

What Theology is This?
Dave Hunt's Misrepresentation of God and Calvinism
By Pastor Steven J. Cole

As I read Dave Hunt's latest book, *What Love is This?* subtitled, "Calvinism's Misrepresentation of God," I felt both profound sadness and righteous anger. I was sad because many unsuspecting and uneducated Christians will believe that Hunt is accurate and thereby miss out on one of the richest spiritual gold mines available, namely, the life and writings of John Calvin and his heirs in the faith. I was angry because Hunt deliberately misrepresents and slanders both Calvin and Calvinism, and in the process grossly misrepresents God Himself. I know that his misrepresentation is deliberate because many Calvinists, including myself, wrote repeatedly to Hunt as the book was being written, pointing out his errors and asking him to stop misrepresenting what we believe. But sadly, he stubbornly ignored our corrections and went full steam ahead.

The resulting book is a first magnitude theological and spiritual disaster. If you rely on the supermarket tabloids as your reliable source of news, you'll probably find Hunt satisfying for your theology. It will give you the same sort of sensational slander as the tabloids, only it is presented as if it were biblically and historically based. But if you want to grow in your knowledge of the living God, I advise you to leave this tabloid theology on the shelf.

I have had to deal with the book because a former elder is giving it to some of my elders and others, telling them that it is a balanced critique of Reformed theology. On the back cover of the book are glowing endorsements from Chuck Smith, Elmer Towns, Tim LaHaye, and others. LaHaye even states, "Calvinism ... comes perilously close to blasphemy" (ellipsis in the quote). Several families have left my church over this issue, because I teach what Scripture plainly affirms, that God sovereignly chooses to save some, but not all. Our salvation rests on the foundation of God's sovereign choice of us. His choice of us is the causative reason that we choose to believe. Thus no one can boast in his salvation, but only in the Lord (1 Cor. 1:26-31; Gal. 1:15; Eph. 1:3-12).

Hunt's main gripe with Calvinism is its view that God is not totally loving toward every person. He argues that if God *could* save everyone, but chose only to save some, He is immoral and unjust, just as someone who could save a drowning man, but chose not to, would be immoral (pp. 111-112, 114-115). Hunt's view is that God wishes for everyone to be saved and He has made salvation available to all. Now it's up to the individual to respond and every person is capable, in and of himself, to respond. If people are not able to respond to the gospel by their own free will, then God's offer of salvation would not be genuine, but a mockery. It would be as if God were dangling a rope above the grasp of a man trapped in a deep well, saying, "Grab the rope." These are Hunt's arguments.

These arguments are quite in line with human logic, but the crucial question is, are they in line with biblical revelation? Hunt wrongly assumes that the free offer of the gospel to all requires that those to whom it is offered are able to respond. But there are many Scriptures that directly state the inability of the sinner to respond to spiritual truth (John 6:44, 65; 8:43; Rom. 3:10-18; 8:6-8; 1 Cor. 2:14; 2 Cor. 4:4; Eph. 2:1-3; etc.). Hunt dismisses or waters down all of these texts, saying that they could not mean what Calvinists say they mean, because if they did mean that, sinners could not respond to the gospel and thus the offer of the gospel would not be valid. In other words, he reasons in a circle, assuming what he later "proves." But he does not accept the plain teaching of God's Word on the human inability to seek after God due to the fall. In so doing, Hunt pulls God in His absolute holiness down, making Him accessible to fallen man. And he lifts up sinful, proud man by telling him that he is able to choose God at any time he pleases.

Rejecting depravity (inability), he proceeds to reject all five so-called points of Calvinism. Hunt asserts that God could not possibly have sovereignly elected some to salvation, because then He would be unloving and unjust. Never mind that in one of God's earliest revelations of Himself, He plainly states, "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion" (Exod. 33:19). That statement loses all meaning if God is gracious and compassionate to every single person equally. From the outset, God establishes His right as the holy God to choose some and reject others, not based on human merit (there is none), but based on His sovereign will. But Hunt denies God this prerogative, in spite of abundant scriptural revelation.

In the process of setting forth and defending his humanistic (and unbiblical) view of God, Hunt rips Calvin and Calvinism, or at least he thinks that's what he's doing. Actually, Hunt does not understand even some of the basic teachings of Calvinism, although he thinks he does. Thus from the very start, and on virtually every page, Hunt misrepresents what Calvinists believe. Even though he does not agree with what they truly believe, for the most part he is setting up and attacking a caricature that at times has some resemblance to the real thing, but more often is so far removed that biblically informed Calvinists would attack it too. They just would not label it as Calvinism, as Hunt erroneously does. Here are a few (of many) examples:

*Hunt says that Calvinism limits God's saving grace to a select few, leaving the majority of mankind without hope or possibility of salvation (p. 78). The offer of salvation is extended only to the elect (p. 103). The truth is, Calvinists believe that God's saving grace is freely offered to the whole world, and that there will be an innumerable company in heaven from every tribe on earth, purchased by Jesus' blood (Rev. 5:9-12).

