

“Calvinism Vs. Arminianism: What Does the Bible Teach?”

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Introduction and Overview:

Just as some of the Corinthian believers got distracted from the main issue by saying they were of Paul or Apollos rather than focusing on being of Christ, so too can we today if we get caught up by trying to solve the paradox of God’s sovereignty and the free choice of man. The Bible clearly teaches that man has the ability and responsibility to choose, and it also just as clearly teaches that God is sovereign over all that happens, including our choices.

The question arises: “How can we freely choose something that God has predestined and foreordained?” In other words, if something is predestined, don’t we have to choose it, thereby limiting our free choice? But the Bible does speak of both predestination and free choice. In our finite, fallen minds, we cannot comprehend how these two concepts can co-exist, yet neither can we fully comprehend the Trinity or eternity, for example. What is important is that we accept both the free will of man and the sovereignty of God because the Bible teaches both. To try to weasel out of this paradox using reason alone will fail us and lead us to the unbiblical conclusion that God forces the will of man to choose hell for himself. There is nothing about God’s character to say that He would force somebody to go to hell without their own wicked will sending them there. God created men surely knowing what they would choose, but He does not make them choose what He knows. His omniscience does not eliminate their free will. Therefore, somehow, God’s sovereignty, foreknowledge, and omniscience co-exist with our human responsibility.

We are not robots, for, as with Adam and Eve, we have choices to make and the capacity to do so. Neither would it be true to say, however, that God is reactive to what we choose. Some have suggested that God only knows the possibilities of our choices, not the exact choice. Obviously, this is foolishness because God knows all. Thus, we are left with a paradox of God’s sovereignty, which includes predestination and the free will of man. Somehow both exist, and we must accept the tension. To veer to either extreme, which Calvinism and Arminianism in many ways are, without balancing it with the other will lead us to very unbiblical conclusions and behavior. We must balance God’s sovereignty with man’s responsibility.

Let’s now look at Calvinism’s teachings and Arminianism’s teachings.

Calvinism’s Beliefs

Here are Calvinism’s five beliefs, commonly remembered by the acrostic T-U-L-I-P.

T- Total Depravity

This belief teaches the total inability of man, namely that man is so fallen and corrupt by sin that he cannot even choose to be saved or conjure up the desire to be saved.

Comments:

This belief does well to show us our utter and total need for grace, given that we are indeed dead in sin (Ephesians 2:1) and enslaved to the devil (2 Timothy 2:26) prior to coming to faith. Yet the danger here is to eliminate the emotions, the mind, and the will of a person as being responsible for responding to the grace of God. A person who overemphasizes total depravity to an unhealthy extreme would tell a person to ask God to give them the faith to believe, rather than telling them to just decide to believe. I agree that we cannot manipulate a conversion, but God does give us as His witnesses the responsibility to preach, to reason, and to do what we can to persuade a person to believe. We ought to engage their fallen mind and pray that God will give them the grace to see and understand. We are indeed totally dependent upon His grace, but let us not use that truth to negate that reason (Acts 17:2), good works (Matthew 5:16), and truth (Romans 10:17) can help lead a person to faith as God's grace works in a person's heart, mind, and will.

U- Unconditional Election

This is the notion that God elects and chooses those whom He will save solely based upon mercy, not upon any foreseen acts of goodness that the person might perform.

Comments:

I agree that God knows ultimately who will be saved, and that it was indeed His sovereign purpose, in one sense, not to save all. Yet, lest we stop there, we must balance this with the fact that God came to seek and save the lost, not just the elected lost. He wants none to perish, but all to come to eternal life. To use this belief to suggest that God delights to send some to hell or that those who go to hell never had a chance at responding to grace is not Biblical. It is not our job to worry about if someone is a member of the elect or not; rather, it is our job and calling to preach to all people indiscriminately, believing that God wants them all to be saved.

God does not choose us because of some foreseen merit on our part, but we are adopted into His family when we trust in Christ by faith. In retrospect, we can recognize that God knew that we would be saved; thus, we are of the elect. But to say that God picks some here and rejects some there simply because He can is to present a wrong view of God. God rejects only those who reject Him. Granted, He knew that they would reject Him, but they are still responsible for doing so. Unconditional election is in danger of blaming God for the eternal damnation of the non-elect.

L- Limited Atonement

Limited atonement means that the sacrifice of Christ only covers the sins of those who receive it, rather than the sins of the entire world. In other words, God only died for the elect.

