

*The Joy of Calvinism: Knowing God's Personal,  
Unconditional, Irresistible, Unbreakable Love*

Copyright © 2012 by Greg Forster

Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street  
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided for by USA copyright law.

Cover design: Josh Dennis

Cover illustrator: Darren Booth / darrenbooth.com

First printing 2012

Printed in the United States of America

Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (*The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

All emphases in Scripture quotations have been added by the author.

Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-2834-7

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-2835-4

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-2836-1

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-2837-8

---

### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

The joy of Calvinism : knowing God's personal, unconditional, irresistible, unbreakable love / Greg Forster.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4335-2834-7 (tp)

1. Calvinism. 2. God (Christianity)—Love. 3. Theology, Doctrinal.  
4. Salvation—Christianity. 5. Joy—Religious aspects—Calvinists.  
6. Christian life. I. Title.

BX9422.3.F67 2012

230'.42—dc23 2011035957

---

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

VP 22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12  
15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# Contents

Acknowledgments	11
Introduction: Rejoice . . . Always?	13
Detour: Five Points about Calvinism	29
1 God Loves You Personally	47
<i>When Jesus died and rose again, he saved you.</i>	
2 God Loves You Unconditionally	69
<i>Nothing is more important to your heavenly Father than saving you.</i>	
3 God Loves You Irresistibly	91
<i>The “new birth” in the Holy Spirit is a radical, supernatural transformation.</i>	
4 God Loves You Unbreakably	121
<i>You can do all things, persevere through all trials, and rejoice in all circumstances.</i>	
Conclusion: The Joy of Calvinism	145
Appendix: Questions and Answers	155
Notes	197
General Index	201
Scripture Index	203

# Detour

## *Five Points about Calvinism*

In the introduction, I said that Calvinism is radically misunderstood by most people in our day. I expect that at that point, my readers divided into two groups. One group really wants to hear me make the case to support that assertion, either because they disagree with it or because they're undecided and are interested in hearing my argument. The other group doesn't need to hear me make the case on this, either because they already agree with me or because they're not interested in the issue—they picked up this book to hear about the joy of Calvinism, not an argument over whether Calvinism is misunderstood. This section is a detour for the benefit of the first group. Members of the second group may feel free to skip it entirely.

To try to convince you of just how drastically Calvinism has been miscommunicated and misunderstood, let me offer my own five points about Calvinism. I'm willing to bet that they'll challenge most people's conception of Calvinism in a pretty fundamental way. These points challenge five common myths about Calvinism. I think these myths are the main reason people don't hear what Calvinism really has to say.

To support my five points, I need to refer to an objective standard of what Calvinists believe. I want you to know that when I say Calvinists believe this or that, I'm not just making things up as I go. To confirm that I'm accurately representing Calvinism, I use the Westminster Confession of Faith as a standard of reference.<sup>1</sup> Of course, there's no authoritative or mandatory doctrinal statement that all Calvinists without exception unconditionally accept.

But we need to use something as a reference, and the Westminster Confession is the overwhelmingly predominant confessional statement of Calvinist theology in the English-speaking world. This is the statement that most confessionally Calvinist church bodies require their clergy to affirm. That's more than enough for my purposes. If I want to prove that "Calvinism doesn't say *x*," pointing out that the Westminster Confession says "*x* is false" is pretty much a slam dunk.

### **1. Calvinism does not deny that we have free will.**

The Westminster Confession has a whole chapter called "Of Free Will." Here is the first section of that chapter, in its entirety:

God hath endued the will of man with that natural liberty, that it is neither forced, nor, by any absolute necessity of nature, determined to good, or evil. (WCF 9.1)

You can't get much clearer than that.

