

Calvin vs. Arminius

by Derrick Stokes

Growing up I remember wondering if everything in this world was placed in its specific location for a divine reason. From each and every tree in the forest down to each grain of sand, I wondered if God's providence guided the placement of all that exists down to the minutest detail. I would dramatize how the placement of a piece of grass would come into play after it is cut. When the blade of grass is cut it would be caught by the wind. The wind would then fly it into a woman's glass of lemonade. She would see the grass in her lemonade and have to go inside to pour a new glass. Because she had to go inside she avoided getting stung by a wasp, which she is allergic to. This story may seem silly but that is the way I used to and at times still view God's providence in the entire created world. God controls all of creation. Yet, man is held responsible for his actions. As I grew older I began to think that the same was true for salvation.

There are two views when it comes to salvation and they both have to do with will. One is the Calvinist view named after theologian John Calvin (1509-1564). Calvinism states that salvation is based on the will of God and man has nothing to do with choosing to be saved or not to be saved. It is built off of the doctrines of predestination and election. Predestination, according to Calvin, says that before the world was created God chose certain people (not based on anything they will do) to become saved. Since God is sovereign over all of creation then He also has control over those whom will have eternal life.

Calvinism is summed up in five points in the acronym TULIP. The "T" stands for total depravity. This means we are all born incapacitated by our sin. "Scripture teaches that because of the fall all human beings are incapable of responding positively to God on their own."¹ The "U" in TULIP stands for unconditional election. This means that there is nothing that a person can do that would merit God saving him or her. Since we are all born spiritually dead God saves whom He chooses based on His divine purposes. Dave Hunt a proponent of Arminianism states, "It is simply the belief that when God chooses to move in the lives of His elect and bring them from spiritual death to spiritual life, no power in heaven or on earth can stop Him from so doing. It is really nothing more than saying that it is God who regenerates sinners, and that freely. The doctrine has nothing to do with the fact that sinners 'resist' the common grace of God and the Holy Spirit every day (they do)' or that Christians do not live perfectly in the light of God's grace."²

The next letter in the acronym, "L" stands for limited atonement. This is perhaps the most controversial points of TULIP. It states that "Christ's death is sufficient for all the sins of the world, but it was intended to save only those whom the Father has predestined to be saved."³ Since God knows all and is in control of all then one could logically assume that His Son's death would be meant for only those who would accept the gift of salvation. If God knew that a person would never be saved then perhaps the atonement wasn't meant for him. In

Matthew 1:21 the angel Gabriel told Mary “She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” The argument here is that He *will* save *His* people.

The “I” stands for irresistible grace. When God draws man to Himself, man responds because God working in him. Lastly the “P” in TULIP is for perseverance of the saints. Those that are saved remain in Christ because “he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”⁴

Those that disagree with Calvinism do so mainly because they understand it as God choosing some for redemption and by default others are condemned to eternal damnation. This goes against our understanding that God is love and is merciful. “Never forget that the ultimate aim of Calvinism... is to prove that God does not love everyone, is not merciful to all, and is pleased to damn billions. If that is the God of the Bible, Calvinism is true. If that is not the God of the Bible, who ‘is love’ (1 John 4:8, emphasis added), Calvinism is false.”⁵

The Arminian view basically says that man has free will. He can choose to come to God if he so desires. Arminianism is named after Jacob Arminius who was a Dutch theologian that lived in the 16th century. While Calvin said man was spiritually dead, Arminius said man was sick. If man were drowning in the ocean he could help himself if only he reached out to God. Calvinism says man is a dead corpse with no will of his own to remain in his current state. By God’s will alone can bring life be brought to man. Man could not choose it even if he wanted to. Calvinism, to its credit, places more glory and power in the will of God. Arminianism, however, is charged with placing too much emphasis on man. Charles Spurgeon said, “We will think too much of the creature and too little of the Creator, preferring knowledge that is to be found by observation and eason to the divine truth that revelation alone could make known to us. The basis and groundwork of Arminian theology lies in attaching undue importance to man and giving God the second place rather than the first.”⁶

The Calvinist view and the Arminian views not only speak on salvation but they bring to the forefront the question of “How much does God control?” Both camps would agree that God is sovereign. However, they would disagree on how much of His sovereignty He chooses to display. Is God’s will always accomplished no matter what man does? Did God fore-ordain everything that has happened and will happen in the universe? Does God hold back some of His control so that man can have free will? Is there a way that shows both can be true and valid at the same time?

There are two ways of viewing God’s will. There is God’s sovereign will and God’s permissive will. God’s sovereign will is what He ordained would happen and has controlled. God’s permissive will is those things that He allows to happen but did not control. He allows things, like evil, however He uses them for His glory. In the Book of Job Satan stands before God and asks permission to test Job, a man who was “blameless and upright” who “feared God and shunned evil.” Yet God allowed Satan to wreak havoc on Job’s family and health. After Job

refuse to curse God, like Satan said he would, Job was blessed with more than he had to begin with. In this aspect God's permissive will was done so that Job might be blessed and God receive glory in the end.

