

What In The World Is Calvinism? (V)

“This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all WHO BELIEVE.” Romans 3:22

As we continue in our study of Calvinism, I hope that you understand that the main issues that bring disagreement between Calvinists and a majority of Southern Baptist theologians are primarily centered around the doctrine of who CAN be saved “and” HOW a person is saved because of the free gift of salvation that comes through faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ at Calvary. Calvinists believe that only a few people (i.e. called the “elect”) were chosen by God and “predestined” by Him to be saved before He even created the world. Since they also believe that all mankind lost their ability to exercise any type of “free will” to obey and respond righteously to God’s demands to repent of sins and to submit to the Lordship of Christ, Calvinists reject the notion that any person has ever “freely” chosen to be saved. They teach that salvation only occurs when, by His grace alone, God intervenes in the life of one of the lost “elect” and gives them the desire to believe and the faith to be born again (Eph 2:8-9; John 3:3-8). Calvinists believe that salvation is something DONE TO someone by God, rather than something OFFERED TO someone by Him. On the other hand, most Southern Baptist ministers (your pastor included) believe that the free gift of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ is “offered to” ALL MANKIND even though God “foreknew” that most people would CHOOSE to reject God’s gift of forgiveness and eternal life.

Last week I provided some of the Scriptural evidence that Calvinists use as proof texts for their doctrine that God’s “sovereignty” (without any assistance from man’s “free will”) is the key attribute of God to remember when interpreting the Bible in reference to man’s salvation. This week, I want to provide you with what I think is a BETTER attribute of God to concentrate on as you attempt to understand the TRUTH about “how” and “who” can be saved as it is revealed in God’s Word.

Based on my own study of “clear” verses of Scripture that relate to God’s plan of salvation for mankind, I believe that God has chosen to emphasize His attribute of “LOVE” over His attribute of “sovereignty”. While there is no doubt that God is “sovereign” and can do whatever He wants with His creation (Rom 9:19-22) and no man can resist God’s ultimate will (Isa 43:12-13), for reasons known only to Him, God continually lifts up “LOVE” as the motivating factor for saving mankind from their sins. For example, in 1 Corinthians 13, we are taught by the Scriptures that the greatest Spiritual “gift” from God is LOVE (v. 13). Jesus clearly said *“For God so LOVED the world that He gave His one and only Son...”* (John 3:16). Many other salvation verses include “LOVE” as the primary characteristic of God’s intentions:

Romans 5:8 *“But God demonstrates His own LOVE for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”*

1John 3:16a *“This is how we know what LOVE is: Jesus Christ laid down His life for us...”*

1John 4:9-10 *“This is HOW God showed His LOVE among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him. This is LOVE: not that we loved God, but that He LOVED us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”*

There are many other verses which God provided to us to indicate “LOVE” is a focal point for understanding what Jesus Christ did for us...not His “sovereignty”. As a matter of fact, no where in Scripture have I found a verse which comes out and says: “God is SOVEREIGN”. But, in the first epistle of John we read: *“God is LOVE.”* (1John 4:16b) Thus, I believe it is obvious that Spirit of God wants us to concentrate on His “LOVE” as we try to look into the *“deep things of God”* (1Cor 2:9-12).

Before we determine “who” God chose to “love” as it pertains to salvation, let us first make sure we understand “how” God “loves”. When the Bible says *“God so LOVED the world...”*, the Greek word translated by the English word “love” is “agapao” which is a derivative of the root word “agape”. “Agape” love is “benevolent” love; meaning, the one who loves someone with “agape” love is doing what is best NEEDED for the person that is loved. “Agape” love is a perfect, non-selfish, outwardly directed concern for the needs of others (1Cor 13:4-8a). It is a type of love that ONLY originates from God (1John 3:19) and it is totally undeserved by anyone He loves. It is love not based on the EMOTIONS of the one doing the loving, but on the INTENTIONS to benefit the one being loved. It was His “agape” love that God was demonstrating to all of mankind through Jesus Christ, NOT His sovereignty! The universe and the things “created” reveal God’s ultimate power and transcendence (Rom 1:20), but Jesus Christ is (and always has been) eternal (John 8:58). Jesus Christ came into the world to reveal God’s “LOVE”, God’s “agape” love, for fallen mankind. And since “agape” love is directed at providing for the NEEDS of the one loved, a good question to ask would be: “What are the NEEDS that Christ came to supply?”

This is where I share common beliefs with those who call themselves “Calvinists”. I also believe that *“ALL mankind has sinned and fallen short of the glory of God”* (Rom 3:23; Rom 3:10-13) and that the sinful nature that we all inherited prevents us from ever having the ability to make godly decisions (Rom 5:12, Rom 7:18). Our sins truly made us *“objects of God’s wrath”* (Eph 2:1-3). Therefore, we NEEDED God’s LOVE. And the Bible says in Ephesians 2:4: *“Because of His great LOVE (i.e. agape) for us, God, who is rich in MERCY, made us ALIVE with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by GRACE you have been SAVED.”* God’s love supplied the “mercy” (i.e. not given us what we do deserve!), the “grace” (i.e. given us what we do not deserve!), the “truth” (John 5:24; John 6:63-64), and the “atonement” for sin (1John 2:2) that ANY person needed to be saved. I also believe, as Calvinists do, that because of our “depraved” nature, NO ONE freely desires to be saved and obey God unless God draws them to Himself (John 6:44).

All of this leads to the BIG questions “How MANY people in the world did God actually LOVE (agape)?” and “Did God

LOVE every person enough to send Jesus Christ to provide for EVERY sinner's need...or just a select FEW?" Next week, I will use Scripture to argue the point that I totally disagree with Calvinists who claim God's love is only directed at the "elect". For I believe that God's love sent Jesus to not only be a sacrifice for our sins, "*but also for the sins of the WHOLE WORLD.*" (1Jn 2:2b)