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Calvinism Versus Arminianism: A Biblical Analysis

Eric V. Snow

Do Christians have the free will to accept or reject salvation? Among Protestants, there are two great overall theological systems in constant conflict that answer this question differently. Calvinists are Protestant Christians who believe in the theology of John Calvin (1509-1564), the great Protestant theologian and reformer who wrote "The Institutes of the Christian Religion." He was one of the key leaders of the Reformation, or Protestant revolt, against Roman Catholicism in western and central Europe in the 16th century. Martin Luther, the founder of what became the Lutheran Church, was the main initial (if also initially unintentional) instigator of this movement. Luther believed in predestination as well. But Calvin was important for systematizing the theology of the Reformation. The Presbyterian and Reformed Churches basically uphold doctrinally some version of his theology, at least to the extent they haven't watered it down for one reason or another. Classical Calvinism maintains that God's sovereignty is total in His plan, so God selects people in advance to be saved or lost. Hence, Calvinism maintains "the perseverance of the saints," which means, "once saved, always saved." They maintain a totally sincere and chosen ("elected") Christian will never change his or her mind, and then lose

salvation. They also upheld the doctrine of the limited atonement, which maintains, by a ruthlessly consistent application of theological logic, that Jesus only died for the elect, not for the unsaved in the world who were destined from birth for the flames of hell by God's awesome decree.

The other theological system, not as well known among average people, is Arminianism, which is named for Jacob Arminius (1560-1609), the Dutch theologian. His central theme concerns maintaining that people do have the free will to accept or reject salvation after God makes the offer of eternal life to people. Hence, Christians do have the opportunity to choose to be lost or saved. Arminians would maintain that Jesus indeed did die for all people in the world since all the world has (theoretically) a chance to repent and to be saved. They also believe totally sincere Christians can change their minds, and choose to be lost at any time before death.

So then, does the Bible fit a predestination (Calvinistic) or free will perspective better? Overall, it fits Arminianism better, although the Calvinists can get in some good shots in some cases, and do have some texts favoring their position, especially in Romans 8-11. A key point that needs to be made is that although not everyone is being called now to salvation, most will receive their first chance at salvation after they die and are resurrected. Full proof of this doctrine would require a lot of space in itself, but notice in particular that the whole house of Israel, a group of people who committed a great deal of idolatry and other sins, when resurrected, wasn't cast into the Lake of Fire, but put into the land of Israel (Ezekiel 37:10-14; cf. Romans 11:26). Nor will there be eternal torment for the unsaved, but they will be totally destroyed into ashes if they still reject salvation then (see Malachi 4:1, 3) since no one has an immortal or eternal soul.

Let's summarize briefly the five points of Calvinist theology. They apparently were chosen to show the important areas in which Calvinism differs from Arminianism and/or Catholicism. These points obviously don't deal with all the most important crucial beliefs Christians should uphold, such as God's nature, Jesus' Deity, or the Bible's infallibility, like a creed or statement of beliefs would. These five beliefs are abbreviated by the acronym "TULIP": 1. Total Depravity. 2. Unconditional election. 3. Limited Atonement. 4. Irresistible grace. 5. Perseverance of the Saints. At its foundation and core, Calvinism strongly emphasizes the great, utterly sovereign power of God and His plan for humanity. This belief permeates the entire system, and explains how one belief so logically fits and leads to others. It's a separate matter, of course, about whether this internally logical system actually lines up with or contradicts what's revealed in the Bible. Resulting logically from its emphasis on God's utter sovereignty is Calvinism's belief in predestination, the belief that God has already foreseen everybody's decisions for and against salvation in Christ, and that no individual can decide otherwise. God chooses people in advance to be saved or lost since God's omniscience insures that He can see in advance who would choose to be saved and who would ultimately choose to be lost in the future.

