



Cruciform Press

KILLING CALVINISM

HOW TO DESTROY A PERFECTLY GOOD THEOLOGY

FROM THE INSIDE

Greg Dutcher

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*How to Destroy a Perfectly Good Theology
from the Inside*

Greg Dutcher

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To Roscoe Adams

November 19, 1943 – April 22, 2012

The most joyful, humble, and gracious Calvinist I've ever known. While I have many teachers, I have few spiritual fathers. Thank you for the privilege of being your true son in the faith.

You were alive and well when this dedication was first written, but you never saw it because God wanted you to see something far superior—and you're seeing it. I'll see it with you on the other side.

– Greg Dutcher

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“This book blew me away! Greg Dutcher skillfully diagnoses how I kill the very truth I love by my hypocrisy, pride, anger, and judgmental attitude. This book will serve a young generation of Calvinists. But the older generation had better heed it, too. There’s medicine here for all our hearts, and taking this medicine will make us more joyful and more humble when making our glorious God known.”

Thabiti Anyabwile, author; Senior Pastor, First Baptist Church, Grand Cayman; Council Member, The Gospel Coalition

“Many Calvinists will find reading this book to be a painful experience. But medicine is like that. The good news is that a healthy dose of Dutcher’s wisdom will go a long way in bringing spiritual health to the young, restless, and reformed.”

Sam Storms, author, speaker; Senior Pastor of Bridgeway Church, Oklahoma City

“An absolute must-read for every YRR—and older Calvinists too! With wit, compassion, and candor, Greg Dutcher exposes how sin taints our theological convictions and undermines our witness. But he doesn’t leave us there; through biblical and historical examples he shows us Calvinism done right to the glory of God.”

Lydia Brownback, author and speaker

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INTRODUCTION

It's interesting to compare the typical Calvinist of yesteryear with his 21st-century counterpart. The former favored his tweed sport coat and may very well have been caught taking out the garbage while wearing a necktie. The latter prefers ripped jeans and sandals, and on any given Sunday may be found serving communion in the same outfit. The Calvinist of old attended worship services in a stately spired church building; lived in a quiet, well-kept home; and enjoyed listening to Bach on his phonograph. Could he have gazed down the corridors of time, he would have stared incredulously at today's 20-something Calvinist dancing madly in total silence, some kind of white wires dangling from his ears as he prepares to attend a meeting of his missional church in a dingy *YMCA*. Yesterday's Calvinist discussed the finer points of Berkhoff's *Systematic Theology* with his button-down peers at the Philadelphia Conference of Reformed Theology; the hipster Calvinist kicks around a little Grudem and Driscoll at the local sports bar over a pint of Guinness.

Ridiculous generalizations? Sure, but I trust you see my point. Calvinism is "in" right now, and while it

struts about in different dress than it did, say, a century ago, it has the same theological framework that propelled men from Augustine to Piper to impact the world with their writing and teaching. While Calvinism itself has not changed,¹ it has attracted a distinctly contemporary audience. Charles Spurgeon noticed this same continuity of doctrine but freshness of expression in his day:

It is no novelty, then, that I am preaching; no new doctrine. I love to proclaim these strong old doctrines that are called by the nickname Calvinism, but which are surely and verily the revealed truth of God as it is in Christ Jesus. By this truth I make a pilgrimage into the past, and as I go, I see father after father, confessor after confessor, martyr after martyr, standing up to shake hands with me Taking these things to be the standard of my faith, I see the land of the ancients peopled with my brethren—I behold multitudes who confess the same as I do, and acknowledge that this is the religion of God’s own church.²

Had Spurgeon done a 180 and seen the future of the church, particularly the early part of the 21st century, he would have found an equally enthusiastic group of confessors as he saw in church history. And he may have been stunned at the army of young preachers in novelty Ts and hipster glasses who regard him as nothing less than a Victorian rock star.

