

# How to Trust God Without Being a Calvinist

by Dean Taylor

**S**overeignty—providence—election—predestination. If you are like me, you have at times felt reluctant to use such terms. Maybe you have even grimaced a time or two to hear others use them. Yet, these are beautiful Biblical concepts that have too often become the objects of doctrinal controversies and denominational differences. This is such a tragedy. Nothing could be more comforting, more sustaining, or more empowering than the settled understanding and heart conviction that God cares and supplies for our every need, and is divinely involved with the smallest of our circumstances. God has willed that every hair on our head be numbered, every step ordered, every sin-stain forgiven, and every bondage broken. What a bountiful storehouse of provisions the Christian possesses!

Unfortunately, many Christians are unaware of these truths. The result has been countless testimonies of miserable defeat by conquered pilgrims

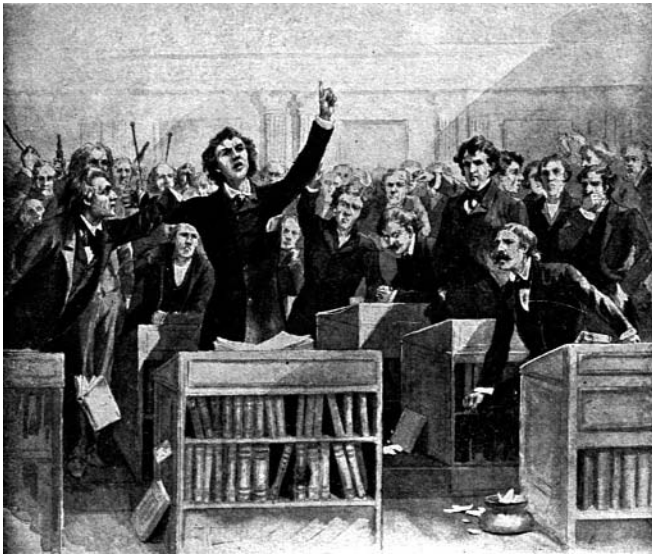
who lost the battle and retreated. I believe one of the most common reasons for this tragedy is ignorance. It is, perhaps, one of the saddest things, to see a child of God, heir to the riches of Christ, spending his life spiritually impoverished simply because he never knew what spiritual riches were his in Christ Jesus.

**Sovereignty**  
**Providence**  
**Election**  
**Predestination**

## How Did We Lose It?

I believe that to a large extent, many of these truths have been avoided because of an overreaction to a few so-called “Calvinist” doctrines. The churches that have followed the teachings of John Calvin have frequently used

many of these themes and terms to defend some of their most controversial doctrines. As a result, many have rebounded and in the process, lost precious truths along the way.



## Where Did These Controversies Come From?

Coming out of the Reformation, many Bible believing Christians felt that the reformers did not go far enough in their “reform” of the church. Later, Christian groups such as the Anabaptists and some Armenian holiness groups, led the church into even greater reforms. Today, church historians now refer to this period of greater reformation as the “Radical Reformation.” These “radical reformers” rejected some of the theological teachings of their time, specifically those of the Calvinist and Lutheran churches. They would have differed in particular with some of the teachings these churches held in regard to the nature of God and salvation. Some of the doctrines that these radical reformers had the greatest difficulty with were the Calvinist doctrines of “unconditional election” and “limited atonement.”

## A Brief Summary Of Differences:

Although I admit this description to be a gross oversimplification, basically these Calvinist doctrines teach that God has arbitrarily chosen some people to be saved and some to be lost. Those chosen by God to be the “lost” are hopelessly damned and have no hope of salvation. Further, they teach that Christ did not die for the chosen “lost” as He did the chosen “saved;” and that the lost will, therefore, be eternally punished in Hell. Likewise, the ones “chosen” or rather *predestined* to be saved are, *irresistibly* compelled to be saved, and can never lose this compulsory salvation.

Some of the radical reformers felt that these doctrines, by definition, made God the author of sin. Others simply felt that these doctrines were making definitions and dogmas about things that were beyond Biblical revelation. To be fair, not all the churches or preachers which have called themselves *Calvinist* have pushed these doctrines to such extremes. Some “reformed” preachers, such as Charles Spurgeon, called teachers that pushed these points to the extreme, “hyper-Calvinists.” I have even heard some writers claim that John Calvin, himself, was not as “Calvinist” as many of the people who have reacted in debates after him.

