**The Rise of Calvinism, Our Own Fault**

My position, simply put, is this: the American Evangelical church, including my people, the Baptists, have been, in the past, significantly off-target in the teaching and preaching of the truth regarding the Christian life, and the gospel as a whole; and into this “truth vacuum” has flowed a number of false teachings. One of the most noteworthy is Calvinism. In this article I intend to point out some of the errors and inconsistencies of Calvinism, but first I want to stress that the long term answer must be approached as a mending of the division between brothers, and will center on a return by both sides to the truth of the bible.

In my view both sides have missed the essence of the gospel and have allowed other errors to creep into their belief systems. Having said that I must say that I feel that Baptists are much closer to the truth and even though I certainly view the Reformed churches as fellow believers, I have serious and widespread “issues” with their belief system. But before I get to those “issues” I want to review the error shared by both groups; even though I recognize that a fair number of my fellow Baptists have “seen the light” in recent times.

The problem with mankind is that we have utterly failed to function in accordance with our original design, and have not therefore produced the result intended by our creator. That result is the glory of God, Isa. 43:7. Part of the problem is our misunderstanding of the word glory. Glory is not a place, as in, “One day we’ll make it to glory.” Nor is it thanksgiving or the proper assigning of credit, as in, “Give God the glory.” Now clearly heaven is filled with God’s glory and it is entirely right that we give thanks to God, and that we give Him all the praise and credit for His work; but the word glory has a much larger meaning. Rom. 3:23 states that our sin has caused us to fall short of the glory. Even that verse is commonly “under interpreted”. It doesn’t mean that on those occasions when I sin I fail in that moment to glorify God; it means that my sin has placed me in a position where I cannot ever, even for a moment, function as God, my designer, intended for me. In my fallen state I am totally incapable of producing the intended result, the glory of God. (In this one area I almost agree with Calvinist brothers in their use of the term Total Depravity.)

In light of Rom. 3:23 it would seem that a man who did not sin would not have fallen short. Obviously there is only one such man, our Lord Jesus Christ. Consider Heb. 1:3: “who being the brightness of *His* glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high,” Scripture teaches us that we are seated there with him, and it is only on the basis of our union with Him that we have any chance of doing what He did, being the brightness of the glory of God, and manifesting through our mortal flesh the image of God. In other words Heb. 1:3, among many other things, teaches us the meaning of glory, it is the outshining of the likeness and image of God. Jesus accomplished in His humanity the purpose for which we were made, He was a visible expression of the invisible God. “For the law was given through Moses, *but* grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared *Him.*” John 1:17-18. Likewise you and I are created for that very same purpose, to be the visible expression of an invisible God twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. (Do you see now how very much we need God to be God in and through us?) God’s original design of man involved God Himself being in that man, and only in that way can the intended result, God’s glory, His likeness, ever be shown through us. “always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus’ sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.” IICor. 4:10-11. Paul apparently believed that the life of Jesus could be manifested in us, but not by our efforts or our wisdom but through our death. This is why being filled with the Spirit is a command for every Christian for every moment of our lives. It is why Jesus told His disciples that without Him, they could do nothing.

This, of course, is an infinitely high goal and there has been a movement in the church for many centuries to “water down” the standard. Almost every church has a different version of what God wants. Some churches spell it out and others have a less formal list, but few state the truth. We Baptists have almost reduced the standard to a list small enough to fit on a small envelope. Sunday after Sunday churches all over this nation tell their congregations what to do but they almost always word their admonition as that which the listeners can accomplish if they simply apply their own will power and increases their level of commitment; but we almost never tell our listeners that they cannot do what they’ve just been told to do apart from divine intervention. Without the very life of Christ being lived through them all their sincere well intentioned efforts will be in vain. We have almost lost sight of the meaning of the Christian life. ”The Christian life is the life of Christ, lived now, by Him, through you.” Mj. Ian Thomas. Jesus told us that out of our bellies will flow rivers of living water. I believe that the living water is the life of Christ. This alone will satisfy the standard for the results intended by God when He created us. Just head knowledge of this truth will not alone achieve the intended result, but only a yielded heart. We are to present ourselves as living sacrifices. Obviously even those who know these truths fail many many times, and that is certainly true for me. And this brings up the other issue where we have failed.

