

## INTRODUCTION

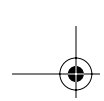
The enormously popular sitcom *Seinfeld*, despite its aim to be a show about nothing, occasionally raised some very important questions. In one episode George Costanza, the character who could never quite get his life in order, finally appears to have everything going his way. But then, true to form, the plane he is on goes into a nosedive. As he sees his life passing before his eyes, he blurts out, “I knew God wouldn’t let me be successful!” (In the end, the plane straightens out and George’s life is spared. He does, however, wind up in prison by the end of the episode.)

We do not want to exaggerate George’s theological insight, but he did manage to hit on an issue of extraordinary importance in his little outburst. In fact, we cannot imagine a more important issue than the one he suggests. The question, quite simply put, is whether there are persons, as George saw himself, whom God has chosen not to bless. Or can we be assured, regardless of our lot in this life, that God truly loves us, desires our well-being and wants us to have his ultimate gift of eternal life? This question is the driving force behind our decision to write *Why I Am Not a Calvinist*. And this is the primary question we seek to answer in this book.

### THE LOCUS OF THE DEBATE: GOD’S CHARACTER

The debate between Calvinism and Arminianism is often framed by the concept of freedom, with God’s sovereign right to do what he chooses with his creation on one side (Calvinism) and humanity’s ability to shape its own destiny on the other (Arminianism). When the debate centers on freedom, the issue boils down to one of power. Is the sovereign Creator





W H Y I A M N O T A C A L V I N I S T

of the universe in control, or is sinful humanity in charge? Does God not have the right and ability to do what he pleases with his creation? It is easy to see the attraction of Calvinism when the debate is transformed into a court hearing with Calvinism defending the majesty of God and Arminianism representing the rights of humanity.

Although we would agree that a portion of the dispute swirls around the topic of sovereignty and human freedom, we contend that the truly fundamental dispute is not over power but rather over God's character. Our motivation for writing this book is not our desire to present a case for human liberty. Protecting the tree of liberty in such a way that Patrick Henry would be proud, which R. C. Sproul suggests is the main Arminian issue, is not in fact the crux of our concern.<sup>1</sup> The fundamental issue here is which theological paradigm does a better job of representing the biblical picture of God's character: which theological system gives a more adequate account of the biblical God whose nature is holy love?

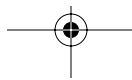
In the chapters that follow, we will argue that Calvinism distorts the biblical picture of God and fails in other crucial ways that show its inadequacy as a theological system. Before proceeding further, let us identify the views we aim to scrutinize and analyze.

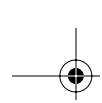
**WHAT IS CALVINISM?**

Calvinism derives its name, of course, from the great Protestant Reformer John Calvin (1509-1564). It is important to understand, however, that we are using the general term *Calvinism* to refer to a certain tradition in theology of which Calvin is the most famous proponent. It is called Calvinism because of Calvin's role in articulating the theology clearly and systematically. Before Calvin, however, the same basic views were defended by a number of important theologians, most notably

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<sup>1</sup>R. C. Sproul, *Chosen by God* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1986), p. 9. After employing the image of the tree of liberty, Sproul goes on to write, "The specter of an all-powerful God making choices for us, and perhaps even against us, makes us scream, 'Give me free will or give me death!'" Of course, Patrick Henry is famous for the line "Give me liberty or give me death!"





## Introduction

Augustine (354-430), although Augustine was not as clear or consistent as Calvin on these matters. Another important figure in this connection is Martin Luther, Calvin's great contemporary in the Reformation, who also follows Augustine and was essentially in agreement with Calvin on the points we discuss in this book.<sup>2</sup> And since Calvin, his system of theology has been further elaborated and refined by numerous theologians down to the present day.

We do not by any means intend to reject everything associated with Calvinism and Reformed theology. We have enormous respect and appreciation for Calvin and the heritage he defined and engendered. Calvinism has for centuries represented a vital tradition of piety that is intellectually and morally serious. Calvinists have set a standard for scholarship and cultural engagement that evangelicals of other traditions can readily admire and emulate. Scholars in the broadly Reformed tradition have developed distinct approaches to matters ranging from epistemology (the theory of knowledge) to political theory and cultural criticism that do not necessarily hinge on the aspects of Calvinism we will criticize.<sup>3</sup> Christians from other theological backgrounds can profit greatly from this rich body of work and even adapt it to their perspectives. Moreover, many Calvinists have been zealous evangelists and missionaries and have contributed powerfully to the cause of winning the lost for Christ. In their passion for the glory of God, Calvinists have played a leading role in the renewal of worship in this generation.

