

Bad Arguments Against Calvinism

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Greg points out the fallacies in many of the common approaches.

We've been talking about the biblical question of predestination lately--not strict determinism, which mechanistically fixes every detail of our lives, but rather the view that God has personally chosen (predestined) those who would believe in Christ for salvation.

Often when I talk about this issue I'm not always making a positive case for the Reformed point of view (Calvinism). Instead, I'm frequently only trying to show that some of the objections raised against the Reformed view simply don't work. By carefully removing the bad arguments, we can get down to the more substantial concerns.

One objection that falls short makes much of the "conflict" between God's sovereignty and man's free will. I personally don't see the tremendous conflict. I think God can be sovereign and fulfill His purposes even though we act freely. One thing that allows Him to do that is His omniscience.

Consider the objection: "If God is sovereign, guaranteeing certain outcomes in people's lives, then there is no free will." This is flawed thinking. It doesn't follow that if God is in full control, then free acts are not possible. What is critical here is the way in which God is in control, the method He uses to guarantee the outcomes. Let me illustrate.

How would you catch a criminal who is on the run? Well, you'd think about where he might go, then you'd try to be there to intercept him. Now, if you had perfect knowledge--if you knew everything-- you'd not only know where he is at any given moment, but where he'll be at any moment in the future. You'd know exactly what time he'd arrive at any point along his entire route.

Would you be able to catch a criminal if you knew the exact moves he was going to make? If you knew the things he was going to freely choose to do--and this is important--at any given point, would you be able to catch him? Sure you could.

If you know he's going down a particular road and will come around a particular corner at a particular time, you could place your men there so that when he takes the route he freely chooses (though known by you), your men would be right there to nab him. You're in control the entire time--you're sovereign. You're able to be in control because you know every move he's going to freely make. Therefore, your plan can be perfectly executed, even though he's making his free choices.

If you owe me a million dollars and I choose to completely forgive the debt, how is your will violated?

This illustration shows that God can be completely sovereign in that He controls all final outcomes, yet human beings could still make free choices. I think there is more to God's sovereignty than described here--I think He does control our specific choices in some ways--but most of our choices are free, yet God is in control. He knows enough about our free choices to work out a plan that will encompass all our free choices and still accomplish His purposes.

This thought introduces another wrong conclusion people draw about Calvinism, and has to do with one particular thing that God seems to predetermine in our lives. Reformed theology teaches that God unilaterally decides whom He will forgive, that He chooses those who are to be saved. These are called the "elect."

The objection is this: If God is responsible for our salvation, then it follows that we are predetermined machines. Another way of saying this is, "If God decides the one issue of my salvation, then He decides everything. Either everything I do is free, or nothing I do is free. If God determines my salvation, then I have no free will at all." Of course, that doesn't follow. This is an all-or-nothing fallacy.

Because God determines one aspect of our lives based on His mercy doesn't mean that all aspects of our lives are merely parts of a deterministic machine. It doesn't follow that if God predestines one thing in our lives--that we go to heaven--then nothing else in our lives is freely chosen. We can do all kinds of things freely. We freely choose to sin all

the time, for example. That's what makes us guilty. God simply makes a choice Himself, on His side of the ledger, to exercise grace on our behalf and allow us to have mercy and forgiveness for the sin we freely commit. (This is why we thank Him, by the way.)

If you owe me a million dollars and I choose to completely forgive the debt, how is your will violated? The debt is owed to me; it's on my side of the ledger. I can cancel it if I want. It may have a further impact on your life, that in canceling the debt you don't have to work for 20 years to pay it off. But it seems to me such an action grants you freedom, not bondage.

Further, freedom usually has some limitations. Even a criminal in prison has a measure of freedom. Though some choices are restricted, it doesn't follow that he has no choices at all. In the same way, if God chooses us for forgiveness and salvation, it doesn't follow that we have become robots.

Here's a third objection: If God exercises forgiveness for some and not for others, then God is the cause of people going to hell. Once again, this is a conclusion that doesn't follow. Consider this illustration.

God is the cause of people going to heaven. However, the cause of people going to hell is their own sin.

A man is imprisoned for a crime he actually committed, yet he calls a press conference claiming to the world he's been unjustly jailed. His incarceration is not fair. Why not? "It's all the governor's fault," he says. Why is it the governor's fault? "Because the governor didn't give me a pardon. If he would give me a pardon, I'd be out on the street right now, but since he didn't give me a pardon, I'm in prison. Therefore, it's the governor's fault I'm in prison, not mine."

Would you be swayed by that logic? I doubt it. Instead, you'd reply that the criminal is behind bars for crimes he committed--because he killed somebody, he robbed somebody, he stole something or he extorted something, etc. He broke the law, that's why he's in prison. Now, the criminal might be out if the governor chose to exercise mercy, but that isn't why he's in. He's in because he's a criminal.

