

## **REVIEW: DAVE HUNT'S *WHAT LOVE IS THIS?* *CALVINISM'S MISREPRESENTATION OF GOD***

**by John Barber**

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**D**ave Hunt's new book, *What Love is This? Calvinism's Misrepresentation of God*, turns this prolific author's attention to Lutherans, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Reformed Baptists — all those who embrace the biblical "doctrines of grace," revived during the period of the Reformation and the birth of the Protestant church.

Discerning Hunt's thesis is made somewhat difficult by the fact that the author does not state it in so many words. Thankfully, I had insight into Hunt's thesis because Dr. Tim LaHaye (who penned the book's foreword) wrote to me and described Hunt's underlying theory about Calvinism, the doctrine of election in particular. LaHaye concisely wrote, "Dave Hunt...proves Calvinism is not a Protestant doctrine, but is based in Greek fatalism brought into the Church in the fifth century by Augustine, paving the way for the Catholic doctrine of predestination that all but destroyed Christianity and then was picked up by Calvin and presented as Reformed theology."

The closest Hunt comes to expressing LaHaye's summation is in the beginning of Chapter 3, titled "John Calvin and His Institutes." He says:

In 386, after studies in philosophy, law and the classics (he was greatly inspired by Plato), a year of teaching grammar and a career as a rhetorician, Augustine embraced Christianity, entered the Roman Catholic Church, and established a monastery which he moved to Hippo, Africa upon being appointed its bishop. Often called the father of Roman Catholicism's major doctrines, as we shall see, Augustine heavily influenced later philosophers and even exerts a strong influence among evangelicals today through Calvinism (p. 23).

Hunt echoes his view in Chapter 4, where he observes, "Augustine was one of the first to place the authority of tradition on a level with the Bible and to introduce much philosophy, especially Platonism, into his theology" (p. 48).

Hunt's assumption is that the heart of Calvinism, more generally known as Reformed Theology, is really modified Greek fatalism. This is immediately challenged by the fact that the only fatalists among ancient Greek philosophers were the Stoics, a group with no influence upon the Reformers because, among many differences, they

were pantheists<sup>1</sup>. Their god was *not* a personal being, nor did he express the compassion that Calvin believed God embodied.

On the contrary, the predominant thought among the Greeks, Plato in particular, was that of libertarian-indeterminate *free will* (e.g. Plato's Receptacle, Anaximander's *Apeiron*, and Aristotle's Prime Matter). Ironically, the leading view of Greek thought is far closer to Hunt's theology! Thus, this first critique of Calvinism, while well targeted, is ineffectual.

The author seeks to further discredit Calvinism by pointing out that because John Calvin was only twenty-four when He penned *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, the Holy Spirit could not have played a major role in his writings. Why? Because at such a tender age young John was too "spiritually immature" to follow the Spirit's leading. Thus, Hunt reasons, Calvin must have taken his classical education in philosophy and law, mixed it with the religious tenets of Roman Catholicism, and created his Reformed theology. "Unquestionably, his Institutes could not possibly have come from a deep and fully developed evangelical understanding of Scripture. Instead, they came from the energetic enthusiasm of a recent law graduate and fervent student of philosophy and religion, a young genius devoted to Augustine and a newly adopted cause" (p. 31). And elsewhere he writes, "Much of his [Calvin's] teaching is warmed over Roman Catholicism" (p. 27).

As for the specific claim that much of Calvinism is "warmed over Roman Catholicism" this would represent a powerful blow to Reformed theology if true, but the author provides no credible support for his claim. Instead, the reader is presented with a long string of ad hominem, question-begging, and guilt by association arguments. Hunt apparently hopes that these logical fallacies will, if repeated enough, discredit Calvinism. For example, Hunt offers a quote from Calvin referring to the Church as "Mother," and then points out that "The only church called 'mother' is the MOTHER OF HARLOTS (Revelation 17:5), the false church headquartered at the Vatican" (p. 27). Hunt also wants to be sure that Calvin's upbringing within a "devoutly religious Roman Catholic family" is not lost on the reader, the inference being that a swatch cut from the cloth never loses its pattern.