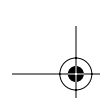
The aspects of Calvinism we will criticize, however, are central to historic Reformed theology and are where Calvinism diverges most sharply from Arminianism and from several other competing theological traditions. We have in mind certain Calvinistic claims about salvation and

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<sup>2</sup>On Martin Luther's "Calvinism," see J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston, "Historical and Theological Introduction," in Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (Westwood, N.J.: Revell, 1957), pp. 57-59. It would be more historically accurate to describe both Luther and Calvin as Augustinians, but this brand of theology is best known as Calvinism, so we will retain this term.

<sup>3</sup>For example, Alvin Plantinga, who has developed a Reformed approach to epistemology, holds an Arminian view of freedom.





## W H Y I A M N O T A C A L V I N I S T

how God bestows it on his fallen children. The issue of salvation is clearly at the heart of Christian theology; some of the most hotly contested disputes among believers arise over it. The distinctively Reformed account of salvation has been spelled out in five concise claims known for generations as the “five points of Calvinism.” Indeed, these five points have been conveniently summarized in what is perhaps the most famous acronym in the history of theology, namely, the Calvinist “tulip”:

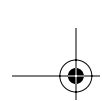
- T**otal depravity
- U**nconditional election
- L**imited atonement
- I**rresistible grace
- P**erseverance of the saints

Of course, no simple summary, no matter how time honored and historic, can do justice to the subtlety and sophistication of Reformed theology. But these five points remain a convenient overview of Calvinism, particularly for those approaching these matters for the first time. So let’s consider these five points in the order they appear in the acronym.

**Total depravity.** Total depravity describes the desperate condition of fallen sinners apart from the grace of God. Sin has affected every facet of human personality to such an extent that we are incapable of doing good or loving God as we should. Our thinking is distorted, our emotions are deceptive and out of proportion, and our desires are unruly and misdirected. In this condition, we are bent on rebellion and evil and are completely unwilling to submit to God and his perfect will. Consequently, we deserve only God’s wrath and eternal punishment. Sinners in this condition are so utterly helpless that they are accurately described as “dead in [their] transgressions and sins” (Eph 2:1). So pervasive and deadly is the effect of sin that they can no more respond to God or do his will than a corpse could respond if commanded to get up and walk.

On the matter of total depravity, Calvinists are in essential agreement with believers in many other Christian traditions. The differences arise





## Introduction

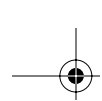
when one asks how God deals with sinners in this desperate condition. The Arminian and Wesleyan answer is that the death of Christ provided grace for all persons and that, as a result of his atonement, God extends sufficient grace to all persons through the Holy Spirit to counteract the influence of sin and to enable a positive response to God (Jn 15:26-27; 16:7-11). The initiative here is entirely God's; the sinner's part is only to respond in faith and grateful obedience (Lk 15; Rom 5:6-8; Eph 2:4-5; Phil 2:12-13). However, it is possible for sinners to resist God's initiative and to persist in sin and rebellion. In other words, God's grace *enables* and encourages a positive and saving response for *everyone*, but it does not *determine* a saving response for *anyone* (Acts 7:51). Moreover, an initial positive response of faith and obedience does not guarantee one's final salvation. It is possible to begin a genuine relationship with God but then later turn from him and persist in evil so that one is finally lost (Rom 8:12-13; 11:19-22; Gal 5:21; 6:7-10; Heb 6:1-8; Rev 2:2-7).

**Unconditional election.** On all of these points, Calvinists beg to differ. It is their contention that God in his sovereign grace has chosen to rescue certain specific fallen sinners from their helpless condition while leaving the rest of humanity to perish eternally. It is important to emphasize that God's choice of whom to save is entirely unconditional; it does not depend in any way on his foreknowledge of a person's faith, obedience and the like.

