

# WHAT IS CALVINISM?

by Lee Moses

John Calvin was a very bright, educated, and charismatic man. When he was only twenty-six years old, he published his landmark work, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. The tremors caused by this work still reverberate throughout the modern religious world, as Calvinism (or select components thereof) is taught in virtually every Protestant denomination. However, this doctrine is rife with error that impugns the love and grace of God, and robs mankind of incentive to love and obey Him.

## Calvinism is a System of Augustine's Ideas

The concepts underlying Calvinism did not originate with Calvin. Augustine of Hippo, a man who spent his earlier years of adulthood wandering from religion to religion and philosophy to philosophy, first expressed the basic tenets underlying Calvinism. It is noteworthy that many of Augustine's doctrines bear remarkable similarities to those of his previous beliefs. Especially could this be said of Manichaeism, a Persian cult which purported to be a blend of all world religions, and held that man's body is from Satan and therefore evil.

In *Institutes*, Calvin took the teachings of Augustine, and, following their implications, formulated them into a consistent system of doctrine. This system entirely stands together or entirely falls together. If any one of its tenets can be proven false, the entire system falls like a house of cards. Calvin made a number of revisions to this work, which in itself would not appear unusual. However, he claimed to be Divinely led as he penned the pernicious pages of *Institutes*. He claimed that he had received visions from heaven instructing him to reform the church. Of course, if he had received direct guidance from God in this endeavor, he would never have required revision. God would not have made a mistake. God would not have changed His mind.

The five points of Calvinism have been organized under the acrostic "TULIP" as follows:

**T** - Total hereditary depravity  
**U** - Unconditional election  
**L** - Limited atonement  
**I** - Irresistible grace  
**P** - Perseverance of the saints

As has brother Robert R. Taylor, Jr., we extend sincere apologies to the pretty little flower of the same name. However, no apology will be forthcoming to the system of doctrine which has bloomed throughout the world with a deadly fragrance.

**Calvinism is a Misunderstanding of the Nature of Man**

The psalmist exclaimed, "*I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made*" (Psalm 139:14). Truly man has been wonderfully made by his Creator, not only regarding man's physical attributes, but also in his intellectual, emotional, and spiritual capacities. Following Adam and Eve's transgression in the Garden of Eden, there was clearly a fall in the state of man (Genesis 3:15-19). There was a fall regarding man's work responsibility, his relatively painless existence, his ability to live forever, and his fellowship with God. Apparently dissatisfied that this fall is far enough, the Calvinist adds that every child is born guilty of sin and thus deserving of eternal punishment. The Calvinist also adds that every human being is incapable of responding to God's offer of salvation until God forces him to respond. Calvinism's misunderstanding of the nature of man will be addressed particularly in next month's article by Denny Wilson, "Are Babies Born Sinful?"

### **Calvinism is a Misunderstanding of the Sovereignty of God**

Calvinists believe that to affirm the sovereignty of God, one also has to affirm that everything that happens is God's will. Is there sin in the world? Is there suffering? Are there men and women who will refuse to obey God, and thus spend eternity in hell? If so, they reason, the all-powerful Sovereign God of the universe must wish it so. They fail to take into account that the all-powerful Sovereign God of the universe would desire offspring that love Him (compare with 1 John 4:8, 16). Love cannot be coerced; it can only occur by a choice of man's own free will.

As dictator of Geneva, Switzerland, Calvin was a man of power. For what he deemed heresy, he banished seventy-six and executed fifty-seven between the years of 1542 to 1546 alone (F. W. Mattox, *The Eternal Kingdom*, p. 259). Regarding Calvin's iron-fisted tenure it has been written,

“There is but one word heard or read: *Death* .... During the space of twenty years, commencing from the date of Calvin's recall, the history of Geneva is a bloody drama . . . . At each step we encounter chains, thongs, a stake, pincers, melted pitch, fire, and sulphur. And throughout the whole there is blood. One imagines himself in Dante's Hell, where sighs, groans, and lamentations continually resound?” (Phillip Schaff, quoting Audin, *Life of Calvin*, 36:354, in *The History of the Christian Church*, Vol. 8, p. 493).

Christ sternly prohibited such an approach of carnal reinforcement of spiritual law (Luke (53-56; John 18:36). As a tyrannical dictator, Calvin displayed a great misunderstanding of his responsibilities as a man of power. Perhaps this explains his misunderstanding of his responsibilities of an all-powerful god, believing that God would likewise have to be tyrannical if He were to be all-powerful. Calvin and his followers to the present day insist that to disagree with their doctrine is to denigrate God's sovereignty.

Calvinism's misunderstanding of the nature of God will be addressed in a future article by Ted J. Clarke, "Can Just Anyone Be Saved?" and another article by Chris Perry, "Can Man Resist the Grace of God?"

### **Conclusion**

Sometimes people speak of a "harmless misunderstanding.." There is nothing harmless about Calvinism. It is blasphemous and it is self-condemning. In this series of articles, the reader will find the tenets of Calvinism honestly examined in the light of Scripture. It is our hope that the reader will as well examine those things that are said within these pages in the light of Scripture. *"Prove all things; hold fast that which is good. Abstain from all appearance of evil"* (1 Thessalonians 5:21-22).

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