

Salvation in Christ: A Calvinist Perspective

Laura Smit

Laura Smit is an assistant professor of religion and theology and the Dean of the Chapel at Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

I have been asked to represent Calvinism, but before I begin I feel a need to introduce a few caveats. First, although I am a Calvinist, I am also other things. I typically identify myself as an evangelical. I am a medievalist, meaning most of my reading and study centers on thinkers who predate Calvinism by hundreds of years. For that reason, I more typically identify myself as an Augustinian, an identification that I think John Calvin himself would approve, since he understood himself for the most part as returning to the Augustinian tradition, not inventing something new. Within medieval studies, I specialize in Bonaventure, and so the Franciscan tradition has also had a large influence on my theological development. In sum then, I am an evangelical, Augustinian, Franciscan, and type of Calvinist.

Second, the Calvinist or Reformed tradition has developed in the last four hundred years in a variety of ways, and there is a good deal

of theological and stylistic diversity within that tradition. For instance, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Hodge, Abraham Kuyper, and Karl Barth could all be classified as Calvinists, and yet each would have specific points of disagreement with Calvin himself, as well as with each other. So it would be inappropriate for me to claim to speak on behalf of all Calvinists everywhere, or even claim to be representing the thought of John Calvin himself. All I can claim to present is my own understanding of salvation.

This said, as a minister in the Presbyterian Church I have taken vows before God to be guided by the confessional tradition of the Presbyterian Church. Additionally, as a member of the faculty at Calvin College I have signed the Form of Subscription, endorsing the Reformed confessions of the Christian Reformed Church (though in that case I did include some specific reservations). So I'm not *just* speaking as a lone voice. I am a person in a tradition, recognizing the authority of that tradition, held accountable to that tradition, but always held more accountable to the Word of God revealed in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Even the Reformed confessions themselves require that I recognize scripture as a higher authority than any confession, for it is God's Word, inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Questions of Methodology

With those caveats out of the way, the question arises of where to begin an exploration of the doctrine of salvation. Several other presenters have already noted that the topic is vast and that there is no possibility of covering it adequately in only forty minutes. This makes the question of where to begin especially significant, since we are not going to get far beyond a beginning anyway.

It is also significant because where we begin affects where we end up. It seems to me that there are three main possibilities when searching for a starting place.

First, we could begin by discussing the experience of being saved. I could give you my testimony, and from my experience—informed by scripture and the confessions—I could construct an understanding of the process of salvation. However, as a Calvinist, I am distrustful of the

authority of experience. I know that sin continues to exert an influence in my life, not just over my will, but also over my ability to know and understand. Furthermore, to begin the discussion here is to understand God's work in terms of myself, rather than understanding myself in terms of God.

Second, we could begin with an understanding of our problem, of our need. The idea of a doctrine of salvation immediately raises the question: Salvation from what? The Heidelberg Catechism, one of the Reformed confessions endorsed both by my college and my denomination, begins with an assurance of the comfort which we are offered in Jesus Christ and then asks, "How many things must you know that you may live and die in the blessedness of this comfort?" The answer is "Three. First, the greatness of my sin and wretchedness. Second, how I am freed from all my sins and their wretched consequences. Third, what gratitude I owe to God for such redemption."¹ I cannot know the saving, delivering work of Christ—I cannot live and die comforted by that saving work—until I know the greatness of my sin and misery. In past ages, this starting point had an additional advantage in that it was not much contested. G. K. Chesterton says that the doctrine of original sin is "the only part of Christian theology which can really be proved."

Modern masters of science are much impressed with the need of beginning all inquiry with a fact. The ancient masters of religion were quite equally impressed with that necessity. They began with the fact of sin—a fact as practical as potatoes. Whether or not man could be washed in miraculous water, there was no doubt at any rate that he wanted washing.²

Evidence for the fact that humanity "wants washing" can be seen, says Chesterton, in the fact that "a man can feel exquisite happiness in skinning a cat," evidence for "positive evil" which "the strongest saints and the strongest skeptics alike [once] took . . . as the starting-point of their argument."³

