

Why I Am A Presbyterian By Dr. D. James Kennedy

Sometimes I am asked why I am a Presbyterian. Since there are many other denominations to which a person could belong, this is a legitimate question.

Why are *you* a Presbyterian? How sound are your reasons? I am a Presbyterian because I believe Presbyterianism to be the clearest form of church government modeled in Scripture and also what many people call *Calvinism* to be the purest expression of the Bible's doctrine.

Some people say, "Why do we have to have doctrines or creeds at all?" They announce, "No doctrine but the Bible, and no creed but Christ." This is a pleasant motto and sounds spiritual. But when you examine it closely, it is superficial. We can say we have nothing but the Bible and still be a great many things. Do not be deceived by simplistic solutions to difficult problems.

OUR CREED

We believe the Bible to be our only infallible, inerrant standard, given by inspiration of God himself, revealed by the Holy Spirit through human authors. No other man-made book stands beside the Bible! But our weak minds are assisted by having a careful and systematic summary of what the Bible teaches.

A creed states basic beliefs. *The Apostles' Creed* states what the early church believed and it acts to unite Christians. The Presbyterian Church is creedal. We have a written statement of belief which is called the Westminster Confession of Faith. We need a creed to be crystal clear to all involved exactly what the church believes on any particular issue.

Our Confession has been agreed upon by many who are not in the Presbyterian Church, or in any Calvinistic group, to be the most carefully worked out statement of the doctrines of Christianity ever made. It was written between 1643 and 1648 in Westminster, England, by approximately 150 of the most learned divines of that time; many of these same men translated the King James Bible. They spent some three million work hours over many months preparing the Westminster Confession. It is a classic statement of the teachings of the Bible.

JOHN CALVIN

John Calvin was born in 1509, a Frenchman. He fled from Paris when his life was threatened. He had written a sermon for the new president of the University of Paris. The president preached it and was burned at the stake, therefore the author of the sermon decided it was time to leave France! On his way to Italy he was stopped by William

Farel and challenged to become leader of the Reformation in Geneva, Switzerland. Calvin's work transformed that city into a model city known for peace, morality, and prosperity.

Calvin was the most brilliant theologian of the Bible, after Augustine in the Fourth century, until his day. Along with Augustine he ranks as one of the greatest theologians of all Christian history.

John Knox went to Calvin's Geneva to study and came away inflamed with zeal and passion for the truth of the Scriptures, then went back to Scotland and took one of the most superstitious, backward countries in all Europe and absolutely transformed it by the proclamation of Calvin's doctrines from Scripture. It was from Scotland that much of Calvin's Reformation influence would later flow to early America. According to John Knox, Calvin had made Geneva "the most perfect school of Christ since the Apostles."

GRACE

Calvinism is a theology of grace. It is free grace, pure grace, and total grace. The Bible teaches Christianity is uniquely among all the world's religions the religion of grace - the totally unmerited favor of God by which man may be saved. Calvinism is pre-eminently *that* view of the New Testament. It is the spirit of the Apostle Paul who was such a strong defender of the doctrines of grace: "By grace are ye saved" - by the totally unmerited favor of God. All other systems of interpreting the Bible fall short of that. Every one of them inserts human worth, human merit, human ability, at some place along the way of man's salvation.

So-called Calvinism boldly affirms that salvation is by grace - totally, completely, finally, from beginning to end, completely of God and not of man. God is exalted and man is abased. I, along with Charles Spurgeon (who as a Baptist proclaimed the free and sovereign grace of God), am happy to say I am a Calvinist who holds to the doctrines of grace.

SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

Calvinism is the theology of God's sovereignty. All things have to be seen in the sovereignty of God. God's grace is sovereign. He bestows mercy on whom He will and withholds it from those from whom He will. God is sovereign in all of His workings. God alone is God.

All other systems, at some point, take away the sovereignty of God and give veto power over the plans of the Almighty to men. Any effort to take away the sovereignty of God elevates man to the position of God and abases God, doing great

damage to the glory and majesty of the God of the Scriptures.

In all other religions, in one way or another, the God that is worshipped is a God who does the best He can. He tries but He fails. He is trying to save the whole world, but He cannot quite do it. "Poor God..." He just cannot hack it. He is the God who fails. But a Calvinist knows, God is determined to save His elect and He is perfectly succeeding in doing just that.

The God of the Bible is a God who knows no such thing as failure. He is the omnipotent, Almighty God who reigns; the One who does according to His will among the armies of heaven and the inhabitants of the earth, the One about whom it is said that "no purpose of His can be restrained." A lot of people do not like a God who is truly sovereign. They want God to be a slightly larger version of themselves, with all of their foibles and failures. That is not the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!

Calvinists do not claim to understand all the deep mystery of Bible doctrines relating to God's sovereignty, such as election, and predestination. There is much we admit our minds cannot comprehend; but that is why God is God and we are not. We find these things taught in the New Testament and we refuse to sweep them aside in our own arrogance to re-interpret God in our image. Nor are we arrogant or proud in finding ourselves to be recipients of God's saving grace. Just the opposite - nothing more humbles a person than to realize the wonders of divine grace!

MISSIONS

Calvinism is pre-eminently missionary-oriented. Not only do Calvinists believe in a sovereign God, but they also believe we are to yield ourselves in obedience to the command of this God to fulfill the great commission to take the Savior's gospel into the whole world.

There are some who find a discrepancy here. They think you have to deny one idea or the other. But the Bible maintains both: God knows his elect from all eternity, yet each person must hear the gospel and respond to Christ in personal faith, as the Holy Spirit regenerates his will to be able to believe. God does not save people fatalistically, or in a vacuum apart from gospel preaching.