**Limited atonement.** Limited atonement is the claim that Christ died only for the elect persons whom God has chosen unconditionally to save, rather than for all persons alike, as Arminians hold. Christ's death covers all the sins of the elect and is therefore effective to save all persons for whom he died. Since his atonement is effective in this way, if he had died for all, then all would actually be saved. But all are not saved, so his atonement is limited in this respect to the elect.

It is noteworthy that recently a number of Calvinists have expressed reservations, and in some cases outright disagreement, with the traditional notion of limited atonement. Some take exception to the phrase itself, preferring alternative formulations such as "particular atonement,"





## W H Y I A M N O T A C A L V I N I S T

and argue that it is actually the Arminians who limit the atonement since they do not believe salvation is guaranteed for all persons for whom Christ died. Others dispute the substance of the notion and argue that it is incompatible with clear scriptural teaching that Christ died for all persons. Those Calvinists who acknowledge this but still want to retain the essence of the traditional Reformed position argue that Christ died for the elect in a different sense than he died for the non-elect.

**Irresistible grace.** This brings us to the fourth point of Calvinism, namely, irresistible grace, which is closely related to the previous two points. If God unconditionally elects who will be saved as a matter of his sovereign will, and if the atonement of Christ is effective in that it ensures the salvation of all persons for whom Christ died, then it follows naturally that the elect will not be able to resist God's sovereign choice to save them. Those who are elect cannot fail to respond positively to God's grace.

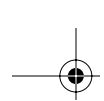
It is tempting to conclude that if grace is irresistible in this way, then God forces himself on the elect and their freedom is destroyed in the process. Indeed, this is a common criticism of Calvinism. However, this criticism is usually a misguided one, for Calvinists typically deny that God forces himself on us and insist that human freedom is maintained throughout God's saving activity. God's grace does not violate our wills but rather changes them so that sinners willingly and gladly respond.

The coherence of these claims is one of the most vexed and difficult issues in this controversy. We will explore this issue in detail below, but for now it is sufficient to note that the notion of irresistible grace should not be understood as automatically ruling out human freedom.

**Perseverance of the saints.** If election is unconditional and the death of Christ is necessarily effective to save for all persons for whom he died, and if saving grace cannot be resisted by these persons, then it follows that those who are chosen will persist in faith. God in his sovereignty will sustain them in faith and accomplish the final salvation for which he elected them.

It is worth noting that the notion of the perseverance of the saints





## *Introduction*

sometimes goes under the label “eternal security,” and as such it is often affirmed by believers who are not full-blown Calvinists. In particular, Baptists of various stripes typically defend eternal security, although many of them reject unconditional election, limited atonement and irresistible grace. While the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints is most at home in a fully Reformed context, it is not necessarily inconsistent to affirm it while denying the middle three points of Calvinism. But those who hold to eternal security while rejecting the middle three points are not truly Calvinists but are rather a sort of Calvinist-Arminian hybrid.

Although these five points represent the core of what is distinctive about Calvinism, they are hardly exhaustive. Underlying them is a particular understanding of divine sovereignty that is also characteristic of Calvinism, an issue we will explore in more detail in chapter four. But for the purposes of this book, Calvinism will be defined in terms of these five points, with allowances for qualifications about limited atonement.

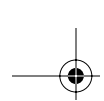
### **CALVINIST COMEBACK?**

The dispute between Calvinism and its critics has raged throughout the centuries of church history at least since the time of Augustine. The details of this conflict are fascinating, but they are not our concern here. What is noteworthy, however, is that in the past several decades Calvinism seemed largely to have lost the battle, at least in the theater of American evangelicalism. Various forms of Arminian, Wesleyan and Pentecostal theology came to predominate in much of evangelicalism in the twentieth century. While Calvinism always had its articulate advocates and has continued to exert considerable influence through educational institutions, publishing houses and other organizations, it seemed to be fighting a losing battle in the modern and postmodern church.

Recently, however, Calvinism seems to be staging a remarkable comeback. Consider the words of popular author Dave Hunt, explaining why he chose to write a book on Calvinism despite the controversy it might cause.

