased the whole world with the special intent of owning the elect. This special aspect of the atonement is called Limited Atonement.

This is the most unfortunate of the TULIP expressions, for it seems to suggest that Reformed people somehow want to restrict the value of Christ's death. This is not the case. The value of Jesus' death is infinite. The question rather is what the death of Jesus Christ was designed by God to accomplish and what it did in fact accomplish. Did God intend to save all individuals by Christ's death, an intention that has obviously been frustrated since not all persons are or will be saved? Or did he intend rather to save a specific number from among the whole? Did the atonement make salvation possible only? Or did it actually save those for whom Jesus died? Reformed theology stresses that God planned to save some persons only and that the atonement did in fact save those persons. Using the Bible's own terms, they stress that Jesus actually atoned for the sins of those the Father had elected to salvation, actually propitiated the wrath of God toward those people by taking their judgment upon himself, actually redeemed these individuals, and actually reconciled these specific persons to God. The proper meaning of limited atonement is "particular (or specific) redemption."

"Christ also loved the Church [the elect] and gave himself up for her" (Eph. 5:25; cf. Acts 20:28). A man may love everyone, but he has a special love for his wife and will do some things for her that he will not do for anyone else. The same is true with Christ. He has a general love for all men and did something for all men at the cross because they were his creatures. But he has a special love for his bride and did something special for her at the cross. He died for her in such a way as to guarantee that she would be saved, made perfectly holy and ready for Heaven.

There are other verses that indicate this special intent of the atonement. The Good Shepherd died for "the sheep" (John 10:15, 17-18). Lest anyone think that this could include all people everywhere, Christ goes on to say that some people are not his sheep (vs. 26). There is a sense in which he died for the sheep (the elect), but not for the goats and wolves (the non-elect). Christ also said that he would lay down his life for his "friends" (John 15:13-14) Isaiah 53:8 prophesied that Christ would die for God's "people", but not all men are God's people— only the elect. Christ died so as to make possible the salvation of all men, but he died to make definite the salvation of the elect alone.

## **Irresistible Grace**

God chose the elect and Christ died for them in a special way, but this redemption must be applied to them in order for them to be saved. As we have shown, there is a general sense in which God loves all men as his creatures (Matt. 5: 45b; Ps. 145:9). Theologians call this Common Grace. Moreover, there is a sense in which God wills all men everywhere to be saved (1 Tim. 2:4), and so he offers them salvation indiscriminately. We call this the Free Offer of the Gospel, and it is seen in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20). God issues a general call to all who hear the gospel (Matt. 22:14). All who hear are invited. But because the reprobate are totally depraved, they resist this call and the work of the Spirit.

So far, most evangelicals agree, but again Reformed theology goes a step further. Out of his special love for the elect, God does something that guarantees that they will accept his invitation. In addition to the general call to all men, God gives them a special call (Rom. 8:28-30) by his special grace (Gal. 1:15). By this Irresistible Grace God draws the elect irresistibly to himself with special lovingkindness (Jer. 31:3).

He causes the elect to come to him (Ps. 65:9), drawing us to Christ (John 6:44) and compelling us by divine omnipotence to come (Luke 14:23). Left to ourselves we resist the grace of God. But when God works in our hearts, regenerating us and creating a renewed will within, then what was undesirable before becomes highly desirable, and we flee to Jesus just as previously we fled from him. Fallen man resists God's grace, but regenerating grace is effective in that it accomplishes what God intends.

How does God do this? There is much mystery in how God works grace in the hearts of the elect, but the Bible tells us that God sovereignly opens the dead hearts of the elect (Acts 16:14). They do not open their hearts to receive Christ in the first place, but Christ

opens their hearts that he might enter. Once he opens our hearts, we can hear his voice and follow him (John 10:16, 27). In the process, God sovereignly gives the elect new life (John 5:21). They do not regenerate themselves; they are regenerated sovereignly by God's free grace (John 1:13). The new birth is a new creation that is sovereignly given by God's irresistible grace (2 Cor. 5:17). "When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins" (Col. 2:13).

The distinctiveness of Reformed theology on this point is that "Salvation is of the Lord" (Jonah 2:9). If anyone is ever to be saved, it is only by God's free grace from first to last. This saving grace is sovereignly given to the elect. It is not merely offered, for it is offered to all. It is sovereignly and irresistibly given to the elect and to them alone.

