

What's Wrong with Calvinism?

March 22, 2013 by Roger E. Olson

This is a talk I gave recently at City on a Hill Church in Seattle, Washington. (City on a Hill is a mostly Russian evangelical church. It's leaders are concerned about infiltration of aggressive Calvinism into their and other Russian evangelical churches whose tradition is Arminianism. I want to thank Russell Korets and the other leaders of the church for inviting me to speak and I want to thank the many leaders of other Russian evangelical churches who came to the events.)

What's Wrong with Calvinism?

A few years ago I came to the conclusion, led by God, I believe, that someone needs to speak out about the problems of Calvinism and defend Arminianism. Many Calvinists unfairly misrepresent Arminianism as a form of human-centered, self-salvation. I kept hearing, and still hear, that Arminians, allegedly, do not believe in a God who saves but in a God who only gives us the opportunity to save ourselves. Also, few of the leading Calvinists admit the problems within Calvinism and most of its young adherents seem blissfully unaware of where it leads—to thinking of God as the author of sin and evil and therefore not perfectly loving or good.

So, what exactly is “Calvinism?” It's a theological belief system named after John Calvin, the Protestant reformer of Switzerland in the sixteenth century. However, it's doubtful that Calvin himself believed everything that goes under the label “Calvinism.” And Calvinism holds many beliefs that pre-date Calvin. The early church father St. Augustine wrote “On the Predestination of the Saints” back in the early fifth century.

Sometime in the early twentieth century a teacher of theology came up with the acronym “T.U.L.I.P.” to summarize the “five main points” of Calvinism. Calvinism is bigger than that flower, but Holland, famous for its fields of tulips, has been a hotbed of Calvinism. And not all Calvinists agree with all five points. Nevertheless, we can safely say that, for the most part, the “five points of TULIP” summarize the Calvinism of John Piper and the “young, restless, Reformed” movement that is making inroads into churches where Calvinism has never before existed (such as Pentecostalism).

The first point is “**total depravity.**” What does that mean? Calvinism teaches that human beings are all born so corrupted and depraved by original sin that they, we, are

incapable of even exercising a good will toward God. As Scripture says “There is none that does good, no not one” (Romans 3:12) and “There is no one who seeks after God” (Romans 3:11). Total depravity does not mean that every person is as evil as it is possible to be. Rather, it means that every part of us, including our reasoning ability, is so damaged by inherited Adamic corruption, original sin, that we cannot do what is truly good apart from grace.

The second point is “**unconditional election.**” It means, according to Calvinists, that *if* a person comes to Christ and is saved it is because he or she was chosen by God to be saved. God selects some people out of the “mass of perdition” that humanity is, to be saved. Others are left to their deserved damnation. This is also known as “double predestination”—that God sovereignly chooses some to save and others to damn—unconditionally. In other words, God’s decision has nothing to do with any good he sees in the elect. There is nothing about a saved person that made him or her chosen by God.

The third point is “**limited atonement.**” Most Calvinists prefer to call it “particular atonement” because it says that Christ died only for particular people. It does not mean that the value of Christ’s death was limited. Rather, according to five point Calvinism, Christ bore the punishment only for the elect and not for those God decided not to save. This is the point some Calvinists reject, calling themselves “four point Calvinists.” Five point Calvinists say the scheme is a “package deal;” it is simply inconsistent to hold less than all five of the points. Why would Christ suffer the punishment for the sins of those God chose not to save? If he suffered their punishment, the argument goes, then God would be unjust to send them to hell. In that case, the same sins would be punished twice. This is the point I cannot find in Calvin; I believe it was added to Calvinism after Calvin by some of his more extreme followers.

The fourth point is “**irresistible grace.**” Most Calvinists prefer to call it “effectual grace.” The meaning is that saving grace extended by God to the elect cannot be resisted by them. It is always effectual. Part and parcel of this is the idea that regeneration, being “born again,” happens *before* conversion. An elect person, predestined by God for salvation, will freely choose to repent and believe *because* he or she has already, perhaps unconsciously, been regenerated by the Spirit of God. The person is a “new creation in Christ Jesus” *first* and only then converted. Regeneration precedes faith.

