

Grace to You :: esp Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time

Why I Am a Calvinist, Part 5

Scripture: 1 John 4:19

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by Phil Johnson

. . . and why every Christian is a Calvinist of sorts.

Part V: Why this issue is really a lot simpler than most people think

At the end of the previous post, I described how even in my Arminian days, I affirmed an awful lot of truth about the sovereignty of God: I would have affirmed with no reservation whatsoever that God is God; that He does all His good pleasure; that no one can make Him do otherwise; that He is in control and in charge no matter how much noise evildoers try to make; and not only is He in charge, He is working all things out for my good and His glory. As a matter of fact, my confidence in the promise of Romans 8:28 was what motivated my prayer life.

That's Calvinism. If you believe those things, you have affirmed the heart of Calvinism, even if you call yourself an Arminian. Those are the basic truths of Calvinism, and if you already believe those things, you are functioning with Calvinist presuppositions.

In fact, the truths of Calvinism so much permeate the heart of the gospel message, that even if you think you are a committed and consistent proponent of Arminianism, if you truly affirm *the gospel* you have already conceded the principle points of Calvinism anyway.

I want to turn to the Scriptures and illustrate for you from a typical passage of Scripture why I think that's true. For the remainder of this series, we'll focus on one very short text of Scripture that illustrates perfectly the point I am making.

Let's home in on a truth Arminians hold in especially high regard, and rightfully so: *the love of God*. I've chosen a short verse, and a familiar one, to make this as simple as possible—1 John 4:19. This is one of those memory verses AWANA kids love because it's easy to get credit for memorizing a whole verse, and it's just eight words in English: 1 John 4:19: "We love Him because He first loved us."

I remember very well the first time I noticed this verse. I was a fairly new Christian at the time, and I was surprised to find this truth in the Bible.

I was appallingly ignorant of the Bible when I was a brand new Christian. I grew up going to liberal churches where the Bible was hardly mentioned unless the Sunday School teacher wanted to disagree with something the Bible said.

So I remember taking a Bible literacy exam when I entered Moody Bible Institute, still as a fairly new

believer. I hate to think what kind of score I made on that exam. I'm sure it was appallingly low. The amount I knew about the Bible was embarrassingly meager. I knew, of course, that Moses got the Ten Amendments on Mount Cyanide, but the only one I could name was "Thou shalt not admit adultery."

But we still sang some of the old hymns, and one of the ones that was familiar to me was, "Oh, How I love Jesus!" And I was always intrigued by the closing line of that song: "Oh, how I love Jesus, because He first loved me." So I was familiar with the words, but I was really surprised to find that this is what the Bible says: "We love Him, because He first loved us."

For some reason, from my earliest childhood, hearing the chorus of that song, that had always struck me as a pretty lousy reason for loving Jesus. Of course, in my unregenerate state, I had almost no understanding whatsoever of the love of Christ for me. I knew that He loved me and I was *supposed* to love Him, because we sang about it and all. But loving Him just because He loved me first didn't seem like a particularly noble or admirable reason for loving Him. In fact it always sounded a little bit childish, because it was the very same reason I always gave my mother when she asked me why I hit my brother: *Because he hit me first!*

I understood that reciprocity is not a good motive for determining how we act toward other people. "You love me, and I'll love you in return" is as morally bankrupt as saying, "You hit me, and I'll hit you back." Love is supposed to be unconditional, isn't it? So "because He first loved me" never sounded like quite an adequate motive for loving Jesus.

So I was really surprised after I became a Christian and started reading the Bible, when I found that these words are taken directly from Scripture: "We love Him, because He first loved us."

But what I didn't understand then, but I understand now, is that this verse isn't speaking merely about the *motive* for our love. It is a profound statement about the grace of God that sovereignly secures our love and transforms us from God-hating enemies into adopted sons and daughters whose hearts naturally overflow with the purest kind of love—not only love for God, but also love for one another.

Incidentally, there's a minor textual issue in this verse that I ought to mention. In the King James and New King James Versions, this verse is translated just the way I have read it: "We love Him, because He first loved us." That's because the Greek texts from which the King James Version was translated include the object *Him*.

It doesn't ultimately matter which reading you prefer, because both things are actually true, and our capacity for loving God is dependent on our ability to *have* true love. If we couldn't love at all, we certainly couldn't love God. So either way, the meaning of this verse *includes* the truth that "We love *Him*, because He first loved us."

This post is adapted from a transcript of a seminar from the 2007 Shepherds' Conference, titled "Closet Calvinists."

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