Predestination is an utterly crucial teaching of Calvinism, and explains how the five points are derived from God's total sovereignty over His creation. There is a serious consequence, however, from applying all this rigorous theological logic: A large chunk of the human race, indeed, the great majority by all accounts when mostly unbelieving nations like India and China are considered, are born to be condemned to the flames of eternal hell fire. That leads to yet one more variation on the problem of evil, which is a subject I deal with in other essays in detail.

Now let's begin to work through the letters of the acronym "TULIP" in order to explain the five summary points of Calvinism. "Total depravity" refers to the belief that people have an innately evil human nature. All parts of human beings, their minds, hearts, emotions, will, and body, are all contaminated by sin. This condition results from after Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden. There's also the continuing evil influence of Satan and the demons that makes human nature worse. Hence, if left on their own, people wouldn't choose God, wouldn't choose to be saved, and they wouldn't choose to overcome their sins. "Unconditional election" means that God doesn't choose people for salvation based on any individual's merit or talents. God choose people only because of His kind intentions. Of course, those not elected, or called to salvation, are unelected, and thus ultimately doomed to hell. Calvin's system includes the doctrine of limited atonement, which maintains Jesus died only for the elect, for Christians, not the world as a whole, including those who would never accept His sacrifice. This doctrine maintains, by a ruthlessly consistent application of theological logic, that Jesus only died for the elect, not for the unsaved in the world who were destined from birth for the flames of hell by God's awesome decree. By "Irresistible Grace," Calvinists mean that when God calls people by the Holy Spirit within them to become Christians, they can't resist that call, but must choose to become Christians. This theological system also believes in the "perseverance of the saints," or, "once saved, always saved." Someone who totally accepts Christ can never change his or her mind from that decision, that one who is sincere in accepting Christ could never be sincere later on in rejecting Him. Calvinists maintain a totally sincere and chosen ("elected") Christian will never change his or her mind, and then lose salvation.

Let's explain Calvinism some more by contrasting its doctrines with those of its main rival theological system among Protestants: Arminianism, which emphasizes human free will and denies predestination. Its central theme is that people do have the free will to accept or reject salvation after God makes the offer of eternal life to people. Arminians think Jesus died for the whole world, including those who reject Him as Savior. But His death and resurrection are only effective if someone has faith and accepts His sacrifice in faith, which requires an act of will on the part of the individual believer. Jesus did indeed die for all people in the world since all the world has (theoretically) a chance to repent and to be saved. Each individual has the opportunity to choose to be lost or saved both before and after conversion. Arminianism thus denies "once

saved, always saved." A Christian always has the freedom to walk away from salvation after having gained it conditionally. A truly sincere Christian can always choose to be lost at any time before he or she dies. Now today, the Methodist Church upholds a version of Arminianism. Baptists seem to be more Calvinist than Arminian on average since it seems a majority of them believe in once saved, always saved. The basic debate among (Protestant) Christians about predestination concerns whether God chooses which people to be saved or whether people choose to be saved themselves.

Consider what Jesus said in (Matt. 22:14): "For many are called, but few are chosen." Obviously the called (i.e., those invited to become saved) need not automatically become saved. For although we know that those who are foreknown are predestined to be conformed to the image of Jesus (Romans 8:28-30), we also know that many are called, but few chosen (Matt. 20:16). Not everyone who is in one group (the called) has to become part of the next group (the justified, i.e., the elect or the saved). Although Romans 8:29-30 looks to be an excellent support for Calvinism's belief in predestination and the perseverance of the saints, other texts need to be consulted also. This text shouldn't be taken mechanically to mean that everyone in each group must advance to the next one, but merely that if one does advance, one had to be in the prior group.