I had scarcely given Calvinism a thought for years. Then suddenly—or so it seemed to me—in the past two years Calvinism





W H Y I A M N O T A C A L V I N I S T

began emerging as an issue everywhere. Perhaps I am just waking up, but it seems to me that this peculiar doctrine is being promoted far more widely and aggressively now than I was ever aware in the past.<sup>4</sup>

These comments resonate with the experience of the authors of this book. While some of our academic colleagues have wondered whether we are “beating a dead horse” in writing a book on Calvinism, we have observed an intense and growing interest in this issue among Christians of all ages. Not long ago we took part in a debate on Calvinism hosted by a local church. It was attended by nearly one thousand people—most of whom looked to be high school, college or seminary students.<sup>5</sup> Most stayed for the entire three-hour debate, and many even remained afterward to continue questioning the participants. So much for the widely alleged claim that Generation X has little interest in theology and doctrine!

Those seeking additional evidence of Calvinism’s comeback need look no further than the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest Protestant body in the United States and a major force within the diverse entity known as evangelicalism. The Baptists are a particularly interesting case study because their theology is often a hybrid of Calvinism and Arminianism. Baptist theology certainly has some strong Calvinist roots, though from the beginning the Calvinist influence was moderated. Most Baptists today are Arminian except for their belief in eternal security.

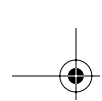
For the past several years, however, several influential Baptist leaders,

<sup>4</sup>Dave Hunt, *What Love Is This? Calvinism’s Misrepresentation of God* (Sisters, Ore.: Loyal, 2002), p. 15. It may seem that people everywhere are talking about Calvinism. But when Houston Astros power hitter Lance Berkman was asked about the best conversation he ever had with a catcher at the plate, he replied, “Benito Santiago is pretty good with the banter. It is not like we are discussing Calvinism versus Arminianism or anything.” Apparently batters are not near catchers long enough to get a good discussion of the matter started! See “Dan Patrick Outtakes,” *ESPN the Magazine*, May 12, 2003, p. 118.

<sup>5</sup>This debate was held at Southland Christian Church in Lexington, Kentucky, on April 12, 2002. The Calvinist representatives in the debate were Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware of Southern Baptist Seminary.







## Introduction

many of them young, have been calling for a revival of Calvinism.<sup>6</sup> They have observed that segments of their denomination, like much of American evangelicalism, have become theologically thin, spiritually superficial and morally confused. As these Baptist leaders diagnose the problem, Arminian theology is a major (if not *the* major) cause of these ills. In a recent work, Ernest C. Reisinger and D. Matthew Allen describe the situation as follows: “Southern Baptists are at a crossroads. We have a choice to make. The choice is between the deep-rooted, God-centered theology of evangelical Calvinism and the man-centered, unstable theology of the other perspectives present in the convention.”<sup>7</sup> Whether this choice is fully free or is one determined by God these writers do not say, but as the title of their book indicates, they see the resurgence of Calvinism in their denomination as nothing less than a contemporary Reformation. And when the choice is posed in such terms, Calvinism seems like the obvious theology of choice.

Others see the matter quite differently. For instance, the eminent Baptist historian William R. Estep cites approvingly the view of Andrew Fuller, an earlier participant in the Calvinist controversy, who contended that if the Baptists had not moderated their views on Calvinism, they “would have become a perfect dunghill in society.”<sup>8</sup> The present controversy, often carried out over the Internet, has been intense, with both sides leveling strong charges against their opponents.

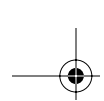
It is worth underscoring that the resurgence of Calvinism among the Baptists is happening particularly among young leaders such as Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville. Moreover, Calvinism seems to have an appeal to persons younger still, especially college students, as indicated by the growing influence of

<sup>6</sup>See Keith Hinson, “Calvinism Resurging Among SBC’s Young Elites,” *Christianity Today*, October 6, 1997, pp. 86-87.

<sup>7</sup>Ernest C. Reisinger and D. Matthew Allen, *A Quiet Revolution: A Chronicle of Beginnings of Reformation in the Southern Baptist Convention* (Cape Coral, Fl.: Founders, 2000), p. 12.

<sup>8</sup>William R. Estep, “Doctrines Lead to ‘Dunghill’ Prof Warns,” <<http://www.founders.org/FJ29/article1.html>>.