Hunt continues to stretch for more proof that much of Calvinism is "warmed over Roman Catholicism" when he asserts that Calvin borrowed from Rome a form of church government that included "a clergy with special powers." Of course, the "clergy" Hunt

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<sup>1</sup> Editor's Note: Calvin's thoughts on the Stoics are not hidden. See Institutes III.8.9-10 for three highly negative assessments of Stoicism, as well as the following answer (from 8) seemingly written for Hunt: "Those who would cast obloquy [shame] on this doctrine [predestination], calumniate [charge falsely] it as the dogma of the Stoics concerning fate. The same charge was formerly brought against Augustine, (lib. ad Bonifac. II, c. 6 et alibi.) We are unwilling to dispute about words; but we do not admit the term Fate, both because it is of the class which Paul teaches us to shun, as profane novelties, (1 Tim. 6:20,) and also because it is attempted, by means of an odious term, to fix a stigma on the truth of God. But the dogma itself is falsely and maliciously imputed to us. For we do not with the Stoics imagine a necessity consisting of a perpetual chain of causes, and a kind of involved series contained in nature, but we hold that God is the disposer and ruler of all things, — that from the remotest eternity, according to his own wisdom, he decreed what he was to do, and now by his power executes what he decreed. Hence we maintain, that by his providence, not heaven and earth and inanimate creatures only, but also the counsels and wills of men are so governed as to move exactly in the course which he has destined."

refers to, and which Calvin supported, is nothing more than the presence of ordained pastors in the church. Non-Calvinist clergy might wonder if, by this standard, they too are not somehow guilty of harboring hidden affections for Rome.

Critical to Hunt's effort to brand Calvinism as an extension of Roman Catholicism<sup>2</sup> is the documentation he provides in Chapter 3 of Augustine's influence over Calvin's writings in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Hunt's theory is that Calvin agreed with Augustine at certain points; Augustine was a Roman Catholic; therefore, this is proof that much of Calvinism is "warmed over Roman Catholicism." But this logical fallacy of association neither proves nor disproves Hunt's thesis. It's just another example of his disassociation with logic.

Chapter 4, slyly titled, "Calvinism's Surprising Catholic Connection," continues this guilty-by-association line of thinking. It is at this point I wanted to ask Dr. Hunt a few questions. For instance, I wonder if Dr. Hunt is unaware that *everyone* who lived in Western Europe during the early sixteenth century was somehow connected to the Roman Catholic Church? That it is virtually impossible to trace the religious affiliation of any reputable European family living during this time without somehow encountering a link to Rome? Whatever his answer might be, the distinction between a good argument and the logical fallacy of ad hominem (circumstantial) seems to be completely lost on Dr. Hunt.

A further use of ad hominem (this time, the abusive form) to build his case is seen in Hunt's questioning of Calvin's salvation. "We have no clear testimony in Calvin's own words concerning his salvation" (p. 30). The author seeks to lend further support to this notion by pointing out that as late as June of 1533, Calvin helped a young woman enter a nunnery (p. 30). Hunt's apparent hope is that the reader will join him in viewing such an act as pure sacrilege, one that a true Christian could not possibly commit.

One of more stunning, a-historical areas of this book is Hunt's description of Calvin in his role as reformer of Geneva, Switzerland. Hunt imputes to the reformer's tenure there as a time of outright tyranny. "With dictatorial control over the populace ('he ruled as few sovereigns have done'), he imposed his brand of Christianity upon the citizenry with floggings, imprisonments, banishments, and burnings at the stake" (p. 68). By the time Hunt is through, the reader is left with the impression that the reformer was a mix of Genghis Kahn, Hitler, and Mao — a despot so ruthless that his campaign of terror left him waist-deep in the blood of the martyrs. Even a brief reading the available writings and histories of that time contradict such a harsh view.<sup>3</sup>

It is true that Calvin and Farel's first effort to reconstruct Geneva using scriptural dictums failed to gain popular support and resulted in their expulsion from the city. It is

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<sup>2</sup> Editor's Note: For those of you unfamiliar with Dr. Hunt, he believes Catholicism is very, very bad.

