

## **CALVINISM AND PREACHING**

### **(1) Total Depravity**

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A "Calvinist" is one who maintains the truths of the Reformed faith as summarised in the creeds of the Reformation. These truths have been summarised in the Canons of Dordrecht: total depravity, unconditional election, limited or definate atonement, irresistible grace, and the perseverance of the saints. It could be said that all of these truths are summarised in the truth of the sovereignty of God.

A "Calvinist" maintains these truths not because they were taught by a man or by men who were instruments of God to bring about the great church reformation of the sixteenth century, but because he finds these truths taught conclusively in the Bible.

There have been many who have denied and even hated these truths of the Reformed faith. A frequently heard criticism is that a Calvinist cannot successfully do the work of missions. It is stated that one cannot preach effectively unless he proclaims a universal love of God and a universal atonement of Christ. It is said that to maintain the truth of irresistible grace makes mission work virtually unnecessary. And it is said that to maintain the truth of total depravity results in the missionary beating his head against a wall and that it is folly to tell the unconverted that they are dead in sins and incapable of believing apart from God's regenerating grace. These assertions, often made without even an attempt to prove them, are considered sufficient to discredit the whole of the Reformed faith.

It is the intention of this rubric to examine each of the five points of Calvinism in the light of their use in, and application to, the work of missions. We begin with the truth of total depravity.

#### **Total Depravity and the Reformed Confessions**

Total depravity is an essential part of the Reformed faith and it is clearly taught in our confessions. The Heidelberg Catechism states that "our nature is so corrupt, that we are all conceived and born in sin," and that we are "so corrupt that we are wholly

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incapable of any good, and inclined to all wickedness" (Q 7,8). Man's will is active and free to desire, but it is able to desire only evil. The Belgic Confession declares that:

"... through the disobedience of Adam original sin is extended to all mankind; which is a corruption of the whole nature, and an hereditary disease, wherewith infants themselves are infected even in their mother's womb, and which produceth in man all sorts of sin, being in him as a root thereof; and therefore is so vile and abominable in the sight of God, that it is sufficient to condemn all mankind." [Article 15.]

The statement of the Canons of Dordrecht is that:

"... all men are conceived in sin, and by nature children of wrath, incapable of saving good, prone to evil, dead in sin, and in bondage thereto, and without the regenerating grace of the Holy Spirit, they are neither able nor willing to return to God, to reform the depravity of their nature, nor to dispose themselves to reformation." [Third and Fourth Heads of Doctrine, Article 3.]

The Westminster Standards are equally articulate in their description of man's total depravity. [Confession, chapter 6; Larger Catechism, Q's 21-29; Shorter Catechism, Q's 13-19.]

The truth of total depravity is also biblical. "God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." "There is none righteous, no, not one." "All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." "Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned." "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us." (Genesis 6:5, Romans 3:10,23; 5:12; 1 John 1:8,10.)

### **Total Depravity and Preaching**

When the apostle Paul preached on the mission field he was very conscious of the fact that those to whom he was preaching were totally depraved. He told the Corinthians that "the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Corinthians 2:14). The knowledge that he was facing such alienation to the truth did not stop the apostle from obedience to the commission of his Lord to go into all the world and teach all nations that they must do everything Jesus

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commanded. Paul and all the apostles of Christ knew that by nature every one to whom they brought the Gospel was totally depraved. He tells the Ephesian and Colossian believers that they "were dead in trespasses and sins" and that they "were sometime alienated, and enemies in your mind by wicked works" (Ephesians 2:1; Colossians 1:21). Concretely this meant for the apostles, and it means for every missionary today, that those to whom the Gospel is brought will not want to hear what is preached.

Further, the objects of mission work would not even be *able* to receive spiritual things. The natural man does not believe the Gospel, does not love it, and therefore refuses to conform his life to it. Spiritual truths are foolishness to him. And the reason these spiritual truths are foolishness to all men, as they are by nature, can be found in man's natural condition: natural man is not able to know them; he cannot know them. The reason for this helplessness of natural man with regard to spiritual things is that the things of the Spirit are "spiritually discerned" (1 Corinthians 2:14). The truths of the Gospel require a spiritual faculty to understand them, which faculty the natural man lacks. This faculty is a gift of God's regenerating grace. He that "is born of the flesh is flesh," and, therefore, "he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:6,3).

