

# **HYPER-CALVINISM IN THE LIGHT OF CALVIN**

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Calvinism is that system of doctrine derived from the great French theologian—John Calvin (1509-64)—author of the famed reformed manifesto called *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536). However, “The Calvinism of some men is not the Calvinism of John Calvin, nor the Calvinism of the Puritans, much less the Christianity of God.”<sup>1</sup> Charles Spurgeon who said that was referring to an erroneous version of Calvinism called Hyper-Calvinism. The prefix “hyper” (Gk: *huper*) means “above” or “beyond.” Hyper-Calvinism is thus a twisted form of Calvinism that goes beyond what Calvin in accordance to Scriptures had taught. So it is necessary to identify the aberrant doctrinal distinctives of Hyper-Calvinism to prevent any misrepresentation of true Calvinism. The errors are basically two: (1) the denial of common grace, and (2) the denial of the free offer of the gospel.

## **Denial of Common Grace**

Common grace must be distinguished from saving grace. When we talk about saving grace we are referring to the Holy Spirit’s regenerative work on the sinner through the Gospel of Christ reconciling him to God (Rom 3:24, Eph 2:8-9). On the other hand, common grace is God’s favourable bestowal upon all of mankind of those things necessary for creaturely existence on this sin-plagued earth (Ps 145:9, 1 Tim 4:10). These non-soteric blessings include the gift (1) of time for man to repent (Rom 2:4, 2 Pet 3:9), (2) of the conscience for sin’s restraint (Gen 20:6, Rom 2:14-15), (3) of intelligence, and talent for the arts and sciences (Exod 31:2-11, 35:30-35), and (4) of rain, sunshine etc, for all to enjoy (Matt 5:44-45, Acts 14:16-17).

## **Hyper-Calvinistic View of Common Grace**

Hyper-Calvinists reject the doctrine of common grace. According to them, God hates all unbelievers, and works all things towards their destruction.<sup>2</sup> One of the favourite proof texts cited is Mal 1:2-3 (Rom

9:13). This passage does speak of God hating the wicked, but the Hyper-Calvinistic interpretation is flawed because of *its failure to distinguish between common grace and special grace*.

### **Calvin's View of Common Grace**

Did Calvin teach common grace? There is no question that he did. Consider his words in his *Institutes* 2.2.14,

The power of human acuteness also appears in learning these [ie the arts] because all of us have a certain aptitude. . . . Hence, with good reason we are compelled to confess that its beginning is inborn in human nature. Therefore this evidence clearly testifies to a universal apprehension of reason and understanding by nature implanted in men. Yet so universal is this good that every man ought to recognize for himself in it the peculiar grace of God.<sup>3</sup>

Consider also what he said in the *Institutes* 2.2.15,

When we come upon these matters in secular writers, let that admirable light of truth shining in them teach us that the mind of man, though fallen and perverted from its wholeness, is nevertheless clothed and ornamented with God's excellent gifts. If we regard the Spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth, we shall neither reject the truth itself, nor despise it wherever it shall appear, unless we wish to dishonor the Spirit of God. . . . Shall we deny that the truth shone upon the ancient jurists who established civic order and discipline with such great equity? Shall we say that the philosophers were blind in their fine observation and artful description of nature? Shall we say that those men were devoid of understanding who conceived the art of disputation and taught us to speak reasonably? Shall we say that they are insane who developed medicine, devoting their labor to our benefit? What shall we say of all the mathematical sciences? Shall we consider them the ravings of madmen? No, we cannot read the writings of the ancients on these subjects without great admiration. We marvel at them because we are compelled to recognize how preeminent they are. But shall we count anything praiseworthy or noble without recognizing at the same time that it comes from God?

In his *Institutes* 2.2.16, Calvin makes a distinction between common grace and special grace,

We ought to understand the statement that the Spirit of God dwells only in believers (Rom 8:9) as referring to the Spirit of sanctification through whom we are consecrated as temples of God (1 Cor 3:16) [special grace]. Nonetheless he fills, moves, and quickens all things by the power of the same Spirit, and does so according to the character that he bestowed upon

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each kind by the law of creation. But if the Lord has willed that we be helped in physics, dialectic, mathematics, and other like disciplines, by the work and ministry of the ungodly, let us use this assistance [common grace].