Notice in this context of comparing Calvinism's assertions with the Bible the famous "Golden Verse" of John 3:16: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life." "Whoever" implies anyone can be saved, but that doesn't mean everyone will be nor that God has to get everyone saved right now before they die. Merely being offered the opportunity to be saved doesn't mean everyone will take advantage of the offer to be saved. Hence, the Arminian view squares with Scripture better than Calvinism here, since this crucial text implies anyone can be saved if he or she truly believes. This verse also poses a problem for the doctrine of limited atonement, since if God loves the whole world, wouldn't Jesus' death have been for them also? It's a separate matter, of course, about whether that sacrifice becomes effective for everyone in the world: A person has to believe in order to be saved, to have the merits of that sacrifice applied to themselves. Jesus' death won't save anyone until someone repents, believes, and is baptized (Acts 2:37-39).

Deuteronomy 30:19 implies Moses' listeners here had a choice about whether they would obey God or not. Otherwise, why tell them to choose to obey if that was already foreordained? "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants." God does want everyone to obey Him, as Paul told his gentile listeners in Athens: "Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should repent" (Acts 17:30).

These verses reveal that the hard-line Calvinistic perspective is simply wrong overall: Why does God constantly tell the world as a whole, or His people (Christians or Israel) to obey Him and have faith in Him if everything is all marked out to happen in just one way? Why tell ancient Israel to choose life and not death, if they had no free will (Deut. 30:19-20, already quoted from above)? Why would Peter tell the gathered crowd on Pentecost that had asked about what they should do to repent and be baptized if they really didn't have a choice in the matter (Acts 2:37-39)? The implied free will of people to choose is built into Scripture implicitly almost everywhere it makes a moral command at some level. Why tell people to do things when those who won't obey and be lost can't do otherwise (ultimately), and those who will have faith and obey can't stop themselves from doing so anyway (ultimately)? Why should God's prophets bother to complain about preordained disobedience?

But now, as a matter of theological theory, can God be almighty and have such enormous power to create and destroy, yet also give puny men and women free will? Arminians maintain God has chosen to limit His power for His high purposes. God has chosen to respect our free moral agency and to give us the power to reject obeying Him even when we're called. A key error of classical Calvinism is to turn men and women into wind-up toy soldiers who make only predetermined choices about the ultimate outcome of their lives. God chose freely to give man's will a freedom rather similar to His own, although it is perverted by an evil human nature acquired since birth from the continuing influence of Satan, his demons, and this world's civilization. By gaining the Holy Spirit, conscientious, converted Christians slowly have much of this negative influence removed or at least restricted. Much like during the incarnation God chose to restrict His power (Jesus was God, but He didn't know everything, as per Matt. 24:36), God has chosen to restrict His power in calling and converting people today. Correspondingly, Arminianism maintains there's a certain level of drama and uncertainty, even from God's viewpoint, concerning how many will be ultimately responsive to His call.

Many verses, especially in Hebrews, pose major problems for the "once saved, always saved" Calvinist position. "Irresistible grace" and the "perseverance of the saints" are both contradicted by these texts, for then they show people who are truly Christians resisting grace, resisting their calling, and choosing to be lost. Now someone can be perfectly sincere in being saved, and yet still change his or her mind later. A Calvinist might reply, "Only the elect will be sincere, and if one is sincere, that person will stay saved for the rest of his or her life automatically." I beg to disagree. Someone who is "sincere" now is allowed by God to choose to be "insincere" later, and thus unsaved at some future point in time.

Consider some of the verses that show the saints don't always persevere. First, notice Hebrews 6:4-6: "For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit [i.e., "saved," Rom. 8:9--EVS], and have tasted the good word

of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God, and put Him to open shame." Second, think about Hebrews 10:26-29: "For if we [that word doesn't refer to the unsaved here--EVS] go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain terrifying expectation of judgment, and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace?" By the way, why need we "fear and tremble" if we're automatically permanently saved anyway? See Phil 2:12.