### **Total Depravity and the Preacher**

In spite of charges to the contrary, the missionary who believes in the Reformed truth of total depravity is *not* unable to do the work of missions. He is *not* stymied in his work. Nor is he doomed to failure before he begins.

Much to the contrary, the truths of Calvinism, including that of total depravity, properly equip one for being a missionary.

**a) Perspective in Preaching.** The first main area in which the Reformed missionary is equipped for his labours is the all-important one of perspective.

First, the truth of total depravity prepares the Reformed missionary for what he will face as he brings the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the unconverted in this "present evil world" (Galatians 1:4). He is not surprised that the truth is not understood and readily accepted. This truth spares him much personal frustration and disappointment. As he strives faithfully to obey his Lord's commission, he does not count success by the number of conversions, or by the size of his audience and of largeness of the offering. He

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knows that his Lord knows personally the difficulty of the labours, and that in his Lord's judgment success is measured by faithfulness in labours rather than by the greatness of visible results.

Secondly, the Reformed missionary sees no need to be ashamed in the proclamation of the message of the Gospel when he faces those who consider it folly. He sees no need to be hesitant or afraid to bring the Gospel, because his motivation to go and teach is derived not from seeing positive results on his work, but from gratitude for the gracious wonder of the salvation of rebellious sinners, of whom he is chief.

**b) The Methodology of Preaching.** The second main area in which the truth of total depravity equips the Reformed missionary is that of methodology.

First, this truth teaches the Reformed church that conversions will not come because of the charisma of the missionary or because of the nature of the advertising used. The total depravity of those who are the objects of mission work is such an obstacle that it cannot be overcome by the wit or power of man. It can only be overcome by the power of the sovereign God. He alone can, and does, open hearts (Acts 16:14). Before the omnipotence of the almighty Spirit, the natural man's hatred of the truth is like wax before the sun. When God works in the elect true conversion, then He "powerfully illuminates their minds by his Holy Spirit, that they may rightly understand and discern the things of the Spirit of God." It is the sovereign God who "by the efficacy of the same regenerating Spirit, pervades the inmost recesses of the man; he opens the closed, and softens the hardened heart, ... infuses new qualities into the will." [*Canons of Dordrecht, Third and Fourth Heads of Doctrine, Article 11.*] The Reformed missionary may not have trust and confidence in himself and in his abilities, but he does have trust and confidence in the sovereign Lord of heaven and earth to be able to convert the most hardened sinner. There is no sinner that the Reformed missionary considers beyond hope.

Secondly, the Reformed and biblical truth of total depravity gives the Christian the tool to show the unconverted his need. The unsaved are of the opinion that the Gospel is foolishness. They are convinced that it is foolishness because they are of a superior mind. The reality of the matter is that they are blind. Total depravity shows them that their mind is darkened. This truth puts them on their knees and fills their mouth with the petition, "Lord,

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that I may be able to see!"

Along with the apostle Paul, every sincere minister of the Gospel must proclaim "the whole counsel of God." The book of Acts (which records the missionary labours of the church, including a record of many of the sermons first preached in the various mission fields) does not use the word "love" while it proclaims the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Scriptures were used to speak of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment. Paul called each of his audiences to repentance. The proclamation of man's natural depravity harmonises with the Gospel call, "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). Although many will hear the proclamation of the Gospel, only those who are convicted of sin will "labour and be heavy laden." They will know the voice calling them and they will come to Jesus in sorrow and repentance seeking forgiveness and rest for their souls.

**c) The Dependency of the Preacher.** Finally, the truth of total depravity puts the Reformed missionary on his knees. The Reformed missionary is greatly aware of his dependence upon the work of the Holy Spirit. He prays that the sovereign Lord will use his efforts as instruments which God may be pleased to use for the conversion and edification of those for whom Christ died. His hope in preaching and witnessing is that, as he does his work, the Holy Spirit will change the natural heart into a spiritual heart. The emphasis of his labour is not on finding the most effective method, but on *simply* being faithful in his calling and in cultivating the spirit of prayer. A prayerful attitude is a monument to the truth of total depravity. Simply to say that one believes in the truth of total depravity is not sufficient unless one prays God to convert and edify. The consciousness that if God does not give a new heart it will never be done, must live strongly in his heart. Then the Reformed missionary will preach and witness with the same disposition that framed his prayers. Then he is looking unto God, that God may be pleased to bless his preaching and witnessing and make it effectual in the hearts of men and women and children.

*[Next issue: ELECTION]*