

“Professor Shawn Wright has given us a good, reliable, readable, basic introduction to Calvinism, and some of the main questions that surround it. If you are a non-Calvinist seeking answers about Calvinism, you will find a clear and winsome presentation of the position, as well as a response to some key criticisms. If you are a Calvinist looking for a model of how to talk about these things with non-Calvinists, then you will find a helpful and humble model for explaining the Calvinist position and its points of disagreement with Arminianism, in a fair-minded, evenhanded way. If you are seeking something that will help you to understand, summarize, and explain these issues, you will find a welcome addition to your library. The biblical doctrines discussed in this book matter. They matter to our understanding of who God is, what he is like, and what he has graciously done. So read and be edified, and give all the glory to God.”

—Ligon Duncan,
Chancellor/CEO, John E. Richards Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology,
Reformed Theological Seminary

“Shawn Wright’s book on Calvinism is biblically rooted, theologically astute, historically informed, and pastorally shaped. Wright lucidly explains the tenets of Calvinism, answers common misconceptions about it, and refutes objections to Calvinist soteriology. Wright’s book is the first book I would give to anyone with questions about Calvinism, for a pastoral, warmhearted love for the gospel, missions, and holiness pervades this work. I recommend this work enthusiastically.”

—Thomas R. Schreiner,
James Buchanan Harrison Professor of New Testament Interpretation, Associate Dean,
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“How we make the greatness of God central in our thought and in how we see ourselves and our world is at the very heart of biblically shaped faith. Over the ages, Calvinists have pondered these matters very deeply. In this book, Wright explains that for which Calvinism stands. It is a book that is informed and informative. It is lucid and forthright. And even when engaging ideas in conflict with Calvinistic beliefs it is fair and even gentle. It is a very commendable study.”

—David F. Wells,
Distinguished Senior Research Professor,
Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

“The resurgence of Calvinism today has necessitated a book that painstakingly answers the many honest questions that are being asked about it. Thankfully, this book answers such questions with biblical and historical fidelity. Here is a book to put into the hands of such inquirers whose understanding of Calvinism may have been formed by those who caricature it. The fact that each chapter is a question helps readers go straight to the issue that is dogging them. Shawn Wright’s book will also help young Calvinists to better understand and express the historic theological position they espouse—to the glory of God!”

—Conrad Mbewe,
Pastor, Kabwata Baptist Church,
Lusaka, Zambia

“One of the most striking features of the writings of the apostle Paul is his willingness to raise the most strenuous questions against his doctrine, and then to answer those questions fully and powerfully. This follows the same pattern seen perfectly in our Lord Jesus Christ, who took on all comers and answered their deepest questions. The same spirit of courageous truth-telling fills Shawn Wright’s excellent volume, *40 Questions About Calvinism*. The questions raised are comprehensive and well-organized, and each one is addressed with a wonderful balance of thoroughness and clarity. This volume will prove a helpful tool to all people seeking to understand Calvinism, and more importantly, biblical doctrine concerning God’s sovereign actions in saving sinners.”

—Andy Davis,
Senior Pastor, First Baptist Church,
Durham, North Carolina

“This is a clear and thoughtful book that fairly represents and quotes from alternative viewpoints, contains much informative historical material, and wisely counsels against common misunderstandings and misuses of Calvinist teaching. This book ultimately presents a highly persuasive argument that what is commonly called ‘Calvinism’ is, quite simply, a system of belief that is taught in the Bible from beginning to end.”

—Wayne Grudem,
Distinguished Research Professor of Theology and Biblical Studies,
Phoenix Seminary

“For all those who want to understand what the Bible says about how we are saved, as well as the arguments surrounding that discussion, Shawn Wright has provided a valuable service. *40 Questions About Calvinism* provides both a clear and persuasive case for the sovereignty of God in salvation, and a helpful resource for specific questions raised by that fundamental truth. With clarity, brevity, accuracy, and always with an eye to pastoral relevancy, Dr. Wright addresses the major topics and objections to Calvinism. But the most pleasant surprise of the book, other than its positive and irenic tone, is the final section, aimed at encouraging Calvinists to be fruitful in gospel ministry because of, not in spite of, the doctrines of grace. This is a great book to hand to a church member with questions, or a young theology student in need of orientation. And it’s a wonderful reminder to those of us long familiar with these doctrines that they are not only true, but beautiful, because they tend most to magnifying God’s glory. I highly recommend it.”