Earlier in the Confession there's a chapter on God's providential guiding of his creation. Again in the very first section, the authors make a point of affirming free will:

God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established. (WCF 3.1)

In case you're wondering, when the Confession refers to "second causes," human will is one of the things included in that category. But affirming the liberty of "second causes" in general wasn't enough for the Confession's authors. They went out of their way to specifically insist that in God's providential control of events there is no "violence offered to the will of the creatures."<sup>2</sup>

Of course, there is much more to be said about these issues, and this isn't the place to get into all the technicalities. The important point for our purposes here is that Calvinism clearly and unambig-

uously insists that we have free will. (For more about these issues, see the appendix, questions 5 and 6.)

If so, why do so many people think Calvinism denies free will? Where did that idea come from?

Today, the phrase “free will” refers to moral responsibility. When we say people have free will, we mean that they are not just puppets of exterior natural forces such as their heredity and environment; they are in control of their own choices and are morally responsible for them. In our language, the opposite of “free will” is “determined will”—a will whose actions are naturally determined by things outside itself.

But in the sixteenth century, at the very beginning of the Reformation, one of the key debates was over “free will” in a completely different sense. The question then was whether the will is, by nature, enslaved by sin and in captivity to Satan. In this context, the opposite of “free” is not “determined” but “enslaved.” Believing in “free will” meant believing that human beings are not born as slaves of Satan. Denying “free will” meant believing that they are.

Erasmus, one of Luther’s most perceptive and influential critics, solidified this use of the term “free will” in his book *The Freedom of the Will*. Erasmus argued that the key issue between Luther and Rome was whether we are born as slaves of Satan or born free to choose whether to serve God or Satan. Luther strongly agreed that this was, indeed, the key issue; he praised Erasmus for being the only person on Rome’s side smart enough to grasp this. When Luther wrote a book in reply to Erasmus’s *The Freedom of the Will*, he entitled it *The Slavery of the Will*. Many others on both sides picked up this theme—including Calvin, who took the same position as Luther. Calvin entitled his own book on the subject *The Slavery and Liberation of the Will*. Denying “free will” (in this particular sense) was one of the earliest defining positions of both Lutheran and Calvinistic theology. It was an essential element of the Protestant view.

In these debates, nobody was questioning that the will is “free”

in the sense of self-controlled and morally responsible, as opposed to being determined by exterior forces. Everyone agreed that people have “free will” in this sense, but people didn’t call it “free will” because that phrase had a different meaning for them. Calvin even called the slavery of the will to Satan “voluntary slavery.” Fallen man is a slave of Satan precisely because, when given a choice, he always chooses to love sin more than God. It is his own voluntary choice (his exercise of “free will” in our modern sense) that keeps him a slave to Satan (thus lacking “free will” in the sixteenth-century sense).

Moreover, at one point in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, his theological masterwork, Calvin actually turns aside from a diatribe against “free will” to make this very point. He notes that the phrase “free will” could also be used to refer to a morally responsible will that is not naturally determined by forces such as heredity and environment, and he says if “free will” means that, then he agrees we have “free will.” But, he goes on to argue, that’s not what most people (at least in his time and place) would understand that phrase to mean, so it would be misleading for him to use it that way.<sup>3</sup>

Our problem is that people who study the sixteenth-century debates often carry its phrases into the discussions and debates of our own time without adjusting for the change in meaning. Of course it’s natural and right for scholarly study of these theological issues to be shaped by the great books that were written during the sixteenth-century Reformation debate. However, we often don’t consider carefully enough how those books continue to shape our language—especially when we talk to audiences made up of people who don’t read five-hundred-year-old books on a regular basis. And the phrase “free will” today has a radically different meaning from the one it took on in the context of the sixteenth-century Reformation debate.

Calvin wrote that he used the term “free will” the way he did because he didn’t want to create misunderstanding. But when we use it that same way today, misunderstanding is exactly what we

create. We would do better to emulate Calvin in his desire to avoid misunderstanding rather than in his particular lexicographical choices.

## **2. Calvinism does not say we are saved against our wills.**

This point is just another application of the general truth that Calvinism strongly affirms the free will of all people. Just as God's providential control of all events does not, on the Calvinist view, negate the free will of human beings in general, the particular work of the Holy Spirit in bringing believers to faith doesn't negate the free will of those individuals.