The fifth point is “**perseverance of the saints.**” It means simply that a truly saved person cannot fall away and be forever lost. That is because he or she is one of God’s elect and God would not elect a person and then allow him or her to fall from grace. This is sometimes called “once saved, always saved” and “eternal security.” Many non-Calvinists believe this doctrine also, but not because they believe the eternally secure person is sovereignty predestined by God. Rather, many Baptists, for example, simply believe God will not allow one of his children to fall forever away from his grace. Calvinists insist that’s inconsistent with free will, so perseverance of the saints belongs logically with the other points of TULIP.

That is a very quick summary of “five-point Calvinism.” It is what is commonly called Calvinism today by adherents of the “young, restless, Reformed” movement and their leaders. Behind the scenes, so to speak, these people carry on some debates among themselves about some of the finer details of the scheme, but they are agreed that these are all necessary beliefs for a holistic, robust, intellectually respectable, evangelical Christian faith.

However, TULIP does not exhaust Calvinism which is more than just a view of salvation. Calvinism *also* includes a broader and deeper “background” view of God’s sovereignty; it is not only about “predestination” but also about “providence” which has to do, of course, with God’s governance of creation.

Now let’s be clear about something. *All Christians* believe in God’s sovereignty, providence, and predestination. These are not concepts unique to Calvinism. Calvinism is a *particular interpretation* of them. There are other interpretations. Arminians, for example, *also* believe in God’s sovereignty, providence and predestination. But we have a different interpretation of these good biblical concepts than Calvinism’s.

Calvinism’s doctrine of God’s sovereignty in providence *includes* its doctrine of predestination. According to it, absolutely nothing ever happens or can happen that God did not decree and render certain. Even sin and evil are part of God’s plan; he planned them, ordained them, and governs them. He doesn’t *cause* them, but he does render them certain. As Sproul says “If there is one maverick molecule in the universe, God is not God.” Calvinist theologian Paul Helm says “Not only is every atom and molecule, every thought and desire, kept in being by God, but every twist and turn of each of these

is under the direct control of God.” One can find similar sayings in virtually every Calvinist theologian’s writings.

Calvin himself spilled much ink discussing this very strong, high view of God’s providential sovereignty—even over evil. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin used the illustration of a merchant who foolishly wanders away from his companions on a trip through a forest. He is set upon by thieves and murdered. Calvin asks how a Christian should regard this event—an all others like it. First, he admits, most Christians will think of it as accidental—not planned but fortuitous—bad luck. Second, however, he says that for the Christian *nothing* is ever merely accidental. The merchant’s death was not only foreseen by God, he says, but planned and rendered certain by God. Even the reprobate, sinners, he says, are compelled by God’s power to obey his plans.

What does this mean? Few consistent Calvinists hesitate to admit that they believe *even the fall of Adam and Eve* and all its consequences, all the sin, evil and agony of the world, are decreed and rendered certain by God. Otherwise, they argue, there would be powers and forces in control of God; God would not be omnipotent and sovereign.

I call the Calvinist view of God’s sovereignty “divine determinism.” Many Calvinists are uncomfortable with that term, but I cannot think of a better, more correctly descriptive phrase for it. God determines everything—even sin, evil and innocent suffering. It is all part of a divine blueprint and everything on it is willed by God. History and our lives unfold according to the blueprint. And nothing can change it. So, Piper preaches a sermon entitled “Don’t Waste Your Cancer.” If you have cancer, it is from God and has a good purpose. Many people hearing that sermon or reading one of Piper’s books such as *The Pleasures of God* say “Yes, God is in control and knows what he is doing.” But they fail to consider that this *also* means that sin and hell are also planned, willed, designed and rendered certain by God—for a good purpose. What good purpose? God’s glory.