In Mal 1:2-3 (cf Rom 9:13) God said, “. . . I loved Jacob, and I hated Esau, . . . .” This statement has to do with God’s special grace, not common grace. He chose to save Jacob rather than Esau. However, God’s refusal to bestow on Esau His special grace does not negate His bestowal of common grace on both elect and reprobate. Calvin indeed saw a distinction between special grace and common grace:

. . . the Jews are reminded of God’s gratuitous covenant [special grace], that they might cease to excuse their wickedness in having misused this singular favour [special grace]. He does not then upbraid them here, because they had been as other men created by God, because God caused his sun to shine on them, because they were supplied with food from the earth [common grace]; but he says, that they had been preferred to other people, not on account of their own merit, but because it had pleased God to choose their father Jacob [special grace].<sup>4</sup>

The reprobate receive the blessings of common grace, not because of God’s decree of reprobation, but because of His goodness and kindness (Matt 5:45, Acts 14:17, 17:28, Rom 1:19, Jas 1:17). His decretive will (ie special grace), and desiderative will (ie common grace) must be clearly distinguished or else we may seriously misrepresent the character of God.

### **Denial of the Free Offer of the Gospel**

What is the free offer of the gospel? It is the Calvinistic view that the gospel is to be preached to all indiscriminately, and that God sincerely invites everyone, elect and reprobate, to repentance and salvation in Christ.

### **Hyper-Calvinistic View of the Gospel Offer**

Hyper-Calvinists deny that there is such a “well-meant” offer of the gospel by God. In their view, God does not desire the repentance of the reprobate. They do not believe that God is capable of loving the whole world, yet effectively saving only those whom He had already chosen before the foundation of the world. This does not necessarily mean that Hyper-Calvinists do not believe in preaching the gospel to all people (Matt 28:19-20). What it does mean is that in their preaching the gospel, the love of God may only be applied to the elect, and not the reprobate.

Thus, they consider it wrong in evangelism to tell someone, “God loves you,” not knowing whether he is elect or reprobate. They would rather say, “God loves the sinner,” in their mind applying it only to the elect. So the “world” of John 3:16, for example, is the world of *the elect only* (ie, “For God so loved the *elect*, that He gave . . .”).

### **Calvin’s View on the Free Offer of the Gospel**

Did God sincerely offer the gospel of Christ to the world at large? Calvin answered in the affirmative. Consider his comments on the term “whosoever” in John 3:16, Acts 2:21, Rom 1:16.

On John 3:16, “that whosoever believeth in him should not perish,” Calvin wrote,

The outstanding thing about faith is that it delivers us from eternal destruction. For He especially wanted to say that although we seem to have been born for death sure deliverance *is offered* to us by the faith of Christ so that we must not fear the death which otherwise threatens us. And he has used a general term, both *to invite indiscriminately all* to share in life and to cut off every excuse from unbelievers. Such is also significant in the term ‘world’ which He had used before. For although there is nothing in the world deserving of God’s favour, He nevertheless shows He *is favourable to the whole world when He calls all without exception* to the faith of Christ, which is indeed an entry into life.<sup>5</sup>

On Acts 2:21, “that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved,” Calvin commented,

So however much a man may be overwhelmed in the gulf of misery there is yet set before him a way of escape. We must also observe the universal word, ‘whosoever’. For God *admits all men to Himself without exception and by this means invites them to salvation, . . .* Therefore since *no man is excluded from calling upon God the gate of salvation is set open to all*. There is nothing else to hinder us from entering, but our own unbelief.<sup>6</sup>

On Rom 1:16, “the gospel of Christ . . . is the power of God to every one that believeth,” Calvin said,

God does not work effectually in all men, but only when the Spirit shines in our hearts as the inward teacher, . . . *The Gospel is indeed offered to all* for their salvation, but its power is not universally manifest. The fact that the Gospel is the taste of death to the ungodly arises not so much from the nature of the Gospel itself, as from their own wickedness. By setting forth one way of salvation, it cuts off confidence in every other way. When men withdraw from this one salvation they find in the Gospel a sure

evidence of their ruin. When, therefore, *the Gospel invites all* to partake of salvation without any difference, it is rightly termed the doctrine of salvation. For *Christ is there offered*, whose proper office is to save that which had been lost, and those who refuse to be saved by Him shall find Him their Judge.<sup>7</sup>

