

## An Exposé on Reformed Theology and Calvinism

Barry O'Dell

**J**ohn Calvin was born July 10, 1509 and died May 27, 1564. He was a leading thinker of the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century. Frankly, I do not know if anyone within the last 500 years has been more influential in religion than he. Over the next several editions of FCGN, the articles will accurately and succinctly address the doctrines of John Calvin and Reformed Theology.

The Reformation movement had its roots in a desire of men to break away from the abuses and errors of Roman Catholicism. In particular, the sale of indulgences was one of the fuses that lit the desire for reformation. John Tetzel (1465-1519) was a leader in the sale of indulgences. His sales pitch for indulgences was “As soon as the gold in the casket rings, the rescued soul to heaven springs.” An indulgence is defined by A.N. Trice in *The Bible Versus Romanism* (1928) as “the remission of the temporal punishments of our sins which remission is granted by the pope for ‘all punishments due to sin, not only the eternal, but also the temporal.’” The sale of indulgences seems to have become more prevalent during the days of Pope Urban II (1035-1099). Throughout the next few centuries, the sale of indulgences increased. It was Martin Luther (1483-1546) who penned his “95 Theses” and nailed them to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany in 1517 in an effort to raise discussion about various doctrines being taught at the time. It has been said that Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses served as the birth of the Protestant Reformation. In time, the Reformation aimed at moving from a “works-based” salvation of Catholicism to a “faith alone” based salvation. In September of 1522, Luther published his translation of the New Testament in the German language. It was in this text that he translated Romans 3:28 as, “We therefore conclude that a man is justified without the works of the law, only through faith.” While he tried to explain what he meant in that translation in a letter he wrote in 1530, the fact is that we see a movement from the Roman Catholic works-based salvation to a Protestant Reformation thought of salvation by faith alone.

### **So What?!**

It is during the time of Luther and Calvin that the current Reformed Theology/Calvinism (RT/CV) doctrines strongly emerged and they are still impacting souls today - even within the Lord’s church.

Many people are familiar with the **TULIP** doctrines of Calvin...

**Total** hereditary depravity.

**Unconditional** election.

**Limited** atonement.

**Irresistible** grace.

**Perseverance** of the saints.

The impetus behind this edition of FCGN and several that shall follow is that the doctrines of John Calvin and Martin Luther still impact people today - even those within churches of Christ! We hear from our pulpits such things as “Romans 7 says that we cannot help but sin!” This author heard one preacher say, “The only way we can overcome our sinful flesh is to get baptized and get the gift of the Holy Spirit.” They’ll say things like, “Babies are born innocent, but not good” and “dead men can’t do anything!” Dear reader, that is Calvinism! It is in our pulpits and classrooms!

These doctrines must be defined clearly and soundly defeated with Scripture. The goal

of the following articles and editions will be to equip the saints with a knowledge of Reformed Theology/ Calvinism and the ability to soundly and confidently defeat this foolish and wicked doctrine. *For the sake of space, we will use the abbreviations of RT for Reformed Theology and CV for Calvinism in the articles.* At the core of RT/CV is the sovereignty of God. As such, some have changed the **TULIP** into **STULIP**. RT/CV holds that God is sovereign over everything and, if anything happens, it is because of the sovereign choice of God. Most specifically, we’ll be addressing salvation in view of this thought. RT/CV teaches that man has a sinful nature and that, in such a state, he can do no good thing unless and until God wills it by a special operation of the Holy Spirit. Not only that, but it is so particular and certain that the saved are saved and the lost are lost and neither group can do anything to alter that condition! RT and CV turn the God of heaven into the most arbitrary and vicious being possible! It should also be understood that, while RT and CV do have their differences, there is not really enough difference to tell them apart.

It is my prayer that what you read in this and the next few editions of FCGN will enlighten you on this subject and equip you with a knowledge of God’s word so that you can identify and overcome the foolish and wicked doctrines of RT and CV.

**“Reformed Theology and Calvinism turn the God of heaven into the most arbitrary and vicious being possible!”**

**A**t the heart of the false doctrine of Reformed Theology/Calvinism (RT/CV) there is a great misunderstanding of God's sovereignty. If we do not properly understand God's sovereignty ourselves, then we will never be able to show to the practitioner of RT/CV how the proverbial house of his doctrine is built on sand. In order to understand God's sovereignty, we must understand His nature and His will.

**His Nature.** Let us understand the nature of God through one verse, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which his in heaven is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). The word here for perfect means "complete or fully actualized." God is a being of harmony, perfect harmony, in all ways. He acts and behaves according to His ideals. In fact, He is THE ideal. God cannot act in a way contrary to His nature, as that would mean He would not be in harmony with Himself. He would be imperfect or incomplete. God being unable to be incomplete means that He can not do anything carrying out His will that would be contrary to His nature. God wants all men to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth (1 Tim. 2:4). To carry His will in salvation out, He cannot authorize someone to lie as lying is contrary to the ideals by which God governs Himself. We know God cannot lie (Titus 1:2). The reason God cannot lie is not because He does not possess the ability to do so. We must therefore conclude that the reason God cannot lie is because He has placed that restriction upon Himself.