<sup>3</sup> Editor's Note: An excellent source contra Hunt is [The Registers of the Consistory of Geneva at the Time of Calvin: Volume 1: 1542-1544](#) by [Robert M. Kingdon](#) (Editor), [Thomas A. Lambert](#) (Editor), [Isabella M. Watt](#) (Editor), [M. Wallace McDonald](#) (Translator), published by Eerdmans (2000). This series presents the minutes of the ecclesiastical meetings of the church in Geneva.

also true that by 1540 a new crop of city officials in Geneva invited Calvin *back* to the city. But what Hunt fails to mention is that as soon as he arrived, Calvin set about revolutionizing Genevan society, with the result that the city soon became the most prominent Protestant center of Europe during the sixteenth century. If Calvin were a feared autocrat, why did Geneva's leaders ask him back? And why did the people of Geneva not riot in an effort to keep him out?

Hunt's critique takes an odd direction when he attacks Christian social activists today, claiming that they "Take Calvin's Geneva as their model and thus hope to Christianize the United States and then the world." And that "Many Christian activists of looser attachment to Calvin hope in their own way, through protest marches and the organizing of large enough voting blocks, to force an ungodly American citizenry into godly living. No one ever worked so hard at attempting to do this and for so long a time as Calvin" (p. 66). I would hope that the socially active Arminians who support such groups as *Focus on the Family* and *Concerned Women of America* take appropriate offense at this statement.

But no area of Hunt's blistering rebuff of Calvinism hurts his case more than the misleading statements regarding Calvin's personal beliefs. Here is one example that contains three misleading statements. "Certainly Calvin's retention of sacramentalism, baptismal regeneration for infants, and honoring the Roman Catholic priesthood as valid, is a more serious embrace of Catholicism's false gospel than is a rejection of Calvinism" (p. 51). Suffice it to say that neither did John Calvin retain the Roman position on these doctrines, nor have any in the Reformed camp accepted the Roman position on these points. Looking at these errors as generously as possible, perhaps this is simply a slanderous oversimplification: Hunt believes you are either an Anabaptist or a Romanist. But regardless of the root of his error, it is entirely false.

A major focus of the book is Hunt's examination of the Five Points of Calvinism (T.U.L.I.P). Using the doctrine of Total Depravity as an example, the author states in no uncertain terms that sinners are *not* completely dead in their sins (pgs.144-145). His proof is to insist that it is folly to analogize the spiritually dead with the physically dead as many do (such as the Apostle Paul), because just as physically dead people cannot choose God, neither can they choose sin. First, it is not folly because the Apostle Paul said it rather clearly (Ephesians 2:1). Second, Dr. Hunt presses the analogy out of shape so that spiritual deadness is redefined as moral inactivity. This is not the meaning of the term in Paul's writings or in Reformed theology. Finally, the spiritual blindness (Luke 23:34; John 9) that accompanies our lost condition is also curiously different from physical blindness, but that does not mean the analogy is false.

Despite the book's many negative traits, a benefit of this particular section of the volume is its orderly and detailed handling of biblical texts, which, either explicitly or implicitly, speak to the relationship of God's sovereignty with human free will in salvation. Hunt seeks to lay waste to the notion that the Bible contains a single verse in support of even one of the Five Points of Calvinism. Consequently, the reader is exposed to an extraordinarily complete, modern treatment of the classic Arminian view

of Christianity. Because the author has had many years to savor and defend the issue, the reader is introduced to one of the more comprehensive responses to the Calvinistic view of salvation this reviewer has seen.