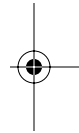




W H Y I A M N O T A C A L V I N I S T

such campus groups as Reformed University Fellowship. It is also worth noting in this connection that Calvinism has had a significant impact on contemporary Christian music and is embraced by a number of well-known singers and artists. Caedmon's Call, one of the most popular Christian bands among college students, is openly Reformed in terms of theological conviction. This band is characterized not only by a distinctive musical sound but more importantly by their lyrics, which are among the most theologically literate in the industry. And often those lyrics convey in memorable fashion a Reformed perspective. Derek Webb, the band's articulate former lead singer, described the focus of Caedmon's Call:

We just try to be as true as we can to what we believe to be the Biblical angle of salvation. . . . Spiritual death is like a physical corpse—what can a corpse do to help itself rise from the dead? If the language of Genesis, Romans, and Ephesians is true (that the day we ate of the fruit, we died and we have to be made alive in Christ) what kind of choice does that give us?<sup>9</sup>



Not all musical comments on Calvinism are so positive, however. Another band known for its rich lyrics is Vigilantes of Love, fronted by songwriter and singer Bill Mallonee. In one of his recordings, Mallonee colorfully expresses a sentiment with which many others involved in this debate can identify: "God's love shines through a prism, I'm so confused by Calvinism."<sup>10</sup>

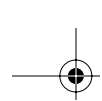
The difficulty and complexity of the issues in this historic debate make his confusion altogether understandable. But such references to Calvinism in popular music are another indication of how the younger generation is coming to this issue with renewed interest and passion.

Why is Calvinism making a comeback? What is its appeal? No doubt

<sup>9</sup>"The Call of Caedmon," interview by Dan Ewald, *All Access*, November 2000, p. 27.

<sup>10</sup>These lyrics appear in a bonus track on the Vigilantes' CD *Room Despair*. In a later recording of the song, the words were changed to "I'm so confused by television." Apparently Mallonee has become an Arminian and is no longer confused by Calvinism.





## Introduction

there are several factors involved here, but let us mention just two. First, part of Calvinism's attraction is surely that it represents a stark alternative to the superficial, seeker-sensitive theology that predominates in many churches in America. In such churches, God is often reduced to a "cosmic bellhop" whose only concern is to meet whatever needs contemporary people feel in their lives. The biblical picture of a God of holy love before whom we stand guilty and in need of salvation is obscured or even denied. Doctrine is dismissed as irrelevant, Scripture is used as a self-help manual, and worship is replaced by various forms of entertainment.

Many have tired of such novelties and have recognized that if there really is a God, he must be taken much more seriously than American Christianity appears to take him. Well, the God of Calvinism is far from a cosmic bellhop. He is not obliged to do anything for you except send you to hell, and if he chooses to do so, he is glorified by your damnation. Calvinism is, if it is anything, serious about doctrine, passionate about the Bible and zealous for the glory of God. As such, it appears to be the perfect antidote to the trivialities prevalent in the contemporary church.

Second, many see Calvinism as a liberating doctrine that breathes new life into sterile and legalistic devotional life. Seminary students Jennifer L. Bayne and Sarah E. Hinlicky highlighted this factor as one of the things that led them to embrace the Calvinistic account of predestination: "Ironic as it sounds, accepting predestination into our lives was the most freeing thing that has ever happened to us spiritually. We were free to be creatures again! We no longer had the burden of trying to be the Creator."<sup>11</sup>

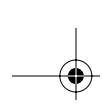
### ENGAGING THE ISSUES

If embracing Calvinism is the best way to take God seriously, to acknowledge our status as creatures and to experience spiritual liberation, then we want to be Calvinists too! Obviously we don't believe this is the case,

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<sup>11</sup>Jennifer L. Bayne and Sarah E. Hinlicky, "Free to Be Creatures Again," *Christianity Today*, October 23, 2000, p. 44.





