

What In The World Is Calvinism? (VIII)

“Do not ADD to what I command you and do NOT SUBTRACT from it...” (Deut 4:2; also see Rev 22:18-19)

Because “Calvinist beliefs” are becoming more and more prevalent again amongst Southern Baptist Seminary graduates, many more Calvinist minded pastors are being called to “preach and teach” in our Southern Baptist churches. This means that there are a growing number of Christians within the Southern Baptist Convention that are becoming aware that they are hearing “new” (i.e. or just “different”) teachings on “salvation” either from their own pastor or from their friends who go to other Southern Baptist churches. Because Jesus has made it clear that He desires us to “*KNOW the truth*” (John 8:32; John 16:13), “*TEACH the truth*” (Matt 28:20), and be “*UNIFIED by truth*” (John 17:17, 21-23), it is encouraging for me to know that we have many Christians here at Northbridge Baptist Church who are still “concerned” about the TRUTH and want to make sure they are being taught the Word of God correctly (2Tim 2:15).

Since “Calvinism” involves a system of biblical interpretation that is “different” than what I am teaching here at Northbridge (and what has been traditionally taught at most Southern Baptist churches) AND since “Calvinism” is causing increasing controversy and “disunity” among cooperating churches within the Southern Baptist Convention, I have written this series of articles on “Calvinism” so that you can better understand “why” it is different and “why” I disagree with it. Although I do believe that most (if not all) Calvinist I have met are indeed “Christian brothers” and are going to be spending eternity in heaven with ALL “true believers” (regardless of denominations or system of doctrinal beliefs), I still believe that Calvinism can be a “danger” to Southern Baptist unity and our “cooperative” efforts to advance the Kingdom of God (Acts 1:8; Matt 28:19-20).

First of all, I believe that it is NEVER “harmless” to misinterpret the Bible. When Calvinists teach that Jesus Christ ONLY died for the ELECT (*i.e. Limited Atonement; see my article dated March 11, 2008*), it requires them to “add” and/or “take away” from the literal Word of God. For instance, Isaiah wrote of the Messiah, “*We ALL, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on Him (Christ) the iniquity of us ALL*” (Isaiah 53:6). In order for Calvinists to teach that Christ did not die on the cross to pay for the sins of the whole world, they have to interpret “ALL” written by Isaiah to not really mean “ALL”. Yet, not even Calvinists would argue against the fact that we have ALL “gone astray” and we have “ALL sinned” (Rom 3:23). But, to maintain their “elect only” doctrines, they say that the Messiah did not take upon Himself the “iniquity” of us ALL. Does God not warn us to be careful about taking away the meaning of the His “words”? (Rev 22:18-19)

Another prime example of how Calvinist practice “rewording” Scriptures to support their doctrines occurred when John Owen (a noteworthy professed Calvinist) retranslated John 3:16 by writing “*God so loved HIS ELECT throughout the world, that He gave His Son with this intention, that by Him believers might be saved.*” (*) Some extreme Calvinists have even boldly claimed that “often the Bible uses the words *world* and *all* in a restricted, limited sense... It is clear (to CALVINISTS) that *all* does not mean “all”! (**) Statements like this allows them the self-proclaimed permission to interpret John the Baptist’s claim that Jesus is the “*Lamb of God, who takes away the sins OF THE WORLD*” (Jn 1:29) to mean that Jesus ONLY takes away the sins of the ELECT “of” the world. Clearly, Calvinist regularly IMPOSE their doctrine upon the Bible instead of DERIVE their doctrine from it. But, the Holy Spirit was given to believers to help us UNDERSTAND God’s revelation (1Cor 2:10-13), not to be CONFUSED by it (1Cor 14:33). How more confusing can you get by openly saying to readers “ALL doesn’t mean ALL”!??!

In addition to confusing people by misinterpreting the Bible, Calvinism can also lead to misleading people about their salvation. Because Calvinists teach that only those that are ELECTED are saved, it leads the average church member to ask the obvious question: “Am I one of the ELECT???” Calvinism denies that salvation is truly offered to “all” people. It also refutes the belief that God gives all people the “free will” enough to choose to “believe” or “reject” His offer of salvation. Therefore, Calvinism downplays what you “believe” as confirmation and/or assurance of your salvation. Some Calvinists have even taught that you can believe in Jesus Christ, pray to accept Him as your Lord and Savior, try to grow in your walk with Him through Bible study and prayer...AND STILL BE LOST! Why? Because they say salvation “*does not depend on MAN’S DESIRE or EFFORT, but on God’s mercy.*” (Rom 9:16) For Calvinists, this means ELECTION is the key to being saved...NOT what you believe! This leads many people (even some who are already Christians) to continuously DOUBT their salvation, because they can’t prove for certain that they are one of the ELECT. This confusion is unhealthy to Christianity, because it can prohibit “believers” from sharing the gospel with others if the “believers”, themselves, ARE NOT EVEN CERTAIN THEY ARE SAVED! That’s why 1John 5:13 says: “*I write these things to you who BELIEVE in the name of the Son of God so that you may KNOW that you have ETERNAL LIFE.*” Christians don’t have to prove they are of the ELECT to be certain of their salvation; all they have to do is to truly BELIEVE in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior to be assured that they have eternal life (Rom 10:9-10, 13)!

Another danger of Calvinism, which has been observed throughout church history, is that churches dominated by Calvinist Theology tend to be less “evangelistic” than those who believe that God wants “*ALL to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth*” (1Tim 2:4). Since Calvinists believe that most people CAN’T respond to the gospel, they can be very quick in judging those who do not respond right away to the gospel as being from the NON-ELECT category of human beings. That’s why many Calvinist pastors do not offer ALTAR calls at the end of their sermons. They just believe that the ELECT will get saved, no matter what, and the NON-ELECT are going to hell, no matter what. Thus, why put too much confidence in MAN’S effort to get other people saved??? God has ALREADY “decided” who will and who will not get saved! Everything else is man’s foolishness!

I, on the other hand, believe that God WANTS all people to be saved. Therefore, Northbridge is trying to obey God’s command to “Love ALL people”, to “PREACH the gospel” to ALL people, and to COMPEL (even those who at first “resist” the gospel) to ALL be saved. Although Calvinists should not be treated as WICKED UNBELIEVERS or PAGAN ENEMIES (for they are certainly not!!!), I truly believe that any system of beliefs that try to convince us that God does not want ALL to be saved...could be used by Satan to hinder us from STRIVING to get all men saved. This is unacceptable to me!

In my next article, I will prove to you that not even JOHN CALVIN, himself, would accept “Calvinism” as it is taught today.

* Owen, John. **The Death of Death in the Death of Christ.** Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth, 1967, page 214.

Palmer, Edwin H. **The Five Points of Calvinism. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972, page 52.