

Free Will: Calvin, or not? If not, what?

An historic argument!



How do we reconcile the seemingly opposing ideas of a sovereign, all-powerful God with genuine free will for people? The Bible attests to both truths, but there is no easy way to understand how they co-exist. Throughout church history, different strands of theology have arisen with different views. A frequent

source of discussion (and friction!) between Christians has been, 'Are you a Calvinist or an Arminian?' Most often, the debate centres around salvation – does God choose who becomes a Christian, or do people have a real choice?

What is Calvinism?

John Calvin was a hugely influential Reformer, following on after Luther. He was born in France in 1509, but spent much of his life in Geneva, Switzerland, from where his influence spread across Europe and continues today. Although quite shy and reserved in himself, he virtually ruled the city, sometimes quite harshly, but his intention was to see the kingdom of God established on the earth in righteousness in every area of life, including the civil government. This transformed Geneva, and the influence and prosperity of the city remains high even today in areas like diplomacy and banking.

Calvin's *'Institutes of the Christian Religion'* became the text book of the Reformation. It expounded his theology, but its main aim was to lead ordinary people into godliness. At the core of his theology were God's utter sovereignty and humanity's duty to glorify God. He taught (as had Augustine) that salvation was purely a work of God and that God predestined some to be saved and others to be condemned (so-called 'double predestination'). His later followers crystallised this thinking (and made it more extreme) as Calvinism became a system of thought still followed today by many. It is a logical, relatively closed system with some major problems (to those on the outside!) but it provides a tidy, consistent way of viewing things that is attractive to some. Its major teachings are covered by the acronym TULIP.



- T: Total depravity – every area of human life is polluted by sin, so we are incapable of saving ourselves (or even of choosing God);
- U: Unconditional election – God chooses some (but not all) to be saved, regardless of any virtue or good works of theirs;
- L: Limited atonement – Jesus died for the salvation only of the chosen, not for anyone else;
- I: Irresistible grace – God sovereignly brings the chosen to a saving faith in Christ in a way they cannot resist;
- P: Perseverance of the saints – God will ensure that the chosen will stay faithful throughout their life, completing their salvation, i.e. everything is God's doing, from predestination, calling, repentance, faith, application of the atonement through to their persistence in faith.



These five points are interlocking, each stressing a vital aspect of the Calvinist belief in the utter sovereignty of God and absence of human choice from the salvation experience (or the failure to receive it).

Step up Arminius

The Calvinist system of 'double predestination' forces us to conclude that God creates multitudes who have no chance of salvation but from birth are forcibly doomed to hell (ECT according to Calvinists – see last session!) and this by God's sovereign choice. John Wesley, the great 18th century preacher, called this a 'horrible decree'. He added that the call to repentance by a Calvinist God is like a jailer calling on prisoners to leave their cells but refusing to open the doors.

Others, long before Wesley, saw this too¹. Jakob Arminius taught, and has come to symbolise, the view that God's choice of certain individuals to be saved is based upon his foreknowledge that they will one day choose



him. God's grace makes salvation possible but not inevitable. Jesus died for all, not just for the 'elect' (see 1 John 2:2). Arminius wrote down four 'decrees' of God, in which God decides:

1. to appoint Christ as the mediator to save humanity;
2. to accept and save all who repent and believe in Christ (and to reject those who refuse);
3. to provide the means necessary for people to repent and believe;
4. to choose certain individuals based on the foreknowledge that they would believe and persevere to the end.

¹ In fact, prior to Augustine the dominant view was not double predestination.

So, for Calvin, we choose God because he has chosen us, whereas for Arminius, God chooses us because of his foreknowledge that we will choose him (see 1 Peter 1:2, Romans 8:29). This difference still divides people today.

Calvinists tend to believe that only *their* system is based on 'grace alone' and that Arminians introduce a form of 'works' (i.e. choice) as necessary for salvation. Furthermore, they claim, as God doesn't need to save *anyone*, the fact that he saves anyone at all is a sign of his great love and grace. Arminians would respond that this does not sound particularly loving, and that Calvinism's closed system of limited atonement and lack



of free will tends to portray God as a bully, obsessed with his own glory rather than a loving Father. Calvinists have seen this weakness and find ways to address it, having to conclude that God loves the 'elect' differently to how he loves the rest of humankind². And the debate continues.

Discussion time...

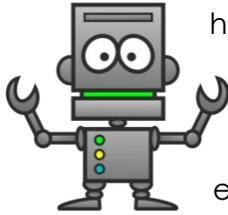
There are in fact several ways of seeing 'election', but they all somehow need to resolve the tension between God's power and human choice. Here are some questions to get the ball rolling in discussion.

1. Which side of the Calvinist / Arminian debate resonates most with you?
2. Does it matter – if so, why?
3. To a Calvinist: If God has decided everything that will ever happen, and controls every human action in advance, what about prayer? Can we ever change God's mind?
4. To an Arminian: If God can already see our future choice, is it really 'free' anyway?

² *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*, D.A. Carson, IVP, 2000 (from a Calvinist position).

Part 2: Why does it matter?

Calvinism prioritises God's sovereignty and glory over his love. In other words, 'control' is central to everything God does. He controls every



human action, even sinful ones (which makes it hard to see how God could hold anyone accountable for sin!) This in turn means that humans do not really have free will – they are not much more than robots, programmed from eternity past to behave in a certain way.