Paul himself, who was unquestionably saved, said he had to work hard, using an analogy drawn from ancient sports competitions, to avoid being a castaway, or becoming unsaved (I Cor. 9:24-27). Obedience simply isn't automatic, although many evangelicals assume this when criticizing others as being "legalistic" (i.e., simply concerned with carefully obeying God's law). Some other verses to examine on this subject are Matt. 24:13, I Cor. 15:2, Hebrews 2:3, 3:6, 12:4, 4:11, 10:35, 39; 12:25; James 5:19-20; II Peter 2:20-22; Rom. 11:22, Eze. 18:24; Deut. 30:17-19; Joshua 24:20; John 8:31; 15:10; I Tim. 4:16; I John 2:24. In the light of such verses when interpreted straightforwardly and literally, how can we sensibly believe in "once saved, always saved"?

Then I Tim. 6:18-19 needs some examination. The latter part of the second verse is a good argument against "once saved, always saved." "That they may hold on eternal life" isn't about higher or lower positions in the kingdom of God, but it's about entering the kingdom. Good works, such as the rich (v. 17) would do, wouldn't bring "justification" (in Paul's standard definition), but they do help in "sanctification," a different but not completely separate part of the overall salvation process. The good works by rich Christians would help them become sanctified, and thus saved, as part of the overall salvation process.

A key point that needs to be made here: Although not everyone is being called now to salvation, most will receive their first chance at salvation after they die and are resurrected. Full proof of this doctrine would require a lot of space by itself, but notice in particular that the whole house of Israel, a group of people who committed a great deal of idolatry and other sins, when resurrected, wasn't cast into the Lake of Fire, but put into the land of Israel (Ezekiel 37:10-14; cf. Romans 11:26). Nor will there be eternal torment for the unsaved, but they will be totally destroyed into ashes if they still reject salvation then (see Malachi 4:1, 3) since no one has an immortal or eternal soul.

The doctrine of total depravity is basically sound, although the Bible shows that human nature isn't innately evil from birth (see Ezekiel 18:1-4, 13-14, 17-19), but

rather it becomes evil afterwards because of the influence of Satan (Eph. 2:1-3; Gal. 4:3-4) and the world. Consider, for example, the listing of Old Testament quotes Paul assembles in Romans 3:10-18 in order to prove that no one, Jew or gentile, is righteous, that indeed all have sinned (verse 23). Jesus described how evil man's heart is when left to its own devices (Mark 7:21-23). There is some truth in the Calvinistic viewpoint that we can't on our own choose when we will be saved since human depravity is so total, we're blinded by our own evil human nature (Jer. 17:9). Notice that God grants repentance, or leads us to realize our fallen spiritual state (Romans 2:4; cf. Romans 5:6-10). Also, the timing of when one is called to accept salvation, in this life or the next, isn't up to us individually, but is determined by God's plan. For example, Jesus said people could only come to the Father if the Father drew them (John 6:44, 65). Jesus likewise spoke in parables not necessarily to make His teachings more clear, but less clear, so not everyone would be saved at that time (notice Matt. 13:10-16) besides His called disciples. Notice also Romans 11:7-8; 31-32.

However, it should be noted that the Calvinistic doctrine of total depravity at times is an exaggeration that lacks contact with our real world experiences. That is, we can always use psychological egoism and claim that anybody's action or good work under any circumstances has a bad motive, but such "explanations" need not really be true since we can't read other people's minds. Hence, the reformed alcoholic who attends AA meetings and really gives up the bottle has done a good work, all other aspects of his moral life being the same, even if he hasn't accepted Jesus as His personal Savior. We can accuse him of having a selfish motive, but that doesn't mean our accusation is true, which is the main flaw of psychological egoism ("everything everyone does is selfish in motivation.") Likewise, we can always accuse someone of being a racist in motive who did something inconvenient to (liberal) blacks, but that doesn't prove the accusation is automatically true. We can't read other people's hearts and minds concerning their true motives.