Comments:

This idea really flies in the face of the idea that man has any responsibility whatsoever. The Biblical picture is that Christ died for the sins of the entire world (1 John 2:2). The issue is not whether Christ died for someone or not but whether or not that person will receive the grace provided to him. God has presented the entire world with a gift of salvation (Romans 6:23), but only some will choose to receive it. All sin has been paid for, but not all people will get the righteousness of Christ transferred and credited to their spiritual accounts.

Limited atonement has dire consequences for Biblical evangelism because one would be left hoping that Christ died for a person. If Christ did not, then what hope can that person have? Why even witness to them? Obviously, God calls us as witnesses to all (Acts 1:8). We are to preach the grace of God to all, and let the seeds sprout where they may. We should not find ourselves having to challenge someone to pray that maybe God would give them the faith to believe, in the case of total depravity, to hope that they are in the elect, in the case of unconditional election, or to hope that Christ died for them, in the case of limited atonement. We are simply to preach the gospel and let the grace of God work as people either receive Christ or reject Him.

I- Irresistible Grace

This belief teaches that, when God chooses to draw a person to faith, they will come to faith as God will overcome all sinful resistances that they have to the truth and to grace. By implication, if God doesn't draw a person, then they won't come to faith.

Comments:

The problem here again is that in sending Christ to this earth, God called all who are sick to be saved (Matthew 9:12). His call goes out not only to those who receive Him but to those who reject Him. How can a person reject a God Who never called to them? Worse yet, how could God hold them responsible for not repenting if He never called to them in grace to repent? This again risks eliminating man's responsibility from the picture. It also risks being an attack against the impartial and all-loving heart of God toward all sinners, for he desires none to perish but all to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9).

The only unforgiveable sin is the blasphemy of the Spirit which is rejecting the call of God to respond to the Creator in faith (Mark 3:29). What else wouldn't God forgive? God's grace is ready to work in any person's life who is open to Him (John 3:16). Yes, we all are dependent upon God's grace, but the key is that it is available to us all if we would respond to it in faith. God doesn't force someone to faith against their will, but He gives them grace as they choose to have faith. In the same vein, God doesn't

force somebody to go to hell against their will. They choose to reject Him, and they are thus responsible for their eternal destiny in torment.

Both the sovereign purposes of God and the free will of man meet in salvation. To choose God is not a work of man but a work of grace; yet, it is still a choice. We can resist the grace of God found in Christ, and it is this choice that will damn our souls.

P- Perseverance of the Saints

Perseverance of the saints means that those whom God has elected will persevere until the end. They cannot relapse into condemnation, as if to lose their salvation, for God will graciously enable them to persevere in righteousness and faithfulness.

Comments:

This belief is very similar to eternal security, the belief that a saved person cannot go back to being unsaved. Once a person is saved, they are changed from the inside out, reborn in their spirit, regenerated in their heart, and able to present their bodies as spiritual sacrifices unto God as they live in holiness. They are sealed with the Spirit, adopted as children of God, seated with Christ in the heavenly places, and destined to be revealed as sons and daughters of God. Nothing and no one can separate them from the love of God or take them from the hand of God. The issue, however, is why. For staunch Calvinists, the perseverance of the saints amounts to having no room for backsliding as a Christian. In other words, if a professing Christian sins for a time or rebels as the prodigal son did, then he or she must not have been a Christian to begin with. After all, the thinking goes, how could a Christian do such a thing? The reality is that Christians can do such things because they still have flesh (Romans 13:14) (the prodigal son did). They are not yet perfected. Alexander and Hymaneus made shipwreck of their faith (1 Timothy 1:18-20). They didn't lose their salvation; they just made a mess of their sanctification. The truth is that those whom God has called, He will also glorify (Romans 8:30). The perseverance of the saints holds true because of the grace of God Who will perfect His saints when they are glorified. If a person habitually practices sin to the point that sin identifies his lifestyle more than Christ, love, and good works, then it is likely that he is not saved (1 John 3:9). However, it is not so clean and neat to be certain that a person was never saved if they rebel. In such cases, church discipline must be carried out so that such a one can be delivered over to Satan for the destruction of his flesh and for the preservation of his soul (1 Corinthians 5:5). Such a one is a hard-hearted, rebellious person that won't give up his or her sin. Did they fail to persevere and thus prove themselves to not be of the elect? Calvinism seems to indicate that the answer is "yes." The reality is that God will finish and perfect their faith (Hebrews 12:2), but the road could be bumpy and even, in a sense, regressive at times. Saints (Christians) persevere because Christ's grace is sufficient; in other words, He will bring them home and sanctify them completely. The journey, however, is capable of great highs and lows, depending on whether we walk after the Spirit or after the flesh. We do have a choice.

