

QUESTION 4

How Should We Respond to God's Revelation?

Before we get into discussions of complicated doctrines such as predestination, evil, and definite atonement, we need to pause and check our hearts because Calvinism deals with significant and awe-inspiring truths. Are we willing to let God direct our thinking about him, us, and how we are brought into a relationship with him? Five statements encapsulate how we should respond to God.

1. Let God Be God

We must allow God to decide who he is and how he will interact with us. Because of our on-going struggle with sin, we all struggle to do this in different ways. There are aspects of God's revelation of himself in the Bible that we especially like, and there are characteristics we think he should, or should not, possess. And in our minds we start to make these things *the* central defining point of who we think God is. Any time someone says (or thinks), "I like to think of God as . . ." that individual is on dangerous ground. John Calvin was correct when he charged that each of us is a "perpetual factory of idols."¹ When we substitute an idea of who God should be for who he really is, we're idolaters. At the end of the day, putting it as kindly as I can, it is irrelevant whether or not you or I "like to think of God" in particular ways.

God—the one who created all that exists and reigns over it, the one who providentially guides every facet of his creation, including us, the one "in [whom] we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28)—has the right to

1. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Library of Christian Classics, 2 volumes, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1.11.8. See Question 13.

be God. He tells us who he is, what he is like, who we are, and how he will be in relationship with us. It's not up to us to conjure up what we think he should be like. We, like Isaiah, are "people of unclean lips." Our attitude towards the Lord must be one of awe and reverence, for "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts" (Isa. 6:3, 5). God is God; we are not. As John Frame notes, while discussing both God's interaction with Job and his declaration of absolute divine sovereignty in Romans 9, "Because God is who he is, the covenant Lord, he is not required to defend himself against charges of injustice. He is the judge, not we."² We must let God be God.³

2. Submit to the Bible

God didn't have to reveal himself to us. He could have left us in our ignorance to try to figure out our way in life and into eternity. Think about those around the world right now who don't have access to the Bible or who are trapped in false religions. That is where we would be today if it were not for God's gracious revelation of himself and his ways to us in holy Scripture. Even the fact that we have the Bible is evidence of God's extreme kindness to us.

The Bible is the very breathed-out revelation of God to us (2 Tim. 3:16), a remarkable and exact product of God as incredible as the creation of the universe by the Spirit of God (Gen. 1:1–2). Since it is God's word, the Bible comes to us with absolute divine authority. It is without error. More than that, this word is given to us to be useful in shaping our thinking and living. It sits in judgment over us. We must never determine what aspects of it we admire or dislike, as we might decide between two items on a menu. No, Scripture is always true whether or not we like what it says. And when we find ourselves repulsed by its truth, we need to be honest with God, confess our sin, and ask him to give us affection for every part of who he is.

Isaiah 66 gives us a remarkable glimpse into the heart of our majestic God:

Thus says the LORD: "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is the place of my rest? All these things my hand has made, and so all these things came to be, declares the LORD. But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word." (vv. 1–2)

Our responsibility is to tremble at God's word, to submit to it, to let it fashion our thinking about God and ourselves.

2. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 180.

3. See Philip S. Watson, *Let God Be God: An Interpretation of the Theology of Martin Luther* (London: Epworth, 1947).

3. Humble Yourself before God

From beginning to end, the Bible is insistent that God is not like us. He is high and lifted up, majestic in his glory, different from us.

The LORD is a great God,
 and a great King above all gods.
 In his hand are the depths of the earth;
 the heights of the mountains are his also.
 The sea is his, for he made it,
 and his hands formed the dry land.

Oh come, let us worship and bow down;
 let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker! (Ps. 95:3–6)

How great is God? Consider Psalm 139 where the psalmist exults in God's knowledge of him (vv. 1–6), in God's omnipresence (vv. 7–12), as well as in God's intricate craftsmanship (vv. 13–16). Consequently, J. I. Packer exhorts us, "Here, then, is the first step in apprehending the greatness of God: to realize how unlimited are His wisdom, and His presence, and His power."⁴

Nothing is greater than God. Nothing. No one has done the things he has done. "Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span, enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure and weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance?" (Isa. 40:12). Even the great nations of the earth "are like a drop from a bucket, and are accounted as dust on the scales" to the Lord (40:15). God is sovereign over his creation, over the great rulers of the world (for he "brings princes to nothing, and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness" [40:23]). Therefore, "Behold your God!"⁵

God is majestic and transcendent; we are pitiful and minute by comparison. God is the Creator—all-knowing, all-powerful, perfect in every way, not bound by anything or anyone. We are creatures. We have multiple limits—in our knowledge, in our strength, in our perspective, in our integrity. "But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, 'Why have you made me like this?' Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honored use and another for dishonorable use?" (Rom. 9:20–21). Because of our creaturely limitations, there will be many things that we don't have the capacity to understand. In addition, God has not revealed everything to us either: "The secret things belong to the LORD our God" (Deut. 29:29). We do not have the right as God's creatures to attempt to pry into his hidden wisdom. Rather, our obligation is to sit humbly before his word: "but the things that

4. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 76.