Today, many Reformed Christians joyfully communicate the great doctrines of grace to a young, attention-

challenged group (did you notice how short this book is?). And though it seems as unlikely as middle-schoolers starting Shakespeare study groups, the generation shaped by graphic novels and unlimited texting has risen up to embrace a high view of God, and this will inevitably shape the doctrinal future of contemporary evangelicalism. While I am a little older than most of my “Young, Restless, and Reformed” peers, I enthusiastically stand with them in this unique moment in church history.³ In doing so, I hope to offer a small contribution that may help us all not to kill off our Calvinism.

From a Portal to a Bunker

I became a Christian in 1986 at age 16, entering the kingdom through a charismatic/Pentecostal portal in woodsy, semi-rural Maryland. My young faith was nurtured by a bizarre amalgamation of Christian rock, cheesy 70s movies about believers vanishing from the earth en masse, and Jack Chick tracts—those pictures of cartoon sinners burning in the lake of fire will stay with me a lifetime. While this does give me an edge at parties when the talk drifts toward unusual conversions and odd formative experiences, the fact is I was a theological train wreck. Yet the grace of God proved greater than my personal and theological deficiencies, and providence kept leading me into a greater and greater appreciation for God’s Word.

By 1989 I had discovered the verse-by-verse Bible teaching of John MacArthur, and I simply could not get enough. I spent every dime I had on sermon tapes (yes,

plastic cassettes larger than my current cell phone). Every now and then, MacArthur would mention something about “divine election” or “predestination,” and it always made me shudder. In college by this time, I told some of my friends, “MacArthur’s a great teacher if you leave out that Calvinism thing.”

But then there was Tim, an outspoken advocate for this strange-sounding doctrine. For months he challenged me on the issue of God’s sovereignty in salvation. I will never forget the day he said to me, “Dutcher, do you think anybody *deserves* to be in heaven?”

“Of course not,” I replied.

“Then why are you so bent out of shape if some people get grace and everyone else gets what they deserve? Nobody’s getting shafted,” Tim reasoned.

I rolled my eyes and blew it off ...on the outside. But Tim’s question placed a stone in my shoe that I simply could not remove. Eventually, I picked up R. C. Sproul’s book *Chosen by God*, and it was all over. He had me halfway through the first chapter. Interestingly, my “switch” to Calvinism was very similar to Sproul’s take on his own conversion: “Reluctantly, I sighed and surrendered, but with my head, not my heart. ‘OK, I believe this stuff, but I don’t have to like it!’”⁴ I will come back to Dr. Sproul’s transparency later in this book, but I suspect that many “newborn” Calvinists likely start their journey on a similar note.

Before too long, my reluctant acceptance of Calvinism-writ-large matured into a genuine love for the doctrines of grace. I realized that God’s love for me was so

great that he had my eternal well-being deep in his eternal heart long before I came on the scene. I also came to see that my sinfulness was so horrible, so debilitating to all of my faculties, that without God outright saving me, apart from any cooperation on my part, I was doomed to everlasting judgment. Paul's words in Romans 9:16, once an unsettling "anomaly" in my ill-formed theology, now became an oasis of peace and confidence: "So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy." What rest! I was saved and preserved completely on the basis of God's proactive kindness.

Like many fresh-from-the-factory Calvinists, I could not wait to share my newfound understanding of God's mercy, salvation, and sovereignty with others. How odd it was, then, to find that so many friends did not share my enthusiasm. *Perhaps*, I thought, *I just need share my own struggle in coming to a Reformed perspective*. But that almost never worked. "Oh, I see. I haven't arrived like you have, right Greg?" Like Sisyphus, the more I pushed my T.U.L.I.P.-engraved boulder up the hill, the more it rolled back on me. Eventually, I made the dreaded mistake I fear many Calvinists continue to make today: I looked for the bunker instead of the coffee shop.

The bunker is the place of uniformity and safety. It is comfortable; it feels like home. In the bunker, we can be ourselves, accepted for who we are, because we are a lot like everyone around us. But the coffee shop, in this analogy, is the place where you at least have a possibility of engaging in meaningful conversation with someone

who doesn't quite believe what you believe. Such a coffee shop can be fairly comfortable, but it's not home. It is the public square, and it is full of people who don't think like you do.