It is interesting to note that the modern missionary activity of the church of Jesus Christ has been predominantly a Calvinistic enterprise. The modern missionary movement of the past 200 years began with William Carey in the late 1700's. This cobbler who worked upon shoes had a map of the world above him. He looked at that map day after day, month after month. His heart went out to the lost, and God called him to go to India with the gospel. This man was a Calvinist of the strictest order. He formed the London Missionary Society, and every person in that society and every missionary that went out was a thorough

going Calvinist. Whether it be William Carey, David Livingstone, or David Brainerd, or the powerful evangelist George Whitefield, the missionary rolls read like *Who's Who in Calvinism*.

BIBLE STUDY

Calvinism is pre-eminently Biblical. When I was doing graduate work in New Testament, my professor of Greek, a thorough-going Arminian, (Arminianism emphasizes the power of the human will) said he had to confess that 95 percent of all the best commentaries written on the New Testament or the whole Bible have been written by Calvinists.

John Calvin himself was a thorough-going scholar of the Bible. Having examined every word in every text in the original language of the Holy Scripture, Calvin endeavored to bring the teachings and government of the church into line with God's Word. He wrote many detailed commentaries on most of the Bible, filling up a good-sized shelf, which are still used today by scholars and preachers. His several volume work, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* is regarded as the most masterful doctrinal summary to come out of the Reformation. Just as Luther was the firebrand to ignite reform, Calvin was the brilliant mind God used to help systematize its teachings.

Calvinism is called "Reformed Faith" because of the insistence that every doctrine must be brought into line with Scripture or reformed according to the Word of God. Traditions of men and mere practical expediency will not do!

CIVIL GOVERNMENT

Calvin moved outside the purely theological realm to affect life in other ways. In the church as an institution, he taught a form of government which was a representative, constitutional republic, in which representative elders from the congregation rule the church body. Also in the state Calvin was a constitutionalist. James I of England, as a monarch, knew this well when he said, "Presbyterianism agreeth with monarchy like God with the devil." French historian Alexis de Tocqueville came to America in its beginning and examined our ways. He said that because Calvin exalted one sovereign above all else and humbled all other sovereigns beneath Him, all concepts of divine right of kings or infallible decrees of popes could not endure before the awful majesty of the sovereign God. So it was that personal freedom and representative, constitutional, republican government came to America, largely by influence of various Calvinists.

ROOTS OF AMERICA

The passengers on the *Mayflower* called Pilgrims were Calvinists of the strictest order. They stated while they were on the *Mayflower*

that they were in complete agreement with the church in Amsterdam, Holland, which they had left and which was a Dutch Calvinist church. So also were thousands of English *Puritans* who followed later into Massachusetts.

According to historians there were three million Americans at the time of the Revolution. Of these, 900,000 were Scotch Irish Presbyterians, 600,000 were English Puritans, and 400,000 German or Dutch Reformed. Two-thirds of the colonists were Calvinists in background at least. This greatly influenced all their ways of thinking

The American historian Bancroft, said the American Revolution, so far as it was affected by religion, was a Presbyterian movement. One zealot wrote King George saying, "I fix all the blame for these extraordinary proceedings upon the Presbyterians." Prime Minister William Pitt, upon receiving word of the revolution back in England, rose in the House of Lords and uttered these famous words, "Cousin America has run off with a Presbyterian parson." He meant John Witherspoon, the only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence, president of Princeton at that time. It is also interesting to note that when the British surrendered at Yorktown, all of Gen. Washington's colonels (the commissioned officers of the American Army) except one, were actually Presbyterian elders.

Is all this mere coincidence?

EDUCATION

Because God is sovereign and Christians must live so as to prepare ourselves to give an account to God, one of the things necessary, according to Calvin, is that people must be taught to read, so they may explore the Scriptures. Everywhere Calvinists went there was great stress on literacy and education in general. This is the difference between the illiterate condition that South America found itself in and the more widespread literacy of North America.

The great early universities of this country, such as Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, Dartmouth and others were founded by the strictest of Calvinists. Yale was primarily a school for Calvinistic ministers, as was Princeton. These schools have long since been choked by the weeds of liberalism.

ECONOMICS

Calvin also brought to light the free enterprise and capitalism we have now in America. He has been called the founder of capitalism by social scholars Max Weber and Ernest Troeltsch who both lay all the blame on the doorstep of Calvin. We accept the blame! We feel capitalism, whatever its faults, has proved to be a system which has provided the most economic benefit for the most people of any system in the world.

Calvin also, with the Biblical concept of the sovereignty of God, and man as a creation of God

owing an accountability of stewardship, felt that private property is guaranteed by the ten Commandments and also free enterprise was essential, in order that man may be able to work out his own stewardship and give an account to God. A saved man must have the responsibility of proving himself faithful and diligent with whatever God had given him. This is utterly contrary to modern socialism. Those who had wealth and position were to exercise it as a stewardship from God. They have in a sense, the same responsibility as a civil magistrate, to exercise their office and powers for the good of others. Wealth was not to be hoarded. Charity was encouraged, though the deliberately idle were not to be encouraged in their sloth. All work could and should be done to God's glory.

Calvin, when he died, owned practically nothing at all, since he had given away large sums of money to help others. He refused to have even his name placed on his tombstone. Years later, people added the initials "JC" on a small stone which lies flat on the ground, and which took us half an hour to find in Geneva. In the midst of grand statues of men on horseback, lies the remains of this man whose heart beat with but one great thought - "of Him, and through Him, and to Him are all things, to whom be glory now and forever more!"

—From the *Christian Observer*
June 16, 1989