5. *Ibid.*, 77–78.

are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law" (Deut. 29:29).

The reality is that God is starkly different than we are. Wayne Grudem writes, "Because God is infinite and we are finite and limited, we can never fully understand God."⁶ We will never completely understand our Lord. Referencing biblical texts such as Job 37:5; Psalm 147:5; Jeremiah 33:3; and 1 Corinthians 2:7, Daniel Montgomery and Timothy Paul Jones observe, "We must approach God with awareness that he is beyond us and that we will never *fully* understand him." They helpfully point out, "Like children, we are called to accept things that perhaps don't make logical sense to us when we first encounter them. Maybe they won't make logical sense to us this side of heaven."⁷

They are correct. As our Creator, God is majestic and beyond our understanding in his fullness and perfection:

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!
For who has known the mind of the Lord,
Or who has been his counselor?
Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?
For from him and through him and to him are all things.
To him be glory forever. Amen. (Rom. 11:33–36)

As one of his creatures, be humble before your Creator. Don't question his right to do as he chooses.

4. Worship God Reverently

From beginning to end the Bible calls us to worship God because of his perfect, awe-inspiring character and for the wondrous deeds he has accomplished for his people. Note these two New Testament texts:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has

6. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 149.

7. Daniel Montgomery and Timothy Paul Jones, *Proof: Finding Freedom through the Intoxicating Joy of Irresistible Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 141 (italics original).

blessed us in the Beloved. . . . to the praise of his glory. . . . to the praise of his glory. (Eph. 1:3–6, 12, 14)

To those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood: May grace and peace be multiplied to you. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. (1 Peter 1:1–5)

One temptation for those who are engaging with the truths of Bible as expressed in Calvinism is to become intoxicated with the wonderful ideas they're seeing—sometimes for the first time, sometimes for the thousandth. Because these are glorious, heart-pounding, intoxicating truths! But if we allow them to remain ethereal ideas, we will have done both God and ourselves a disservice. God declares, "I am the LORD; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols" (Isa. 42:8). If we are not moved to praise God for his sovereignty over everything, if we are not brought to our knees in worship since the Creator has delighted in weak, sinful clay like us, if we do not sing out to the one who in his sovereign freedom predestined us to be his children before the creation of the world—then we are failing to engage properly with the truths Calvinism holds dear. The truths of Calvinism should lead us to worship God.

5. Trust God

Related to the necessity of our worshiping God, we must trust the Lord. Faith, of course, is one of the great themes of the Bible. God has uniformly called on his people to throw themselves upon his mercy and compassion and to follow him in the nitty-gritty, difficult parts of life. Trust involves an awareness of our poverty, a recognition that God is able to meet our need, and then a conscious giving of that concern to the Lord with an awareness that he is the only one who can accomplish what we would like to happen. It is doing what Peter exhorts us, in "casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7).

Faith is essential to the Christian life. Indeed, "without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him" (Heb. 11:6). We don't

put our faith in an idea. We don't trust an abstraction. No, just like young children learning to trust their parents, we run to our heavenly Father and give our lives, our hopes, our concerns, our everything over to him. We do this because he is a Person!

Trust, then, is essential as we consider the truths of Calvinism. We're not trusting that our "system" is better than some other intellectual construct. No, we're believing that the glorious God revealed in Scripture is real. We want to know him as a Person and to tangibly rely on him.⁸ Trust the Lord.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Do you struggle with doing any of the five suggestions in this chapter? Why?
2. In which of the five areas have you seen the most consistency in your own life?
3. Do you have a consistent plan and time for your Bible reading? If not, what can you do to make sure you're regularly reading Scripture?
4. How does it make you feel that you're a creature crafted by Almighty God?
5. Are you moved to worship God as you consider who he is? What aspects of his character call out for your praise? Sinclair Ferguson has noted that Calvinists have always been tremendous singers. How's your singing?⁹

8. See J. I. Packer's *Knowing God* for help doing this.

9. Sinclair Ferguson, "Doxology," in Joel R. Beeke, *Living for God's Glory: An Introduction to Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Trust, 2008), 387–96.