In the book of Romans chapter 9, Paul says that before Jacob and Esau were born God had chosen which brother would serve the other. In the same chapter Paul quotes God's words to Pharaoh from Exodus 9:16, "I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." If God raised Pharaoh up for his purposes then did God raise Judas Iscariot up for his specific purpose also? If God knew before the foundation of the world that man would fall, and need to be reconciled to Him, and that He would have to come to earth as a man and suffer and die, then it is reasonable to say that Judas through his betrayal played a part in God's sovereign will. It was the Father's will that the Son come to die.⁷ It was prophesied in the Old Testament that Jesus would suffer and die. It even seems to be prophesied that Jesus would be "sold" for 30 pieces of silver.⁸ However, it was never said that he would be betrayed. So that it would seem that it was God's sovereign will that Jesus die for the sins of the world, it might have been God's permissive will that it be accomplished through betrayal.

Ephesians chapter 1 and Romans chapter 9 speak most of God's sovereignty when it comes to the elect and predestination. God, however, has set a place aside for those who do not choose to accept the truth of the Gospel. Hell is a place of eternal torment for those who reject the work of Jesus on the cross. This means man's freedom to choose has its place in what happens. Although the phrase "free will" is never mentioned in the Bible, we first see God giving man free will in the Garden of Eden. He set before Adam and Eve a choice, to choose to obey God or to eat of the forbidden fruit. Man chose to eat the fruit and because of their choice we now have sin and death in the world. Death was never a part of God's perfect will for man. Man was given the gift of freedom to exercise his own will.

Therefore, Calvin's view of God's will and Arminius' view of man's will seem to be two sides of the same coin. God chooses yet man is still held responsible. In John 6:44 Jesus said no can come to Him unless the Father draws him. However, as it has been stated for millennia, "Why, then, does God still blame us?"⁹ These to seemingly contradictory views are not only logical they are biblical. By choosing one and rejecting the other, we limit God's sovereignty and/or His love. It seems to be that the two extremes of Calvinism and Arminianism is what makes the trouble. Anything that an Arminian disagrees with about Calvinism is the usually the extreme, or hyper-Calvinist, views. An example would be double-predestination. God chooses some for heaven and chooses the others for hell. We must remember, however, that we have built entire doctrines off of fallible man's views (the two arguments discussed here are named after two imperfect men). But God's are far more incomprehensible that what we can gather with our minds. Yes, He reveals *some* things to us about Himself. But, if we understood all the ways of God we would be God ourselves. So while many of us reject one side of the coin and choose to believe only the other side is biblical, maybe we would be right to think that it's the edge of the

coin that is correct. In a coin flip it is the side least likely to land on. However, this side makes both sides visible.

There is an often quoted phrase that says “God works in mysterious ways.” This phrase is basically a truth attributed to the providence of God. The story I stated at the beginning of this essay would be an example. Perhaps a more relevant example would be the person who couldn’t find his car keys as he’s attempting to leave for work. Since he couldn’t find his car keys he was delayed and missed being involved in an accident on the freeway. God’s providence was displayed through the act of losing the keys.

Even the very things that cause us to come to Christ can seem random at first. When a violent thunderstorm threatened Martin Luther’s life, he devoted his life to God and subsequently became one of the leaders of the Reformation.¹⁰ Even the results of sin can lead a person to Christ. The birth of an out-of-wedlock child can cause the parent to seek answers for guidance which could lead to saving grace. These things can cause a person to become afraid, angry, or even disgruntled. But, if we could see the big picture we would have reason to rejoice.

The Bible promises in Romans 8:28 that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” So not only does God use seemingly random circumstances to bring us to Him, He uses these same types of circumstances for His children. He uses them to remind us of His love and provision. He uses them to remind us that we are helpless without Him. He even uses them to correct us and bring those of us who stray back to the Fold.

God is an omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient being. He is all present. He is all powerful. And, He is all knowing. We can neither thwart God’s plans nor can we change His mind.¹¹ Yet, since He has given man freedom of will, I believe He with-holds some of His power so that man’s freedom can be exercised. It is only in the realm of man’s will that I believe God “restrains” the full brunt of His power. When it comes to the natural world, He is in full control.

Bibliography:

¹ Boyd, G., Eddy, P. *Across the Spectrum: Understanding Issues in Evangelical Theology* 2nd Edition (Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI 2009) p. 147

² Hunt, D., White, J. *Debating Calvinism: Five Points, Two Views* (Multnomah Publishers Inc., Sisters, Oregon 2004) p. 109

³ Boyd, G., Eddy, P. *Across the Spectrum: Understanding Issues in Evangelical Theology* 2nd Edition (Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI 2009) p. 149

⁴ Philippians 1:6

⁵ Hunt, D., White, J. *Debating Calvinism: 5 Points, 2 Views* (Multnomah Publishers Inc., Sisters, Oregon 2004) p. 14

⁶ Partner, D., *The Essential Works of Charles Spurgeon: Selected Books, Sermons, and Other Writings* (Barbour Publishing Inc., Uhrichsville, OH 2009) p. 128

⁷ Isaiah 53:10

⁸ Zechariah 11:12-13

⁹ Romans 9:19

¹⁰ Elwell, W., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* 2nd Edition (Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI 2001) p. 718

¹¹ Numbers 23:19