However, as Chesterton himself goes on to point out, this doctrine of sin is no longer considered self-evident. Many philosophers and theologians today want to assert the inherent goodness of human beings. As a Calvinist, I suspect that even at times in history when

people have been more quick to acknowledge the inherent sinfulness of humanity, most people have often exempted themselves from this acknowledgment. In my classroom teaching, I find that although my Calvinist students will happily assent to the doctrine of original sin in theory (saying, with the Heidelberg Catechism, that “by nature I am prone to hate God and my neighbor”⁴ and that “I have grievously sinned against all the commandments of God, and have not kept any one of them, and that I am still ever prone to all that is evil”⁵), they still do not *really* believe that people are all sinful, certainly not that all people are genuinely deserving of eternal judgment. We tend to think about sin the way we think about driving over the speed limit: we acknowledge that we are all guilty, but in our heart of hearts we do not really think that our guilt is that big a deal. This becomes clear when students protest at the idea of someone being judged guilty and sent to hell without having heard the gospel. This strikes them as “unfair,” indicating how insignificant the guilt part of the equation really seems.

I believe that I can only come to a *true* knowledge of my sin by knowing something of God’s goodness. Apart from a knowledge of God and His will for my life, I am quite capable of thinking myself a pretty good person. Even if the sin of *other* people may seem self-evident, my own sin and my need for salvation is not so clearly seen, making this the wrong place to start my investigation. Furthermore, this starting point again suffers from the problem of me understanding God’s work in terms of myself rather than understanding myself in terms of God.

Third, we could begin with an understanding of the nature of God. This is where Calvin begins his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, and this is where I choose to begin today. For a Calvinist, beliefs about salvation will most typically arise out of, and be controlled by, beliefs about God’s nature, rather than the other way around. (In the interests of full disclosure, let me also admit that within systematic theology I specialize not in soteriology but in the doctrine of God, so this starting point has the additional advantage of letting me talk about a topic I actually know something about).

So I would like to begin by stating some things I believe about God and then draw out the soteriological implications of those beliefs.

Nature of God

Here are some of my most basic convictions about God's nature:

- ◆ God is the one Creator of all that exists.
- ◆ God is triune.
- ◆ God is love and goodness.
- ◆ God is immutable and eternal.
- ◆ God is absolutely sovereign.

Each of these convictions has implications for a doctrine of salvation, so let us consider them one at a time.

First, God is the one Creator of all that exists. From this it follows that God is not like us, nor indeed like anything or anyone else in our experience. There is only one Creator, and everything else exists depending on Him, relating to Him as Creator. This raises the question of whether we can ever know God at all. There is an ontological gap between us and God which our understanding can never bridge.

However, God can bridge that gap and has bridged it. The very act of creating forged a connection between us and God which we cannot break, though we may sometimes deny it. Through the creation, through the scriptures, and most of all through the incarnation, God "accommodates himself" (to use Calvin's language)⁶ to the limits of our finite minds. Calvin uses the image of a nanny bending over a newborn baby and speaking baby talk, babbling to the child. So too God stoops to us, communicating His love for us in terms appropriate to our weakness.⁷ We are not able to understand Him fully, but we are able to understand enough to respond in love and gratitude.

The limits of our understanding are expressed in the following poem by C. S. Lewis, a poem which he offers as a qualifier for all his praying.

Footnote to All Prayers

He whom I bow to only knows to whom I bow
When I attempt the ineffable Name, murmuring *Thou*,
And dream of Pheidian fancies and embrace in heart
Symbols (I know) which cannot be the thing Thou art.
Thus always, taken at their word, all prayers blaspheme

Worshipping with frail images a folk-lore dream
And all men in their praying, self-deceived, address
The coinage of their own unquiet thoughts, unless
Thou in magnetic mercy to Thyself divert
Our arrows, aimed unskilfully, beyond desert;
And all men are idolators, crying unheard
To a deaf idol, if Thou take them at their word.

Take not, oh Lord, our literal sense. Lord, in Thy great,
Unbroken speech our limping metaphor translate.⁸

The title tells us that Lewis intends to continue praying, but with a recognition of his own lack of knowledge. Not only our praying, but also all of our theology must be done within this context of humility, knowing that our words are inadequate. Yet we are emboldened to speak because God has authorized us to speak, telling us to serve Him with our minds as well as with our hearts and bodies.