The great Puritan preacher and theologian Jonathan Edwards wrote a treatise entitled “The End [Purpose] for Which God Created the World.” Piper considers it one of the greatest Christian essays ever written and simply translates its main points into contemporary English. According to Edwards, Piper and most conservative, classical Calvinists, God created the world as what Calvin called “the theater of God’s glory.”

Everything that happens is predetermined and rendered certain by God *for his glory*. Even sin, evil and hell glorify God. How? By manifesting his justice. Without hell, for example, God's attribute of justice could not be fully revealed.

Although not all Calvinists are consistent, Calvinism itself is meant to be a consistent system of doctrinal beliefs. It begins with a certain "picture" of God believed to be biblical: God as absolutely glorious, powerful and sovereign. A bedrock Scripture for Calvinism is Isaiah 45:7: "I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things." Many other verses in Isaiah point in this same general direction and are interpreted by Calvinists as meaning that God rules over every detail of history and individual lives such that whatever happens is ordained and rendered certain by him for a purpose. Turning to the New Testament, Romans 9 is the bedrock text for Calvinism. There Paul the Apostle says "God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden" (Rom 9: 19)

Of course, not all Christians interpret these and passages like them as Calvinists do. For example, Arminians and other non-Calvinist Christians point to God's *permission*. To be sure, nothing can happen that God does not *permit*, but that is not the same as saying he *causes* or renders certain everything and certainly not evil, sin or innocent suffering. If those passages are to be interpreted as Calvinists interpret them, how are we to understand God's grief over unbelief? Jesus wept over Jerusalem because they rejected him and stoned the prophets. He cried "How I would have gathered you but you would not" (Mathew 23:37). Also, according to 2 Peter 3:9 and 1 Timothy 2:4, God wants all people to be saved and no one to perish. Yet we know that is not what happens. So how can it be that everything is predestined by God, in the Calvinist sense? Arminianism uses the concept of God's *permission* to explain these otherwise biblical contradictions.

So what is the Arminian alternative to Calvinism? First, let me say that Arminianism and Calvinism do not conflict at every point. We agree about many things. We are all evangelicals and believe in biblical inspiration, the Trinity, the deity and humanity of Jesus, salvation by grace through faith and numerous other basic biblical beliefs. The point of disagreement is God's sovereignty—is it all-determining or not?

Basic to Arminianism is God's love. The fundamental conflict between Calvinism and Arminianism is not *sovereignty* but *God's character*. *If Calvinism is true, God is the author of sin, evil, innocent suffering and hell*. That is to say, *if Calvinism is true God is*

not all-loving and perfectly good. John 3:16 says “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life.” “God so loved the world.” Calvinists *must* explain this as meaning that God loves “all kinds of people,” not everyone. *Or* that “God loves all people in some ways but only some people [the elect] in all ways.” Arminians believe these interpretations distort the clear message of the Bible about God’s love. If Calvinism is true, John Wesley said, God’s love is “such a love as makes the blood run cold.” It is indistinguishable from hate—for a large portion of humanity created in his own likeness and image. Let me repeat. The most basic issue is *not* providence or predestination or the sovereignty of God. The most basic issue is *God’s character.*

Calvinists commonly argue that God’s love and goodness are somehow “different” than ours. How different can they be and still be meaningful concepts? If God’s love and goodness are compatible with predestining people to hell, then the words mean something other than they say. And if God is not perfectly good, then he is not trustworthy. If he can hate, then he can lie. Why trust Scripture to be a true revelation and guide if God is not good in some way analogous to our best ideas of goodness? If God’s goodness is consistent with predetermining large portions of people to hell, then why might it not be consistent with deceiving us? Our very trust in the Bible as God’s true revelation *depends* on God being good, trustworthy, one who cannot deceive.

The Calvinist, like the Arminian, approaches Scripture with the assumption that God cannot lie. He or she can trust the Bible to be a true revelation of God if it is inspired by God. The moment the Calvinist says, “But God’s goodness is different from ours,” he or she undermines reason to trust the Bible. Of course God’s goodness is different from ours in that it is *greater*, but that’s not what Calvinists faced with passages such as John 3:16 mean. They mean that God’s goodness, God’s love, is *wholly different* from our highest and best concepts of them—even as revealed through Jesus Christ.

