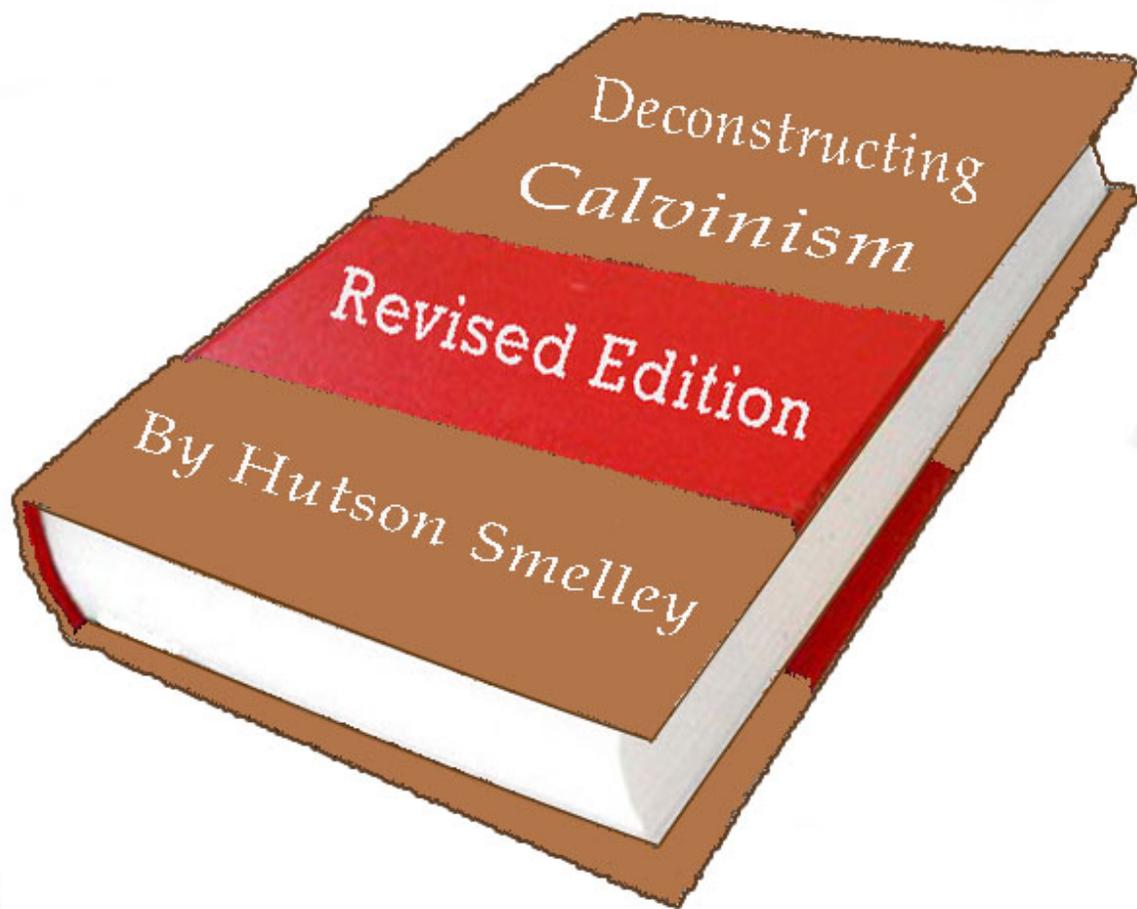


BOOK REVIEW
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By Dave Weeks

Book Review of *Deconstructing Calvinism* by Hutson Smelley 1-13-2015

The question has been asked many times: "Why are there so many different beliefs and denominations?" Someone wisely answered, "Because not everyone that believes in God and reads the Bible has the same rules for interpreting it."

I have given Smelley's book a very high rating because he seeks to present the facts based on the rules of hermeneutics (the science of Bible interpretation) and the rules of law (sub-miscible evidence). In putting Calvinism on trial, he simply asks you, the jury, to examine the evidence. In mentioning his degrees, he alludes to the fact that he is qualified to respond to those who propagate Calvinism and Reformed doctrine.

In a courtroom, all evidence that is presented must comply with the rules of law otherwise, it is deemed inadmissible. Smelley states his position from the very beginning, when he speaks of Calvinism as being outside *the hermeneutical circle*. He demonstrates decisively how proof-texts are used in presenting Reformed doctrine that violates the context, harmony, and grammatical rules of hermeneutics. The hermeneutical rules act like referees on a football field. They drop flags on plays when anyone commits a rules violation. It doesn't matter whether they are defense or offense, Calvinist or non-Calvinist. If one does not abide by the referees decisions, they are removed from the game, and so it is in theological discussions. Like many people watching a football game, folks reading theological dialogues like these are not aware of all the rules that govern the rendering of Scripture.

In Matthew Chapter 4, Jesus Christ Himself used the context rule and the harmony rule when rebuking Satan for misinterpreting God's Word. 2 Timothy 2:15 compels those who preach and teach Scripture to *study to show themselves approved onto God rightly dividing the Word of truth*.

One fine example of Smelley's giving evidence of a doctrinal error is in the following text. In Ephesians 2:8 he proves that faith, in this verse, is not the gift of God as Calvinists contend. In their rendering of this verse, Reformed doctrine proposes that faith is a gift because man is not capable of believing by his own volition. A follower of Calvinism and Reformed doctrine is led to believe that the free will of man relieves God of His sovereignty. The truth is that the sovereignty of God will never be altered by any act of man's God-given free will.

The Calvinist view of Ephesians 2:8 is a violation of a grammatical rule of hermeneutics. Before we examine that, let's ask a question: What is faith? The answer is twofold. First, *saving faith* is an act of the human heart generated by trust. It is subjective and abstract. God, in all His mighty and gracious acts, has proven that He is trustworthy; therefore, it is His will that we trust Him. *Unbelief*, or the lack of faith, is an act of the human heart that is self-centered and generated by pride or deception. Second, faith is objective and concrete. One contends for the faith (doctrinal faith) as a system of religious beliefs. How does one get faith? The answer is quite clear: Romans 10:17 *So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.* Both saving faith and doctrinal faith come from hearing the Word of God preached and taught.

Now let's take a look at Ephesians 2:8 and eliminate the confusion. *For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God:* The confusion begins when one reads verse 8 and assumes that faith is the gift of God, which is a syntactical impossibility. What does that mean? The problem exists in the gender of *faith* and *that*. The common error is to match the antecedent for the pronoun *that* with *faith*. This is not possible because *faith* is of a feminine gender and *that* is in the neuter gender. In Greek, the pronoun and antecedent genders must match. Typically there are three points of view here: conjectural, conceptual, and contextual. Those of the *conjectural point of view* accept this rendering without grammatical support—they just believe faith is the gift of God because someone else has said it. Those of the *conceptual view* reject that faith is the gift of God and accept salvation as the conceptual antecedent for *that*. Those of the *contextual view* also reject that faith is the gift of God in verse 8 and believe that *mercy* in verse 4 is the neuter antecedent for the neuter *that* in verse 8.

Hats off to Hutson Smelley! He does a good job by quoting authorities who have put in print what Calvinist and Reformed people accept as truth. He also does a good job at putting Scripture before the hermeneutical referees, giving the jurors an opportunity to look at the “replays” with the rules in focus. Referees applying the rules, without bias, on both side of the scrimmage line is what all spectators desire the most. This is what I liked best about *Deconstructing Calvinism*.

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