It would go against His nature to lie. Remember, God MUST act according to His nature or He is not God. The RT/CV has, at the core of their doctrine, a god who goes against his own nature.

**His Will.** God's will is His desire or what He wants. Before the foundation of the world, He purposed to have all together in one location, the church (Eph. 1:10; 3:1-11). His will can be clearly seen unfolding on every page of Scripture - the salvation of man. His desire is that ALL men should come to repentance and NONE should perish (1 Pet. 3:9). Also, He is no respecter of persons in matters of salvation (Acts 10:34-35). How then can the ultimate, limitlessly powerful Being both desire that all be saved and allow some to not be saved? The RT/CV simply explain this away by saying, "God is sovereign in all things and it is not for us to question." The problem is that their view of God has God at odds with Himself, making their god no God at all. They teach that since God is sovereign in all things then He must have willed some to be damned and some saved from the foundation of the world. This is both arbitrary and unjust. It simply goes against the nature of God and God will not do anything in carrying out His will which goes against His nature.

**True Sovereignty.** God being sovereign simply means that He is the ultimate in authority in all things. He has limitless authority and limitless power to enforce that authority. You can rest assured that if it happens, then it falls under the purview of God's authority ultimately. Now,

that does not mean that every little thing is dictated by God. After all, you made a decision to turn left when you could have just as easily turned right. Do you think God decided that? He did not. But, a decision as simple as turning left when you could have just as easily gone right, which is your will, still falls under the purview of God's will because God is powerful enough to use man to the end goal of His will. This power is difficult to comprehend. For instance, God would not will His own Son to die. The Bible clearly states He sent His Son for that purpose making it His will. How we understand this is that God did not desire for His Son to die, but His overarching will in saving mankind demanded a sacrifice. Therefore, ultimately, Jesus dying was God's will in that it facilitated His end goal. This is a very difficult thing to comprehend - a Being of limitless power having a will has the ability to enforce it using beings of very limited power responding to His will to carry out His will. This causes us to ask a very difficult question in relation to free will and God's sovereign will. "How do you limit a limitless being?" The aforementioned question was posed by Jordan Peterson during a podcast, lecture, or some other piece of content he has online. Forgive me for not citing the source,

but Dr. Peterson has thousands of hours of content and I have listened to at least hundreds of it. To answer the question Peterson talked about the Divine Logos. What he means by that is what you and I would call "The Word." For instance, God will not "leave us nor forsake us" (Heb. 13:5).

God possesses the ability to leave us and forsake us. Therefore it would be accurate to say, "God cannot leave us nor forsake us" because the limiting factor of God's power is His own Word or, as Peterson put it, the Divine Logos.

We must understand this limiting power when understanding God's sovereign will. God's will, just like His power, will always be limited by His Word. God clearly wills all men to be saved. All men are clearly not saved. The RT/CV assert that this means that God's sovereign will is that some are willed to be saved and some are willed to be lost. This puts God's will and His Word at odds with one another and, therefore, makes Him no God at all. The correct understanding of God's sovereign will is that God wills all men who desire to be saved to be saved. The Word further teaches that it is all who fear Him and work righteousness will be accepted (Acts 10:34-35). Can you see how God's will is done even when some are lost and some are saved? Ultimately, God's will is carried out in that what He prescribed in His Word is carried out. He has seen fit to give us a choice. His will is for all to be saved. Individually, we can accept salvation or not. Our carrying out our will in no way thwarts the carrying out of His. The RT/CV serve a god who is unjust and goes against His own nature. The God of the Word is powerful enough to give those whom He loves the freedom to choose or reject in such a way that His will is still accomplished. Which would you rather serve, the impotent god of RT/CV or JEHOVAH GOD ALMIGHTY who is powerful to the saving of mankind?

*"In order to understand God's sovereignty, we must understand His nature and will."*

**P**aul's letter to the church in Rome is the most abused letter in the New Testament. One of the most prominent systems of error is known as RT. This ideology makes its arguments on Paul's use of Abraham in Romans 4 and Paul's word "sanctification" in Romans 6. Consider with me some important questions that will help in these matters.

**Why did Paul use Abraham as an example of being saved by faith apart from works in Romans 4?** RT argues that Paul is using Abraham as an example of one who did absolutely no works to be justified, but was justified by God by faith only. Consider with me the historical and immediate context and why Paul used Abraham as an example of salvation by faith. Paul used Abraham because (1) Abraham lived before and without the Mosaic Law, but yet was justified; (2) Abraham was justified before he was circumcised; (3) Abraham is an example of how we today are justified by grace through faith; (4) Abraham is proof that God's promise to Abraham and to the world did not depend on the Mosaic Law or oneself. Anyone who ignores these obvious historical and contextual facts is not being honest with the text, but is knowingly being dishonest with the text. If we can be honest, we recognize that the doctrine of RT and it's proponents did not come along until Augustine and then, later, John Calvin and others.