In fact, the parallel between the two cases goes much deeper. God's providential control of all events, far from negating the freedom of our wills, is actually the source of that freedom. It is God's eternal decree that our wills be free, so his providential control sustains our freedom. Similarly, the saving work of the Spirit preserves the freedom of our wills rather than negating it.

Section 10.1 of the Westminster Confession, which describes the work of the Holy Spirit in converting sinners, insists that when the Spirit is "drawing them to Jesus Christ" they "come most freely." As we saw above with the free will of the whole human race, so here with the free will of God's people during their regeneration and conversion—the Confession goes out of its way to affirm the free will of human beings. Just as God the Creator gives all people free will in their original nature, so God the Savior preserves the free will of his children as he gives them a new nature.

Again, there is much more to be said, and this is not the place for technical discussion. The important point is that you can't be a Calvinist, according to the Confession, unless you affirm free will. (See the appendix, question 5.)

In fact, the work of the Spirit enlarges our freedom. Who is more free, the inquisitive and learned man or the contented ignoramus? Who is more free, the sober and self-controlled man or the addict? Who is more free, the man with natural and well-ordered desires or the pervert? In one important sense, they are all equally free.

That is, they are all free to act within the bounds of their capacities and powers, and they are all fully responsible for their actions. And yet, those whose capacities and powers give them a wider scope to exercise their freedom are, in another important sense, freer. The addict is free, but the sober man is (in one sense) freer. The addict can freely struggle to overcome his addiction or freely wallow in it, but the sober man is free to do many other things—such as receiving the ordinary enjoyment that God intended us to get from moderate drinking, or having relationships that aren't disrupted by the struggle with drunkenness—that the addict isn't free to do because of his addiction.

It's the same, but on a much more profound level, with the work of the Spirit. The natural human life is dominated by ignorance, impotence, frustration, compulsion, self-obsession, solipsism, disappointment, and (at best) resignation. The Christ life that the Spirit puts into us lives into ever more abundant knowledge, power, self-control, self-givingness, pleasure, contentment, and joy. In one sense, we are as free as we ever were—free to act within the life we have. But in another sense, who would not agree that the freedom to live as a slave is a lesser freedom than the freedom to live as a god (Ps. 82:6, John 10:34–36)?

It's true that, on the Calvinistic view, the Holy Spirit does not ask our permission before working this change in our hearts. But the change that he works is a change that makes us more free, not less. Here is yet another parallel to the work of creation—we all agree that even though God didn't ask our permission before he created our wills, he nonetheless created our wills free. If he can create a free will without its permission, he can also make it even freer without its permission. The important point is that freer is what he makes it.

Unfortunately, Calvinists have often obscured all this by the way we talk about the work of the Spirit. We have been anxious to emphasize that when the Spirit works the new birth in our hearts, he does not discover a prior willingness on our part and build upon



that as a starting point. Nor does he (as some have claimed) start working in us, and then either continue or withdraw based on whether we accept or resist his work. The Calvinist view is that a willingness to be worked on by the Spirit is always and immediately the fruit of the Spirit's work, so it's logically impossible, even in principle, to speak of that work as ever being resisted. Hence, the "five points of Calvinism" describe the work of the Spirit as "irresistible," because no resistance can in fact take place. Hence, Calvinistic apologists often point out that the Greek word used to describe the work of the Spirit in John 6:44 is elsewhere used to refer to actions like physically pulling or dragging. These and similar approaches, though appropriate in limited doses, can give occasion for the misunderstanding that Calvinists picture the human will struggling vainly against the Spirit and then being violently overcome, routed, captured, and enslaved. But that is not what Calvinism pictures at all.