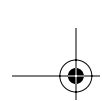
## W H Y I A M N O T A C A L V I N I S T

or we would not have written this book. But we appreciate the appeal of Calvinism and respect many of the motives that draw believers to embrace it. Moreover, we hold high regard for all those who are currently engaging this issue, whether as convinced advocates or as those who are still trying to make up their mind. There is a lot at stake in this controversy, and it is altogether understandable that its participants express strong feelings. What is at stake is nothing less than the question of how we are saved from our sins and granted eternal life—a question toward which no believer can rationally be indifferent. If we don't care about this question, we just don't understand! Indeed, the issue is deeper still, for it concerns the ultimate matter of how God is truly worshiped and glorified. Furthermore, far-reaching practical implications for life and ministry flow from what we believe are the answers to these questions. Earnest discussion is both appropriate and desirable if it helps us get at the truth.

The widespread doctrinal indifference of our times is in part a failure to recognize the important role of argument and even controversy in the life of the church. Of course, some arguments are fruitless and hinder the work of the gospel. This will always be the case when love is absent and neither side sincerely attempts to determine the truth and obey it. But when the truth concerning matters of great importance is at stake, indifference is hard to understand and defend. In view of this, the Baptists are to be commended for their doctrinal seriousness and their passion for being faithful to the truth of the gospel. Those who look down their noses with an air of urbane superiority on the Baptists (and on those who engage in doctrinal disputes) are the ones who are misguided here.

Accordingly, we will engage these matters forthrightly and with conviction appropriate to what is at issue. However, we need more than conviction and passion to engage these questions insightfully. These disputes have occupied many of the best minds in the church, and we cannot even understand the issues involved, let alone take an informed position, without patient inquiry and careful thought. Unfortunately, sometimes both sides of this debate give the impression that what is at





## Introduction

issue is quite simple and easy to decide. For instance, Mohler claims that “Calvinism is nothing more and nothing less than the simple assertion that salvation is all of grace, from the beginning to the end.”<sup>12</sup> Such a statement, however, is highly misleading, however effective it may be as a sound bite, for Calvinism is considerably more than that. We would certainly agree that salvation is by grace from start to finish, but that does not make us Calvinists. The really interesting questions are how grace is bestowed and how it effects our salvation.

These are multifaceted questions, and we acknowledge that to engage them seriously requires both informed interpretation of Scripture and careful conceptual analysis. In other words, the issues involved are exegetical (matters of biblical interpretation) as well as theological and philosophical. Both sides not only defend their views biblically but also make judgments that are philosophical in nature. Unfortunately, it is sometimes asserted that Calvinists base their views on Scripture while Arminians make their case primarily from reason and philosophy. This serious misunderstanding unfairly slants the issue in favor of Calvinism before the discussion has even started.

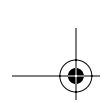
The reality is that Calvinists no less than Arminians rely on controversial philosophical judgments and assumptions. When this is not understood, contested philosophical judgments are sometimes passed off as simple biblical truth. But the less aware we are of our philosophical assumptions, the more they control our thinking. We need to be aware of the philosophical issues as well as the biblical issues, and sorting them out from each other requires our careful effort.

We want to stress emphatically that these are *not* matters only for experts to address. Indeed, this book is written for a popular audience. Too much is at stake in the life and ministry of the church to confine intelligent discussion of these matters to the relatively small circles of the professional theologians. Accordingly, in this book we have interacted both with pop-

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<sup>12</sup>R. Albert Mohler Jr., “The Reformation of Doctrine and the Renewal of the Church: A Response to Dr. William R. Estep,” <[wwwFOUNDERS.org/FJ29/article2.html](http://wwwFOUNDERS.org/FJ29/article2.html)>.





W H Y I A M N O T A C A L V I N I S T

ular Calvinist authors as well as with more scholarly and classical sources. We have attempted to write clearly and accessibly, while also providing enough detail to represent the issues fairly.

One of us is a biblical scholar, and one of us is a philosopher. There is some overlap in our discussions, and some issues, such as the nature of sovereignty, are so central that both of us deal with them. Of course, we do so from somewhat different angles since we work in different disciplines, but we arrive at conclusions that dovetail quite nicely.

It is our goal to do justice to the full range of questions involved in order to help readers make an informed decision on these crucial matters. But again, doing so requires a measure of patience, thoughtful inquiry and plain-old hard thinking. (This is not the sort of issue one can discuss in the batter's box while waiting for a fastball down the middle!) Understanding and insight can be achieved, but they will not come cheaply or easily.

So strap your boots on. It is time to get serious.