*Hunt says that Calvinism puts the blame for sin and the damnation of sinners totally upon God who predestined everything to turn out that way (p. 84). God causes all men to sin (p. 42). The truth is, Calvinists believe that while all things are under God's sovereign decree (Eph. 1:11), He is not the author of sin. Sinners are responsible for their own damnation, and none can blame God for being in hell. I personally referred Hunt to the Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 3, paragraph 1, for the Reformed statement of how God is sovereign over all and yet not responsible for sin. But Hunt chose to ignore this and persist in his slanderous charge.

*Hunt says that Calvinism denies any genuine choice for mankind (p. 89). Coupled with this, Calvinists deny that men have a will (p. 94). "According to Calvin, salvation had nothing to do with whether or not a person believed the gospel" (p. 42). The truth is, Calvin and Calvinists believe in human choice and will. They assert, however, that fallen men are, as the Arminian Wesley even put it, "fast bound in sin and nature's night," unable to choose salvation apart from God's sovereign working in their hearts. I'm not sure where Hunt dug up the ludicrous charge that Calvin separated salvation from faith. A simple reading of his chapters on faith and repentance in *The Institutes* (Book 3, chapters 2 & 3) will show that Hunt either has not read Calvin or he is deliberately misrepresenting him.

*Hunt says, "Calvinism presents a God who fills hell with those whom He could save but instead damns because He doesn't love them" (p. 116). Hunt brazenly states that if God did not show mercy to all when all were equally guilty, then He perverts justice (p. 115)! The truth is, Calvinists affirm that God is mighty to save all whom He chooses to save (*e.g.*, the apostle Paul). But He owes salvation to none. For reasons known only in the secret counsel of His will, God chose to be glorified both in the salvation of His elect, and in the just damnation of those who have rebelled against Him. Paul's entire argument in Romans 9 is that as the divine potter, God has the prerogative to make some vessels for mercy and some for wrath, and that we have no basis to question what He does. The Bible is also clear that God's love is not uniformly revealed to all. He loved Israel, but He did not choose to love the surrounding nations to the same degree (Deut. 7:6-8). In His inscrutable will, He permitted the nations for many centuries to go their own way in spiritual darkness. He gave them the witness of His goodness through creation and common grace, which is enough to condemn them, but not sufficient to save them (Acts 14:16-17; Rom. 1:18-32). Oddly, though, against both Scripture and history, Hunt argues that God loves all the heathen exactly the same as He loves His elect bride, the church. I would like him to answer how God loved the American Indians who lived here 3,000 years ago to the same degree that He loved King David and revealed Himself to him? A quick glance at the world today shows that not all have an equal chance of hearing and responding to the gospel.

In order to discredit Calvinism, Hunt has to discredit Calvin and his famous *Institutes*. Incredibly, Hunt dismisses the *Institutes* in one sweeping judgment by pronouncing that they came from the two primary sources of Augustine and the Latin Vulgate Bible (p. 38)! Since Calvin was a new convert when he wrote the first edition of the *Institutes*, they "could not possibly have come from a deep and fully developed evangelical understanding of Scripture." But Hunt does not mention whether or not they actually do reflect such an understanding! If they were as shallow as Hunt alleges, why did they have such profound impact, not only on his generation, but also on godly Christian scholars through the centuries, up to the present day? I can testify personally, that of the hundreds of human books I have ever read, none rival *The Institutes* for their profound spiritual insight. Calvin uses Scripture to exalt God and humble me as a sinner as few writers can do.

As for the man Calvin, Hunt asserts that he was so heavily influenced by Augustine that he never really broke free from his Roman Catholic roots. He totally rejects Augustine's writings by asserting, "Calvin drew from a badly polluted stream when he embraced the teachings of Augustine! How could one dip into such contaminating heresy without becoming confused and infected?" (p. 51). I must wonder, has Hunt even read Augustine? I have read substantial portions of Augustine's works, and while he obviously was tainted in a bad way at points by the Catholic Church, he also had a solidly biblical grasp of much essential Christian doctrine. To dismiss the man as "a badly polluted stream" and as promoting "contaminating heresy" shows Hunt's, not Augustine's, ignorance and error.