Let us move to the second premise about God's nature: God is triune. God is both one and three. God is one substance, one being, but three persons or *subsistences* (the word Calvin prefers). This is one of the two central convictions of the Christian faith, the other being the doctrine of the incarnation. We confess that each of these central convictions—the triune nature of God and Jesus Christ's full humanity and full divinity—is in some ways mysterious and beyond human understanding, which is why we know them only through God's revelation. C. S. Lewis likens our attempts to understand the Trinity to the attempts of a two-dimensional being to understand a three-dimensional being. "In God's dimension, so to speak, you find a being who is three Persons while remaining one Being, just as a cube is six squares while remaining one cube. Of course we cannot fully conceive a Being like that: just as, if we were so made that we perceived only two dimensions in space we could never properly imagine a cube."⁹ God has revealed Himself as both one and three, three distinct persons who love one another more deeply and are united to each other more completely than anything in our experience. Christians have coined the word "Trinity" to express this mystery. Given God's triune nature, several things follow for our understanding of salvation.

First, since the three persons of the Trinity are one being, with one will, they may not be “played against” each other. We sometimes speak as though the Father were the harsh, rather grim member of the Trinity; as though Jesus were the approachable, nice member of the Trinity; and as though Jesus’s intervention serves to “soften up” the Father, much as a kindly older sibling might intervene on our behalf when our parents are steaming over some stupid act of disobedience on our part. But this is a radically wrong way to understand the Godhead. There is not a “good cop/bad cop” division within the Trinity, who are united in loving us, desiring our good, and drawing us back into God’s will. Indeed, all three persons of the Trinity are at work in the process of salvation. Although this conference is about “salvation in Christ,” salvation is also the work of the Father and the Spirit.

Second, because God is triune—a dynamic, fully actual and self-sufficient community of three loving persons—God does not need human beings in order to be in relationship nor does He need us in order to be a loving being. God is relationship, a relationship far more intimate than anything we could ever offer. From this it follows that not only salvation but creation itself is a free act of grace. When I was a little girl, my mother used to play a record for me featuring a reading of James Weldon Johnson’s poem “God’s Trombones.” In the poem Johnson imagines God stepping out into space, saying (and this was read in a very deep, resonant voice), “I’m lonely. I’ll make me a world.” Although I like the poem in many ways, the idea that God would have been lonely without us violates the truth of God’s triune nature.

Let us move to the third premise about God’s nature: God is love and goodness. God is not simply loving; He is love itself. God is not simply good; He is goodness itself. There is no standard of love or goodness above God to which He must conform, but neither are standards of love and goodness whimsical decisions which He makes for us and could have made in some other way. God’s own character or nature provides the standard for love and goodness. From this, several things follow for our understanding of salvation.

First, although God had no *need* to create us nor to save us once we had rebelled against Him, such gracious acts are fitting for God, natural to Him given that He is all love and all goodness. It is natural,

though not necessary, that God's love would overflow into the creation. It is natural, though not necessary, that God would give Himself in love to that which He had created. I must reject any doctrine of salvation which suggests that God does not love everyone and everything He has made.

Second, since God is goodness itself, there can be nothing good in all the cosmos that does not have its source in Him. There can be nothing good in any human life that does not have its source in Him. Whenever any human person shows love to another or makes something beautiful or knows something true, God's grace is working, whether or not that person is aware of it. As James says, "Every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation of shadow due to change" (James 1:17). Jonathan Edwards elaborates on this, saying:

The several ways . . . wherein the redeemed of Jesus Christ depend on God for all their good, are these, viz. that they have all their good *of* him, and that they have all *through* him, and that they have all *in* him: that he be the cause and original whence all our good comes, therein it is *of* him; and that he be the medium by which it is obtained and conveyed, therein they have it *through* him; and that he be that good itself that is given and conveyed, therein it is *in* him.¹⁰

All of our experiences of love and goodness point to God.

Third, since God is love itself and goodness itself, all of His actions toward the world and all who live in it are manifestations of love and goodness, no matter how they may appear to us. As William Law says,

[A]s certainly as he is the Creator, so certainly is he the Blessor of every created Thing, and can give *nothing* but Blessing, Goodness, and Happiness from himself because he has *in himself* nothing else to give. It is much more possible for the Sun to give forth Darkness, than for God to do, or be, or give forth anything but Blessing and Goodness.¹¹

The Reformed confessions explicitly affirm that because of His being as love, God desires the salvation of all those to whom the gospel is offered.¹² The offer of salvation is genuine and sincere. God does not toy with us. He takes no delight in the death of the wicked. He is not a

sadist, but our loving Maker who has nothing to give us but love and goodness.