As Christians we must know that our sins are forgiven. We have, however, not done a good job of teaching this. Our Catholic brothers believe that a man about to die must confess his sins to a priest to be clean. As Baptist we have removed the need for a human priest from that story but not much else. We present an image of God as smiling down on us, until we sin, at which time God turns his back on us and refuses to look back at us until we repent and confess our sins. I believe that God the Father turned His back on His Son so that He would never need to turn His back on me. He promised that He would remember my sin no more forever, so why does He turn His back on me as if He still is upset at me over my sin. Look, either all our sins have been forgiven or they haven’t. If they haven’t then all is lost, God’s a liar, so let’s go play golf. But if they have then lets live in that blessed place and stop our “stinkin thinkin” about our Father; and stop asking Him to do what He promised He has already done. Certainly we sin and clearly that sin prevents us from enjoying God as we should, and yes we should confess that sin, but we should not think that God is ever disgusted with us nor that He has turned His back on us. He views us always as being as pure as the driven snow. This is true on my best day and also true on my worst day. Do you think the father in the prodigal son parable was grumbling under his breath about his “lost” son’s evil behavior? Was he in his house making a list of all the sins of his wayward son? There was someone making such a list and one who clearly was disgusted with his younger brother, but it wasn’t the father. The father spent his days looking down the road leading to his house, looking with love and complete forgiveness for his son. Since the true nature of our forgiven status is so poorly taught, our people doubt that God actually wants to be with them. Some would say that a full understanding of our cleansing in Christ removes the fear of God’s wrath, therefore promoting sinfulness. Certainly God is capable of getting our attention, such as the famine He sent to the prodigal son; but in I Jn. 2:1 we find a clear connection between abstaining from sin and having an advocate. I believe that a clear realization of our complete cleansing in Christ is the most powerful thing in our “arsenal” against a sinful lifestyle. Without that understanding we will be hesitant to go boldly into the throne of grace, and thus be forced to live a powerless life. You couldn’t come up with a better system to promote sinfulness if you tried to. This hesitancy to come into the throne of grace has a snowball effect for the more you stay away, the more you sin, and the more reluctance you have to draw near to God. We must break this cycle. I’m not saying it will be easy or quick but under solid biblical teaching God’s people will begin to walk more closely with God. As we do that we increase our understanding and appreciation for what our precious Savior purchased for us. “You’ll never really know how pure the blood of Christ has made you until you draw close enough to God to see your reflection in His eyes.”

As you can see above I feel that we are much to blame for any number of false teachings by our failure to hold to the truth. Having said that I have some very serious issues with Calvinism. My chief problem is with limited atonement. You have to be a mental gymnast to follow their convoluted tap dance around the extremely clear verses which flatly contradict their heretical assertion. The truth is clearly taught by scripture, “And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.” 1Jn. 2:2 “For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if One **died** **for** **all**, then all died;” 2Cor. 5:14 “and He **died** **for** **all**, that those who live should live no longer **for** themselves, but for Him who **died** **for** **them** and rose again.” 2Cor. 5:15 If you talk to a Calvinist about these verses you’ll be led down a very winding crooked path of explanation as to why the clear meaning of these verses is not the truth. That conversation is usually a waste of time. The fact, indeed the central fact, of Christianity is that Jesus took all man’s sins upon Himself and paid the penalty for all mankind. “For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God *did* by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh.” Rom. 8:3 The law could condemn the sinner but it could not condemn sin. Jesus did what the law could not do. His death paid the debt for all men, indeed for all sin, for sin itself. When on the cross Jesus said “It is finished.” If you go to Greece today and hang around in a local store you might hear the same words, in Greek of course. The phrase means, “Paid in full.” Jesus paid all the debt of all men. One of the original complaints of John Calvin was that if Jesus paid the debt for all men, then no man would go to hell. Consider Jn. 3:18, “He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, **because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.** “ Notice that the reason for a lost man’s condemnation is not his sin but because he has not believed. In a sense John Calvin was right, men do not go to hell for their sin, they go to hell because they refuse to believe in Christ. Nowhere in scripture are the words, “Man goes to hell because of his sin.”; nor does the bible teach that myth.

Although the paragraph above is true it is not going to convince many Calvinist, especially the devout ones. That is not my main reason for writing this article. I am hoping to get some open minded Calvinists to ease up on teaching limited atonement; but primarily I want my Baptist brothers not to be drawn into this cult-like belief system. I would also like one Calvinist on one day to actually be honest about what he believes. I have absolutely no problem standing before a congregation and telling them that the way to God is open for all of them because all their sins have already been paid for. (By the way, not all Baptists preach this; that is our fault.) But I can’t help but wonder what goes on in the mind of a Calvinist when he stands and presents the gospel. If he was honest he would have to say something like this: “I stand before you today to present the gospel but to be honest with you I need you to understand that I am not talking to all of you. I do not know who of you is elect and who is not, but probably there are some from each group before me now. For those of you are the elect then you have nothing to worry about. You will of necessity come to receive Christ. No matter what you think or feel right now your destiny is set, you cannot change it, you will be saved either tonight or some other time. You do not need to worry about dying before you accept him; for that cannot happen. You do not need to be concerned about any sin you might be planning to commit. Nothing you can do, say, or think can ruin your eventual salvation. Congratulations. Now to those of you who are not elect, then to be honest with you, I must tell you that you have no hope whatsoever. Your eternal destiny is set and no promise of God or verse of scripture can offer you the slightest hope whatsoever. You will not accept Christ tonight or any other day. You will live out your days, then die, then burn in eternal torment for all eternity, and there is nothing you can do about it. You may go to church for the rest of your days if you want to, but it will have no effect on God’s decision which was made before you were born and has nothing whatsoever to do with anything you have done or will do. You can study the bible until you’ve memorized it and then “claim” every promise printed there, but it will do no good. God does not love you, He never loved you, and He never will love you. It will bring a smile to his face to send you off into everlasting misery. The reason for your miserable state, and the reason that you cannot be saved, is because Christ did not die for you. Your fate was sealed 2000 years ago. CHRIST DID NOT DIE FOR YOU, NOR DID HE PAY FOR YOUR SINS, AND THEREFORE YOUR FATE IS SEALED AND YOU ARE HELLBOUND AND YOU COULD NOT BE SAVED EVEN IF THE LORD GOD ALMIGHTY STOOD BEFORE YOU AND APPLIED ALL THE GRACE IN THE UNIVERSE. HE, GOD, WOULD MISERABLY FAIL, FOR YOU MUST PAY FOR YOUR OWN SINS AND THERE IS NO SACRIFICE LEFT SINCE THE SACRIFICE OF JESUS CHRIST MY LORD WAS NOT IN EFFECT FOR YOU.”