Be that as it may, in seeking to defend these positions many of these Calvinist churches have lifted up words like predestination, election, and sovereignty, as justification for their mistaken doctrines. Tragically, however, throughout the centuries of debate, the Calvinist’s persistent and sometimes erroneous references to words like sovereignty and predestination have led many professing Christians to view these words as detestable. This has cost the church so dearly. The Calvinists have since reacted into hyper-Calvinism, which has finally evolved into modern evangelical easy-believism. On the other hand, holiness and Anabaptist groups have also



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reacted, emphasizing self-effort which has often resulted in hypocrisy and self-righteousness.

These truths are too pertinent to the Christian walk to remain locked up forever in the tangles of debate and controversy. Just because some groups have taken these truths to erroneous extremes does not lessen the strength or power of the Word of God one bit. "Let God be true and every man a liar" (Rom 3:4). Realizing the truth of sovereignty and predestination in its proper perspective can empower a feeble Christian, bound by condemnation and doubt, to arise to a new storehouse of spiritual strength. Likewise, it can awaken the nominal, sleepy Christian to the phenomenal realization of a Holy God who sees and cares about their every thought and deed.

D.L. Moody told a stirring account of a slave girl who, after the Civil War, struggled to apprehend her freedom. President Lincoln had published the Emancipation Proclamation granting freedom to the slaves. A lady was traveling in the southern states and came one night to a little inn. She was cared for there by a slave girl. Looking up to the girl the lady said,

"Is this your place?"

"No, it is my master's."

"Does he pay you for what you do?"

"No, of course not, I'm a slave!"

"Oh...but there are no slaves anymore," the lady said bewilderedly.

"Indeed there are slaves—I'm one of them!"

"Have you not heard of President's Lincoln's proclamation to free the slaves?"

"Well, we did hear about it, Ma'am, but Master said it was all a pack of lies. Therefore, I am bound to stay here as long as my master says I am a slave."

"Please, listen Dear, everyone knows that all the slaves have been set free. You are as free as I am!"

That very moment something changed in her eyes. She instantly finished serving her guest, packed her bags, and left to appropriate what was hers—freedom.

It was her master's prejudice that prevented the slave girl from appropriating her freedom. Likewise, in the Christian walk, theological reactions and extremes often swing the doctrinal pendulum to bigoted excesses. Prejudices like these have prevented many beautiful gospel truths. Sadly, something as fundamental as trusting God has become one of these prejudices. Sovereignty, predestination, election, and providence are not teachings that Bible-believing Christians should be afraid of. Understood properly, these truths are emancipating.

## God is Eternal

In the book of Revelation Jesus said, "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last" (Rev. 22:13). This is a truth that is bigger than our finite minds can comprehend. In this verse God did not say that He *was* the beginning and *will be* the end, but rather, He said that He exists—all at the same time—as the beginning and the end. In other words, God exists as much in the beginning of time, and at the end of time, as he does at this very moment—that's eternal! All of us will live forever, but none of us will ever be eternal. "From everlasting to everlasting thou art God" (Psalm 49:2).



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## Foreknowledge

Because of God's eternal omnipresence, God exists at the beginning of our Christian walk and at the end. He not only *knows* if we will accept him by faith but he actually *experiences* our future perseverance or future rejection, by existing in the future already. God's foreknowledge is not mere premonition—it is experiential. As John Wesley put it, "Strictly speaking, there is no foreknowledge, no more than after-knowledge, with God: but all things are known to him as present from eternity to eternity. This is therefore no other than an instance of the divine condescension to our low capacities."

What a glorious thought, that before the beginning of time and throughout all our life, God is there, knocking, leading, and calling out—"whomsoever will may come" (Rev 22: 17). To those who answer this call and surrender their lives to Him, God pours grace into their lives to be saved. John 1:12 says, "But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name." Keep in mind, however, that John is not saying that these people, through the act of believing, *earned* their own



salvation. The act of believing is no more a *work* than that of a child, who, reaching out to receive a present from his father, does anything to merit the gift by the simple act of receiving it.

Speaking of God's work of salvation, 2 Tim. 1:9 says, "Who hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, **not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began.**" What an astonishing truth! Here, God is telling us that all the ability and power and requirement of our salvation was met in the person of Jesus Christ even before God created the world!

The Thought of God caring for *my* salvation throughout time is overwhelming. Consider this for a moment...*your life* planed before the mountains were framed, *your soul* numbered in Abraham's starry sky, *your salvation* sung about from David's harp, and *your holiness* groaned for in Zachariah's burden! This contemplation causes my heart to marvel like the Psalmist when he said, "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him" (Psalms 8:3-4).