Finally, since God is the source of everything which is, and since God—who is perfect goodness—cannot be the source of anything which is imperfect, we should respect and remember the goodness of the creation as He designed it. The effects of sin in creation are not part of God’s design but rather results of our disobedience. The Reformed Church in America’s contemporary faith statement *Our Song of Hope* says, “We have enmeshed our world in a realm of sin.”¹³ But God loves all His creations, not just people, and salvation must involve the renewal of all creation, not just the redemption of human beings. The goal of life is a new creation, not just a new society. In his book *On Being Reformed*, I. John Hesselink identifies the idea that Christians should “be indifferent or opposed to the so-called ‘worldly’ realms of culture, economics, and politics, and to be concerned only about the salvation of souls” as a *misunderstanding* of what it means to be Reformed.¹⁴

From its powerful concept of a sovereign God whose will determines the destiny of humankind and nations to the vision of the glory of God which is manifest and acknowledged throughout the ends of the earth, Calvinism is a faith of the grand design. . . . [T]he ultimate concern in the Reformed tradition transcends the individual and his salvation. It also goes beyond the church, the body of Christ. The concern is for the realization of the will of God also in the wider realms of the state and culture, in nature and in the cosmos. In short, Reformed theology is kingdom theology.¹⁵

Steve Davis has already drawn out some of the implications of this Reformed view in his presentation.

Let us move to our fourth premise: God is immutable, impassible, and eternal. As many of you are doubtless aware, the traditional Christian understanding of God’s attributes has been questioned throughout the twentieth century, not primarily by those outside the faith but from within. During my own college and seminary education I was taught to distrust the classical attributes as so much Hellenizing of the gospel, but the more I have studied these questions the more convinced I am

that the Bible itself requires me to embrace God's immutability, impassibility, and eternity. From my embrace of this traditional, orthodox understanding of God's attributes, several things follow in our understanding of salvation.

First, although the god being proposed by critics of the classical attributes may appear kinder and gentler, friendlier and more approachable as one who feels our pain, I am convinced that such a god is ultimately powerless to save us from that pain. A god who changes, suffers, and is in time even as we are cannot save us.

Second, God's love for us—or as William Law put it, “God's gift of Blessing, Goodness and Happiness”—is unchanging. We must reject any understanding of salvation which suggests that God loved us once, but then his love cooled and needs to be rekindled, or that God has ambivalent feelings for us, or that God comes to love us once we have fulfilled certain conditions. God's love is unchanging and cannot be manipulated by our actions. Nothing we do can make God not love us, though it may very well affect how we experience that love.

Let us look at the last premise about God: God is absolutely sovereign. Just as God has no need for anyone or anything beyond Himself, so God cannot be controlled by any outside influence. Rather, God is in control. The created order remains within His power to do with as He pleases. Several things follow for our understanding of salvation.

First, the complete sovereignty of God combines with His love and goodness to assure us of His providential care over all creation. As the Heidelberg Catechism affirms, “without the will of my Father in heaven, not a hair can fall from my head; indeed . . . everything must fit his purpose for my salvation.”¹⁶

Still, since God's sovereignty is exerted as the eternal Creator, His control is not like our own human control over one another. If I gain control over another person, then that person is not free. Insofar as that person is free, I have no control. However, God's power of causation is beyond ours here. Just as I am able to make use of a tool while honoring its design and its nature, so God is able to control us while still honoring our nature as beings with free will. God's sovereignty is completely compatible with the free will of creatures and the liberty

of secondary causes. The Westminster Confession makes this point quite explicitly.¹⁷

In exploring the interaction between divine sovereignty and human freedom, The Canons of Dort teach:

[T]his divine grace of regeneration does not act in people as if they were blocks and stones; nor does it abolish the will and its properties or coerce a reluctant will by force, but spiritually revives, heals, reforms, and—in a manner at once pleasing and powerful—bends it back. As a result, a ready and sincere obedience of the Spirit now begins to prevail where before the rebellion and resistance of the flesh were completely dominant. It is in this that the true and spiritual restoration and freedom of our will consists.¹⁸

Ultimately I become a free person when I recognize God's sovereignty and conform my will to His. Biblical freedom is not primarily about freedom of self-control, but rather about a renewed capacity for goodness.