—Michael Lawrence,
Lead Pastor, Hinson Baptist Church,
Portland, Oregon

“This book is an excellent introduction to Calvinism by a seasoned scholar, Shawn Wright. Those looking for a solid overview of Calvinistic soteriology that is scholarly, yet clear and accessible, will find it here. Despite the obvious disagreements I—as an Arminian—have with Wright’s Calvinistic theology, I highly recommend this erudite and well-written volume for those who want to gain a fuller understanding of the Calvinistic system of thought.”

—Matthew Pinson,
President,
Welch College

40 QUESTIONS ABOUT
Calvinism

Shawn D. Wright

Benjamin L. Merkle, Series Editor

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To Jonathan and Madison,
Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures forever!
(Psalm 107:1)

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Introduction

“Calvinism” is a hot topic in many conservative Christian contexts in our day. Just mention the word, and you’re likely to become entangled in an argument you weren’t looking for. Let me be clear about my intentions in writing this book, then. I didn’t compose it in order to pick a fight. Nor is it meant to prepare you to be a more adept theological brawler. Several better motivations are behind the book in front of you. In fact, four factors led me to write it.

One impetus was simply to explain. Since “Calvinist” is a provocative label that regularly breeds misunderstanding, I wanted to lay out the Calvinistic interpretation of key biblical doctrines for interested readers’ consideration. I sought to explain the Calvinistic view of salvation to those interested in understanding it better, whether they are Calvinists, Arminians, or don’t know what they are or why the different labels matter. My goal has not been to win an argument with Arminians, let alone to take cheap shots at their system of doctrine. As one who was an Arminian for years and largely grew up within that tradition, I have great respect for many Arminians. I have no desire to add more acrimony to what often has been a heated debate between Calvinists and Arminians carried on with varying degrees of light. Of course, though, to explain Calvinism I have had to compare it with its main evangelical rival, Arminianism. I hope that I have represented evangelical Arminianism fairly. Calvinism, I think, stands or falls based on its consistency with the Bible’s own testimony of who we are, who God is, and the manner in which God saves sinners. My hope is that after reading this book, you’ll be convinced that Calvinism is correct because you see its contours clearly taught throughout Scripture.

Second, I wrote this to inform those who are new to Calvinism. Many have been surprised that Calvinism has been enjoying a resurgence in our increasingly secular society.¹ There are probably several factors behind

1. For example, the March 23, 2009, cover story of *Time Magazine* was “10 Ideas Changing the World Right Now.” The third idea noted was “The New Calvinism” by David Van Biema (http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1884779_1884782_1884760,00.html). In addition, see Mark Oppenheimer, “Evangelicals Find Themselves in the Midst of a Calvinist Revival,” *The New York Times*, Jan. 3, 2014 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/04/us/a-calvinist-revival-for-evangelicals.html>).

this renaissance.² As one who has been encouraged by the growing coterie of “young, restless, and reformed” Christians seeking to hold on to gospel convictions in our day, I want to speak to this group of men and women.³ I want these readers to be fortified in their biblical understanding. In addition, I hope that these pages will remind you, brother and sister, that Calvinism is not fundamentally an esoteric, ivory-tower system of thought to be debated by rarified theologians. Unfortunately, it’s not atypical for those new to Calvinism (we sometimes refer to this as “the cage stage” of Calvinism) to become *de facto* hyper-Calvinists for a season as they swing from Arminianism to the other end of the spectrum until they keep reading their Bibles more and see the grave errors of hyper-Calvinism. They see that they must pray. They must evangelize. Though the cage stage may be an understandable phase, we should not indulge it, because the Bible doesn’t. A proud, or non-praying, or non-evangelizing, or worldly Calvinist is, at best, grossly inconsistent with his or her system of thought. My hope is that you will be provoked to humble yourself before the majesty of God more, pray more, share the gospel more, support missions more, and pursue holiness more vigorously by reading and contemplating this book. Those characteristics—not being able to dissect the intricacies of the lapsarian debates!—are what should mark biblical Calvinists.