If strong, five-point Calvinism is true, then God is monstrous and barely distinguishable from the devil. The only difference in character is that the devil wants everyone to go to hell and God only wants some, many, to go to hell.

Another difference between Calvinism and Arminianism lies in Arminians’ view of God’s sovereignty in providence. According to Arminianism, God is now, before the coming of his Kingdom of perfect righteousness, sovereign *de jure* but not *de facto*. Jesus and Paul

both referred to Satan as the “prince” of this world. According to Calvinism, Satan is God’s instrument; according to Arminianism he is a true enemy of God and presently resisting God’s will. Why God is allowing that is not revealed to us; we are only told that God is being patient. So, according to Arminianism, God limits himself, restrains his power, holds back from controlling everything. Why? For the sake of free will. God wants our freely offered and given love, not love that he has instilled in us without our consent. If Calvinism is true, salvation is a *condition*, not a *relationship*. A relationship requires free consent. So, in the interim, between the fall in the garden and the return of Christ in judgment, God is sovereign *by right* but not *exercising that sovereignty over everything*. He *could* but he *doesn’t*. Thus, sin, evil and innocent suffering, and especially hell, are not God’s *antecedent will* but God’s *consequent will*.

God’s *antecedent will* is what he perfectly wanted to happen—including our willing obedience out of love and everlasting fellowship with us. God’s *consequent will* is what God permits to happen that is contrary to his perfect will. It is *consequent* to our free choice to rebel against God and push him out of our lives and our world. It is consequent to our free choice to obey Satan and make him “god of this world” rather than obey God. So, according to Arminianism, God is *in charge* but not yet *in control*. God is like the king of an enemy occupied territory and we Christians are like resistance fighters who look forward to the day when our hero, God, will return and take back his full sovereignty over our country. Of course, this is only an analogy. Our God is not banished from this world, but neither is he controlling everything that happens, rendering it certain according to his blueprint. If that were the case, our prayers could make no real difference. If Calvinism is true, God’s will is already being done “on earth” and yet Jesus taught us to pray “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Calvinism flatly contradicts that prayer.

Of course, Calvinists have their answers to all these objections, but I do not find any of them convincing. They sound forced to me. They say, for example, that our prayers for God’s will to be done are God’s “foreordained means to a foreordained end.” In other words, our prayers are also foreordained and rendered certain by God as a means of having his will done on earth as in heaven. But, at the end of the day, that means our prayers never really change anything.

Calvinists also say that not everything is “God’s will” in the same way. For example, they say that God *wishes* none had to perish in hell. That’s their interpretation of the verses

cited earlier that God is not willing that any should perish but that everyone be saved. God *wishes* hell were not necessary, but it is—for his full glory. God wills what he wishes he did not have to will.

Perhaps the most troubling answer of Calvinists is the two wills of God—not “antecedent” and “consequent” but “prescriptive” and “decretive.” If Calvinism is true, God decrees that people do what he forbids. God decrees things that violate his prescriptions—commands. God commands “Thou shalt not murder,” but decrees “Thou shalt murder.” Calvin explained in *Institutes*, and most Calvinists agree, that God does not sin in decreeing that someone sin because God’s *intention* is good whereas the murderer’s intention is evil. God intends the murder he decrees and renders certain *for his glory*. The murderer, who could not do otherwise than God decrees, is guilty because his *intention* is hateful. Not only is this hairsplitting; it also raises the question of the origin of the murderer’s evil intention. If every twist and turn of every thought and intention is under the direct control of God, then even the murderer’s intention cannot escape the all-determining sovereignty of Calvinism’s God. This is why Arminius stated that if Calvinism is true, not only is sin not really sin, but God is the only sinner.