Human Nature

Now, I think, we are ready to consider the problem from which we need to be saved. It is by recognizing God's greatness that we come to see our own sin. Calvin says this clearly at the beginning of the *Institutes*. If we had no perfect reference point, we might consider ourselves to be rather good people, but once we have looked at God's pure goodness, we recognize our own lack. We see our own sin. We see our sin in the mirror of the Law, but we also see our own sin in the mirror of the Word (or the Law or Torah) made flesh—Jesus Christ. We are not what we were meant to be. As G. K. Chesterton put it, "Whatever I am, I am not myself."¹⁹ Sin is therefore profoundly anticreational, a rejection of the order that God has built into the creation in preference for an order of my own devising. Thus it is not surprising that sin results in the disordering of our lives—our desires are misdirected, our priorities are out of line, our perception of reality is foggy.

Calvin is famous for teaching the doctrine of *total depravity*. This does not mean that Calvin thinks human beings are as bad as they might be. No one is *absolutely* depraved. Rather, depravity is total in that there is not one part of our lives untouched by the influ-

ence of sin. When I was a girl, my pastor explained this to me using the example of milk which has gone sour. Although the milk may not be as sour as it could be, still the sourness infects the entire carton of milk. You can't just pour the sour part off the top, the way you might cut mold off cheese. There is no part which is not sour. So too human beings on our own, apart from the saving power of God, are sinful all the way through. Even our best acts have a sinful tang.

Of course, milk which is just a little bit sour is still quite drinkable, if there is nothing better around. Living in a sinful world, we get used to the flavor of sin. Jesus, the only sinless human, reintroduces us to the fresh, wholesome flavor of a genuinely righteous life. The more we know Him, the more clearly the sin in our own lives is revealed.

This sin is in us, because all human beings are enmeshed in Adam and Eve's first sin, the rejection of God's sovereignty and the assertion of themselves as being like God. The Scots Confession summarizes the effect of their sin on all other human beings:

By this transgression, generally known as original sin, the image of God was utterly defaced in man, and he and his children became by nature hostile to God, slaves to Satan, and servants to sin. And thus everlasting death has had, and shall have, power and dominion over all who have not been, are not, or shall not be reborn from above.²⁰

Sin's influence extends beyond human nature. All of creation has been infected with our sin, so that the creation also "groans" to be released and redeemed. A Christian understanding of salvation must be the salvation of the cosmos. As Neal Plantinga has observed, "At their best, Reformed Christians take a very big view of redemption because they take a very big view of fallenness. . . . God isn't content to save human beings in their individual activities. God wants to save social systems and economic structures too."²¹ This process of salvation does not just involve individuals. All of creation is subject to the work of salvation. Calvinists, and especially those Calvinists in the tradition of Abraham Kuyper, emphasize, as Kuyper said, that "there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over *all*, does not cry: 'Mine!'"²² The redemption of all of life is a natural outgrowth of individual salvation.

God's Saving Work

The incarnation. God's saving work begins not on the cross but with the incarnation. The Athanasian Creed identifies belief in the Trinity and belief in the incarnation (specifically that Jesus is fully God and fully human) as the two essential affirmations one must make to be a Christian. So how should we understand the incarnation?

First, the incarnation is wholly in keeping with God's nature as we have just outlined it, for God, as one whose love overflows unchangingly, naturally desires union with those He loves. Although the incarnation is a free act for God, it is nonetheless compatible with His nature.

Second, the incarnation, in my view, does not occur only so that Jesus can die on the cross for us. The incarnation is the building of a bridge between the eternal, immutable, impassible God and temporal, changeable, suffering people. We cannot ascend to God, so He descends to us, accommodating Himself to us, making Himself known in the only form that we will be able to understand. The first and primary purpose of the incarnation is to show us God's glory, to allow us to know God as we cannot possibly know Him without the incarnation.

Although Calvin is very clear that the incarnation occurred only for the purpose of our salvation, I disagree with Calvin here. Given God's immutable, loving, self-giving nature, it seems likely to me that the incarnation would have happened even if there had been no sin. It seems supremely unlikely that the greatest event in human history occurred as a direct result of human sin, and if that were the case it would be hard to avoid believing in a "happy fall."