Third, a desire that God would be glorified has fueled these pages in front of you. Throughout Scripture God’s supreme desire is that he would be honored and receive the glory that is his due. As sinners, we regularly fail to do this and erect all sorts of idols to worship in the place of the one true God. As Christians our battle against indwelling sin in many ways is simply a fight to eradicate idolatry. Biblical Calvinism is the most helpful antidote to idolatry I know. At its heart, Calvinism broadcasts a God who is supreme in all ways, one who is unlimited and saves those who are unwilling and unable to save themselves.⁴ The biblical heart of Calvinism is that “salvation belongs to the LORD!” (Jonah 2:9), not to us. The biblical core of Calvinism is the remarkable “but God” of Ephesians 2:4, alerting us to the fact that even though we were utterly spiritually dead, unable to save ourselves due to our willing entrapment in sin, and therefore meriting only God’s righteous eternal wrath (2:1–3), God lovingly, kindly, and mercifully rescued us (2:4–6). And he did it so that he would be glorified (2:7). All of us sinners struggle to think as highly of God as we ought. Calvinism aids us to think rightly of our Lord, for it exalts the God who is absolutely sovereign. “Our God is in the heavens; he

2. See, for example, Mark Dever, “Where’d All These Calvinists Come From?” June 18, 2014 (<https://www.9marks.org/article/whered-all-these-calvinists-come-from/>).

3. Collin Hansen, *Young, Restless, Reformed: A Journalist’s Journey with the New Calvinists* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

4. For a Bible-saturated picture of the glory of God, see John Piper, *The Pleasures of God: Meditations on God’s Delight in Being God*, rev. ed. (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2012).

does all that he pleases” (Ps. 115:3). In this sense, I agree with B. B. Warfield’s sentiments about the heart of Calvinism:

Perhaps the simplest statement of it is the best: that it lies in a profound apprehension of God in His majesty, with the inevitably accompanying poignant realization of the exact nature of the relation sustained to Him by the creature as such, and particularly by the sinful creature. He who believes in God without reserve, and is determined that God shall be God to him in all his thinking, feeling, willing . . . is, by the force of that strictest of all logic which presides over the outworking of principles into thought and life, by the very necessity of the case, a Calvinist.⁵

My desire that we magnify God’s glory has influenced the tone of this book. Although I have tried to answer common questions asked about the Calvinistic understanding of salvation, I have tried not to be fundamentally defensive. Arminians have historically expressed several grave concerns with Calvinism. I believe that each one of them is answered satisfactorily by the testimony of Scripture. And it’s because of the Bible’s clear witness to Calvinism that I have attempted a more positive approach in this book. Calvinism is not mainly a denial of certain things Arminianism holds to be true (such as corporate election and universal atonement). Nor is it primarily an assertion of truths that Arminians say Calvinists cannot legitimately believe (such as indiscriminate gospel proclamation, God’s love for all people, and the importance of prayer). Although that is a common portrayal, the reality is much different. Calvinism asserts truths; it doesn’t fundamentally deny things. And it asserts those truths based on the authority of God’s self-revelation to us in Scripture. Calvinism proclaims, “God saves!” Because of that, “All glory belongs to him!”

Fourth, I have been motivated by a desire that we rightly understand the gospel, the good news of reconciliation that God effects between sinners and himself.⁶ Evangelicals are gospel-people. Calvinist or Arminian, we believe that people are sinners who must be born again (John 3:3). Calvinists rejoice that our non-Calvinistic brothers and sisters believe these truths and tell them to non-Christians. How effective, though, is the gospel to save?

Calvinism believes that in the gospel of Jesus Christ God actually accomplishes the salvation of his chosen people. It rejoices in these truths because

5. B. B. Warfield, “Calvinism,” in *Calvin and Augustine* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1980), 288–89.

6. Two helpful books on the gospel are Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Gospel?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010) and Will Metzger, *Tell the Truth: The Whole Gospel to the Whole Person by Whole People* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1984).

the gospel teaches us that “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (1 Tim. 1:15). He completed his mission. Indeed, his name is Jesus “for he will save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21). Calvinism rejoices in the fact that God in Christ accomplished all that he determined to do in saving his people from their sins. It’s only by God’s particular grace that anyone—Calvinist, Arminian, or anyone else—believes the gospel and receives salvation. Praise his name! Calvinism stresses that God in the gospel actually saves his chosen ones by the power of his Spirit (John 3:8).

