

# Who Can Understand the Gospel?

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Calvinists emphasize that their theology rests upon solid biblical exegesis, being “firmly based...upon the Word of God.” Some have gone so far as to assert that “this teaching was held to be the truth by the apostles,” and even that “Christ taught the doctrines that have come to be known as the five points of Calvinism.”



According to the Bible itself, however, no one should accept such claims without verifying them from Scripture. Any doctrine claiming to be based on the Bible must be carefully checked against the Bible—an option open to anyone who knows God’s Word. Relying upon one supposed biblical expert for an evaluation of the opinions of another would be going in circles. No matter whose opinion one accepted, the end result would be the same: one would still be held hostage to human opinion. Each individual must personally check out all opinions directly from the Bible. Yet I have been advised to keep silent on the basis that only those with special qualifications are competent to check Calvinism against the Bible, an idea that in itself contradicts Scripture.

The inhabitants of the city of Berea, though not even Christians when Paul first preached the gospel to them, “searched the scriptures daily, [to see] whether those things [Paul preached] were so” (**Acts:17:11**)—and they were commended as “noble” for doing so. Yet leading Calvinists insist that it requires special (and apparently lengthy) preparation for anyone to become qualified to examine that peculiar doctrine in light of the Bible. Why?

After all, the Bible itself declares that a “young man” can understand its instructions and thereby “cleanse his way” (**Psalms:119:9**). Even a child can know the Holy Scriptures through home instruction from a mother and grandmother (**2 Timothy:1:5**; 3:15). Timothy was certainly not a seminary-trained theologian, yet Paul considered him competent to study and “rightly divide” God’s Word. If special expertise were required to test Calvinism against Scripture, that would be proof enough that this peculiar doctrine did not come from valid biblical exegesis. Anything *that* enigmatic, by very definition, could not have been derived from the Bible, which itself claims to be written for the simple.

Many friends, whose obvious sincerity was appreciated, have told me that in spite of my quoting John Calvin directly from his writings, along with quoting leading Calvinists of today, I was still likely to misrepresent Calvinism. Even after many hours of detailed discussions with Calvinist friends, they still told me, “You just don’t understand Calvinism.” Then what of the claim that Calvinism *is* the gospel and true Christianity? Could multitudes of mature and fruitful evangelicals have somehow misunderstood the gospel and Christianity?

In contrast, “Jesus called them unto him, and said, Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God. Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child shall in no wise enter therein” (**Luke:18:16–17**).

Should Calvinism remain a mystery for the common Christian? That very fact, if true, would be additional proof that Calvinism was not derived from the Scriptures. How could something so complicated possibly come from that upon which every person is capable of meditating day and night (**Psalms:1:1–2**), and joyfully received—even by a “little child”? If the essential nourishment God’s Word provides is to be every man’s daily sustenance for spiritual life (**Deuteronomy:8:3**), could Calvinism really be the biblical gospel and biblical Christianity and yet be so difficult for the ordinary Christian to understand?

Why should Calvinism be such a complex and apparently esoteric subject that it would require years to comprehend? Such an attitude could very well intimidate many into accepting this belief simply because such a vast array of highly respected theologians and evangelical leaders espouse it. Surely the great majority of Calvinists are ordinary Christians. On what basis, then, without the expertise and intense study that I apparently lacked, were they able to understand and accept it?

Most Calvinists (but not all) agree upon five major points. Some insist that there are ten or even more relevant points. Edwin H. Palmer, in his book *The Five Points of Calvinism*, suggests, “Calvinism is not restricted to five points: it has thousands of points.” It’s not likely that we can cover all those alleged points in these pages! Palmer himself deals with only five.

There are a number of disagreements between “five-point” and “four-point” Calvinists. For example, Lewis Sperry Chafer, founder of Dallas Theological Seminary, called himself a “four-point” Calvinist because he rejected Limited Atonement. Laurence M. Vance points out that “Many Baptists in the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches are four-point Calvinists” [Vance, *The Other Side of Calvinism* (Pensacola, FL: Vance Publications, rev. ed. 1999), p. 147]. To deny one point while accepting the other four, however, has been called by five-point Calvinists the “blessed inconsistency.” They

are correct. We shall see that each point is a logical consequence of those preceding it. It is not possible to be a Calvinist and hold *logically* and consistently to less than all five points.

God's foreknowledge, predestination/election, human choice, God's sovereignty, and man's responsibility are widely alleged to be mysteries beyond our ability to reconcile. Therefore, some insist that these concepts should be accepted without any attempt at understanding or reconciling apparent conflicts. The illustration is used repeatedly that as we approach heaven's gate we see written above it, "Whosoever will may come," but once we have entered we see from the inside the words, "Chosen in Him before the foundation of the world." We respect the many church leaders who continue to offer such an explanation as though that were sufficient. There are, however, several compelling reasons for not acquiescing to that popular position.

First of all, God intends for us to understand His Word rather than to plead "mystery" over vital portions of it. He has given it for our learning. Of God's Word the psalmist said, "it is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path" (**Psalm:119:105**), and such it is intended to be for each of us today. Peter acknowledged that there are "things hard to be understood" and warned that Scripture is sometimes twisted by some, resulting in destruction to those who do so (**2 Peter:3:16**). God never suggests, however, that there is any part of His Word that we should not attempt to understand fully. Inasmuch as many passages in Scripture are devoted to the difficult themes we will address, we can confidently expect that the Bible itself will clarify the issues.

Second, the history of the church from its earliest beginnings has involved sharp differences of opinion on many vital subjects, including the gospel itself. Numerous destructive heresies have developed and have been vigorously opposed. Neither Christ nor His apostles considered divergent views on the essentials of the gospel to be normal or acceptable, but commanded the believers to "earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). That command applies to us today.