For the record, Jonathan Edwards did *not* compare the work of the Spirit to rape. The phrase "a holy rape of the surprised will" was coined in a 1943 article by historian Perry Miller to describe what he (Miller) thought the doctrine of the work of the Spirit in some seventeenth-century New England Puritan writings amounted to.<sup>4</sup>

And yet . . . why would so many people, including many Calvinists, find it plausible that Edwards would say such a despicable thing—and mean it as praise!—if not because we Calvinists have done a poor job expressing what we really think about the new birth? I believed in this story myself until I started doing the research for this book, so I'm not claiming to be Mr. Knows-Everything-about-Theological-History. But the mere fact that so many people find this story believable speaks volumes about the state of Calvinistic theological discourse.

### **3. Calvinism does not say we are totally depraved.**

The "five points of Calvinism," at least in their twentieth-century form, begin with the assertion that human beings, in their natural state, are "totally depraved." But just as the phrase "free

will” meant something completely different in the sixteenth-century Reformation debate than it does today, the phrase “totally depraved” in the five points doesn’t mean what it would mean if somebody used that phrase in everyday conversation. In that sense, which is the sense that matters, Calvinism strongly denies “total depravity.”

The five points use the phrase “total depravity” in a misleading, technical, counter-intuitive way. And unlike the case of “free will,” in this case there is no good excuse for the confusion. Embarrassingly, the five points begin with this misleading phrase so that the first point will begin with the letter *T* in order to form the acrostic TULIP. Never has so much theological confusion been so widely sown for so trivial a reason!

When people hear the assertion that apart from the regeneration of the Holy Spirit we are “totally depraved,” they naturally take that to mean there is nothing in us that is good in any respect. Besides being false to all experience, such a view is easy to disprove from Scripture. The Bible frequently notes the presence of qualities in unbelievers that are good in some way. Jesus calls the scribes and Pharisees hypocrites and declares that they lack justice and mercy and faithfulness, “the weightier matters of the law”—and in the same breath praises them for tithing scrupulously (Matt. 23:23). More generally, Paul declares that “Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires” (Rom. 2:14). Perhaps most profoundly, we are admonished not to murder anyone because all people are made in the image of God (Gen. 9:6).

Moreover, if there were really nothing good in us, then we couldn’t know right from wrong—since knowledge of righteousness would be something good. If that were the case, we wouldn’t be culpable for sinning; it couldn’t be our fault that we sin if we didn’t know right from wrong. This seems to be exactly Paul’s point in Romans 2, where after observing that the Gentiles “by nature do what the law requires,” he goes on to comment that “they show

that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness” (Rom. 2:15).

But in fact, Calvinism doesn’t say there’s nothing in us that is good in any respect. This is clear even from the very first sentence of the Westminster Confession, which asserts (among other things) that fallen people are “unexcusable” because they have “the light of nature” to show them “the goodness, wisdom, and power of God.” As we will see in more detail below, in its chapter “Of Good Works” the Confession also acknowledges that fallen people not only know right from wrong, but are able to serve their neighbors and do many other things God requires.

Calvin said the same:

In every age there have been persons who, guided by nature, have striven toward virtue throughout life. I have nothing to say against them even if many lapses can be noted in their moral conduct. For they have by the very zeal of their honesty given proof that there was some purity in their nature. . . . These examples, accordingly, seem to warn us against adjudging man’s nature wholly corrupted, because some men have by its prompting not only excelled in remarkable deeds, but conducted themselves most honorably throughout life. But here it ought to occur to us that amid this corruption of nature there is some place for God’s grace; not such grace as to cleanse it, but to restrain it inwardly.<sup>5</sup>

Calvinism doesn’t say fallen people are never good in any respect. It says fallen people are never completely and totally good—good in *every* respect. In our natural state, without regeneration from the Holy Spirit, we can never be the kind of good that God had in mind when he surveyed what he created and called each thing “good” (Genesis 1) or that Jesus had in mind when he said “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone” (Mark 10:18).

The matter becomes clearer when the Confession comes to the subject of Adam and Eve’s original sin:

## *Detour*

By this sin they fell from their original righteousness and communion with God, and so became dead in sin, and wholly defiled in all the parts and faculties of soul and body. (WCF 6.2)

“Dead in sin and wholly defiled in all parts” is a much clearer statement of what Calvinism teaches about the natural sinfulness of humanity.