I sometimes fear that if we all just stay holed up in our bunkers, we will end up killing the revival of Calvinism in our midst. I dread the thought of my kids and grandkids looking back decades from now at this time and concluding that Calvinism was merely the flavor of the month. If the theology of Augustine, Calvin, Knox, Edwards, Spurgeon, and Piper has been able to strengthen the church, advance the gospel, and protect Christians from the damnable influences of false gospels, then you and I must do all we can to make sure that what's going on right now is more than just a fad. We must not give current and future generations plausible reasons to reject the very essence of Christianity that we believe Calvinism represents.

That is, if we don't live our Calvinism, we might just kill it.

Consider the harm we Calvinists can do to ourselves, our spouses, our children, and ultimately our legacies if we do not think, meditate, pray, preach, and practice our Calvinism—our *faith*—as we should. How can anyone believe that this body of doctrine is ultimately sound and biblical if it has only an academic effect on many of its proponents? What areas of our lives should be transformed as a direct result of what we believe and embrace? What areas should *not* be? Shouldn't Calvinism be able to do more than provide us with a potent

arsenal for debating an Arminian? Shouldn't it do more than establish a set of technical terms by which we can join the Calvinist bunker down the street?

A PhD in Blundering

In the more than twenty years since “switching sides,” I have made my fair share of blunders. To my shame, I have literally made others cry with my lack of tact. At times my arrogance and insensitivity have burned like jet fuel, while I smugly justified it all because I was “standing up for the truth.” I have damaged friendships, ruined Bible studies, strained prayer meetings, and actually mocked people who could not come to terms with what I believe to be true.

Meanwhile, I find myself today in a special place. The church I planted eight years ago and still pastor is non-denominational. While the church has a thoroughly Reformed flavor in its teaching, many in my congregation are not Calvinists. Some, I suspect, don't even know what Calvinism is. As a result, I have many “coffee shop” moments and have learned a great deal about how important it is to be winsome and charitable in our presentation of Reformed theology.

More importantly, I am a husband and father of four, and I am still learning how my Calvinism can be utterly wasted in my own home if not lived and handled carefully.

All this to say that I feel qualified to write this book. From my little bunker, I plead with my brothers and sisters: may we never be guilty of killing Calvinism.

While I could offer countless ways to squander the enormous potential for good in Calvinism, I have boiled them down to eight in this book. I urge you to read carefully, asking yourself often if a particular killer of Calvinism could be at work in your life right now. Most of all, I pray that your God-centered understanding of Christianity will truly impact your life with God-centered thinking, actions, and affections.

Christ is worthy of lives well lived. May he help us do just that!

One

BY LOVING CALVINISM AS AN END IN ITSELF

A few years ago, Lisa and I took our four children on a day trip to Cunningham Falls State Park in Western Maryland. As we were leaving, a kind, elderly gentleman urged us not to head back toward Baltimore until we got a good look at the sky on what promised to be a crystal clear evening. “You’ll never be able to see such a pretty sight back in the city with all that haze and light pollution blocking your view,” he warned us. We gladly took his advice, stopping at a Dairy Queen drive-through and finding the nearest overlook off Route 70. We sat there in the fading light, finishing our cones, talking and anticipating the natural beauty we were about to behold. As dusk settled in, however, so did our grip on reality: we realized we wouldn’t have been able to see a meteor shooting ten feet away because we were looking through the smudged windshield of a well-used minivan belonging to a family with four small children.

Fortunately, with a little glass cleaner from the glove compartment and the roll of paper towels no family minivan should ever be without, Lisa was able to remove years of nasty film formed by the mysterious substances of childhood. In minutes the glass was so clean that it blended imperceptibly with the world just outside. As the darkness of a summer evening fell, our family was mesmerized by the stunning splendor of a full moon, vivid in the western Maryland sky and set among what seemed like twice as many stars as there ought to be. We sat in speechless awe as the heavens declared God's glory.

And not once did anyone say, "What a beautifully clear windshield!"

Who Praises a Windshield?

Windshields are one of those technological wonders we have all gotten used to. In fact, they work best when you don't notice them, when they are invisible so that all you can see is what they reveal.