Justification/Sanctification. Because of our sin, Jesus's incarnation culminates in the cross and resurrection. His death has saving power for us because He struggles against death and wins. We were trapped in a prison of unreality, almost nonbeing. Think of C. S. Lewis's image in *The Great Divorce* of hell as a tiny crack in the ground.

My Teacher gave a curious smile. "Look," he said, and with the word he went down on his hands and knees . . . and presently [I] saw that he had plucked a blade of grass. Using its thin end as a pointer, he made me see, after I had looked very closely, a crack in the soil so small that I could not have identified it without this aid.

“I cannot be certain,” he said, “that this is the crack ye came up through. But through a crack no bigger than that ye certainly came. . . . All Hell is smaller than one pebble of your earthly world: but it is smaller than one atom of *this* [Heavenly] world. . . .”

“It seems big enough when you’re in it, Sir.”

“And yet all loneliness, angers, hatred, envies and itchings that it contains, if rolled into one single experience and put into the scale against the least moment of the joy that is felt by the least in Heaven, would have no weight that could be registered at all. . . . For a damned soul is nearly nothing: it is shrunk, shut up in itself. Good beats upon the damned incessantly as sound waves beat on the ears of the deaf, but they cannot receive it. Their fists are clenched, their teeth are clenched, their eyes fast shut. First they will not, in the end they cannot, open their hands for gifts, or their mouths for food, or their eyes to see.”

“Then no one can ever reach them?”

“Only the Greatest of all can make Himself small enough to enter Hell.”²³

In Jesus, God makes Himself small enough to invade that little crack and then releases the power of His divinity, exploding our prison wide open from the inside.

The process of salvation involves two actions: justification (which is a once-and-for-all declaration in which we are “clothed with the righteousness of Christ”) and sanctification (which is a lifelong process of being purified and made holy, involving “the dying away of the old and the coming to life of the new”). Calvin emphasizes that in both these events we are united with Christ. We participate with Him in His death, and we participate with Him in His resurrection. The process of salvation is the process of being united with Christ.

This union is effected by the Holy Spirit. In the Augustinian tradition, the Holy Spirit is understood as the love that binds the Father and the Son, and in the same way He is also the love that binds us to Jesus Christ. As we are united with Christ, we are transformed from one degree of glory to another, so that the reflective image of God is restored within us. This image consists of our capacity to be good and to give God glory through holy living and through worship. Through the interceding work of Christ we are brought into the inner life of the

Godhead, especially through our partaking of the sacrament of communion. We are joined with one another as members of the body of Christ. As Calvin says,

First, we must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us. Therefore, to share with us what he has received from the Father, he had to become ours and to dwell within us. For this reason, he is called 'our Head' [Ephesians 4:15], and 'the first-born among many brethren' [Romans 8:29]. We also, in turn, are said to be 'engrafted into him' [Romans 11:17], and to 'put on Christ' [Galatians 3:27]; for, as I have said, all that he possesses is nothing to us until we grow into one body with him. . . .

To sum up, the Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ effectually unites us to himself.²⁴

Union with Christ and being built into church happens through "the secret energy of the Holy Spirit,"²⁵ and through the gift of faith which we acquire through grace. The church is "our mother [who] nourishes us at her breast."²⁶ Union with Christ is always communal.

The work of the Holy Spirit may be summed up this way: The Holy Spirit regenerates, convicts of sin, moves us to repentance, persuades and enables us to embrace Jesus Christ, unites us to Christ, comforts and sanctifies us, adopts, and prays for us. Notice that the first five actions in that list can be summed up by saying, as Calvin does, that faith is the primary work of the Holy Spirit. Apart from the Holy Spirit, we are dead in our sin and incapable of responding to the offer of grace. We need the Holy Spirit's empowering work in order to confess and believe.