On the other hand, Hunt's penchant for offering simple explanations of texts that appear to favor the Arminian position, while offering far too "ingenious" interpretations of texts that are partial to the Calvinist position, makes more than a little obvious that the author had determined early what the research needed to prove. In an effort to support his view of a universal atonement, Hunt inconsistently insists on wooden reading of Peter's sermon. "How could Peter say to thousands of Jews gathered on Pentecost, 'Repent, and be baptized *every one of you*...' (Acts 2:28), if Christ had not died for each one of them?" (p. 325). On the other hand, when faced with John 6:44, where Jesus declares, "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him," Hunt, is apparently unable to follow his own hermeneutic. "He [Jesus] could not have taught it [irresistible drawing] because it would not have been in harmony with the rest of His Word." And "Nor is it [irresistible drawing] obvious from the text. Of course, it is the only one which fits Calvinism..." (p. 444-445).

The constant theme that runs throughout the book is that, from the outset, Calvinism's view of election, and attending doctrines, is wrong because a loving and gracious God would not affect salvation for a select few without affecting it for everyone. But it is evident that what Hunt really means is that such an act is unfair and unthinkable from a purely *human*, emotional perspective. In fact, throughout the work, the author consistently appeals to a purely anthropomorphic framework in his interpretation of key passages of Scripture regarding what he thinks God would, or would not do, for the lost. While Hunt assails Calvinism for introducing pagan ideas into Christianity, Hunt's man-centered, emotionally driven hermeneutic, represents the very heart of pagan thought. It is these presuppositions that make his critique of Calvinism fall far short of God's glory.

In conclusion, permit me to say that there is one way in which this book can be helpful to Calvinists. Going back to Dr. LaHaye's clarifying letter, he mentioned that his willingness to write the book's foreword was largely motivated by the fact that he considers the doctrine of predestination to be the "death knell for evangelism." While I am the first to admit that Reformed churches have not always been the strongest in evangelism, it is only the twisting of Scriptures known as Hyper-Calvinism that says, "Mr. Carey, if God wants to convert the heathen, he can do it without your help." This is the *true* death knell to evangelism, and Calvinists have sometimes had a hard time understanding the fact that God does not predestine ends without also predetermining the means (evangelism).

Thus, Calvinists would do well to ask themselves if there is not at least a grain of truth in this particular observation. But at the same time, we must be careful to add that this deficiency, where it is found in our churches, cannot be blamed on the doctrine of election, as such. Typically, a lack of evangelistic fervor among Reformed Christians stems from; (1) a *misunderstanding* of election; (2) intellectualism coupled with a traditionalist system of priorities; (3) a kind of elitism that refuses to express the gospel

on the level of ordinary people; (4) apathy, the same problem many Baptist, Methodist, Assembly of God, and other churches face.

Conversely, LaHaye and Hunt and all those that criticize Calvinism as being at conflict with evangelism would do well to observe the powerful, evangelistic ministries of notable Calvinistic preachers who have managed to avoid the above obstacles. C. H. Spurgeon, George Whitefield, and the notable Jonathan Edwards, the great intellectual light of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, considered by many to be the most influential figure of the First Great Awakening in America. Edwards was a thoroughgoing Calvinist who supplied the major apologetic, and indeed some of the more memorable sermons, for this revival of religion.

Theologically, Edwards was highly indebted to both Augustine and Calvin for his description of Divine election, total depravity, and man's need for the all-sufficiency of Christ's atonement. Edwards' acceptance of these doctrines did not cause him to entrust the salvation of the lost to God without regard for evangelism. Quite the opposite, these truths only served to heighten his appreciation of the fact that the root of human sinfulness is a deep-seated antagonism toward God so great and firmly imbedded in the heart of man, that only the power of God can change it. And if only God can change it, then only the preached Word, in conjunction with the Holy Spirit, can serve as the catalyst. This is the heart and soul of evangelism. Edward's example helps us see that the doctrines of grace, rather than being the death knell to evangelism, serve as the soil from which grows a unique biblical passion for revival and reformation.