The word “wholly” in “wholly defiled” may seem similar at first to the word “totally” in “totally depraved.” And in fact, that’s where the phrase “totally depraved” comes from. It was an attempt to rephrase “wholly defiled” so that it would begin with the letter *T* and thus fit the TULIP acronym.

But there’s a critical difference. “Wholly” implies “all over, throughout, pervasively, everywhere.” But “totally” implies “as much as possible, completely, ultimately, utterly.” The phrase “in all parts” clinches the difference. The point is that all our “parts” are defiled, not that we are as defiled as we can be.

There is as much difference between being “wholly defiled” and being “totally depraved” as there is between being dirty all over and being dirt. It’s not that we have no good things in us; it’s that the good things God put in us have all become spoiled: our hearts, our intellects, our emotions, our desires, our wills, our bodies, our souls, our spirits. Every part of us is defiled—corrupt and ruined. And it’s important to notice that the very concepts “defiled,” “spoiled,” “corrupt,” and “ruined” can be applied only to something that was originally good and still retains its original goodness at least in some respects. What makes a thing defiled, spoiled, corrupt, or ruined is not that its original goodness has been annihilated, but that it has been redirected to evil purposes.

An unregenerate person can keep a promise. He can even keep a promise for the right reason, for the sake of the promise rather than because keeping it will profit him in some way. In doing so, he does what God commands and serves his neighbor. Those are both good things. But he doesn’t do it with a heart that loves God or with a mind that knows God’s revealed word or with a will that seeks

God's glory, and that means his promise-keeping is not "good" in the full and ultimate sense the Bible intends when it refers to "good works."

Calvinism says that everything in our fallen nature is hostile to the perfect goodness of God—to "goodness" in the absolute sense. This is not because our nature contains nothing that is good in any respect, but because everything in us is spoiled by our sin. In other words, Calvinism is saying that we are born as slaves to Satan—so we're right back to the "free will" issue again! We are born with every part of ourselves participating in, and hence defiled by, a state of freely chosen rebellion against God. (See the appendix, question 6.)

#### **4. Calvinism does not deny that God loves the lost.**

In each of the three cases above, people believe Calvinism says *x* when in fact Calvinism strenuously denies *x*. The question of whether God loves the lost, however, is different. Calvinism, in itself, implies no position one way or the other on this issue. Calvin himself didn't address it because the question hadn't been raised yet during his life. It was later generations of Calvinists, contemplating the Calvinistic doctrine, who started asking whether God loves those whom he has not chosen to save.

There are Calvinists who have all sorts of different opinions about this. Ask a hundred Calvinists whether God loves the lost and you will get a hundred different answers. Many of those answers will begin with yes; many will begin with no; many will begin with "we can't know the answer because he hasn't told us"; and many will begin with "I honestly have no idea what to think." But it's likely that no two answers will be exactly the same.

The issue was debated during the writing of the Westminster Confession. Ultimately, its authors chose not to have the Confession take any position on this issue. But they chose language that at least inclines toward the view that God loves the lost.<sup>6</sup> And some other historic Calvinist confessions, such as the Canons of Dort, explicitly endorse the view that God loves the lost, while

no Calvinist confessions have ever explicitly endorsed the opposite view. This is more than enough to establish that Calvinism, simply as such, doesn't deny that God loves the lost, even if some Calvinists do.

Since this is a question Calvinists disagree about, it's especially important that I not open up a discussion of the technical issues here. What I want to make clear is that you can be a good Calvinist while believing very strongly that God loves the lost, or that he doesn't, or that we can't know, or while not knowing what to think, or while not thinking about the issue at all.