It's worth some thought about whether unconditional election is fully, radically true. That is, it seems sometimes God really, really wants specific individuals to take on special roles in His great plan. Consider the case of Moses' great reluctance to go back to Egypt to lead Israel about, and the list of excuses he gave while talking to God after seeing the famous "burning bush." Then there's the case of Paul/Saul, who God so spectacularly struck down on the road to Damascus while he was engaged in an operation to persecute the early church. Perhaps also there was something special in Noah and Abraham as well. But on the other hand, it seems we're all replaceable at some level, that no one should think their talents (physical or spiritual) are "indispensable" to God. Presumably, God could always use miracles (veiled or not) if necessary in order to get the people He needs for His plan whenever that's necessary, and not enough people (or enough of the right people) are responding to what was being done before in order to be saved.

Two key places where the term "predestination" is actually used concerns the saved, not the lost, since no particular person is said to be predestined to damnation (Eph. 1:4-6, 11-12). Notice the statement in verse 12 saying, "that we who first trusted in Christ should be the praise of His glory." Although these texts in Eph. 1 aren't fully clear, the later ones are evidence for people being predestined to be called at different times. People are saved in a different order; not everyone is being called now to salvation (cf. I Cor. 15:22-24). So one way to sort out the Bible's statements in this area is to say that although the timing of when someone is called is predestined, which determines whether they are called in this life or in the next life after being resurrected, no one is predestined to be lost or saved (i.e., the ultimate outcome, "glorification.")

So, what is the fundamental mistake in Calvinism's perspective concerning God's master plan and giving the human race salvation? It relates closely to the classic problem of evil: Why did a good God create a universe in which He allows evil, pain, and death? Why did God give humanity free will? Why did God tell Adam and Eve to not eat of the Tree of Life? But why? Well, God is in the process of making beings like Himself (Matt. 5:48; Eph. 4:13) who willingly choose to be 100% righteous, but have 100% free will. God doesn't want to create a set of robots that automatically obey His law, His will, for they aren't like Him then, for they wouldn't have free will, and the ability to make fully conscious choices. Here God needs to test us, to see how loyal we'll be in advance of gaining eternal life. The greatness of the prize, being in God's Family and living forever happily in union with God, ultimately makes up for the suffering in this life. For what's (say) 70 years of pain relative to trillions of years of happiness in God's kingdom? Unfortunately, our emotions, which normally focus on what's right before us physically, rebel against this insight, but it's true nevertheless.

Perhaps the psychological and emotional trap that Calvinism can lead to in people's spiritual lives is to create a sense of fatalism, that your destiny isn't under your control at all. Whether you're saved or lost was determined by God long ago, so why try to change the outcome? Good works, of course, have no effect on being saved for Calvinists, who are so strong about justification by grace through faith alone, but then you can't even choose to have saving faith on your own either. Calvinism also leads to a harsh view about the unsaved, although Calvinists merely share a greater degree of this error than most Arminians (or Catholics). They think the vast majority will be lost, that Satan has "won" more souls for hell than God has won for His kingdom. Therefore, Satan has been beating God in this contest to win the affections of the human race! But this problem is solved by pointing to the evidence that people can be called and then saved after they die and are resurrected (e.g., Ezekiel 37:1-14).

For although we know that those who are foreknown are predestined to be conformed to the image of Jesus (Romans 8:28-30), we also know that many are called, but few chosen (Matt. 20:16). Not everyone who is in one group (the called) has to become part of the next group (the justified, i.e., the elect or the

saved). One way to sort out the Bible's statements in this area is to say that although the timing of when someone is called is predestined (Eph. 1:4-5, 11-13, although these texts aren't decisive for proving this idea), which determines whether they are called in this life or in the next life after being resurrected, no one is predestined to be lost or saved (i.e., the ultimate outcome, "glorification.") A theme that recurs in Hebrews concerns Christians making sure they believe and obey so that they can't end up among the lost (Hebrews 2:3; 6:4-6; 10:28-31), which denies "once saved, always saved" and "the perseverance of the saints." Paul himself said he had to work hard, using a sports analogy, to avoid being a castaway, or becoming unsaved (I Cor. 9:24-27).