I am concerned that many Calvinists today do little more than celebrate how wonderfully clear their theological windshield is. But like a windshield, Reformed theology is not an end in itself. It is simply a window to the awe-inspiring universe of God's truth, filled with glory, beauty, and grace. Do we need something like a metaphorical windshield of clear, biblical truth to look through as we hope to marvel at God's glory? Absolutely. But we must make sure that we know the difference between staring *at* a windshield and staring *through* one.

When I was in seminary, some friends and I went

to a theology symposium near Philadelphia where one speaker “rocked the house,” to borrow a current phrase. He spoke on the glory of God as the reason we were created. With verse after verse, illustration after illustration, he thundered from the pulpit and filled our minds with powerful thoughts of God’s holiness and transcendence. I remember feeling small and thinking, *Yes, this is good—I should feel small. It’s all about God—not me!* During the break that followed, my friends and I gathered in a corner, buzzing from the message. Most of us didn’t even care that we were consuming bad instant coffee and stale pastries.

“Okay, I’m ready to hear from a Calvinist now,” said one friend I will call ...Calvin. He was referring to the renowned Reformed theologian slated to speak next.

“Calvin, didn’t you enjoy what you just heard?” someone asked.

“Yeah, he was okay, I guess. But he’s no Calvinist,” Calvin shrugged.

We all muttered in agreement and returned to our seats. The famous Calvinist spoke next, and he did a good job, but it seemed a bit too academic to me. He was clearly teaching sound, biblical doctrine, but it was not easy to follow him. At the next break, Calvin went on and on about how much he had enjoyed that message and how just *knowing* the speaker was a Calvinist had put him at ease.

I cannot judge my friend’s heart, but I suspect many of us have come to love Reformed theology simply because it is Reformed theology. Consider your books.

We Calvinists love books, don't we? How much money have we spent on commentaries and systematic theologies just because they are Reformed in tone? Rarely have I thought, "Oh, this will help me relish the glory of God and the beauty of salvation!" I have simply laid another volume on my growing Calvinist stack. They look so good in my bookcase! Kevin DeYoung captures some of these trendier aspects of Calvinism among growing numbers of young people:

Here are the two most important things you need to know about the rise of the New Calvinism: it's not new and it's not about Calvin. Of course, some of the conferences are new. The John Piper-packed iPods are new. The neo-reformed blog blitz is new. The ideas, however, are not. "Please God, don't let the young, restless, and reformed movement be another historically ignorant, self-absorbed, cooler-than-thou fad."⁵

All around the world blogs, study groups, conferences, podcasts, and unusual little publishing houses are churning out material on election, justification, covenantalism, amillennialism, postmillennialism, Christo-centric hermeneutics, Augustine, Calvin, Luther and, yes, even the differences between infra-, supra- and sub-lapsarianism. Frankly, it is indeed cool to be a Calvinist right now, and more resources are available to the "Young, Restless, and Reformed" crowd than ever before. Don't get me wrong: I celebrate this resurgence and hope to see it flourish. Yet we should be careful to make sure

that we are not busy polishing windshields just to mutually admire each other's techniques.

Loving Calvinism for its own sake, even with all of its rich internal language and traditions, is the fast track to killing it. There is a better way.

Through a Windshield, Clearly

Sitting there in our messy family minivan on that summer night, not only relishing what I was seeing in the sky, but also aware that this was a supremely teachable moment for our kids, I did what any loving Christian father would have done. I got our children's attention and instructed them to look closely at the windshield mommy had worked so hard at cleaning, not even leaving any streaks. I showed them the Windex, warning them against cheap substitutes, and passed along some wisdom about selecting from among the many varieties of paper towels. "If you don't understand these things," I admonished, "the sky will be obscured." Right?

No, I didn't really do any of that. I ignored the windshield. In fact, it completely vanished from my awareness. I was taken up entirely with the wonders of God's creation and the privilege of sharing this moment with my family. Emphasizing the windshield under those circumstances might make a good Monty Python skit, but it would have missed the point entirely.