Perseverance of the saints, according to Calvinism, allows for some sinning but not backsliding or hard-hearted defiant rebellion. The reality is that some Christians stop trying and stop fighting because the battle against sin is hard. They fail to persevere

against their own flesh. I agree that Christians' lives cannot be characterized by a practice of sin, though they do stumble (James 3:2). Yet, I believe it is possible for believers to backslide and quit. Some commit suicide. Did they not persevere? In their own choosing, they did not, but by God's grace in eternity, they will. The perseverance of the saints is ultimately based in the grace of God. Part of the definition of being a Christian is that Christ will finish the work He started. This is eternal security and the true perseverance of the saints.

Let's now move on and look at Arminianism's beliefs.

Classical Arminianism's Beliefs

Depravity Is Total- Arminianism teaches that man cannot be saved unless assisted and excited by the grace of God to believe.

Comments:

Calvinism and Arminianism here mostly agree. Because of the need for grace, Calvinists might be tempted to tell someone to plead for faith, rather than to just believe. Arminianism would just preach faith in Christ indiscriminately, believing that the grace of God will have worked if the hearers do indeed believe. We don't need to make a person beg God to give them the grace to believe. God will give grace because He will be found by those who seek Him (Jeremiah 29:13, Luke 11:10). This is where Calvinism tends to go too far. Arminianism gives a better balance in respect to honoring man's responsibility in receiving Christ by faith.

Atonement Is Intended for All- In complete disagreement with Calvinism, Arminianism teaches that salvation is available to all if only they will receive it.

Comments:

Jesus did indeed pay the penalty for all sin, if only sinners will receive the gift. (See comments under the Calvinism "U" for unlimited atonement.)

Jesus' Death Satisfies God's Justice- The sacrificial death of Christ on the cross paid for the sins of all people, but it is only appropriated to the elect because it is the elect who choose by faith to receive the gift of Christ, giving them His righteousness. Only those who put their faith in Christ will be saved and thus demonstrate themselves to be the elect.

Comments:

This is basically a corollary or addendum to the previous point, emphasizing that man can only be made righteous through faith in Christ. The jab at Calvinism is to say that God's elect are proven when they receive Christ, rather than saying that they receive Christ because they are the elect.

Grace Is Resistible- God draws all men with His grace, but some resist it while others receive it. The grace of God at work in a sinner's heart does not automatically imply that they will be saved. It can be ignored and rejected. Grace is only received when the person chooses by God's grace to respond in faith. God's grace doesn't force them to respond, but they choose willingly to respond.

Comments:

This is directly in contrast to Calvinism's position that grace is irresistible. Arminianism emphasizes that all people are confronted with the opportunity to respond in faith or to reject God's call. For Calvinists, only the elect are so fortunate as to have the "efficacious" grace of God pull on their hearts. The grace that pulls on the rest of man's hearts, according to Calvinism, does not have the power or intention to effect salvation. These non-elect are thus hopeless. Arminianism doesn't accept this hopeless scenario.

Man Has the Free Will to Respond or Resist- This goes along with the previous statement, but the point is that Arminianism gives more importance to man's free will. Arminianism acknowledges that man's free will does not override or supersede God's sovereignty, but God does allow man to choose his eternal destiny.

Comments:

My real problem with Calvinism is how it seems to ignore or displace human responsibility. Arminianism does a good job at holding man accountable for his actions as God will do come judgment time. Calvinism could also lead to pride-filled thinking on the part of the elect as they reflect on their "privileged" state. Arminianism levels the playing field, so to speak, and calls every man to make the right choice about salvation and how to live this life. We do need to be careful, however, to acknowledge that God does know beforehand who will choose Him because all things are foreordained (Psalm 139:16).

Election Is Conditional- Arminian belief is that election is the decree of God to justify believers through Christ. In other words, those who respond in faith to the gospel of Christ are the elect. Election doesn't negate man's responsibility; rather, it is man's choosing to respond to God's grace in faith that demonstrates that he was indeed elected of God. Election is a matter of the sovereign hand of God, but it is revealed practically only when a person trusts Christ by faith.

