

# 21 Misunderstandings of Calvinism | Sam Waldron

by [Sam Waldron](#) | Mar 22, 2022 | [Reformed Theology](#)

## ***Introduction:***

I have arranged my treatment of *21 Misunderstandings of Calvinism* in the order of T-U-L-I-P.

### ***1. Calvinists do not believe in free will!***

It certainly is true that Calvinists do not believe in what most people call (usually with a great deal of confusion) free will. Sometimes I have heard respectable Calvinists say that they believe in free agency rather than free will. As for myself and many other Calvinists, we prefer to say that we believe in free will *properly defined*. What is a proper and biblical definition of free will? It is the one given in the 1689 Baptist Confession in chapter 9, paragraph 1: “God hath endued the will of man with that natural liberty and power of acting upon choice, that it is neither forced, nor by any necessity of nature determined to do good or evil.” Here free will is defined as the power of acting upon choice. This is the natural liberty of the human. Such a view of free will is suggested by a number of texts: **Matthew 17:12** but I say to you that Elijah already came, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they wished (willed). So also the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.”

**James 1:14** But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust.

**Deuteronomy 30:19** “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants,

As I implied above, mankind still possesses this natural liberty or ‘free will.’ This is implied by an analysis of the outline of Chapter 9 of the Confession. It may be outlined as follows:

I. The Definition of Human Freedom, par. 1

II. The States of Human Freedom, par. 2-5

A. Free will in the State of Innocency, par. 2

B. Free Will in the State of Sin, par. 3

C. Free Will in the State of Grace, par. 4

D. Free Will in the State of Glory, par. 5

The force of this outline is that paragraphs 2-5, including and especially paragraph 3, do not function as a negation of the definition of human freedom given in paragraph 1. All of these paragraphs simply tell us the four states in which the natural liberty or free will of man may exist.

But, of course, mankind does not in the state of sin possess the spiritual or moral liberty to use his “free will” to choose what is right. His will is tied to his sinful nature so that he cannot will any spiritual good. Thus, Jesus teaches in Matthew 7:17-18: “So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit.” All this means that I agree with Walt Chantry that man’s will is free, yet bound. So it is not true to say that Calvinists do not believe in free will.

My intention in this blog is not to condemn all denunciations of free will in our preaching. We often assume, properly it seems to me, an Arminian definition of free will in such legitimate denunciations. I am saying that when it comes to calm and careful theological discussion that it is better to affirm that we believe in free will *properly defined*.

### ***2. Calvinists do not believe in human responsibility!***

This assertion is also a slander on authentic Calvinism. Calvinists not only believe that men have a natural liberty, but they also agree that men are responsible for their actions because of that natural liberty.

The reason why Arminians claim that Calvinists deny human responsibility is that they have adopted what amounts to a Pelagian premise into their theology. They believe that responsibility assumes ability. The notion that responsibility for doing something assumes ability to do something is not true—if *you are talking about moral ability*. The Bible in many places teaches that men *cannot* come to Christ, but it still holds them responsible to do so.

**John 6:44** No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day.

**John 6:65** And He was saying, “For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father.”

I am in agreement with the great Calvinists Jonathan Edwards and Andrew Fuller who made a distinction between natural and moral ability. I think in making this distinction they are simply enlarging on what the Confession already teaches. Human responsibility assumes natural ability, but it does not assume moral ability. God does not tell us to run one minute miles. He does tell us to do things which He has given us the natural ability to do. We are able to love and trust and be sorry. We have the natural ability to do such things. But we do not have the moral ability to love and trust and be sorry *about the right things*. Thus, God tells us to do things that, because of sin, we do not have the moral ability to do. John 5:40 rebukes the Jews precisely for not coming to Christ for salvation: “and you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life.”

### ***3. Total depravity means that men are as bad as they can be!***

Once more this is not mainline Reformed teaching. While it is true that men can do no spiritual or saving good, the Reformed tradition has recognized that unconverted men can and do perform what is often called acts of civil righteousness. It was better that Ahab outwardly responded to Elijah’s rebuke than if he had not, but it did not mean that Ahab had truly repented or truly done anything spiritually good. Here is the language of 1 Kings 21:27-29: “It came about when Ahab heard these words, that he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and fasted, and he lay in sackcloth and went about despondently. 28 Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, 29 “Do you see how Ahab has humbled himself before Me? Because he has humbled himself before Me, I will not bring the evil in his days, but I will bring the evil upon his house in his son’s days.”” Thus, I agree with E. H. Palmer who in his book on the five points of Calvinism said that, while men are not as *bad* as they can be, they are as *bad off* as they can be. Total depravity is not absolute depravity!