## Predestination

Defining the landmarks of our salvation and sanctification, Paul spells out the steps clearly in the Book of Romans... "For whom he did foreknow, he also did **predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son**, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified" (Romans 8:29-30).

Like divine rungs of a celestial ladder leading to Glory, this scripture points out God's way of salvation, all the way to Heaven. But perhaps the most astonishing thing about this whole path is this idea of *predestination*. Predestination is not presented here as a random choosing of people to salvation or damnation. In the scripture above, I chose to highlight what the entire purpose of predestination is—**to be conformed to the image of His son**. Two very important points can be drawn from this verse. First, the salvation spoken about here brings real changes in a Christian's life. A Christian like *this* will be different than the world around him. Moreover, a Christian transformed like this will actually begin to look like Jesus. Secondly, God Has promised to effect these changes in our lives completely by *His* ability. It is *He* who justifies, it is *He* who sanctifies and finally, it is *He* who glorifies.

We simply can't afford to lose this truth to overreaction and debate. An early Anabaptist leader,

Michael Stattler, summarized his faith in a list of articles in which he was not ashamed to declare both of these truths. He stated, "They are true Christians who practice in deed the teachings of Christ," but he also said, "The foreknown and called believers shall be conformed to the image of Christ."

Ponder it, when I am accepted into His covenant, His oath and promises—when I am surrendered of my own efforts and ambitions—in essence, when I am literally "*in Him*," then I am *predestined* to become just like Him. In such a case, God has promised that I can't help but live a holy life and become like Jesus. Here we see that predestination is no mere legal transaction



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in Heaven where we are legally considered cleansed and holy with no actual change in our life. God is telling us in these verses that He does the work of changing us, and conforming us to **actually make us like Jesus**. God's predestined purpose in our salvation is to make us a holy people. The apostle John said, "Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not" (1 John 3:6).

In the first letter of the apostle Peter, he wrote concerning this empowering gospel, calling the Christians, "Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:2). Here again, we see that the fruit of our sal-

vation brings obedience, actually making us holy by the sprinkling of the blood of Jesus. Once I get my attention off my own problems and desires, I can understand that my salvation is made to give glory to God—*not me*.

To the Ephesians Paul wrote, *“For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we*



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*should walk in them”* ( Eph 2:8-10). His workmanship? What a gift! In the storehouse of Christ’s boundless ability and power He changes me, conforms me, quickens me, and makes me into a vessel that gives glory to Him. All I have to do is to die to myself, believe His promises, and keep focused on Jesus—He will do all the rest.

This truth is as emancipating as the truth the slave girl received when she finally realized she was free. It puts the whole mystery of faith and works into its proper place. In total surrender/total trusting, I can rest in Christ and allow Him to change me and make me holy. In this truth, I find that New Testament salvation is not just a new set of laws to follow, accomplished by human strength. That would be worse than the old covenant! New Testament Christianity calls for physically impossible holiness and obedience, but it is God who accomplishes this holiness in us, completely by the power of His grace. Contrasting this new covenant with the old one, the Book of Hebrews records these beautiful prophetic words, *“Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they continued not in my covenant, and I regarded them not, saith the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, saith the Lord; I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts: and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people”* (Hebrews 8:9-10).

I am reminded of a great story of the purifying process, once used by a silversmith. One day, a little boy walked into a silversmith shop while an old silversmith was purifying a lump of silver. Bewildered at the relentless determination and commitment the silversmith had as he sat there heating and reheating the silver lump, he finally got up the courage to ask the silversmith, *“What’s taking so long?”* The silversmith explained, *“As I heat this over and over again, eventually all the impurities float to the top and when they are exposed I can remove them.”* *“How do you ever know when to stop?”* asked the boy. *“That’s easy,”* said the silversmith with a smile, *“It’s finished when I can see a clear reflection of my face.”*

Brethren, such truth needs no apology! We serve a sovereign God who cares for us and loves us before the beginning of time! He is with us always! He foreknew us from the beginning of our faith in Him, and has made us elect and chosen in His Son! Throughout our lives, and forever in Glory—He is there! What’s more, when we give up our own ways and surrender to Him and truly place ourselves *“in Him,”* he promises and predestines us to a life of holiness before God. The end result He tells us, is to make us just like the one who did all this for us—the one I love with all my heart—Jesus!

Without debate and without apology, you can truly trust God without being a Calvinist.

Trust God, believe His Word, surrender from your own way, then just watch what God will do in your life! □