This is the “Amazing Grace” gospel of John Newton that actually saves wretches like you and me. And it’s the “And Can it Be?” gospel that Charles Wesley lauded when he sang,

Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature’s night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray,
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free.

Calvinism is not the gospel. But it is a clearer expression of the biblical gospel than any of its evangelical rivals. I hope readers will be encouraged to trust in, and share, the gospel of Jesus Christ by reading these pages.

These four reasons motivated me to write this book. There’s not much, if anything, new in it. I have benefited from reading many authors who have helped me to understand Calvinism better. You will see many of their names in the footnotes. However, the format of the 40 Questions series makes it uniquely helpful both in displaying the contours of Calvinism and in answering the typical concerns people have about it. Patient readers who work through the book in its entirety will understand the Calvinistic understanding of salvation in its totality. Yet its format will also enable readers to find answers to the questions they have by turning directly to the pertinent questions. For those who would like to quickly understand the argument of this book, I would suggest starting with five questions: 2, 3, 6, 10, and 40. The answers to these five questions get to the biblical essence of Calvinism, I think. The seventeen questions of Part 1 introduce the subject. Here you will understand what I mean by “Calvinism,” what the answers to three of the most prevalent Arminian arguments against Calvinism (God’s love, prevenient grace, and human free will) are, and what the most pertinent historical background issues are in the differences between Calvinism and Arminianism. Part 2 explains the significance of TULIP, or “the five points of Calvinism,” showing their importance and the biblical justification for them. In Part 3, I deal with four additional theological issues related to Calvinism that are not part of the “five points.” Finally, Part 4 attempts to encourage Calvinists to be practical—i.e., biblical!—in their doctrine. If you

think that Calvinism has no bearing on real life, you might want to begin your reading here.

I could not have written this book on my own. I owe a fundamental debt to my father, Robert Wright (1933–2010), who taught me to love Jesus and trust the Bible. Though he never agreed with all of my Calvinism, he loved his Bible. I hope he would appreciate the biblical character and irenic tone of this book. One of the hardest parts of writing this book was narrowing down my initial list of well over sixty questions to the forty you now have in front of you. Several friends helped me to arrive at these forty. My thanks in this regard to Andrew Ballitch, David Dykes, Joshua Greever, Steve Matteucci, John Morrison, Matthew Robbins, Tom Rogstad, Tom Schreiner, and Gary Steward. My dear wife, Gretchen, read most of the penultimate draft of the book and asked many good questions and made many astute observations of it that, I hope, made the final version much clearer. Two friends at Clifton Baptist Church, Ken Billings and Tom Rogstad, kindly read the entire book and made helpful suggestions about both style and content. Ben Merkle, the book's editor, encouraged both lucidity and brevity. I hope I heeded his advice. I also thank the trustees of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary for granting me a half-sabbatical to work on this book, and its president, R. Albert Mohler Jr., and my dean, Gregory A. Wills, for supporting my efforts. Thank you, dear friends. Of course, I alone bear responsibility for the final contents of this book in front of you.

Finally, I dedicate this book to my son, Jonathan, and his wife, Madison. From a young age Jonathan regularly asked insightful questions about Scripture and theology as we worked our way through a catechism, read the Bible together, dialogued about our Muslim neighbors in Central Asia, and discussed numerous books and sermons. He continues to be one of my regular and trusted conversation partners. Madison grew up in Papua New Guinea in a family fueled by the beliefs expressed in this book and out of a desire to bring the gospel to a people who never before heard of Christ. She exemplifies the reality that biblical Calvinists are evangelists and missionaries. I pray that Jonathan and Madison will delight even more in the God of their salvation as they revel in the biblical truths Calvinism trumpets.

PART 1

Introductory Questions

SECTION A

General Questions

QUESTION 1

What Is the Difference between “Calvinism” and the “Reformed Tradition”?

Since “Calvinism” is an easily misunderstood term, we need to define it carefully, especially distinguishing it from “Reformed,” a word with broader connotations than “Calvinism.” Calvinism is a movement set on recovering the Bible’s understanding of the relationship between a sovereign God and responsible sinners. It spans many centuries and has been affirmed by pastors and theologians from a variety of church backgrounds.