There is no question that Calvin has a doctrine of common grace:

Paul makes *grace common to all* men, not because it in fact extends to all, but because it is *offered to all*. Although Christ suffered for the sins of the world, and is *offered by the goodness of God without distinction to all men*, yet not all receive Him.<sup>8</sup>

### **Calvin's View of God's Love for the Reprobate**

Does God, in a certain sense, love those whom He had not elected? or are His feelings toward the reprobate pure hatred? Calvin did see God as loving all men in general, while at the same time loving the elect in a special way. Calvin pointed out the various degrees of God's love in his exposition of Mark 10:21 where Jesus is said to love the rich young ruler. Calvin explained,

. . . since *God loves all His creatures without exception*. It is therefore important to distinguish degrees of love. So far as relates to the present place, it is enough to hold in sum that God embraces in His fatherly love only His children, whom He regenerates by the Spirit of adoption, and that, because of this love, they are accepted at His judgment seat. According to this sense, to be loved by God and to be justified before Him are synonymous. *But sometimes God is said to love those whom He neither approves nor justifies*. The preservation of the human race is dear to Him (the preservation which consists in righteousness, justice, moderation, prudence, loyalty, temperance), and therefore He is said to love the social virtues; not that they merit salvation or grace, but because they aim at something which He approves. . . . Thus the question which might be put is answered, that Christ loves the proud and hypocritical man, although there is nothing more hateful to God than these two vices. For there is no absurdity in God loving the good seed which He has some in some natures, while rejecting the persons and their works on account of their corruption."<sup>9</sup>

On 1 Tim 4:10, “. . . God, who is Saviour of all men, specially of those that believe,” Calvin wrote,

. . . God's kindness *extends to all men*. And if *there is no one without the experience of sharing in God's kindness*, how much more of that kindness

shall the godly know, who hope in Him. Will He not take special care of them? In short, will He not keep them in all things safe to the end?"<sup>10</sup>

On 2 Peter 3:9 where God says He "is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance," Calvin commented,

*This is His wondrous love towards the human race, that He desires all men to be saved, and is prepared to bring even the perishing to safety. . . . It could be asked here, if God does not want any to perish, why do so many in fact perish? My reply is that no mention is made here of the secret decree of God by which the wicked are doomed to their own ruin, but only of His loving-kindness as it is made known to us in the Gospel. There God stretches out His hand to all alike, but He only grasps those (in such a way as to lead to Himself) whom He has chosen before the foundation of the world.*<sup>11</sup>

Ezekiel 18:32, and 33:11, reveal the heart of God toward the reprobate, "For I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord God: wherefore turn yourselves, and live ye." "Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live." How can the Hyper-Calvinist then say that there is no measure of love whatsoever in God for those whom He had not chosen to save?

### **God's Desiderative Will**

Hyper-Calvinists are unable to see how God can be gracious to all, and yet at the same time be gracious to some; and willing to save all when He had already willed that only the elect would be saved. To them, it is a contradiction that God Himself cannot reconcile. It must be categorically stated that there is absolutely no contradiction in the gospel offer, and in the grace God shows to both the elect and reprobate. It behooves Calvinists to understand those concepts properly by distinguishing God's decretive will from His desiderative (from "desire") will as Calvin himself did. Dr Timothy Tow explains this aspect of God's will,

It is God's character not to exult like Nero in the torture and death of his Christian subjects, nor like Hitler exterminating six million Jews with a stone-dead heart, but the very opposite. God is good. God is love. So it is in Himself to see sinners turn to Him in repentance, for He is not willing that any should perish.

