

Greg Forster's, "The Joy of Calvinism"

Review of Greg Forster, *The Joy of Calvinism*, Wheaton: Crossway, 2012, pbk, 205 pages

This new book by Greg Forster is written to set the record straight as regards what Calvinism is. The author feels that Calvinism is often misrepresented by non-Calvinists, so he writes to help them understand this theology. Forster's book joins the shelves of books along the same lines that have been written by Calvinists. That said, what he has produced is to be commended for its frankness. Even if, like me, one finds it hard to accept that Calvinism broadly conceived can be easily misunderstood, *The Joy of Calvinism* presents it (again), often in plain terms, for the uninitiated.

One of the things of note is that Forster puts aside the TULIP acronym in favor of a presentation more in keeping with older formulations of Calvinism; although by "Calvinism" he is speaking in particular of soteriology (15). He observes that "many Calvinist writers seem to agree that the five points are a lousy way to describe Calvinism!" (16). So, much of the reason for the misunderstanding comes from the source. As Forster says,

There are a million books out there claiming that "everything you know about" some subject "is wrong." This is another one. But in this case it's really justified. The absence of affirmative and spontaneously devotional expression of Calvinistic theology has left a gaping hole in the public understanding of what Calvinism is. Put simply, the rest of the world has no idea of what it's *like* to be a Calvinist. It's like trying to describe Italian food by making a list of all the things it doesn't taste like. (19).

Towards the close of his introduction the author issues an urgent warning relating to his use of the pronoun "you."

Throughout this book I speak of the promises of salvation with reference to "you" – as in, "when Jesus died and rose again, he saved you" – on the assumption that you, the reader, possess these promises. If you have genuinely repented from sin, trusted Christ alone as your Savior and Lord, and embarked upon a life of active discipleship through obedience and service to others, you do. If not, you don't. (27)

He underlines the discipleship aspect in assurance by declaring that the "biblical basis of assurance is to test the fruits of your faith in your life by God's standards," which he says is taught by 2 Peter 1:1-11 and 1 John.

The next chapter; entitled "Detour," repeats the claim that Calvinism has been "radically misunderstood" and presents the author's own "5 Points" aimed at dispelling some of these major misunderstandings. One such misunderstanding is over the issue of free will. Forster says the Reformers were concerned, not with voluntary choices but in captivity of the will to Satan (31-32). But even with this qualifier, what needs clarifying is how modern Calvinists use the word. Forster reasons that even though the Holy Spirit "does not ask our permission" before regenerating us, this should not be understood as a violation of our freewill because this change "makes us more free, not less." (34).

On the issue of whether or not God loves the non-elect the writer admits that Calvinists have not come to a consensus about it, and admits that the Westminster Confession takes no position on it (39). He stresses the Trinitarian aspect of salvation (43), and declares that the Calvinistic view of predestination “encourages reverence and meekness” (44).

There then follows four chapters on definite atonement, unconditional election, effective calling, and perseverance, and a Conclusion. After that is a long Appendix dealing with questions and answers.

Chapter one proper brings us right up against the doctrine of “limited atonement” or “definite atonement” (also called “particular redemption”). This might seem like a surprising move, especially for any four-point Calvinist readers. To be confronted with what many believe is the most uncomfortable, not to say debatable tenet of Calvinism like this might be thought of as unwise. This reviewer believes it is very commendable. As one who has studied this form of theology for many years I find myself in full agreement with those who locate the very logic of Calvinistic soteriology in this doctrine. A Calvinism which denies limited atonement makes no sense to me, and I was glad that Forster nailed his colors to the mast like he did.

Forster wants to get across that Jesus died for each of us (the elect) personally and specifically (49-50). He believes that “Whatever work God sets his hand to do must be effective” (51), which means all other options end up depersonalizing God’s love by universalizing it. Hence, this is the watershed doctrine for Forster; “the most fundamental dividing line between Calvinism and all other theological traditions.” In fact, he is clear that “everything else in this book hangs on it.” (52). He presses the contrast by saying (throughout the rest of the book) that other views of the atonement ultimately are “salvation systems” which hinge on the “moment of decision” instead of the overriding work of the Holy Spirit to make us willing. He throws in a few verses which he interprets in particularistic terms, because the elect were all “saved at the Cross and the empty Tomb. This has to be the case because Jesus died for “you” (individual elect sinners), “and when he did, he *actually* saved you.” (59 my emphasis). This statement is repeated numerous times.