There is one more critical point that must be mentioned. One thing Calvinists all agree on is that God does not actively intervene in the wills of the lost in order to *make* them sin so that he can condemn them. The Westminster Confession insists that while God is active in choosing the saved for salvation, removing their judgment, and creating holiness in them, he is strictly passive in passing over the lost, permitting them to remain sinful and under judgment.<sup>7</sup> On the suggestion that God actively intervenes to cause lost people to reject him, R. C. Sproul—perhaps the most widely read Calvinist theologian of the twentieth century—justly comments:

Such an idea was repugnant to Calvin and is equally repugnant to all orthodox Calvinists. The notion is sometimes called “hyper-Calvinism.” But even that is an insult. This view has nothing to do with Calvinism. Rather than hyper-Calvinism, it is anti-Calvinism.<sup>8</sup>

## **5. Calvinism is not primarily concerned with the sovereignty of God or predestination.**

If the last point was somewhat tricky to address, this one is even trickier. There is no absolute, unanswerable proof for what is or is not the “primary concern” of a theological tradition. It's a matter of judgment. Yet I think this issue is pretty clear cut if you make a serious study of Calvinism, so it's worth mentioning here. And the widely held idea that Calvinism is all about sovereignty and pre-

destination is one of the most subtly destructive misperceptions of them all.

To be sure, Calvinism strongly affirms a particular view—a particularly “high” view, as such terms are used—of the sovereignty of God and predestination. But that view was not the unique and distinguishing theological contribution of Calvinism; nor was it the issue that Calvin or his followers (from that day to the present) thought was most important. Calvinism insists upon this particular view of sovereignty and predestination only as a necessary precaution against errors that would undermine other doctrines, and those other doctrines are Calvinism’s real primary focus.

The “high” view of sovereignty and predestination was already fully worked out by Augustine in the early fifth century. All the important issues on this topic were aired during the debate between Christianity and the legalizing heresy of Pelagianism—and the endless bewildering variety of related movements, known as the “semi-Pelagian” heresies, that came after it. Pelagius argued that salvation is earned by good works; Augustine responded by showing that salvation is entirely a free gift of God’s grace. The key dispute was over whose decision—God’s or the believer’s—effectively brought about salvation.

Not everyone in the church fully agreed with Augustine’s position; in fact, by the early sixth century the church was already settling into a comfortable compromise that B. B. Warfield aptly dubbed “semi-semi-Pelagianism.”<sup>9</sup> The important point, however, is that the “high” or thoroughly anti-Pelagian doctrine of sovereignty and predestination was fully formulated and systematically presented to the church not by Calvin but by Augustine eleven centuries before him.

Later generations of Augustinians would develop and debate different applications of that doctrine to other areas of theology. The most notable of these was Martin Luther, who worked out the connections between the Augustinian doctrine of sovereignty and predestination and the doctrine that our right standing with God

comes by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. But on the doctrine of sovereignty and predestination simply in itself, subsequent theologians have added almost nothing to Augustine. On this topic, if we look past the superficial differences in tone and emphasis, there's not a dime's worth of difference between Augustine, Luther, and Calvin.

That's why, when sovereignty and predestination are the only issues on the table, it is common to hear this doctrine described as the "Augustinian" doctrine rather than the "Calvinist" doctrine. If Calvinism were primarily about this doctrine, it wouldn't be called Calvinism at all; it would just be Augustinianism. Calvin himself would be remembered only as an expositor of Augustine rather than as the father of a theological tradition in his own right. Or, more likely, he wouldn't be remembered as a theologian at all, since the great expositor of the Augustinian doctrine was really Luther, not Calvin.

What distinguishes Calvin as a theologian, and Calvinism as a theological tradition, is its uniquely "high" doctrine of the work of the Holy Spirit. In all the areas of theology where Calvin made his most distinguishing contributions, such as his doctrine of Scripture or his doctrine of the church and the sacraments, we see the exaltation of the work of the Spirit driving his analysis. Even if we look only at his understanding of salvation itself, what makes Calvinism uniquely Calvinistic is not primarily its doctrine of the work of the Father in election, but its doctrine of the work of the Spirit in regeneration.<sup>10</sup> And this predominance of the Spirit in Calvin's thought is mirrored throughout the Westminster Confession and other Calvinistic confessions and documents.