Election. Finally, no Calvinist account of soteriology would be complete without a discussion of election. Why have I saved election for last? In part, of course, because I was hoping we would run out of time and I wouldn't have to speak about it, but more significantly because in my mind (and here is a way in which I differ from many, maybe most, Calvinists) when the Bible talks about our being "elect" or "chosen" in Christ, I take it that the Bible is not generally speaking

about personal salvation at all, but rather about the call of the body of Christ to be God's representatives in the world. Biblical election is not primarily a soteriological category; rather it is a vocational and ecclesiastical category, referring to the call Christians receive to fill the three-fold office of prophet, priest, and ruler. In his book *Union with Christ*, Lew Smedes observes:

God's election is His 'plan for the fullness of time, *to unite all things in him*' (Eph. 1:10). Christ was elect as the Christ 'to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of the cross' (Colossians 1:20). He is elect as the one in whom a new creation is brought into being through the reconciliation of men with God at the cross. He is elect as head of His body, the Church, which is the harbinger of the coming new creation. This is the comprehensive sense in which we must think of the election of Jesus Christ. Christ the concrete individual, the Man for others, is elect. But *His election, like Israel's, and with Israel's, is the decision of God to create a new world of people in partnership with Him. When we think of election, we must think of God's comprehensive decision to have a 'new creation.'*²⁷

This is the proper context for understanding the often-vexatious question of election. Election is primarily a corporate missional category. The elect are those chosen for service, those called to fill the three-fold office of prophet (bearing witness to the Word of God in the world), priest (interceding on behalf of the world), and king, or ruler (exercising God's authority in the world). Since the elect are chosen precisely on behalf of the non-elect world it is a serious error to assume, as many have, that only the elect may be saved.

Ultimately, a Calvinist doctrine of salvation is meant to be a doctrine of comfort, not a doctrine of fear. The Heidelberg Catechism begins with this question: "What is your only comfort, in life and in death?" I have already quoted a part of this answer, but here is the entire response:

That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall

from my head; indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.²⁸

Notes

1. Q&A 2; unless otherwise noted, all quotations from the Reformed confessions will be taken from *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA): Part I: Book of Confessions* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, 1999).

2. G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1959), 15.

3. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 15.

4. Q&A 5.

5. Q&A 60.

6. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill, The Library of Christian Classics, volumes XX and XXI, eds. John Baillie, John T. McNeill, and Henry Van Dusen (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), I.VII.13; II.XI.13.

7. Calvin, *Institutes*, I.XIII.1.

8. C. S. Lewis, *Poems*, ed. Walter Hooper (San Francisco: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1964), 129.

9. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 126.

10. Jonathan Edwards, "God Glorified in Man's Dependence," *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume 17: Sermons and Discourses 1730–1733*, ed. Mark Valeri (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 202.

11. William Law, "The Spirit of Love," *The Works of the Reverend William Law*, Vol. VIII (London: G. Moreton, 1893), 4.

12. See *Westminster Confession*, X.1: "God in infinite and perfect love, having provided in the covenant of grace, through the mediation and sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ, a way of life and salvation, sufficient for and adapted to the whole lost race of man, doth freely offer this salvation to all men in the gospel."

And also *Westminster Confession*, XXXV, "Declaratory Statement": "[T]he doctrine of God's eternal decree is held in harmony with the doctrine of his love to all mankind, his gift of his Son to be the propitiation for the sins of the whole world, and his readiness to bestow his saving grace on all who seek it; that concerning those who perish, the doctrine of God's eternal

decree is held in harmony with the doctrine that God desires not the death of any sinner, but has provided in Christ a salvation sufficient for all, adapted to all, and freely offered in the gospel to all; that men are fully responsible for their treatment of God's gracious offer; that his decree hinders no man from accepting that offer; and that no man is condemned except on the ground of his sin."

13. The full text of this contemporary statement of faith can be found at the website of the Reformed Church in America: <http://www.rca.org/welcome/beliefs/creeds/oursong.html>.

14. I. John Hesselink, *On Being Reformed* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1983), 63.

15. Hesselink, *Reformed*, 108–9.

16. Q&A 1.

17. *Westminster Confession*, III.1, "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."

18. III/IV: Article 16. The complete text of the Canons of Dort can be found on the website of the Christian Reformed Church in North America: http://www.crcna.org/cr/crbe/crbe_conf_cd_03-04.htm

19. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 158.

20. The Scots Confession, chapt. III, "On Original Sin."

21. Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Engaging God's World: A Reformed Vision of Faith, Learning, and Living* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 97.

22. Abraham Kuyper, "Sphere Sovereignty: Inaugural Address at the Free University, Amsterdam," *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. and trans. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans and Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1988), 488.

23. C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 122–24.

24. Calvin, *Institutes*, III.I.1.

25. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.I.4.

26. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.I.4.

27. Lewis B. Smedes, *Union with Christ*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 88–89.

28. Q&A 1.