Now let’s turn to Arminianism’s alternative view of God’s predestination. Here I return to the TULIP scheme. Arminians agree that fallen humans are *totally depraved* in the sense Calvinism means—helpless to do anything truly good, pleasing to God, apart from grace. Arminians, however, believe in *prevenient grace*—that grace of God that heals the deadly wound of sin and frees the fallen sinner from the bondage of the will to sin and gives him or her ability to exercise a good will toward God. We do not know all the means of prevenient grace, but the preaching of the gospel is one. “Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God.” The gospel read or heard imparts prevenient grace so that the person is for the first time freed to repent and trust in God. In other words, Arminians do *not* believe in “free will” but in “freed will.”

Where is prevenient grace in the Bible? Where is it *not* in the Bible? It is everywhere assumed, taken for granted, presupposed by Scripture. No one seeks after God and yet many *do* seek after God. That pattern of “don’t” but “do” is found everywhere in Scripture. It is explained by the concept of prevenient grace. Left to ourselves, apart from a special impartation of grace that convicts and calls, illumines and enables, we would never exercise a good will toward God. But with prevenient grace, we can and some of us do.

Arminians also believe in *unconditional election*, but we believe it is *corporate election*—God’s unconditional plan to have a people for himself: Israel and the church. Individual election is *conditional*. It requires faith which is both a gift of God and a response of the individual. Philippians 2:12-13: “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling for God is at work in you....” (The text and subject of my sermon tomorrow morning) God provides all the ability, the seed of faith, and we freely accept it and use it to repent and trust in God alone. But once we do repent and trust, we see that it was God who made it possible in every way, so we cannot boast. And God *foreknew* that we would (or wouldn’t) repent and believe. That’s another dimension of God’s election in Arminian theology. Individual election, predestination, is *conditional* in that we must accept it. If we do, it turns out that God foreknew that we would (Romans 8:29: “Those whom he foreknew he did predestine....”)

One of Calvinism’s main arguments *against* Arminianism is that *if* Arminianism is true, God’s salvation is not *all of grace*. We *earn* it. Only if election to salvation is absolutely unconditional and grace irresistible, they argue, can it truly be the case that “by grace we are saved through faith.” Only then is salvation a sheer gift. This is, of course, untrue. Think of this analogy. If someone gives you a check for a thousand dollars that saves you from bankruptcy, and all you have to do is endorse the check and deposit it, did you earn part of the money? Was it any less a gift? Absolutely not. What if someone who received such a check that saved him or her from bankruptcy then boasted of having earned part of the gift? People would think him mad or ungrateful or both! A gift that must be freely received is no less a gift.

Now let’s look at Calvinism’s idea of unconditional election. If God is good and could save everyone because election to salvation is *absolutely unconditional*, why doesn’t he? How can he be truly good if he *could* but *doesn’t*? Again, we are back at the fundamental conflict between Calvinism and Arminianism—God’s character.

Arminianism believes that the atonement of Jesus Christ is unlimited in every way. Christ died for everyone; he took the punishment for the sins of all. Does Scripture teach it? Absolutely. 1 Timothy 2:6 says that Christ gave himself as a ransom for everyone. The Greek is clear: it says “all people.” There is no room to interpret this as meaning “all kinds of people.” John Piper, noting the conflict between this verse and limited atonement, which he espouses, claims that Christ *did* die for even the non-elect. His

death affords them many blessings in this life even if not escape from hell in the next. Christ did not die to save them but only to offer them temporal blessings. This is the same as saying he gives the non-elect a little bit of heaven to go to hell in. Piper's "explanation" is clearly contrary to the plain sense of this Scripture passage which is why many Calvinists cannot accept limited atonement. And yet they cannot explain why Christ would die for those God planned *not to save*.

But there are other passages that completely undermine limited atonement: Romans 14:15 and 1 Corinthians 8:11. Both passages warn believers against flaunting their freedom in Christ in front of brothers and sisters of weaker conscience because this might cause one *for whom Christ died* to be "destroyed." The Greek word translated "destroyed" always only means utterly destroyed; it cannot mean "damaged." But if Calvinism is correct, a person for whom Christ died cannot be "destroyed" because he or she is one of the elect.