Of course, in Calvinism the Spirit does not rise to a level above the Father or the Son! Like all Western theological traditions, Calvinism holds that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, while neither the Father nor the Son proceeds from the Spirit.<sup>11</sup>

But while the Spirit does not get a place above the Father or the Son, he does get a much higher place in Calvinism than he got



in the earlier Roman and Lutheran traditions, where his work got short shrift. And subsequent theological traditions have differentiated themselves from Calvinism primarily by their lower estimate of the importance of the Spirit's work (although they do still elevate the Spirit to a higher level of importance than either Rome or the Lutherans).

With its elevation of the Spirit's work alongside the work of the Father and Son, Calvinism fully brought out the consequences of the Trinity for Christian theology. In Calvinism, a distinctively high view of the work of the Father (Augustinian predestination) is integrated with a distinctively high view of the work of the Son (personal substitution) and a distinctively high view of the work of the Spirit (supernatural regeneration) to form an integrated Trinitarian whole. The Augustinian view is that all phenomena are from God (through predestination) and to God (because they all work together under God's sovereign control to manifest his glory). Calvinism takes this a step further. For the Calvinist, the whole Christian life, individually and collectively—salvation, worship, discipleship, and mission—is not only *from* God and *to* God but also *through* God in the overwhelming, all-encompassing, miraculous power of the Spirit. And the fully Trinitarian character of Calvinism preserves the stability of the whole; its high view of the work of each divine person upholds and protects its high view of the work of each of the others. This gives Calvinist theology coherence and stability.

It is this integrated theological whole, encompassing all phenomena through a fully Trinitarian account of God's work in all things, that is the real heart of Calvinism. As Warfield put it, "God fills the whole horizon of the Calvinist's feeling and thought."<sup>12</sup> He does so because the Calvinist sees all of God (all three persons) glorifying himself in all phenomena.

By contrast, the aforementioned chapter 3 of the Westminster Confession, asserting the Augustinian doctrine of sovereignty and predestination, abruptly issues this stern warning:

## *Detour*

The doctrine of this high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care, that men, attending the will of God revealed in his Word, and yielding obedience thereunto, may, from the certainty of their effectual vocation, be assured of their eternal election. So shall this doctrine afford matter of praise, reverence, and admiration of God; and of humility, diligence, and abundant consolation to all that sincerely obey the gospel. (WCF 3.8)

This is not the kind of thing one normally finds in a confessional document. The purpose of a confession is to confess things, not to issue warnings about how dangerous it is to confess them for the wrong reason. I'm not aware of any other confessional document that contains a warning like this. And no other doctrine in the Westminster Confession is accompanied by such a warning.

Amazingly, the authors of the Confession refuse to take a back seat to anyone in asserting that it's spiritually dangerous to make predestination your central theological concern. This doctrine is to be confessed, they admonish us, for the limited purpose of helping believers form a godly assurance of their salvation through self-emptying humility before God's majesty. Under those conditions, and only those, the doctrine of predestination encourages reverence and meekness. Those who make predestination the core of their theology, we are left to infer, are setting themselves up for the opposite result—self-righteous pride. No Roman, Lutheran, or Arminian ever repudiated an obsession with predestination more firmly than the authors of the Westminster Confession.

### **Beyond the Superficial**

Admittedly, everything I've said here is very superficial. But that's because I'm responding to very superficial errors. These deep theological topics invite us to enter into the contemplation of God with a rich depth of seriousness and vulnerability. Simple and superficial answers can never be sufficient for us to really encounter God in these things. But we can't get to the level of depth and nuance until we first clear away the more gross and simplistic misunderstandings.

### *Detour*

In other words: if you think that everything I've said here is oversimplified to the point of being pat, ham-handed, and glib—I agree! My only point has been that the simple preconceptions almost everyone brings to these questions are insufficient. With that out the way, we can get to the really interesting stuff.