Thus when we read John 3:16, the most famous verse in the whole Bible, 'For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son,

that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life,' we take the plain, simple sense that salvation is offered to all mankind. John 3:16 expresses the desiderative will of a God of goodness, to both the good and the evil (Matt 5:45). But there are the Hyper-Calvinists who see God's goodness only on the elect, that they cannot but conclude the world (*cosmos* in Greek) to be the world of the elect. John 3:16 is not a universal offer of the Gospel but a limited one. This is like holding a sale for a departmental store with a restrictive sign under the word SALE—'only buyers can enter'! Now, if these Hyper-Calvinists know there is an aspect of God's will known as the Desiderative, their blind spot on God's Abounding Grace would be removed. 'I counsel thee to buy of Me . . . anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see' (Rev 3:18). . . . By the desiderative will of God we will see clearly what is succinctly stated by Augustine on the effectualness of Christ's death—'sufficient for all, efficient for the elect' . . .

Now, when we see the desiderative will of God applies to all men, we will be the more zealous to spread the Word to as wide a field as possible. We will not like those Hyper-Calvinist Baptist ministers, when approached by William Carey to support his mission to India, be heard saying, 'God had predestined whom He would save. He doesn't need you!' How like the Sale in that departmental store we have mentioned above that has a restriction beneath the big sale sign: 'Only buyers can enter'!

But our God is not static. Our God is dynamic. Our God is not a computer. Our God is Controller of the universe and Comforter to the Church, yea, even to you and me, who says 'And him that cometh to Me, I will in no wise cast out' (John 6:37). God's grace is not bound, but abounding. John 3:16 is God's universal offer to salvation to everyone who believes. When you believe, you will soon know from Scripture you are elect.<sup>12</sup>

If Hyper-Calvinists must insist on denying the reformed doctrine of common grace and of the free offer, they insist against Calvin, and would justifiably have to wear the title "Hyper." We hope they would shed it.

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Iain H Murray, *Spurgeon Versus Hyper-Calvinism: The Battle for Gospel Preaching* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1995), 68.

<sup>2</sup> Hyper-Calvinism is represented in the literature of the Protestant Reformed Churches (USA), namely, *The Standard Bearer*, the *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, and by the books of Herman Hoeksema, Herman Hanko, David Engelsma, and others published by the Reformed Free Publishing

Association. See *Encyclopedia of the Reformed Faith*, s.v. “Hyper-Calvinism,” by Peter Toon.

<sup>3</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed John T McNeill, trans Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 273-5; parentheses mine. Calvin’s concept of common grace is also found in 1.3.1-3, 1.4.2, 1.5.3-4, 1.5.7-8, 1.11.12, 1.13.14, 1.17.1, 2.2.12-27, 2.3.3, 2.7.1, 3.2.32, 3.7.6, 3.9.3, 3.14.2, 3.20.15, 4.10.5, 4.20.1-4, 4.20.9-11. See also H Henry Meeter, *The Basic Ideas of Calvinism*, 6th ed, rev Paul A Marshall (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 50-6.

<sup>4</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, trans John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker, nd), 5:464; parentheses mine.

<sup>5</sup> John Calvin, *The Gospel According to St John 1-10*, trans T H L Parker (Grand Rapids: Wm B Eerdmans, 1993 reprint), 74. Italics mine.

<sup>6</sup> John Calvin, *The Acts of the Apostles 1-13*, trans John W Fraser and W J G McDonald (Grand Rapids: Wm B Eerdmans, 1989 reprint), 62.

<sup>7</sup> John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, trans Ross MacKenzie (Grand Rapids: Wm B Eerdmans, 1991 reprint), 27.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 117-8. See also “Free Offer of the Gospel,” in Graham Miller, *Calvin’s Wisdom* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1992), 119-20.

<sup>9</sup> John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke*, vol 2, trans T H L Parker (Grand Rapids: Wm B Eerdmans, 1989 reprint), 257-8.

<sup>10</sup> John Calvin, *The Second Epistle of Paul to the Apostle to the Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon*, trans T A Smail (Grand Rapids: Wm B Eerdmans, 1991 reprint), 245.

<sup>11</sup> John Calvin, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews and the First and Second Epistles of St Peter*, trans William B Johnston (Grand Rapids: Wm B Eerdmans, 1989 reprint), 364.

<sup>12</sup> Timothy Tow, *The Clock of the Sevenfold Will of God* (Singapore: Far Eastern Bible College Press, 1991), 40-6.