The apostle Paul, often called the proto-Calvinist, taught *about* God in ways that never looked *away from* God. He spared no effort in describing the beauty, complexity, and justice of God's sovereign right to rule over all of history. Because Paul's system of doctrine was

a clear windshield, he could see through it to the soul-stirring depths of God's very character.

“Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” (Romans 11:33). When Paul reflected on the doctrines that make up what we call Calvinism, he was moved to rejoice in God. This is the key to not killing off today's Calvinist upsurge. When we read our books, attend our conferences, and “Piper-up” our iPods, the primary goal must not be to gain a better understanding of 16th- and 17th-century doctrine. It must be to be blown out of the water by the God who has chosen us in infinite mercy and wisdom.

It seems that the Calvinist heroes of church history knew how to do this. They stared *through* Calvinism to get the best view of God's splendor and the gospel's glory. Charles Spurgeon fought both non-Calvinists and hyper-Calvinists in 19th-century England, but not for the sake of Calvinism per se. The former found Calvinism offensive; the latter saw it as a mandate for not preaching the free offer of the gospel to all men. Spurgeon responded to both by claiming that Calvinism is just a convenient nickname for the gospel.

In fact, Spurgeon believed that it is not possible to preach Christ and him crucified unless we preach what is called Calvinism. He meant that we cannot preach the gospel without preaching certain “Calvinistic” doctrines:

I do not believe we can preach the gospel, if we do not preach justification by faith, without works;

nor unless we preach the sovereignty of God in his dispensation of grace; nor unless we exalt the electing, unchangeable, eternal, immutable, conquering love of Jehovah; nor do I think we can preach the gospel, unless we base it upon the special and particular redemption of his elect and chosen people which Christ wrought out upon the cross; nor can I comprehend a gospel which lets saints fall away after they are called, and suffers the children of God to be burned in the fires of damnation after having once believed in Jesus. ⁶

It is interesting that Spurgeon saw the content of his preaching as something called Calvinism. Obviously, Reformed theology was making a resurgence in his day: there was a trend or a movement within 19th-century British Christendom that gladly bore the label that has gained new popularity in our day as well. Spurgeon identified with that movement, but not because he was interested in fashions. It's clear that what supremely interested him was "Christ and him crucified," and he allied himself with Calvinism because it was supremely interested in the same thing. Yet, it appears that Spurgeon never felt he was called to preach Calvinism as an end in itself. His commission was to preach the gospel.

Notice that what consumed the British preacher were the component truths of the gospel. These truths ignited Spurgeon's heart and pushed him back into the pulpit each week to preach to thousands. For Spurgeon, the life-transforming truths of the gospel were rivet-

ing. Was he an unflinching Calvinist? Certainly. But his Calvinism was merely a way to see, appreciate, and present the glorious message of Jesus Christ and him crucified. About a century before Spurgeon, one of his heroes, George Whitefield—an avowed Calvinist—expressed a very similar view: “It is an undoubted truth that every doctrine that comes from God, leads to God; and that which doth not tend to promote holiness is not of God.”⁷ Whitefield saw no benefit to doctrine—even the most robust, Reformed doctrine—unless it “leads to God” and would “promote holiness.”

The non-Calvinist may not discern why anyone would get excited about the Westminster Divines, the Arminian remonstrance, or the history of English Puritanism—but salvation by faith and God’s unchanging, conquering love? “Yeah, I guess I can see why you guys are pumped about all of that,” say the onlookers. The best Calvinists that history has given to us were using Reformed theology to get a clearer hold on the majesty of God, the wonder of the gospel, and the exhilaration of Christian living. By God’s grace—yes, his sovereign grace—may we do the same.

* * *

Lord, help me not to love Calvinism as an end in itself.

Mighty God,

Thank you for giving me eyes, ears, memory, and intellect. You have enabled me to see the wonder of your

sovereign mercy throughout your Word. Had you not chosen me, I would not be your child. Had you not loved me first, never would I have loved you at all.

May I never be more enamored with the theology that helps me see these things clearly than with seeing you. Forgive me for the times when I have made my understanding of you and your saving ways an idol rather than an aid. When others see me, may they see a person completely captivated by your glory and humbled by your mercy.

For Jesus' sake, amen.