Also, while Calvin often quotes Augustine favorably (because there is much favorable to quote, and because Calvin did not have nearly the theological resources to draw on that we possess), he often disputes with Augustine when he thinks that he failed to interpret Scripture rightly. Calvin's sole source of truth was the Bible, as T. H. L. Parker's excellent book, *Calvin's Preaching* [Westminster/John Know Press] so capably demonstrates. Again, if Hunt had carefully read either Augustine or Calvin, he would have seen that these men sought to base their teachings on

the Bible alone. Of course both men made errors. Who doesn't? But read these men and you will sense, "They knew God in a way that I do not know God!"

Hunt portrays Calvin as the evil tyrant of Geneva who sought to force Irresistible Grace on the people, in line with his view of denying all power of choice to man (pp. 62-63). "Calvin exerted authority much like the papacy which he now despised" (p. 63) Hunt accuses Calvin of exercising "dictatorial control over the populace" (p. 64). He approved the use of torture for extracting confessions, including the cruel 30-day torture of a victim who was then tied to a stake, his feet nailed to it, and his head was cut off (p. 65). And, of course, Hunt blames Calvin for the burning of Servetus without giving any of the historical context for his readers (pp. 68-70). Hunt concludes, "Calvin's conduct day after day and year after year was the very antithesis of what it would have been had he truly been led of the Spirit of God" (p. 72). In all of these accusations, Hunt is echoing militantly anti-Christian critics, such as Voltaire, Will Durant, Erich Fromm, and others (see *Christian History* [Vol. V, No. 4], p. 3).

Of course, Calvin had enemies, even in his own day, who picked up on his weaknesses and exaggerated them in an attempt to smear him, because they did not like his teaching. Every godly man can expect such treatment, to one degree or another (Matt. 5:11-12; Luke 6:26; 2 Tim. 3:12). But anyone who has read T. H. L. Parker's life of Calvin, his *Calvin's Preaching*, or Beza's life of Calvin (Beza was Calvin's understudy and successor in Geneva), will be horrified at how a professing Christian can attack a great man of God like Calvin as ruthlessly as Hunt does. Of Calvin, Beza said, "I have been a witness of him for sixteen years and I think that I am fully entitled to say that in this man there was exhibited to all an example of the life and death of the Christian, such as it will not be easy to depreciate, and it will be difficult to imitate" (*Christian History, ibid.*, p. 2).

The plain fact of history is that the godly Puritans, including John Bunyan and John Owen, plus the spiritual giants Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, Charles Simeon, Charles Spurgeon, the Princeton theologians, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Francis Schaeffer, and a host of others have all looked to Calvin not only as an astute theologian, but also as a great model of godliness. I have read the *Institutes*, about a half dozen biographies of Calvin, thousands of pages of his commentaries, numerous books about Calvin and his theology, and several books of his sermons. I have never picked up anything even close to resembling Hunt's caricature of the man. I agree with the learned Scottish theologian, William Cunningham, who said, "Calvin is the man who, next to St. Paul, has done most good to mankind" (*Christian History, ibid.*). Hunt's attack is simply impossible. An evil, cruel tyrant could not have written such exalted views of God and such deep insights into God's Word as you find in Calvin's writings. When so many great men of God pay tribute to Calvin, shouldn't Hunt at least have stopped to consider that he might be missing something?

Another major problem with Hunt's work is his unscholarly manipulation of source material to suit his purposes. For his attacks on Calvin, he often quotes the militant anti-Christian, Will Durant, without ever acknowledging that he is quoting an enemy of the faith. He often quotes the liberal, Frederic Farrar without acknowledging his theological bias. Even though Hunt in his other writings is militantly anti-Catholic, he uses the pro-Catholic leader of the Oxford Movement, Pusey, when he sides with Hunt against Calvinism. But there is no mention from Hunt, even in a footnote, of the theological bias of his sources. Ignorant readers would think that he is quoting great men of the faith.

But far worse is the way that he uses sources to "prove" blatant historical errors! He cites a source (p. 19) that claims that, among others, Richard Baxter, John Newton, and John Bunyan opposed Calvinism! Anyone who has read those men knows that they all were strong proponents of God's sovereign election. (Baxter held to a universal atonement, but he also strongly held to human depravity and God's sovereign election.) On the same page, he pulls a quote from Spurgeon's *Autobiography* to prove that Spurgeon was against limited atonement. But in the original context, Spurgeon was arguing *in favor of* limited atonement (*Autobiography of C. H. Spurgeon* [Banner of Truth], 1:171-172)! In fact, Spurgeon states (1:172) that the teaching that Christ died for everyone is "a thousand times more repulsive than any of those consequences which are said to be associated with the Calvinistic and Christian doctrine of special and particular redemption." Later (p. 122), Hunt cites "a British scholar who thoroughly knew Spurgeon's writings and sermons" again to the effect that Spurgeon definitely rejected limited atonement and that he ascribed freedom of will to men. Yet in his bibliography (p. 428), Hunt lists Spurgeon's sermon, "Free Will a Slave," where Spurgeon refutes free will. Iain Murray (*The Forgotten Spurgeon* [Banner of Truth], pp. 81 ff.) cites numerous references to show that Spurgeon not only affirmed "limited atonement"; he also argued that those who deny it weaken and undermine the entire doctrine of the substitutionary atonement. In his autobiography (1:168), Spurgeon called Arminianism (which *is* Dave Hunt's view, even though Hunt denies it, since he holds to eternal security) heresy and states plainly, "Calvinism is the gospel, and nothing else." Either Hunt is a very sloppy scholar, or he is deliberately trying to deceive his readers into thinking that Spurgeon is on his side when he very well knows that he is not.