The elevation of sovereignty over love seems strange in light of Scripture. After all, the Bible says that God is power-ful. It does not say God is power. But it does say that God is love, rather than merely God is lov-ing (1 John 4:8). The biblical emphasis is on God's love, not his power or his glory. Self-giving love is the core of his being, not control or the desire to be glorified. Here is what one ex-Calvinist said of his former beliefs:

"God's desire to glorify himself had not only subsumed but consumed all his other desires, so that the only thing I understood about God was that he would glorify himself. Love, justice, and goodness had been warped beyond recognition as they were sucked into the black hole of glory." – Austin Fischer

As we saw when looking at the Trinity, the Bible presents God as seeking *relationship* with people. The nature of loving relationship requires giving others the freedom of choice to enter in or not. In this, God makes himself vulnerable to his creation! Calvinists object to this, saying that it makes God seem weak, as though appealing forlornly to stubborn human beings who hold all the cards. However, if we take seriously the nature of God as a relational being, is it not possible that almighty God sovereignly decides to *limit his control over us* in order to establish true relationship? Only a truly sovereign God would dare to do that! And is that not a better, safer, more friendly view of God than of a God who controls every aspect of us and our behaviour like a puppeteer?



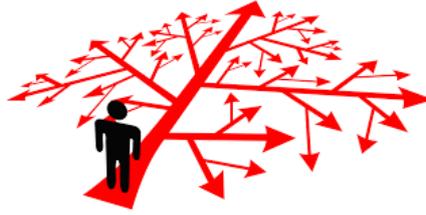
God limiting his control would also help make more sense of the existence of evil. If God controls everything, why does evil exist? But if he has relinquished some of his control to others, and if they have genuine choice, then evil becomes a real possibility.

Open Theism

So, how does God's self-limiting work? One branch of theology that seeks to answer this question is the so-called 'open view of God' or 'Open Theism'. According to this view, God has fixed certain things in the

future which will definitely happen, but has left other aspects undecided – leaving it to created beings to determine the exact course of events.

This is certainly how things feel. We pray and act, believing that we can make a difference, even though we can be confident in the final triumph of the gospel. Scripture records God changing his mind and reacting to his people. Calvinists would argue this is *anthropomorphism* – God using human language and ideas to help us understand him, when in reality the situation is not so simple. Open theists would reject this and say that the way things appear is *the way things really are*. In other words, God really does adapt to our actions and prayers. This would surely be an encouragement and a spur to action!



Many Christians would agree with the above, however Open Theism goes even further. In order for people to make real choices, God chooses *not to know* in advance what they are going to decide. This means that the future is partially unknown, even to God. To some, this makes him appear 'less than God'. However, arguably it takes even more skill and strength to weave every choice together and still accomplish the desired final outcome.

Does this reduce divine omniscience³? Open theists would argue not so, because God knows everything it is *possible* to know within his own self-imposed limitations – and indeed he knows every *possible* outcome of any situation, not just a single outcome – and knows what to do about every path that could be taken. This could be said to increase our view of God rather than diminish it. However, it does raise questions about time. Is God outside of time, or does God travel along in time with us? If God is outside of time, then he can see the choices we are going to



make before we make them. But how can they be free if they have been foreseen in advance? Doesn't God's knowledge constitute a concrete reality, rather than free choice? For that reason, Open Theism states that God experiences time gradually, as we do, rather than being 'outside' time altogether.

All of this raises questions about how 'election' then works – if God cannot know who will respond to the gospel, how does he predestine them to be saved and what is his 'foreknowledge' exactly?

³ A characteristic of God in that he knows everything.

Final thoughts: It's a mystery!

Whether we accept Open Theism in its entirety or not, I believe that human beings are more influential than we think. The God of the universe has chosen to interact with us, making us co-rulers with God in Christ (see Rev 3:21, Rom 8:17, Rom 5:17). Far from keeping a monopoly on sovereignty, God has united us with the Trinity in order that we may share in ruling over the universe – and more importantly enjoy genuine two-way relationship with God! (See John 17 and 2 Pet 1:4.)

My own tentative view is that there are different 'depths' in God's dealing with us. God is a God of infinite depth and the God of the impossible! Maybe in the depths of God he can actually know what we are about to choose, even though he limits his control... This would certainly be a great mystery! The three Persons of the Trinity enjoy relationship and free will amongst themselves, whilst surely still knowing what each will choose to do (see 1 Cor 2:10-11). Maybe, in our union with the Trinity it can work the same way with us.

Tying all this down fully, as any of the three systems we have considered try to do, may actually be doing God an injustice by defining him too tightly, when in fact he wants to be known in intimate relationship rather than merely known about.

The biggest mystery is Christ himself (see Col 2:2). One thing we can be certain of: God is like Jesus! Christ embodies the full nature of God (see Hebrews 1:3 and Colossians 1:15). That means he is not a God of control but of relationship and love.



Rather than his immense power and strength, the most amazing thing about God is that he voluntarily cedes control and gives genuine choice to his treasured human creations who, in turn, are to bear God's image by refraining from control themselves and instead prioritising relationship.

"The Christian God's power comes through his powerlessness and humility. Our God is much more properly called all-vulnerable than almighty, which we should have understood by the constant metaphor of 'Lamb of God' found throughout the New Testament." – Richard Rohr