**Is Romans 6 about sanctification, justification or baptism?** First, Paul is describing the new life a Christian is charged to live "in Christ." A person "in Christ" is not to continue in sin that grace may abound (6:1-2). A Christian has died to a life of sin by being baptized into Christ Jesus' death (Rom. 6:3). Just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even a risen soul from baptism has been raised to walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:4). In this new life a Christian is charged to no longer be a slave of sin because the old person who lived a life of sin has been crucified (Rom. 6:6). Now, since that person has been raised from baptism to walk in newness of life, he is to consider himself to be dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus (Rom. 6:11). He is to no longer present his members as weapons of unrighteousness to sin. Under the Gospel of grace such a person is released from the dominion of sin through forgiveness and justification (i.e., made just, just as if they'd never sinned; Rom. 8:1). The "we" of Romans 6:15 refers to those who have been baptized into Christ Jesus (Rom. 6:3-4). To whomever one presents himself a slave to obey, he is that one's slave whom he obeys - whether sin to death or obedience to righteousness. Second, Paul was thanking God for something the Christians at Rome

had done - they had obeyed from the heart the "form of doctrine" to which they were delivered (Rom. 6:17). Romans 6 is about living a sanctified life, but within such a context Paul takes a snapshot of something they did in the past to be free from the penalty of sin i.e., be justified by faith. It was obeying from the heart that form of doctrine.

**What is that form of doctrine?** Reader, Romans 6:3-4 and 17 is speaking of water baptism (cf. Mt. 28:18-20; Mk. 16:15-16; Acts 2:38, 41; 8:36; 22:16). It is a "reenactment" of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. The doctrine that was delivered to them was the death, burial, resurrection, and appearances of the resurrected Christ (1 Cor. 15:1-4). A form is a type. How do I obey from the heart that "form of doctrine?" By repenting of sins and being baptized into Christ (Rom. 6:3-4).

**What happened at the point of their being obedient from the heart to that "form of doctrine?"** They were set free from the penalty of sin and became slaves of righteousness (Rom. 6:17, 23). What was the line of demarcation? When they obeyed from the heart "that form of doctrine." When a penitent believer obeys that "form" they are clothed with Christ (Gal. 3:26-27). That means they have been sanctified i.e., set apart. A penitent believer is not justified and then baptized later in order to be sanctified. Being justified from sin and being sanctified to God occurs at the same time - when a penitent believer obeys from the heart that "form of doctrine." There is no way a person can be declared righteous by God while not at the same time being set apart [sanctified] by God. Peter wrote that we purify our souls in obeying the truth and when we obey the truth we are born again (1 Pet. 1:22-23). When the penitent believers in Rome actively obeyed from the heart that "form of doctrine" they passively became slaves of righteousness. As slaves of righteousness they were *then* to present their members as slaves of righteousness for holiness i.e., unto sanctification (6:19). They then did this by doing what the context says they were to do - reckon themselves alive to God and dead to sin; to not let sin reign in their mortal body (Rom. 6:12). If RT is true, then Paul has in Romans 6 individuals who are justified from their sins only to still be slaves of sin meriting eternal death (cf. Rom. 6:17-18, 23). No, dear reader! When you obey the form of doctrine from the heart, God makes you a servant of righteousness, no longer a slave of sin! All who are in Christ are justified and sanctified! But there's just one way to get into Christ (Rom. 6:3-4; Gal. 3:26-27)! Think about it! Search the Scriptures and obey the Gospel from the heart - not RT.

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**The Churches of Christ**

- Bible only (2 Pet. 1:3)
- Name of Christ (Rom. 16:16)
- Began in Jerusalem (Isa. 2:2-3; Acts 2:1-4)
- Established by Jesus (Matt. 16:18)
- Purchased with Jesus' blood (Acts 20:28)
- Married to Christ (Rom. 7:4)
- Established in the 1st century (Acts 2:47)
- Jesus the Head of the One Body (Eph. 1:22-23; 4:4; 5:23)
- Added to the church by God (Acts 2:41, 47)

**Salvation**

- Saved by grace, though faith (Eph. 2:8-9)
- Not by faith alone (Jas. 2:14-26)
- Not by grace alone (Matt. 7:21)
- Belief and baptism (Mk. 16:16)
- Repentance and baptism (Acts 2:37-38)
- Belief, confession, and baptism (Acts 8:37-38)
- Hear, belief, baptism (Acts 18:8)
- Faith and baptism (Gal. 3:26-27)
- Baptism does save us (1 Pet. 3:21)

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