### ***4. Total inability means that, even though men want to be saved, they cannot be saved or come to Christ!***

Once more this is a *total misunderstanding* of the doctrines of *total depravity* and *total inability*. May I quote the Confession once more?

Man, by his fall into a state of sin, hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation; so as a natural man, being altogether averse from that good, and dead in sin, is not able by his own strength to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto.

Total inability absolutely does not mean that men want to be saved, but they just cannot be because they are totally depraved. Total inability consists in an indisposition of the will to any spiritual good. It means that men are “averse” to good. It means that “the cannot’s” of John 6 are a way of describing “the will not” of John 5:40: “and you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life.” Total inability means that nobody really wants to be saved apart from the grace of God working in their hearts.

### ***5. Calvinists are fatalists!***

I looked up the dictionary definition of fatalism, but I think it has little to do with what the people who make this charge actually mean. Let me tell you what I think they mean. I think they mean to say that Calvinists think that nothing we do changes our final destiny. I think they mean that there is no relationship between how a person acts and where he will spend eternity. I think they mean that somehow a person's destiny in eternity is fixed regardless of how he responds to the gospel here in this life. If that is what they mean by fatalism, then it has nothing to do with mainstream Calvinism. Calvinists believe that the promises of the gospel are true for any person who will receive them by faith. The promise of Acts 16:31 is true without exception: "They said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household."” *Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved is absolutely true for everyone.* The person who repents of his sins and believes in the Lord Jesus Christ will be saved without exception. Election does not mean that God is free not to keep His gospel promises. It does not mean that He may not save you even if you believe in Christ.

Listen to the first systematic statement of the doctrines of grace, the *Canons of Dort*:  
SECOND HEAD: ARTICLE 5. Moreover, the promise of the gospel is that whosoever believes in Christ crucified shall not perish, but have eternal life....

### ***6. Calvinists believe the elect will be saved no matter what we or they do!***

Once more this is absolutely not what the doctrines of grace teach. Consider these words of chapter 3 of the *1689 Baptist Confession*:

God is neither the author of sin nor hath fellowship with any therein; nor is violence offered to the will of the creature, nor yet is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established ...

Here the Confession makes clear that God honors human liberty and the contingency (conditionality) of second causes in the working out of His eternal plan. This means that what people do does matter! The Confession teaches this because it is absolutely the teaching of the Bible. 2 Timothy 2:10 gives us Paul's doctrine of the election: "For this reason I endure all things for the sake of those who are chosen, so that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus and with it eternal glory." If Paul believed that the elect would be saved no matter what they or we do, how could he have uttered these sentiments? Election does not mean that the elect will be saved no matter what we or they do. It means that they and we will certainly do certain things! It means missionaries will suffer. It means that the elect will believe. It means that both of these things will happen, *and in this way* the elect will be saved!

### ***7. Calvinists steal assurance of salvation from God's people!***

Wrong! This assertion is exactly and precisely the opposite of the truth. It is Arminians who make assurance of salvation impossible. I remember seeing John Wesley quoted in support of assurance of salvation. But whatever John Wesley believed, since he believed in falling from grace, he did not and could not consistently believe in genuine assurance of salvation. Real assurance of salvation is only possible if the genuine Christian cannot fall from grace. If a genuine Christian can fall from grace, then you can have assurance that you are Christian today, but you can have no assurance that you will be a Christian tomorrow! This is no true assurance of salvation at all. Only someone who believes that salvation is a gift of the sovereign God and the fruit of sovereign election can be certain that the salvation he has today he will have on the day he dies!

But Arminians probably make this assertion that *Calvinists steal assurance of salvation from God's people!* because they think that connecting salvation with election makes it into a

mysterious matter about which one can never be certain. But this is simply a misunderstanding. The London Baptist Confession of Faith (3:6; 10:1) teaches what the Bible clearly says and that is that someone's election is made clear by the results of that election in his life. One can know that one is elect from the fruits of election in their life.

Here is 3:6 of the 1689:

As God hath appointed the elect unto glory, so he hath, by the eternal and most free purpose of his will, foreordained all the means thereunto; wherefore they who are elected, being fallen in Adam, are redeemed by Christ, are effectually called unto faith in Christ, by his Spirit working in due season, are justified, adopted, sanctified, and kept by his power through faith unto salvation; neither are any other redeemed by Christ, or effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified, and saved, but the elect only.