Comments:

I prefer some sort of in between view on this one. I believe that God knew all about our lives before we were even conceived (Psalm 139:16). Thus, in the realm of God's omniscience, He knew that we would respond in faith for salvation. Thus, we would prove ourselves to be the elect that God knew we were even then. I don't believe

that God elected us so that we would choose salvation against our will, but I believe that our choosing to be saved revealed our election before the foundation of the world. The only limiting factor on the number of those who are elected is the sinful will of man, certainly not the love of God. God foreknew this sinfulness, and this is what kept all from being elected. God loved us enough not to force our love for Him but to give us the capacity to do so, rendering love meaningful rather than meaningless.

God Predestines the Elect to a Glorious Future- Predestination does not mean that God predetermines who will come to faith, but predestination rather is speaking of God predetermining the believer's future inheritance.

Comments:

I believe that when the Bible speaks of predestination that it does speak of salvation. That we are adopted as sons and given a future inheritance is virtually synonymous with being saved. As one happens, so does the other, though practically we haven't lived out the fullness of the promises yet. Yet, even now, we are seated with Christ in the heavenly places (Ephesians 2:6). The point is that our inheritance is sure. I really don't see how we can differentiate between being predestined as sons of the kingdom and being predestined as in being saved. Arminians don't like the word predestine or predetermine, but all of history is predetermined in the omniscience of God (Acts 4:27-28). Yet God is God, and His predeterminations exist outside of the constraints of finite human reasoning ability, time, space, etc. Thus, it is possible for God to predetermine something and for man to still shape his own destiny. I believe in a mysterious co-existence of this divine decree and the free will of man because the Bible presents both sides.

Eternal Security Is Conditional- Arminianism teaches that, just as believers can choose to follow Christ, they can choose to willfully become apostate and deny Him, thereby losing their salvation. Salvation is assured as long as a person remains in Christ.

Comments:

I don't believe eternal security is conditional because it is based upon the work of Christ ultimately, the author and perfecter of our faith. Our perseverance is based ultimately in His love and grace which enables us to work out our salvation. Yet even those who grow weak in faith can still be considered to have persevered because of the grace of God.

Conclusions

So, as you can see, in my view, neither camp is totally right, though the Arminians are more often right. Yet I have a great problem with their view on eternal security as they overemphasize the work and responsibility of man and underemphasize the keeping power of Christ. I have hinted at my views and referenced Scriptures in my comments, but let me now list my views on this with the associated Scriptures:

1. Man Is Totally Depraved and Unable to Respond in Faith Until God Awakens His Spirit By His Grace to Choose to Respond in Faith

Romans 3:10-12, 23

“What then? Are we better than they? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin; as it is written, ‘THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE; THERE IS NONE WHO UNDERSTANDS, THERE IS NONE WHO SEEKS FOR GOD; ALL HAVE TURNED ASIDE, TOGETHER THEY HAVE BECOME USELESS; THERE IS NONE WHO DOES GOOD, THERE IS NOT EVEN ONE.’ For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

Clearly, we have no inherent goodness, or righteousness. The ability to choose is there, and the desire and insight to choose rightly is available (see Romans 1:32). What is not is the actual choosing and the conviction unto repentance which requires a work of God’s grace to change a heart and rebirth a spirit.

Jeremiah 17:9

“The heart is more deceitful than all else
And is desperately sick;
Who can understand it?”

We are broken and filled with deception to the deepest end possible.

Ephesians 2:4-6

“But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.”

Sinful man is dead and unable to awaken himself out of sin, but when the grace of God awakens his spirit, he is able to respond in faith and repent unto salvation, being thus made alive in Christ.

Isaiah 30:15

“For thus the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel, has said, ‘In repentance and rest you will be saved, In quietness and trust is your strength.’ But you were not willing.”

Repentance, an act of the will, is a necessary response to God’s call. Man does play a role in his salvation (Luke 13:5, John 3:16). The issue for which we are held to account is whether or not we are willing to respond in faith and repent.

2. Election/Predestination and Free Will/Human Responsibility Are Both At Work in Salvation and Sanctification

Psalm 139:16

“Your eyes have seen my unformed substance; And in Your book were all written The days that were ordained for me, When as yet there was not one of them.”

God ordained our entire lives before we were even conceived. All of our steps are known by Him, even designed by Him.

Acts 4:27-28

“For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur.”

Clearly, the apostles believed in predetermination and God’s sovereignty over all events. Yet they believed in faith, prayer, and change.

Ephesians 1:10b-12

“In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will, to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory.”