On page 102, Hunt quotes Spurgeon again and claims that he “could not accept the teaching that regeneration came before faith in Christ through the gospel.” Obviously, he is quoting Spurgeon out of context for his own ends (as he frequently does), without any understanding of Spurgeon’s theology. Murray (*ibid.*, pp. 90 ff.), thoroughly documents how Spurgeon believed that faith and repentance are impossible before God regenerates the sinner. For example, Murray (p. 94) cites Spurgeon as saying that repentance and faith are “the first apparent result of regeneration.” And, “Evangelical repentance never can exist in an unrenewed soul.” Murray cites many more examples. Spurgeon believed “that the work of regeneration, conversion, sanctification and faith, is not an act of man’s free will and power, but of the mighty, efficacious and irresistible grace of God” (p. 104).

On page 100 is another example of how Hunt uses quotations out of context to make his opponent look bad and himself look good. He quotes R. C. Sproul to sound as if Sproul is fully endorsing the view “that God is not all that loving toward” sinners. But in the preceding and following context of Sproul’s book, Sproul is raising an objection that a critic might ask, conceding the critic’s objection as true for the sake of argument, and then raising a further question to show that the critic’s question is misguided. Hunt omits the context and thus makes Sproul appear to be saying something he isn’t stating at all! This is incredibly bad scholarship and argumentation on Hunt’s part.

On page 99, Hunt reveals his ignorance of theology when he says that J. I. Packer contradicts his fellow Calvinists and even himself in declaring that regeneration follows faith and justification. Hunt then quotes a sentence from Packer that speaks of justification by faith, not regeneration! Those are distinct theological terms with distinct meanings, as anyone with even a rudimentary understanding of theology would know! But never mind, Hunt discredits Packer to the unsuspecting reader, which is all that matters to Hunt.

It would be easy to expand this review to book length, since the errors, faulty logic, and gross misrepresentation of Calvinism and the God of the Bible just keep on coming. My quandary both in personal correspondence with Hunt prior to the publication of the book and in reading the book itself has to do with Hunt’s personal integrity. If he is honestly ignorant about what Calvinists believe, he should not have written the book until he gained a fair understanding of their views. It’s not that Hunt was not confronted with this beforehand. A number of Reformed men besides me warned him that he was misrepresenting the Reformed faith. But he ignored these warnings and persisted in blasting away. He acknowledges as much in chapter 2, claiming that Calvinists are elitists and that if Calvinism is so difficult to understand that Hunt can’t understand it, it must not be biblical. However, I know many who are young in their faith who understand these doctrines quite well. Hunt should have stopped long enough to understand the opposing view so as not to misrepresent it. His attacks on his straw man simply discredit him as a reputable critic.

Although Hunt would vigorously disagree, I believe that at the root of his slanderous attack on Calvin and Calvinists, and his blasphemous charges against the God of the Bible, is his refusal to submit to clear biblical revelation that does not fit human logic. After stating that God has mercy on whom He desires and He hardens whom He desires, Paul raises the objection, “You will say to me then, ‘Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?’” (Rom. 9:19). Dave Hunt’s logical answer is, “The reason that God rightly can find fault is that He has given free will and the opportunity for salvation to every man.” It makes perfect logical sense. But the problem is, that is *not* the biblical answer! The biblical answer is, “On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, ‘Why did you make me like this,’ will it?” In other words, God’s answer is, “You don’t have a right to ask the question!”

I admit, that answer is not *logically* satisfying! Years ago, as a college student, I used to fight with Paul over it, accusing him of copping out right where I needed my question answered. Then one day as I was contending with Paul, the Lord opened my eyes to see. He was saying, “I *did* answer the question, you know! You just happen not to like the answer!” I realized then that I had to *submit* to what God had written through Paul. On that day, I became a “Calvinist,” although I had not yet read a single page of Calvin. If Dave Hunt would submit his logic to God’s revelation in Scripture, he would also become what he now hates and so grossly misrepresents—a Calvinist! Don’t waste your time reading Dave Hunt. Pick up a copy of Calvin’s *Institutes* and begin to feast on the majesty of God!