Calvinists argue that Arminianism falls into inconsistency in this matter of universal atonement. The Arminian belief, so it is said, leads inexorably to *universal salvation* because if Christ dies for a sinner, his or her sins are already punished; they are put on Christ. So for God to send a person for whom Christ died to hell would be unjust—it would be to punish the same sins twice. That is simply nonsense. A person can refuse to accept another's vicarious payment of his or her punishment. That's what hell is—sinners' refusal to accept Christ's vicarious sacrifice on their behalf. That's what makes hell so tragic; it is absolutely unnecessary. A blanket amnesty does not require its acceptance. President Jimmy Carter declared a blanket amnesty for all Vietnam War resisters who had fled to other countries such as Canada. They could come home without fear of punishment. And yet many stayed away.

Finally, Arminianism has its own interpretation of *irresistible grace*. Prevenient grace comes to a person through the gospel. That's not a choice. What to *do* with it is a choice. So *saving grace* is resistible. Everywhere the Bible represents grace as resistible. Acts 7:51 accuses the Jewish people who crucified Jesus of always "resisting the Holy Spirit." Of course, the Calvinist will simply say that whoever is said to resist the Holy Spirit or grace is not elect. In other words, the Calvinist simply defines election as including "not resisting the Holy Spirit," so it's impossible to come up with an example of resisting grace as they mean it. It's a matter of definition. In other words, the saying has to be

true that “Those who do not resist grace do not resist grace.” Calvinists define “election” and “resisting grace” as mutually exclusive. That makes “irresistible grace” a tautology. Arminians believe Scripture warns even believers, the elect, against resisting saving grace. What else can Paul mean in Galatians when he tells those who turn from the gospel to works righteousness that they have “fallen from grace.” And what else is Hebrew 6 all about? Clearly these passages are warning against resisting saving grace. Why would they if that is impossible for the elect, for true Christians? People often think this disagreement between Calvinism and Arminianism can be settled by simply listing Bible passages in two columns—one under “Calvinism” and one under “Arminianism.” Whichever column is longest, that view wins. It doesn’t work that way.

In my opinion, strongly biblical cases can be made for both views. Of course, I happen to think the stronger case is in favor of Arminianism. Otherwise I would be a Calvinist! However, I will concede, at least for the sake of generosity, that very strong cases can be made from Scripture for both views. How then should one settle on one view over the other one?

First, ask yourself which view is most consistent overall with the portrait of God given in Jesus Christ, God’s self-revelation, and in Scripture as a whole?

Second, ask yourself which view is internally consistent? Both have some problems, but which one has the problems you can live with? Which one has problems you cannot live with? I know that I cannot live with Calvinism’s view of God’s goodness, or lack of it. Also, if Calvinism is true, then nothing can be truly evil because God decreed it and rendered it certain for his glory. If everything is predestined by God *for his glory* then nothing can offend the glory of God. That is a problem inherent in Calvinism that defies logic.

Third, ask yourself why Calvinism was literally *unheard of* before Augustine in the fifth century? That view of God’s sovereignty is completely absent in the earlier, Greek-speaking church fathers. The earliest church fathers rejected determinism and affirmed free will. How could someone like Irenaeus, late second century church father, have gotten it so wrong when he was trained in the Christian faith by Polycarp who was a disciple of John, the youngest disciple of Jesus?

Let me conclude with a ringing, resounding affirmation of God's sovereignty! *God is sovereign—even over his own sovereignty!* Saying we have free will to resist and even thwart the will of God does not diminish the greatness of God's sovereignty and power *because* our ability to resist and thwart God's perfect will is given us by God for the sake of having real relationships with us, not artificial ones. Yes, of course, God *could* control us. But he doesn't. Not because *we* have some power *over him* but because *he* wants us to love him and obey him freely and not by compulsion. And let me conclude with a ringing, resounding affirmation of the *gift* nature of God's saving grace! We do not earn any of it. But we can reject it and God will not impose it on us against our wills.