Of course, such teaching simply reflects the clear assertions of the Bible. Faith, hope, and love, and true conversion under the power of the gospel are according to the Apostle Paul the tell-tale marks of divine election in a person's life.

**1 Thessalonians 1:3** constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father, 4 knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you; 5 for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.

Listen also to the *Canons of Dort* on this subject:

**FIRST HEAD: ARTICLE 12.** The elect in due time, though in various degrees and in different measures, attain the assurance of this their eternal and unchangeable election, not by inquisitively prying into the secret and deep things of God, but by observing in themselves with a spiritual joy and holy pleasure the infallible fruits of election pointed out in the Word of God – such as, a true faith in Christ, filial fear, a godly sorrow for sin, a hungering and thirsting after righteousness, etc.

#### ***8. Calvinists teach the damnation of infants!***

Once more this is simply false. Many famous Calvinists believe in the salvation of all infants dying in infancy. [Spurgeon](#) a century ago and [Al Mohler](#) are two examples of such Calvinists. Others think that God has shrouded this whole matter in mystery and says little or nothing directly about it in Scripture. They adopt an optimistic agnosticism about the matter. No Calvinists of whom I am aware affirm the damnation of infants.

#### ***9. Calvinists teach double predestination!***

Here we Calvinists must avoid a snare. We must first ask our accusers, *What do you mean by double predestination?* We may affirm double predestination and mean something by it that is much different and much better than what our accusers mean by it. So we must be careful.

- It is certainly true that unconditional election means that when some are elected for salvation others are passed over and left to their just condemnation for their sins. So (True!) the same election which chooses some for salvation leaves others in their sins. This is a kind of double predestination.
- But if someone means by double predestination that people are predestined to hell regardless of their sins, then that is not true, and I know of no Calvinists who ever taught it. Predestination to hell is always in light of the sins of the creatures and therefore well-deserved.

- And if someone means that some people are predestined to damnation *in the same way* that others are predestined to salvation, then they also are quite mistaken! God intervenes in magnificent and multiple acts of grace in bringing the elect to salvation. He simply leaves others to follow their own sinful desires so that their predestination to damnation is brought to pass.

***10. Calvinists do not believe in missions or evangelism!***

Listen to the *Canons of Dort* once more:

SECOND HEAD: ARTICLE 5. Moreover, the promise of the gospel is that whosoever believes in Christ crucified shall not perish, but have eternal life. This promise, together with the command to repent and believe, ought to be declared and published to all nations, and to all persons promiscuously and without distinction, to whom God out of His good pleasure sends the gospel.

Here we want to cry out to our accusers, Have you never heard of William Carey? Do you not know that this first Baptist missionary was a Particular or Reformed Baptist and was sent out by churches that were Particular or Reformed Baptist?

The fact is that it is not Calvinism, but Arminianism which is the great danger to evangelism and missions! The foundation of evangelism and missions is the exclusivity of the gospel. The great defenders of the exclusivity of the gospel are the Calvinists.

It is the Arminians who think God has to be fair with sinners. It is Arminians who think God owes everyone a “chance” to be saved. It is Arminians who think that it is not fair for God to send people to hell who never heard the gospel. It is Arminians, therefore, who are always inventing ways for men to be saved without the gospel. It is Arminians who for this reason and in this way are always chipping away at the exclusivity of the gospel and, thus, chipping away at the foundations of evangelism and missions.

***11. It is not the duty of the non-elect to believe in Christ for salvation! Calvinists do not believe in the free offer of the gospel.***

This is, indeed, the doctrine of a few Hyper-Calvinists, but it has never been the doctrine of mainstream Calvinism. The *1689 Baptist Confession* (7:2) affirms: “Moreover, man having brought himself under the curse of the law by his fall, it pleased the Lord to make a covenant of grace, wherein he freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in him, that they may be saved.” Listen once more to the *Canons of Dort*:

THIRD AND FOURTH HEAD: ARTICLE 9. It is not the fault of the gospel, nor of Christ offered therein, nor of God, who calls men by the gospel and confers upon them various gifts, that those who are called by the ministry of the Word refuse to come and be converted. The fault lies in themselves; some of whom when called, regardless of their danger, reject the Word of life

***12. God does not desire the salvation of the non-elect, but has only hatred for them.***

There are again some High Calvinists that teach that, even though God commands the non-elect to come to Christ, He really has no desire that they come. But listen again to the *Canons of Dort*:

THIRD AND FOURTH HEAD: ARTICLE 8. As many as are called by the gospel are unfeignedly called. For God has most earnestly and truly declared in His Word what is acceptable to Him, namely, that those who are called should come unto Him. He also seriously promises rest of soul and eternal life to all who come to Him and believe.