“Reformed” vs. “Calvinist”

We need to clarify two essential words: “Reformed” and “Calvinist.” Philip Benedict notes that the followers of John Calvin did not prefer the latter term. Instead, they styled “themselves variously the evangelical, reformed, evangelical reformed, or reformed Catholic church, the term *reformed* emerging as the most common label” in the latter part of the sixteenth century.¹ “Reformed,” then, has a historically rooted genesis. These churchmen sought to distinguish themselves from both Catholics and Lutherans.

“Reformed” often has connotations that are beyond the debate between Calvinism and Arminianism over soteriology.² John R. de Witt, for example, identifies seven key distinctive markers of the Reformed tradition.³ First, it stresses not only the truthfulness of Scripture but also that the Bible must be followed in its entirety. Second, God is completely sovereign. The

1. Philip Benedict, *Christ’s Churches Purely Reformed: A Social History of Calvinism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), xxiii (italics original).

2. “Soteriology” refers to the doctrine of salvation.

3. John Richard de Witt, *What Is the Reformed Faith?* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1981).

Reformed tradition insists that “nothing can stop or retard the progress of the gathering of his elect people, the building of his church, the coming of his kingdom.”⁴ Third, God’s grace towards his elect children is invincible. Fourth, Christians must submit to Jesus as Lord, not just hold on to him as Savior. We can’t have the latter apart from the former. Fifth, there is a distinction between biblical law and gospel. Fundamentally, the law teaches us how God desires for his children to live. Sixth, God has given his people the “cultural mandate” so that the church would impact society for God’s glory (see Gen. 1:28). Seventh, the Reformed tradition has a distinct view of pastoral ministry “and of the life of the church in relation to it,” which is marked by a particular form of church order.⁵

I. John Hesselink similarly offers five “characteristics and distinctive emphases” of the Reformed tradition.⁶ First, it is God-centered, especially in its emphasis that God has to sovereignly make sinners willing to come to Christ. Second, it bases life and ministry on Scripture. Third, it teaches that doctrine must impact how one lives. Fourth, it develops a particular view of the individual Christian’s relationship to the surrounding culture such that the believer should seek to glorify God in every facet of his or her life, whether he or she is called to be a bricklayer or a missionary. Finally, it has a particular view of the church, most commonly seen in Presbyterian ecclesiology, with its emphasis on both teaching elders and ruling elders and their particular relationship to the congregation.⁷

Both de Witt and Hesselink alert us to the fact that “Reformed” is about more than just how one comes to be saved by Jesus. It involves worldview distinctives and the cultural mandate (which we will not address in this book). It also has much to do with a particular vision of what the church is. According to Benedict, “At its core was the conviction that God’s holy word made clear the form of worship expected from his children. . . . The gratitude they owed [God] in return should inspire them to serve him in all their deeds, to worship in the manner he had decreed, and to shun all false devotion and idolatry.”⁸ In other words, part of “being Reformed” is that one follows the “regulative principle,” which is simply the belief that God in Scripture has regulated both how the church is to be organized and how the church is to worship him. In this way, the Reformed were different from Lutherans who assumed that as long as their worship practices were not clearly prohibited biblically, it was

4. *Ibid.*, 9.

5. *Ibid.*, 17.

6. I. John Hesselink, *On Being Reformed: Distinctive Characteristics and Common Misunderstandings* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant, 1983), 95.

7. *Ibid.*, 104–5.

8. Benedict, *Christ’s Churches Purely Reformed*, xv–xvi.

fine to use them in their liturgy. “Reformed,” in part then, has to do with one’s vision of the church and worship.⁹

Richard Muller made a similar point in critiquing the notion of a “Reformed Baptist.” Even though such a Baptist’s soteriology might be orthodox, that individual fails to see it as part of a larger complex of ideas that are antithetical to his or her Baptist identity. Reformed Baptists are out of line, for example, with the Reformed confessions, which

are carefully embodied patterns of teaching, drawn from Scripture and brought to bear on the life of the church. They are, in short, interpretations of the whole of Christian existence that cohere in all of their points. If some of the less-famous points of Reformed theology, like the baptism of infants, justification by grace alone through faith, the necessity of a thankful obedience consequent upon our faith and justification (the “third use of the law”), the identification of the sacraments as means of grace, the so-called amillennial view of the end of the world, and so forth, are stripped away or forgotten, the remaining famous five [i.e., the five points of Calvinism] make very little sense.¹⁰

De Witt, Hesselink, and Muller rightly emphasize that “Reformed” has much broader connotations than “Calvinism,” avenues of the Reformed tradition that we are not going to travel in our study. For this reason, throughout the rest of the book I will forego the term “Reformed” and use “Calvinism” to identify the distinctive doctrinal position this book is intended to explain and endorse.