The same thing is true with us. We're in deep trouble with God because we are criminals against Him. If we go to hell, it's for only one reason: because we've broken His law. Those who are punished are not punished unjustly. They are punished justly because they're guilty. It would only be unjust if they weren't guilty.

If God chooses to exercise mercy on some people, on the other hand, well, that seems to me to be His prerogative. It's His ball game; it's His mercy. That's what grace means: undeserved, unmerited, and not required. He doesn't have to do it. There's no obligation. God can forgive whomever He wills.

So, God is the cause of people going to heaven. However, the cause of people going to hell is their own sin.

But there's a fourth question that comes up because of statements like Jesus' in Matthew 23:37 "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling." Peter also writes that, "The Lord...is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish, but for all to come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9).

Verses like these prompt a question. If these verses say that God wills all men to be saved, then how can Calvinists say that God only wills the elect to be saved? This is a very fair question, but poses problems for all Christians, not just Calvinists.

The problem is that the Bible seems to indicate in these verses that God has a will for something which doesn't get done. Israel didn't come to Jesus, though He willed it. Not everyone is saved, though God wills it. Yet at the same time, the Bible says that nothing can thwart God's will. Check out Dan. 4:35: "And all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, but He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, 'What hast Thou done?'"

Now, isn't that a strong statement? Doesn't that indicate--especially in the context of Daniel 4, the unfolding of world history--that the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing in the sense that they cannot disrupt God's plan? He does what He wants. So, if it says in Daniel that God does according to His will and no one wards off His hand, and then we read in 2 Peter 3 that God wills we all be saved and yet we're not all saved, then clearly we can ward off His hand.

Guess what we've got here, ladies and gentlemen. We've got an honest to goodness, bona fide contradiction. Daniel says nothing can violate God's will. Peter says, clearly, something can, because God wants all to be saved, yet all are not. Therefore, we do violate God's will. Now, how is it possible that God's will can be violated and can't be violated at the same time? It sounds like a contradiction.

There's only one way out. The law of non-contradiction states that "A cannot be non-A at the same time and in the same way." The only way these teachings are not contradictory is if God's "will" in one case does not mean the same thing as God's "will" in the other case. This is the only way out.

The words "God's will" can mean two different things. Or, to put it another way, you can have different "wills" of God, or two aspects of the will of God. The simplest way to describe them is God's moral will--what He morally desires, but doesn't always take place (like salvation for everyone)--and God's sovereign will--described in Daniel 4 and other places--that which He purposes to take place and which always happens.

Two wills of God. Moral will and sovereign will. Moral will entails all those things God wants us to do, yet we may disobey. God wants us to be saved, yet many are not. God wanted Israel to turn to Jesus, yet most did not. God wants all kinds of things of His people--He wills those things--but they don't come to pass. There's a sense of God's will that can be violated.

If you reject the notion that there are two aspects of God's will...you have one of two choices. Either God is not sovereign, or God is the author of evil and there is no such thing as disobedience.

Yet, at the same time, there are other things which are clearly stated about God's will that He intends actually come to pass. We see some of those details in the book of Daniel, and this is why Daniel makes the statement that God's will, in this sense, cannot be violated. Daniel's statements can only be sound if we're talking about a different aspect of God's will. If we're not talking about a different will, then we have a contradiction.

If you reject the notion that there are two aspects of God's will-- sovereign and moral --and don't want to concede the obvious contradiction, you have one of two choices. Either all of God's will is moral, or all of God's will is sovereign.

If you choose the first option, that there is only one aspect of God's will--the moral aspect--which can be broken by our free choices, then it's hard to see how God can have ultimate and sovereign control over human history if our choice is the deciding factor. You might take refuge in the element of God's omniscience, as I mentioned above. I think that explains some things, but I think the full sense of God's sovereignty entails more than just incorrigible anticipation of our moves.

If, on the other hand, God's sovereign will is the only concept taught in Scripture, then there can be no immorality. Everything we do is something that He, as the primary and sufficient cause, irrevocably ordains. We don't choose to disobey His moral will; we're just doing what God has already caused us to do. This would make God the direct author of evil.

Either God is not sovereign, or God is the author of evil and there is no such thing as disobedience. These are unacceptable alternatives because the Scripture clearly teaches otherwise. Clearly, it seems to me, there are two different wills of God. There's a moral will and there's a sovereign will. And if that's the case, then this removes the fourth objection.

By the way, none of my responses establishes Calvinism as true. I could have, in the same spirit, also refuted bad arguments against Arminianism, though that wouldn't establish the truth of that view, either.

What it means is that some of the objections raised against Calvinism don't stand, ultimately, and must give way. There might be other objections which are good objections, but not these. If you want to undermine or disprove the Reformed point of view on salvation, then you have to find some other way. Maybe that way can be found. However, the objections I've just described are not good objections to Reformed theology. Calvinism will have to be defeated on other grounds.
