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Does Calvinism Matter?

author: Brian Proffit

issue:

In this year of John Calvin's 500th birthday, we wanted to talk to John Piper (pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church and vocal proponent of Calvin's teaching) about the relevance of Calvin to Christians today. Piper was busy preparing for his Desiring God 2009 National Conference in Calvin, but gave us permission to use his thoughts from materials he had written.



john piper
desiringgod.org

In a world in which the church is already divided by so many doctrinal differences, is it important to take a stand on Calvinism? Why do you believe it is so important to understand that, in regards to salvation, God chose us first?

Because God means to get all the glory for our salvation. We need to know the One on whom we're leaning and what we're really leaning on Him for. We need to know how we got saved. We were born not of blood, not of man, not of the human will—we were born of God. That is, we were brought into being as spiritually alive people by God. We were dead, according to Ephesians 2, and now we are alive together with God—by grace we have been saved.

Grace is the sovereign work by which God speaks to the dead corpse of our own spiritual life, and says, "Lazarus, come forth," and we awake from the dead, or "John Piper, come forth," and we are brought into being. We need to know that so we can

rest in God's sovereign saving of us. That's how we got saved! We didn't somehow raise ourselves from the dead. We didn't somehow create—out of nothing—spiritual affections. God did this for us, and he means to be glorified for all of this.

God wants to be acknowledged for all that He has done and for all that He is. We will not give Him all of the praise and glory that He should get if we don't acknowledge what He has done for us. So I think it is really important that we teach people how they actually got saved, because we want them to begin—now better than never—praising and honoring and relying on God for all that He did and not just for part of it.

This can be a sticking point in evangelism. There are those who feel—perhaps because of some things in their past—that they must not be one of God's elect, so they're already doomed.

I've had some people very close to me who have been in this category, so I don't take the question lightly.

You should say to them, somewhere along the way, "You know, don't you, that the doctrine of election is not a paralyzing, destructive, excluding doctrine? It is a hope-giving, liberating doctrine for people like you." And then you could explain it like this:

The doctrine of unconditional election, which I believe is biblical, says that God chooses us apart from any preconditions that He creates or foresees. He chooses us before we were born or did anything good or evil. This means that any given person at any given moment, looking back over their lives—whether the last five minutes or the last five decades—and seeing them shot through with sin, thus giving evidence of them being outside of Christ, is still eligible for salvation. None of the conditions of his past may be used to exclude him from heaven.

A person who is struggling with whether or not he is elect is doing exactly the opposite. He is taking election and using it to exclude him from salvation. And I'm saying that, in reality, the doctrine of unconditional election makes it dead wrong and logically impossible to exclude one's self, at this point, from redemption, because the doctrine of unconditional election says that there is nothing you can bring to this moment right now to warrant your exclusion.

You can't point to anything in your life that excludes you from election. Therefore believe and prove that you are elect! I think that has tremendous power to free people.

Some have said that Calvinism can lead to an almost fatalism, in which people take the sovereignty of God to the extreme of saying they have no responsibility—even for their own sins or spiritual growth.

In 1 Peter 2:2 God commands us not to be spiritual fatalists. Peter says in verse 2: "Like newborn babes, long for the pure milk of the word, that by it you may grow in respect to salvation." The word for "long" here is very simply the word "desire"—it's a command to desire.

What this means is that if you feel stuck because you don't have the kind of spiritual desires that you should, this text says,

You do not need to be stuck! It says, "Get them! Get the desires you don't have." If you don't desire the milk of the Word, start desiring it!

Now, isn't that amazing! A command to desire! A command to feel longings we do not feel. A command to feel desires we do not have. Is anything more contrary to spiritual fatalism than that?



John Piper is the pastor for preaching at Bethel Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and the author of more than 30 books. [Check out his Web site here.](#)



Brian Proffitt ([e-mail him here](#)) brings experience as pastor, writer, and publisher to his role as chief visioneer of BP Resources and author of the [Smart Ministry Blog](#).

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