Why “Calvinism”?

I still need to answer the question, Why are you using a label to define a doctrinal viewpoint based on one particular person? Later, we will see just how important John Calvin is for the tradition that takes his name.¹¹ For now, we can note that Calvin’s formulation of essential doctrines regarding salvation was so clearly manifested and beautifully articulated in his magnum opus, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559), and he was so active in defending his views from the Bible against Catholic, Lutheran, and Anabaptist opponents

9. On the “regulative principle of worship,” see J. Ligon Duncan III, “Does God Care How We Worship?” and “Foundations for Biblically Directed Worship,” in *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas, and J. Ligon Duncan III (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003), 17–73.

10. Richard A. Muller, “How Many Points?” *Calvin Theological Journal* 28 (1993): 428.

11. See Question 13.

that his way of understanding God’s relationship to sinful humanity quickly came to be called by the shorthand name, “Calvinism.”¹²

The next two chapters will define what I intend to communicate when I speak of “Calvinism.” Much of the rest of the book attempts to explain and defend it. For now, though, I can say with B. B. Warfield, a nineteenth- and twentieth-century Calvinist theologian, that

Whoever believes in God; whoever recognizes in the recesses of his soul his utter dependence on God; whoever in all his thought of salvation hears in his heart of hearts the echo of the *solī Deo gloria*¹³ of the evangelical profession—by whatever name he may call himself, or by whatever intellectual puzzles his logical understanding may be confused—Calvinism recognizes as implicitly a Calvinist, and as only requiring to permit these fundamental principles—which underlie and give its body to all true religion—to work themselves freely and fully out in thought and feeling and action, to become explicitly a Calvinist.¹⁴

“Calvinism,” then, is a particular way of understanding how a sinner is saved that differs from Catholicism, Lutheranism, and Arminianism. Arminians, especially, forced the followers of Calvin to search the Scripture to answer the question of the relationship between a sovereign God and sinful humans in an individual’s salvation.¹⁵ J. I. Packer stresses that the two systems are antithetical to one another. Calvinism preaches a God who sovereignly saves his elect, whereas Arminianism teaches that God gives all fallen people the ability to do what they need to do in order to cooperate with God in their salvation.¹⁶ Calvinism proclaims that in salvation the three Persons of the Trinity are united in their saving acts towards the same people (“election by the Father, redemption by the Son, and calling by the Holy Spirit”) which secures the elect’s salvation; Arminianism divides the objects of affection of the three Persons (“the objects of redemption being all mankind; of calling, all who hear the gospel; of election, those who respond”). Packer’s summary is apt:

12. Benedict, *Christ’s Churches Purely Reformed*, xxii–xxiii.

13. *solī Deo gloria* means “to God alone belongs the glory.”

14. B. B. Warfield, “Calvinism,” in *Calvin and Augustine* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1980), 290.

15. See Question 15.

16. Calvinism “holds that God saves sinners without their assistance, while synergism (‘working together’) [the Arminian view] teaches that salvation depends on our cooperation. In all its varieties, synergism teaches that God’s grace makes everything possible, but our response makes everything actual” (Michael Horton, *Pilgrim Theology: Core Doctrines for Christian Disciples* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012], 251).

The two theologies thus conceive the plan of salvation in quite different terms. One makes salvation depend on the work of God, the other on a work of man; one regards faith as part of God’s gift of salvation, the other as man’s own contribution to salvation; one gives all the glory of saving believers to God, the other divides the praise between God, who, so to speak, built the machinery of salvation, and man, who by believing operated it.¹⁷

Arminianism asserts “synergism,” the idea that human salvation is the result of the cooperation between the gracious, sovereign God and renewed human freedom. Calvinism, alternatively, affirms “monergism,” the biblical reality that God alone acts to save spiritually dead people whom he’s elected to be his own. Calvinism, in other words, is just shorthand expressing the biblical reality that God saves his people, the ones he has eternally chosen to belong to him, the ones for whom his Son died. It’s the life-giving truth of Ephesians 2:4: “but God.” It’s the soul-comforting reality of Romans 8:28: “we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose,” and of Romans 8:39 that nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” It’s the praise-inspiring, hope-giving certainty of Galatians 2:20: “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” This is what the rest of this book means by “Calvinism.”