Calvinism fundamental error in exegesis arise from taking a particular interpretation of Romans 8-11, and then trying to make the rest of the Bible fit those theological assumptions. But a lot of the rest of the Bible, taken at face value, using normal grammatico-historical-linguistic interpretative methods, simply doesn't fit that Procrustean bed. The assumptions just don't fit. If indeed many are called, but few are chosen (Matt. 20:16), then the standard Calvinist interpretation of Romans 8:30 can't be correct. Hebrews, in particular, is totally incompatible with "once saved, always saved." Likewise, many of Jesus' own statements emphasized works and said nothing about faith as the requirement for salvation, such as in the parable of the sheep and the goats and what he told the young rich ruler about how to gain eternal life. Sanctification by its main definition, but not justification, by its main definition, requires actual works, not just repentance, faith, and the holy Spirit's active presence, to occur. And it's the second stage of the overall salvation process. That can be easily documented from Romans 6:13, 16, 19, 22. It's selective proof texting to cite the texts that say salvation is only by faith, and then ignore the texts that show individual human participation is required beyond faith and receiving imputed righteousness by the grace of God. God wants us to become actually righteous, and that to a certain degree (since 100% perfection in actualized holy righteous character will never be achieved in this life) is required by God as a condition to salvation. Philippians 2:12-13 captures this conundrum well, since it states that God works within us yet also we are work out our own salvation also: A Calvinist shouldn't quote verse 13 and then pretend that the point of verse 12 doesn't exist, based on normal, literal interpretative methods, not hair-splitting reinterpreive evasions. "Salvation" has more than one definition, and "justification" (by its main definition, which isn't the one used by James in chapter 2), or being declared righteous by faith alone, isn't the only meaning it has. Ultimately the main problem with Calvinism, and why Western man has increasingly rejected it over the past three centuries stems from its failure to secure justice for the great majority who are doomed to eternal hellfire the moment they are conceived. Predestination is a monstrous doctrine. It teaches that perhaps 100 billion human beings will roast away in hell fire for unending trillions and trillions of years without ever having had an opportunity to be saved. They are born doomed to eternal misery, including all those who never so much as heard the name of Jesus Christ during their entire lives. And for what? Perhaps 70 years of sins committed in ignorance much of the time.

The God of the Calvinists condemns sinners to eternal torture without their receiving any opportunity to avoid it. This is why the plan of salvation, as taught by the Church of God, which maintains people weren't called in this life can be saved after being in the second resurrection as based on our interpretation of the holy days of Leviticus 23, is vastly morally superior.

The theodicy (i.e., explanation for the problem of evil) of the Church of God (i.e., those who follow the basic theological system of Herbert W. Armstrong) is based upon free will: God is in the process of making beings like Himself who have 100% free will yet who will choose to be 100% righteous, just like He is. Hence, the purpose of life, why we were born, is to become as God is, which involves developing holy righteous character as the Holy Spirit aids us by our actively choosing to obey God's law after accepting Jesus as Savior. Free will is crucial to explaining not just the problem of evil, but why God created humanity to begin with. God could have made any number of robots who would automatically obey Him, which is what Calvinism's model really boils down to, stripped of the pretty rhetoric and clever wordsmithing, but they couldn't have been exactly like him in character. As has been observed, God can't create 100% holy righteous character in another free moral agent by fiat, since the other entity has to learn to choose to be righteous. Otherwise, that created being is just another wind-up toy. And about 95%+ of the 100 billion or more people who have lived on earth are headed for unending trillions of years of torture in hell fire, based on orthodox Calvinist theology strictly applied. This is a foundational reason why Christians should reject Calvinism.

In general, Calvinism is mainly wrong compared to Arminianism, but not always. Clearly God has selected people to be saved by calling them, but that most aren't called now and thus can't be saved now. But once one is called, whether it be in this life or the next, after God has made an offer of salvation by grace as demonstrated and implemented by Jesus' sacrifice to you personally, then you have to make a choice. May it be the right one!

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