## **Perseverance of the Saints**

God has promised two blessings of salvation for the elect. First, he has promised to keep them forever, and never to forsake them. Second, he has promised to work within them so that they will never fall away from him. Both blessings are expressly promised in Jeremiah 32:40: "I will make an everlasting covenant with them: I will never stop doing good to them, and I will inspire them to fear me, so that they will never turn away from me."

The fifth point of Calvinism is the Perseverance of the Saints. God has promised to preserve the elect. Once they are saved they are preserved, kept, and guarded by God himself (Ps. 37:28, 2 Tim. 1:12). He will never leave or forsake the elect (Ps. 94:14; Heb. 13:5). Jesus promised that he would never cast out any who came to him (John 6:37). The elect are kept in the same way in which they were saved, namely, by the invincible power of God (1 Pet. 1:5). Jesus says, "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:28-30). The elect are eternally secure in the hands of both Christ and the Father. God keeps them safe from Satan (1 John 5:18); "the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one" (2 Thess. 3:3). It is true that on occasion the elect slip and fall into sin. But when they do, God catches them and makes them stand again (Rom. 14:4; cf. Deut. 33:27). Even when the elect let go of God's hand, God's hand does not let go of them: "though he stumble, he will not fall, for the Lord upholds him with his hand" (Ps. 37:24).

The elect will always be saved because they were eternally elected by grace (Rom. 8:29-30). Christ will not lose even a single one of those who were chosen (John 6:39). The Bible reasons that if Christ loved us enough to die for us, then surely he will do as much to keep us saved (Rom. 5:9-10; cf. 8:32). "Once saved, always saved." God's gifts and God's call are irrevocable (Rom. 11:29). When the elect are irresistibly drawn to Christ and regenerated by free grace, they are sealed by the Holy Spirit as a guarantee that they will always belong to God (Eph. 1:13-14).

Scripture also says that one must remain in faith and obedience to advance to heaven. Only those who persevere to the end will be saved (Matt. 10:22, 24:13). But the glory of it all is that the elect most certainly shall persevere to the end. Christ is both the author and

the finisher of our faith (Heb. 12:2). The perseverance of the saints depends on the perseverance of the Savior.

The true believer has received a new nature in regeneration, which guarantees that he will not live in permanent, perpetual unbelief and disobedience (1 John 3:4-10). The doctrine of eternal security excludes the possibility of a regular life of sin for true believers. How? The elect persevere because God perseveres in them. God has promised to finish what he began in the elect (Phil. 1:6). He will preserve the elect and glorify them in the end (Rom. 8:30; 1 Cor. 1:8-9). God perseveres with us, keeping us from falling away, which we would certainly do if he were not with us. But because he perseveres we too also persevere. In fact, our perseverance is the ultimate proof of our election. We persevere because God preserves us from full and final falling away from him.

What about those who "fall away" by apostasy? They were never saved to begin with. Had they been true Christians, they would have persevered and been preserved (1 John 2:19). The fifth point of Calvinism teaches both the preservation and perseverance of the saints by the sovereign grace and power of God.

## **Conclusion**

One objection to Reformed theology is that if one believes along Reformed lines, he or she will lose all motivation for evangelism. "If God is going to do the work, why should I bother?" But it does not work that way. It is because God does the work that we can be bold to join him in it, as he commands us to do. We can do so joyfully, knowing that our efforts will never be in vain. Reformed theology lays special stress on the cultural mandate, which means the obligation of Christians to permeate society and work for the transformation of the world and its cultures. We are called to be in the world and not to withdraw from it. We are to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the prisoners, and such things. Yet, the chief needs of people are nevertheless spiritual, so that social work is therefore no adequate substitute for evangelism. In fact, efforts to help people will only be truly effective as their hearts and minds are changed by the gospel.

The doctrines of grace have a two-fold effect. First, they humble the sinner and encourage the saint by giving God his due place. Reformed theology invigorates the believer; if God is for us, who can be against us? (Rom. 8:31). The second effect is that these doctrines give great glory to God. God is God, and he will not give his glory to another (Isa. 42:8). Reformed theology recognizes that man is man and God is God. We exist for God's glory. And so our song shall ever be, "To God alone be the glory!"