

What Is a True Calvinist?

Basics of the Reformed Faith

Also available in the series:

How Do We Glorify God?

How Our Children Come to Faith

What Are Election and Predestination?

What Is a Reformed Church?

What Is Biblical Preaching?

What Is Justification by Faith Alone?

What Is Providence?

What Is the Christian Worldview?

What Is the Lord's Supper?

What Is Spiritual Warfare?

What Is True Conversion?

Why Do We Baptize Infants?

What Is a True Calvinist?

Philip Graham Ryken



P U B L I S H I N G

P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

© 2003 by Philip Graham Ryken

This booklet first appeared as chapter 8 in *The Doctrines of Grace: Rediscovering the Evangelical Gospel* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2002). Used by permission.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—except for brief quotations for the purpose of review or comment, without the prior permission of the publisher, P&R Publishing Company, P.O. Box 817, Phillipsburg, New Jersey 08865-0817.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

Italics within Scripture quotations indicate emphasis added.

Page design by Tobias Design
Typesetting by Michelle Feaster

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ryken, Philip Graham, 1966—

What is a true Calvinist? / Philip Graham Ryken.

p. cm. — (Basics of the Reformed faith)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN-10: 0-87552-598-9

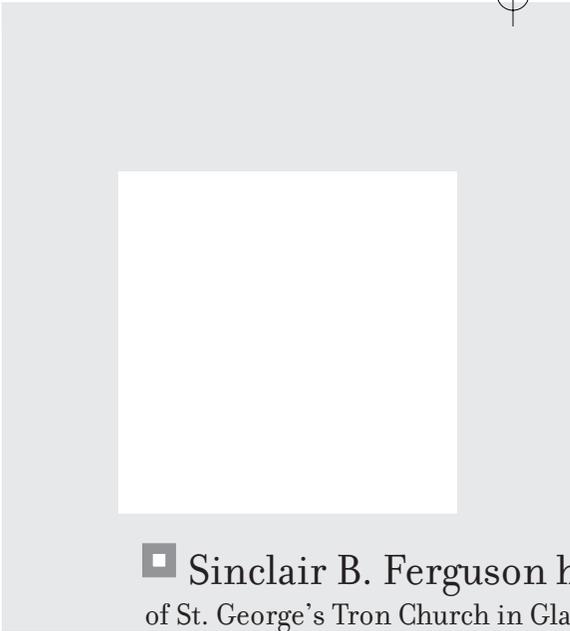
ISBN-13: 978-0-87552-598-3

1. Spiritual life—Reformed Church. 2. Reformed Church—Doctrines. 3. Calvinism. I. Title. II. Series.

BV4501.3.R95 2003

248.4'8—dc21

2003048230



■ **Sinclair B. Ferguson** has served as the pastor of St. George's Tron Church in Glasgow, Scotland, and also as professor of systematic theology at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. His students well remember how he would begin his course on the Holy Spirit: "The goal of theology is the worship of God. The posture of theology is on one's knees. The mode of theology is repentance."

This is a good set of guidelines to remember because so many of those who have discovered the beauty of Reformed theology are anything but beautiful themselves. People sometimes speak of "TRs," meaning those who are "Truly Reformed." But what this term brings to mind is usually not very nice (some people have the same instinctive response to the term "Calvinist"). The "Truly Reformed" are considered narrow in their thinking, parochial in their outlook, and uncharitable in their attitude toward those who disagree. They have a bad reputation—and, sadly, perhaps some of it is deserved.

There is a combative streak in Calvinism, and whenever the doctrines of grace¹ (most accurately identified as radical depravity, unconditional election, particular redemption, efficacious grace, and perseverance) are divorced from warm Christian piety, people tend to get ornery. Some Christians who identify themselves as Calvinists seem to be in a perpetual state of discontent with their pastors, often making unin-

■ True Calvinist

vited suggestions for their personal improvement. Others seem overly concerned with converting people to their ecclesiastical denomination. Still others have memorized TULIP (the acronym for the traditional five points of Calvinism: Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, and the Perseverance of the saints) but somehow seem to be missing the heart of the gospel. Thus we have sympathy for the man who wrote: "Nothing will deaden a church or put a young man out of the ministry any more than an adherence to Calvinism. Nothing will foster pride and indifference as will an affection for Calvinism. Nothing will destroy holiness and spirituality as an attachment to Calvinism. . . . The doctrines of Calvinism will deaden and kill anything: prayer, faith, zeal, holiness."²

This ought not to be. In fact, it *cannot* be, provided that Calvinism is rightly understood. The doctrines of grace help to preserve all that is right and good in the Christian life: humility, holiness, and thankfulness, with a passion for prayer and evangelism. The true Calvinist ought to be the most outstanding Christian—not narrow and unkind, but grounded in God's grace and therefore generous of spirit. Toward that end, this booklet is a practical introduction to Reformed spirituality. We will consider what the doctrines of grace mean for personal growth in godliness, seeking to answer the question, What should a true Calvinist be like?

A GOD-CENTERED MIND

Calvinism has implications for the whole person, but we begin with the mind because this is where the Scripture begins: "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Rom. 12:2a). While Calvinism is much more than a mind-set, it

nevertheless begins with a mind that is enlightened by the truth of the gospel.

What is most on the Calvinist's mind is the glory of God. The old Princeton theologian B. B. Warfield claimed, "Evangelicalism stands or falls with Calvinism" (that is, the gospel of grace stands or falls with the doctrines of grace). What Warfield himself meant by "Calvinism" is "that sight of the majesty of God that pervades all of life and all of experience." Or, to quote him at greater length, it is

a profound apprehension of God in His majesty, with the poignant realization which inevitably accompanies this apprehension, of the relation sustained to God by the creature as such, and particularly by the sinful creature. The Calvinist is the man who has seen God, and who, having seen God in His glory, is filled on the one hand with a sense of his own unworthiness to stand in God's sight as a creature, and much more as a sinner, and on the other hand, with adoring wonder that nevertheless this God is a God who receives sinners. He who believes in God without reserve and is determined that God shall be God to him in all his thinking, feeling and willing—in the entire compass of his life activities, intellectual, moral and spiritual—throughout all his individual social and religious relations, is, by force of that strictest of all logic which presides over the outworking of principles into thought and life, by the very necessity of the case, a Calvinist.³

If the true Calvinist is a sinner who has received God's grace and seeks to live for God's glory, then the prophet Isaiah is the perfect example. In *The Practical Implications of Calvin-*

■ True Calvinist

ism, Al Martin claims that Isaiah 6 is the historical account of how God “makes a Calvinist.”⁴ To some this may seem a surprising connection to make. But if the essence of Calvinism is a passion for God’s glory, then one could hardly come up with a better example than the prophet Isaiah:

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”

At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.

“Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.”

Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.”

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?”

And I said, “Here am I. Send me!” (Isa. 6:1–8)

This vision—in which God revealed his glory, majesty, holiness, and grace—changed Isaiah’s entire life and min-