Knowing that Jesus died for “you” personally is what leads to the joy of Calvinism, so definite atonement is utterly central to the author’s thesis (e.g. 62).

If Jesus makes atonement for your sins, you are in fact saved; therefore if you are not saved, he didn’t make atonement for your sins... What we know about the love of God and the cross of Christ compels us to say that God’s saving love cannot, in fact, be extended to everybody. (66)

There is no beating around the bush with Forster:

In fact, since Jesus knows the lost every bit as completely and as intimately as he knows his own people, the exclusion of the lost from Jesus’s saving work would also have to be a personal exclusion. It would have to be as though Jesus said... ‘I am not doing anything to make him my brother, cleanse him, or bring him into my kingdom. He is lost forever, because I have not chosen him (51).

Following on from definite atonement comes a chapter on unconditional election. This includes a section on our individuality being seen either as a part of inviolable “nature” or as God “smashing through” our sinful natures to save us. Arminian systems and such hold to the former, while only Calvinism advocates the latter (see 79-84). One result of believing the Calvinist position is “the more Calvinist our piety becomes – the more fully and deeply we will love him back and have joy in resting in God’s personal love” (85). Forster continues by surmising that the reason God does not save everyone is that “He values his justice too much to permit that.” (86).

I’m going to return to the author’s bold statements soon. This will mean I shall have to cut short my interaction with the other chapters. Let me just include here then that Forster asserts, “Rather than working against our will, God simply replaces it.” (107-108), which about sums up irresistible grace (Cf. 115). His chapter on perseverance speaks of the importance of “joy through suffering” (133). The conclusion stresses the superiority of Calvinism over “compromising” positions. Then the Q & A section explores some of the issues raised in a bit more detail.

For this reader the impression is that Forster is playing to the galleries. That’s okay, because while doing that he speaks quite bluntly about what he believes. At several points he admits that the force of Calvinist logic leads to difficult implications (50-51, 53, 85, 90, 186). Thus:

The search for a universal saving love that doesn’t save universally is a theological snipe hunt...None of this makes the idea of God passing over the lost and allowing them to remain in their sins any less horrible to us. Calvinistic theology shows us that this horrible truth must be accepted. It does not make it any less horrible. (66-67).

True, there are places, such as in the quotation above, where the logic ought to be more consistent: if God is in “total control” (171), so that “everything that happens is ordered and directed by God’s activity” (173), including “all human actions rather than just some of them” (175), and the very “essence of Calvinism to rejoice that God is in control of all phenomena” (180), then God doesn’t simply “allow” sinners to remain in their sins, He controls the whole process from birth to damnation.

Non-Calvinists hoping to see their theology correctly represented via quotes from the sources will be disappointed. Forster deals a lot in wide-ranging characterizations of opposing views. Nevertheless, the book is recommended to non-Calvinists because it purports to set the record straight about what Calvinism is, and it does so frankly. It is also recommended to four-pointers because it serves up a challenge to that outlook by placing definite atonement front and center.

On the downside, I would have to say that the organization of the book seems a bit awkward to me. Much of the Appendix could have been included in the main body of the book, especially if Forster had not rambled so much in places. But that’s not a big issue. Of more moment is the poor use of Scripture to elucidate the teaching. With few exceptions the Bible is used to support general evangelical sub-points rather than the affirmations of Calvinistic soteriology in particular. The author’s hope for the possible regeneration of a miscarried child (117) is a carry-over from covenant theology and will not be accepted by all Calvinists. And certainly non-

Calvinists will hardly acquiesce to Forster's opinion that Calvinism leads to more joy and a greater appreciation of God's love!

Does the book communicate "the joy of Calvinism"? Only if "you" know "you" are one for whom Christ died. But how can one infallibly know this? Even self-examination is fraught with uncertainty. Finally, Forster's admittance that the justice of God requires the damnation of some (most?) has serious ramifications for God's aseity. If God's attribute of justice, or any other attribute for that matter, necessitates the damnation of something He created, it makes that attribute contingent and destroys God's Self-sufficiency. This is a problem which Calvinist theodicies often fail to deal with.

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