***13. There is no such thing as common grace.***

Once more the *1689 Baptist Confession* contradicts this claim. At 14:3 it speaks of “the faith and common grace of temporary believers...”

This is a good place to stop and make a comment or two about what is going wrong when Hyper-Calvinism denies duty-faith, the free and well-meant offer of the gospel, and common grace. What is going wrong is that they have adopted an imbalanced doctrine of the divine will! They are identifying the divine will simply with God’s decree. The Bible, however, teaches that the divine will is also revealed in God’s precepts. Consider a few texts:

**Deuteronomy 29:29** The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law.

**Genesis 50:20** As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive.

**Ezekiel 33:11** “Say to them, ‘As I live!’ declares the Lord GOD, ‘I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn back, turn back from your evil ways! Why then will you die, O house of Israel?’

**Romans 2:4** Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance? 5 But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God,

Hyper-Calvinism refuses to value, or undervalues God’s preceptive or revealed will in favor of His decretive or secret will. But these two dimensions of God’s will must be equally valued. God as holy, righteous, and good, desires and must desire that men act in a way that is holy, righteous, and good. For mysterious reasons of His own He has not predestined in His decretive will that men should always act according to His preceptive will. Sometimes it is God’s decretive will that men violate His preceptive will and do what Joseph calls “evil.” We must bow to this mystery and not try to explain it away!

#### ***14. Only Calvinists limit the atonement.***

The fact is that every evangelical somehow limits the atonement. Only the Universalist who believes that absolutely everyone will actually be saved by the death of Christ has a really unlimited atonement. Evangelicals with an atonement which is unlimited in extent limit the power or efficacy of that atonement to actually save those for whom Christ died. Calvinists limit the extent of the atonement. But both limit the atonement! This is why—by the way—I prefer to describe limited atonement as particular redemption.

#### ***15. Calvinists limit the value of the atonement.***

Actually, it is Arminians who do this! But it is certainly not Calvinists who limit the value of the atonement.

Listen once more to the *Canons of Dort*:

SECOND HEAD: ARTICLE 3. The death of the Son of God is the only and most perfect sacrifice and satisfaction for sin, and is of infinite worth and value, abundantly sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world.

The question debated between Arminians and Calvinists in regard to limited atonement is not, then, how much the atonement is worth or how valuable the redemption price paid by Christ is. The question is for whom was it paid and for whom was atonement made.

#### ***16. Limited Atonement contradicts the free and well-meant offer of the gospel!***

Arminians make this claim because they rightly conclude that limited atonement means that we Calvinists cannot tell everyone you meet that Christ died for them. If limited atonement is true, then Christ did not die for everyone, and we may not say that He

did! This seems a serious issue for the one who assumes that sharing the gospel means telling people that Christ died for them.

The problem is that the offer of the gospel does not consist in anybody's view of whom Christ died for, or statement about the extent of the atonement. The gospel offer is not 'Christ died for you.' You can find no such gospel offer in the preaching of the Apostles of Christ or in the Book of Acts. The offer of the gospel is simply the offer of Christ Himself as a sufficient Savior. It is not necessary to make assertions with regard to those for whom Christ died in the mystery of the divine will in order to offer Christ as a sufficient Savior for all men without exception. Paul's declaration in Galatians 2:20 that Christ loved me and gave himself for me is not a statement of the gospel offer to all sinners, but a statement of glorious assurance of salvation for saved sinners.

***17. Limited atonement means that whosoever will may not come!***

Once more the *Canons of Dort* contradict this slander:

FIRST HEAD: ARTICLE 2. but in this the love of God was manifested, that He "sent his one and only Son into the world, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (1 John 4:9, John 3:16).

The question, then, is not if "*whosoever will may come.*" Of course, anyone may come. The question is who actually will come and what will make them come.