We must choose to hope in Christ if we want to receive an inheritance. What we will discover is that, though we were responsible for our choosing Christ, He had chosen us long ago.

John 1:12-13

“But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.”

We must choose to receive Christ, but ultimately we are born of the will of God, not of man.

Philippians 2:12-13

“So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.”

Even in our sanctification, we are responsible to work it out, yet ultimately it is God at work in us enabling us to work it out. There is a mysterious balance of God’s divine decree and our willful participation in His plan. A deviation to either extreme will lead us into unbalanced theology and potentially dangerous thinking.

3. The Atonement Is Unlimited In Terms of Availability But Limited In Terms of Its Effect**John 12:32**

“And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself.”

When Christ died on the cross, His call was to all men to be saved, even those who crucified Him (which ultimately is all of us because of our sin).

Luke 19:10

“For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.”

The call of Christ is to all people, for He came to seek and save all who were lost, not just some.

2 Peter 3:9

“The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.”

God wants all people to respond in faith, but He is not going to force them to do so. His mercy is great, even to us as we testify to His grace.

1 John 2:2

“And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.”

I don't know what could be clearer than this. Christ's sacrifice is available to all, but they must still receive it. Simply back up a couple verses to 1 John 1:9 which tells those unsure of their faith to confess their sins and trust Christ Who is faithful and just to forgive their sin and cleanse them from all unrighteousness. All can be saved, but not all will be saved because of man's own love for his sin.

4. The Draw of the Spirit Is Resistible, But God Remains Sovereign

Matthew 22:14

“For many are called, but few are chosen.”

The obvious truth from this verse is that some reject the call, and are therefore obviously not chosen. In other words, those who are not chosen choose not to be chosen.

Mark 3:29

“But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.”

Man is able to resist the draw of God, and it is the only sin that won't be forgiven him.

Proverbs 21:1

“The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the LORD; He turns it wherever He wishes.”

Though we make choices, let us not forget Who is ultimately in control of all things to His glory.

5. The Saved Are Secure Not In Their Perfect Faithfulness But in Their Faithful Savior

James 3:2

“For we all stumble in many ways.”

Even Christians still sin.

1 Timothy 1:18-20

“This command I entrust to you, Timothy, my son, in accordance with the prophecies previously made concerning you, that by them you fight the good fight, keeping faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith. Among these are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan, so that they will be taught not to blaspheme.”

Some even make shipwreck of their faith to the extent that they have to be put out of the church and turned over to Satan until they are destroyed by their sin, such that their souls can be preserved (1 Corinthians 5:5).

2 Timothy 2:13

“If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself.”

Our hope and joy is that God won't fail us, for Christ is always faithful to us to finish the work He began (Philippians 1:6) and to perfect our faith (Hebrews 12:2).

Romans 8:38-39

“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Nothing, including our own backsliding, can separate us from the love that God has for His children. Just like the father of the prodigal son always loved his rebellious son, so too will God love even a hardened child of His. He will, however, discipline him, and his sin will cost him eternal rewards.

John 10:27-28

“My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand.”

Those who are saved will never perish, no matter what because true believers are secure in God's hand. They will persevere in the Biblical sense because of God's faithfulness, even when they are not faithful. Of course, persistent and consistent faithlessness and a

life characterized by the world and sin is indeed indicative that a person was never reborn in the first place.

Final Thoughts

In doing this study, I arrived at some conclusions about the whole debate between Calvinists and Arminians. First, the debate will never end because neither side is right. Second, there is an alternative viewpoint which I have laid out. Third, we cause division and destruction when we let man-made doctrinal systems dictate our interpretation of the Bible. Both systems are convoluted enough to really distort our ability to understand Scripture, if we adhere to their basic assumptions. Fourth, I believe Calvinism puts too much emphasis on God's sovereignty while Arminianism puts too much emphasis on the ability and work of man. One camp would tend to gloat in its election while the other would fear that another sin would send them to hell with no chance at redemption. One might try to manipulate a conversion while another would be reluctant to even persuade the sinner. One might be preoccupied with fate and another with shaping their own destiny irrespective of seeking God's will. The reality is that either extreme creates dangers for practical Christian living.

We are not victims of blind fate; neither are we able to do anything unless God wills it. We must acknowledge God's sovereignty and omniscience and the free will of man. We must accept the tensions that such a position creates. May God make us those who rest in His providence and who are adamant about doing all that we can by His strength and grace to make a difference in this world.