Now I ask you, does that sound like the God of the bible? This teaching is heresy of the first order. Apparently Jesus lied when He said it is finished; because in fact it was only one tenth or one seventh or by some number only partially finished. Finished for some but not for others. Paid in full for some but not paid at all for others. What a cruel and wicked lie for God to inflict on the world. My dear Calvinist brothers are genuinely dedicated and love God and had rather die than insult the integrity of God, yet because they have been caught up in what is almost a cult; they stand every Sunday and call God a liar. But they would say that they would never word their message as I did in the paragraph above, but that is what they believe in their heart and God looks at your heart. To my Calvinist brother: I have been where you are. I thought I was sure that I was correct. I don’t expect you to stop just because of my writings here, but I truly believe that if you’ll just allow your heart to hear what God is saying to you then there is hope.

The other issue I have with the Reformed belief system is their treatment of the responsibility of man. Apparently lost man is not responsible but saved men are. The quote below gives you some idea of this perplexing mixture of ideas.

“But we mean more than this by the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. We mean that the saints will and must persevere in the obedience which comes from faith. Election is unconditional, but glorification is not. There are many warnings in Scripture that those who do not hold fast to Christ can be lost in the end. **There is a falling away of some believers, but if it persists, it shows that their faith was not genuine and they were not born of God.” John Piper**

**So even the elect can be lost. They get out of this contradiction by stating that God will not allow the truly elect to stray. So ultimately they totally reject man’s responsibility anywhere. T**his perseverance belief has the effect of ultimately removing even the elect’s responsibility. The problem with this is of course the bible. The entire bible, which is of course not written to lost men but to the saints, is packed full of appeals to the responsibility of man. Seek the Lord while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near. Ask, seek, knock. Repent. Follow me as I follow God. Do not harden your heart. Believe. Forgive. Be filled. Draw near. Enter boldly. To deny that we as saints are able to respond to God in obedience , by dependence on the indwelling Christ, is to deny a major theme woven throughout the bible. A Christian will live a life of joy and peace or a life of self-imposed poverty, depending on his choices. But the perseverance teaching states that God will make him obey Jesus just as He made him accept Jesus. In the final analysis nothing is man’s fault. Man is not accountable for accepting Christ and a saved man is not accountable for obedience. God makes some believe and then makes them obey.

l believe in the sovereignty of God, but I believe that in His sovereignty God gave man the ability to respond. To believe that man’s responsibility does not enter the picture in any part of man’s life, lost or saved, is to say that God not only chooses who will be saved but also chooses which of His children will be allowed to believe the truth. I actually had a Calvinist tell me that it was not “given to me” to believe the truth, to explain why I was not a Calvinist. So let me get this straight: The Calvinists have two groups of people, the elect and the non-elect, and apparently they also have two groups of the elect, those destined and chosen to receive the truth and those poor saps like me who have been chosen by God, their Father, to live out their lives burdened with a false concept of God and not allowed to share in the glories of the truth that all good Calvinists enjoy on a daily basis. Consider the implications in my life of being relegated by God into a state of ignorance. Surely my Calvinist brothers understand that in my God imposed ignorance my life will be full of problems and self-imposed poverty, and my witness will be essentially meaningless and fruitless. I simply can’t believe that any sincere Christian would be comfortable with such a division in the Body of Christ. The fact is that **beliefs about how you enter, will inexorably find their way into how you operate once inside.** This perseverance notion holds many people captive and enslaves them to a legalistic system which, as all legalistic systems do, elevates the lawgiver and enslaves the listener. If any of them were to try to leave then all their friends would conclude that they were never saved. So by peer pressure they are held captive and must submit to the whims of the pastor/elders. The whole thing is a mess and that is because it is built on lies.

I urge you not to get involved with the Reformed movement. Pray for them and for us. God help us all.