Third, it hardly seems that our Lord would have us draw back from seriously considering and understanding foreknowledge and election/predestination, as well as man's responsibility and how it all fits together in God's sovereign grace. Although we may never see the entire body of Christ in perfect agreement, each of us is responsible to understand these issues as clearly as each one is able, through diligent study—and to help one another in the process.

Finally, God calls upon us to seek Him in order that we may know Him, though His ways and His thoughts are as far above ours as "the heavens are higher than the earth" (**Isaiah:55:8-9**). Surely, as we come to know God better, we will understand His Word and His will more fully. God is our Savior; to know Him is life eternal (**John:17:3**). Knowing God must include a deepening understanding of all He has revealed to us in His Word.

We are to live, as Christ said (quoting His own declaration as the *I AM* to Israel through Moses in **Deuteronomy:8:3**), not "by bread alone, but by *every* word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God" (**Matthew:4:4**). Solomon said, "*Every* word of God is pure" (**Proverbs:30:5**; italics added).

Then we must carefully consider and seek to understand *every word*.

It is a general assumption that, whatever other disagreements we may have, when it comes to the gospel of our salvation both Calvinists and non-Calvinists are in full agreement. Some Calvinists, however, disagree, claiming (as we have already seen) that the biblical gospel *is Calvinism*. For example: "God's plan of salvation revealed in the Scriptures consists of what is popularly known as the Five Points of Calvinism." Loraine Boettner declares, "The great advantage of the Reformed Faith is that in the framework of the Five Points of Calvinism it sets forth clearly what the Bible teaches concerning the way of salvation." Others insist that "if you do not know the Five Points of Calvinism, you do not know the gospel, but some perversion of it...." B. B. Warfield claimed, "Calvinism is evangelicalism in its purest and only stable expression."

Such claims that the Five Points *alone* constitute the gospel raise concerns about Calvinism to an entirely new level! If much special study is required to understand Calvinism, and if years of Bible study still leave one ignorant on this subject, and if Calvinism *is the gospel of our salvation*—then where does that leave the multitudes who think they are saved but are ignorant of Calvinism? This question may seem divisive but it cannot be ignored.

Another grave question is raised concerning the proclamation of the gospel to the whole world as Christ commanded. Calvinists insist that their doctrine does not diminish the zeal with which the gospel is to be preached. To support this assertion, they name some of the great preachers and missionaries who were staunch Calvinists, such as George Whitefield, Adoniram Judson, William Carey, and others. And it is true that, although they know that many to whom they preach are not among the elect, some Calvinists nevertheless preach earnestly so that the elect may hear and believe.

Certainly, however, the zeal of such men and women in bringing the gospel to the world could not be *because* of their Calvinism but only *in spite* of it. To believe that those who will be saved have been predestined to salvation by God's decree, that no others can be saved, and that the elect must be regenerated by God's sovereign act without the gospel or any persuasion by any preacher, or by any faith in God on their part, could hardly provide motivation for earnestly

preaching the gospel. No matter how the Calvinist tries to argue to the contrary, such a belief can only lessen the zeal that a reasonable person might otherwise have to reach the lost with the gospel of God's grace in Christ.

The gospel that Peter and Paul and the other apostles preached was for everyone in the audiences they faced, wherever they went. It was not a message that only the elect could believe. In contrast, Calvin's gospel says that Christ died, and His blood atones, for only the elect. This is the way Calvin put it:

To many this seems a perplexing subject, because they deem it most incongruous that of the great body of mankind some should be predestinated to salvation, and others to destruction.... From this we infer, that all who know not that they are the peculiar people of God, must be wretched from perpetual trepidation.... [John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998 ed.) III:xxi,1]

Could this be the same gospel Paul preached? Paul proclaimed to audiences, "We declare unto [all of] you glad tidings..." (**Acts:13:32**). The "glad tidings" of the gospel that Paul preached echoed what the angel of the Lord had said to the shepherds at the time of Christ's birth: "I bring you tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people..." (**Luke:2:10**). These tidings of great joy concerned the fact that "the Savior of the world" (**Luke:2:11**; **John:4:42**) had been born.

Calvin's gospel, however, says that Christ is not the Savior of the world, but only of the elect. How could that message be "tidings of great joy" to those whom the Savior did not come to save and for whose sins He refused to die?

Could it really be true, as Arthur C. Custance insists, that "Calvinism is the Gospel and to teach Calvinism is in fact to preach the Gospel" [Custance, *The Sovereignty of Grace* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1979), 302]? Is Calvinism founded upon the plain text of Scripture? Or...[is] a peculiar interpretation of Scripture required to sustain this doctrine?

Our concern is for the defense of the character of the true God, the God of mercy and love whose "tender mercies are over all his works" (**Psalms:145:9**). The Bible declares that He is "not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (**2 Peter:3:9**); "who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth" (**1 Timothy:2:4**). Such is the God of the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation.

Open examination and discussion of important issues—especially the gospel and the very nature and character of God—can only be healthy for the body of Christ. It is my prayer that our investigation of Calvinism and its comparison with God's Holy Word...will bring helpful and needed clarification. **TBC**

*Excerpted from the book, T.U.L.I.P. and the Bible: Comparing the Works of Calvin with the Word of God .*

Quotable
Question: Recently I joined a yoga class for fitness and relaxation. During the class, mantras are used....Everyone I have asked seems to think there is no problem with this but I feel uncomfortable and do not know why.
Question: Do you believe smoking to be a sin?
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- Question: Is Paul a tare, planted by Lucifer (God's perfect flaw) who blinded Saul on the road to Damascus, parading as Jesus to deceive Paul? I'm convinced Paul is a tare, and many will follow him instead of following Jesus.