It is the same poetic theology of hymns such as “A Debtor to Mercy Alone” by Augustus Toplady (1740–1778):

A debtor to mercy alone,
Of covenant mercy I sing;
Nor fear, with Thy righteousness on,
My person and off’ring to bring.
The terrors of law and of God
With me can have nothing to do;
My Savior’s obedience and blood
Hide all my transgressions from view

The work which His goodness began,
The arm of His strength will complete;
His promise is Yea and Amen,

17. J. I. Packer, “Saved by His Precious Blood”: An Introduction to John Owen’s *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*,” in *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 128–29.

And never was forfeited yet.
 Things future, nor things that are now,
 Nor all things below or above,
 Can make Him His purpose forgo,
 Or sever my soul from His love.

My name from the palms of His hands
 Eternity will not erase;
 Impressed on His heart it remains
 In marks of indelible grace.
 Yes, I to the end shall endure,
 As sure as the earnest is giv'n;
 More happy, but not more secure,
 The glorified spirits in heav'n.

The “Calvinism” of This Book

In researching and writing this book, I have employed numerous sources from soteriological Calvinists. If you peruse the footnotes, you will notice that most of them span in time from the sixteenth to the twenty-first century. I didn't intentionally try to have sources from each of these periods, but you'll notice, for example, John Calvin from the sixteenth century, Francis Turretin from the seventeenth, Jonathan Edwards from the eighteenth, Robert Dabney from the nineteenth, J. I. Packer from the twentieth, and Roger Nicole from the twenty-first. Beyond that, I refer to “Calvinists” who predated Calvin in the sixth century up to the Reformation of the sixteenth century.¹⁸ You'll also see that some of them are Presbyterian or Reformed, some Congregationalist, some Baptist, some Anglican, and others are non-denominational in orientation. In fact, Augustine and others referenced in Question 14 were Catholics! In other words, I have intentionally tried to support my biblical case with a variety of sources to guard myself from presenting a minority position within Calvinism.

Additionally, I have often used two Calvinistic confessional documents that have garnered broad support among Calvinists. The first, the *Canons of the Synod of Dort* (1618–19), were written directly to controvert the new movement of Arminianism.¹⁹ It has confessional status in the Dutch Reformed tradition. The second, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1646), was a product of English Puritans (primarily Presbyterians, but some others too) during an unusual period of Puritan control in England.²⁰ The Westminster Confession, which has confessional status in Presbyterian churches, is probably the most

18. See Question 14.

19. See Questions 16 and 17.

20. See, for example, Chad Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith: A Reader's Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2014).

significant confessional document in English-speaking churches because of its broad influence. Twelve years after its production, in 1658, English Congregationalists led by John Owen revised it slightly and released it as the Savoy Declaration. Eager to show that they were similar to their Presbyterian and Congregationalist brethren, English Baptists used both Westminster and Savoy as the basis for their Second London Baptist Confession, often referred to as the 1689 Confession because of its year of public release.²¹ The Westminster–Savoy–1689 tradition agrees on almost all matters of soteriological significance. Given its influence in the English-speaking world, I have used the Westminster Confession frequently as an expression of Calvinistic thought in this book.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Do you think the distinction between “Reformed” and “Calvinistic” is important? Why?
2. How would you define a “Reformed” Christian in your own words?
3. Do you think Warfield is correct in his quotation above, or is he a bit arrogant? Why?
4. How do you think that your own history with Calvinism will impact your interaction with the material in the rest of the book? Are there particular aspects of your own journey you especially need to be aware of as you consider Calvinism?
5. Have you read the Westminster Confession of Faith (or its Congregationalist or Baptist derivatives)? If not, it might be helpful to read a copy.

21. Released in 1689, it had actually been composed in 1677.