***18. Irresistible grace means that God saves men against their will!***

Exactly not! Irresistible grace means rather that God makes people willing in the day of His power! The text often quoted by Calvinists here is Psalm 110:3: "Your people will volunteer freely in the day of Your power." The 1689 (10:1) makes this matter abundantly clear:

Those whom God hath predestinated unto life, he is pleased in his appointed, and accepted time, effectually to call, by his Word and Spirit, out of that state of sin and death in which they are by nature, to grace and salvation by Jesus Christ; enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God; taking away their heart of stone, and giving unto them a heart of flesh; ***renewing their wills, and by his almighty power determining them to that which is good, and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ; yet so as they come most freely, being made willing by his grace.***

***19. Irresistible grace means that men never resist the Holy Spirit!***

Of course, if irresistible grace meant this, then irresistible grace would not be biblical. The Bible is explicit that some men do resist the Holy Spirit. Acts 7:51 reads: "You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did."

Irresistible grace, however, does not mean that men never resist the Holy Spirit. As I showed in a previous post, according to the *1689 Baptist Confession* Calvinism teaches something known as *common grace*. The wooings and workings of common grace are not irresistible. As I also showed in a previous post, The *Canons of Dort* and the *Confession* both make clear that there is also such a thing as the general call of the gospel. In common grace and the general call of the gospel, the Holy Spirit speaks to men and sincerely calls them to come to Christ. Such common grace and general calls of the gospel are frequently resisted by men. However, the special grace and the effectual call of the Spirit actually *create* the response to which men are summoned. That grace and that call are, therefore, irresistible!

***20. The Perseverance and Preservation of the Saints means that, once men are saved, it does not matter how they live, they will still go to heaven!***

In our degenerate age this is actually how many professing Christians understand what they call eternal security. Eternal security is a corrupt form of the doctrine of the perseverance and preservation of the saints.

The historical fact is that at the time of the *Synod of Dort* and the writing of the *1689 Baptist Confession*, neither mainstream Calvinists nor Arminians believed such a horrible doctrine. Neither the Calvinists who wrote the *Canons of Dort*, nor the Arminians who forced them to write the Canons, would ever have dreamed of teaching anything akin to the idea that once you are a Christian, you will be saved no matter how you live. Both Calvinists and Arminians believed that the perseverance of the Saints was a necessity. They only disagreed as to whether it was a reality and a certainty!

Listen to these excerpts from the *Canons of Dort*:

Those whom God, according to His purpose, calls to the communion of His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and regenerates by the Holy Spirit, He also delivers from the dominion and slavery of sin .... But God is faithful, who, having conferred grace, mercifully confirms and powerfully preserves them therein, even to the end. (5<sup>th</sup> Head; Articles 1 and 3)  
Saved people are delivered from the dominion and slavery of sin and are powerfully preserved in that deliverance to the end. This is the authentic and original doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints.

***21. The Perseverance and Preservation of the Saints means that God's people can have no assurance of salvation until after they have persevered!***

Nothing could be further from the truth. It is only the doctrine of the perseverance and preservation of the saints that grounds assurance of salvation. Only a salvation bestowed by sovereign election and in which every true Christian will certainly be preserved provides any ground or hope of authentic assurance of salvation.

And furthermore assurance of our perseverance does not have to wait until after we have persevered. It can be gained from the marks of special grace which accompany all true faith. *The 1689 Baptist Confession* affirms this clearly in chapter 14, paragraph 3:

This faith, although it be different in degrees, and may be weak or strong, yet it is in the least degree of it different in the kind or nature of it, as is all other saving grace, from the faith and common grace of temporary believers; and therefore, though it may be many times assailed and weakened, yet it gets the victory, growing up in many to the attainment of a full assurance through Christ, who is both the author and finisher of our faith.

Once more and finally, listen to the Canons of Dort:

FIFTH HEAD: ARTICLE 9. Of this preservation of the elect to salvation and of their perseverance in the faith, true believers themselves may and do obtain assurance according to the measure of their faith, whereby they surely believe that they are and ever will continue true and living members of the Church, and that they have the forgiveness of sins and life eternal.



**Sam Waldron**

Dr. Sam Waldron is the Academic Dean of CBTS and professor of Systematic Theology. He is also one of the pastors of Grace Reformed Baptist Church in Owensboro, KY. Dr. Waldron received a B.A. from Cornerstone University, an M.Div. from Trinity Ministerial Academy, a Th.M. from Grand



Rapids Theological Seminary, and a Ph.D. from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. From 1977 to 2001 he was a pastor of the Reformed Baptist Church of Grand Rapids, MI. Dr. Waldron is the author of numerous books including *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*, *The End Times Made Simple*, *Baptist Roots in America*, *To Be Continued?*, and *MacArthur's Millennial Manifesto: A Friendly Response*.