

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS OF EVANGELICALS REGARDING CALVINISM

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In the evangelical community today there is much opposition to the system of doctrine known as Calvinism. In the minds of many people the word itself conjures up the image of a cruel God who determines the fate of each human in an arbitrary and capricious manner, or perhaps the image of a cold, dead Church, unconcerned with discipleship or spiritual purity.

There is no doubt some truth to the idea that many who have claimed the name Calvinist could be associated with such images.¹ Yet it is my contention that these images do not correctly portray classical (or orthodox) Calvinism and that much of the opposition is based upon prevailing misconceptions regarding what most Calvinists believe and proclaim. True Calvinists are not antinomian, supralapsarian, or anti-free-will, as they are often accused of being. If rightly understood it is highly possible that antagonism toward Calvinism will be lessened, or at least placed on surer theological footing. Some of the more prevalent misconceptions are discussed below.

I. BELIEF IN DEGREES OF CALVINISM

It is quite common in discussing Calvinism to hear someone confess to being a three- or four-point Calvinist. This of course means that some of the so-called five points of Calvinism are accepted while others (usually limited atonement and/or irresistible grace) are rejected. Such a position seems to imply that each of the five points is a separate and unrelated concept. One can pick and choose whichever one likes.

A notable example of this innovation can be seen in the recent work of H. Leon McBeth. When speaking of the influence of Calvinism on the history of Baptists, McBeth frequently uses terms like "strict," "moderate," and "soft" to describe what he considers to be varying degrees of

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¹ Some American Primitive Baptists, calling themselves Calvinists, could well be identified as holding such views of God and double predestination as described. Also the cold-Church concept has often been associated with the John Gill variety of Calvinism in eighteenth-century England.

Calvinism. He usually associates "strict" with what are known as hyper-Calvinism and antinomianism.² "Moderate" represents orthodox Calvinism "softened" by an emphasis on evangelism.³

Whether McBeth's understanding of the tenets of both hyper-Calvinism and Calvinism is sound is not the issue here, though he does seem to make the common mistake of confusing the two kinds of double predestination (as discussed below). What is important is that the belief in degrees of Calvinism is itself a serious misconception.

Many evangelicals apparently think that doctrine can be placed on a continuum with Arminianism at one extreme and hyper-Calvinism at the other. Orthodox Calvinism is probably seen either in the center or somewhat to the right of center. The non-Calvinist evangelical, perhaps averse to both Arminianism and Calvinism, would fall somewhere between them.

The five points of Calvinism, however, besides being drawn inductively from Scripture, are all logically dependent upon one another. They represent a closed system in which Biblical data are carefully balanced in order to achieve a consistent picture of Christian theology. Even critics of Calvinism concede this fact. I. H. Marshall, for instance, remarks that "the systematic formulation of Christian dogmatics by Calvinist theologians leads to a set of basic and *mutually related* principles."⁴ When one rejects or distorts any point of the Calvinist system he ceases to be a Calvinist in any meaningful sense of the word. He is then dealing with an entirely distinct theological formulation.

For the non-Calvinist evangelical, his theology is formed by picking and choosing from the "best" of both Arminianism and Calvinism. Thus is born the so-called "four-point" or "modified" Calvinism so prevalent among evangelicals today. What this usually amounts to is a semi-Pelagian fusion of Calvinism's ideas on total depravity and unconditional election with an Arminian understanding of free will. This bypasses any notion of irresistible grace, nullifies the concept of limited atonement, and allegedly makes room for man to respond freely to God's offer of salvation.⁵

² H. L. McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987). Examples of such associations can be found on pp. 172, 713, 717. See also I. H. Marshall ("The Problem of Apostasy in the New Testament," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* [Winter 1987]) as another prominent example of the use of such terms.

³ McBeth, *Heritage* 182-183, 706, 774.

⁴ Marshall, "Problem" 66 (italics mine).

⁵ The Calvinist objection to this fusion is based on Scripture and the fact that both irresistible grace and limited atonement are logical corollaries of the first two points as well as the doctrine of predestination. If the Bible teaches (as Calvinism claims) that God has chosen whom he will elect and that man is a slave to his sinful nature (which predisposes him to hate God), then it follows that election is unconditional—that is, based solely upon God's good pleasure and not on man's merit. And if election is unconditional and predetermined, then it is irresistible (since God's will cannot be thwarted) and limited (since not everyone is saved). That a rejection of these corollaries results in logical contradictions seems not to bother most non-Calvinists. There is of course, as R. C. Sproul ironically points out, "the happy inconsistency by which people hold incompatible views at the same time" (*Chosen by God* [Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1986] 204).

Concerning the hyper-Calvinist, he seemingly holds to orthodox Calvinism as far as the five points are concerned but formulates some of his concepts in such a way as to diverge from that system. For example, many hyper-Calvinists believe that predestination rules out the need for evangelism. This belief, however, results from limiting Calvinism to the famous five points. When this is done it is logically possible (though not necessary) to draw the conclusion that evangelism is an unwarranted intrusion of human effort into God's monergistic work of regeneration. Yet Calvinism is not limited to the five points. Edwin H. Palmer rightly argues that "Calvinism has an unlimited number of points: it is as broad as the Bible."⁶ It can therefore be argued that when the Scriptures are seen in their totality, evangelism is not only compatible with Calvinism but is a necessary part of its theology.

The aim of all this is not primarily to defend Calvinism but to show its uniqueness as compared to rival systems and especially as compared to hyper-Calvinism. I have found that hyper-Calvinistic concepts are frequently misconstrued as orthodox Calvinism. At times, some even mistake Calvinist ideas for hyper-Calvinism. This can only reflect a general lack of understanding about the tenets of Reformed theology.

II. CALVINISM ASSOCIATED WITH SUPRALAPSARIANISM

The doctrine of election has been elaborated in two distinct ways throughout Christian history: sublapsarianism and supralapsarianism.

Sublapsarianism is the orthodox Calvinist view that states that all people stand under the judgment of God for their sin but that God sovereignly chooses to elect some to salvation and actively works in their hearts to bring them to Christ. Those who are not elected are left to perish for their sin. The basis of God's choice is found in his own "good pleasure" (Eph 1:9) and not in the merit or demerit of the individual, thus repudiating any possibility of boasting. God is free from any charge of injustice in that the unelected are justly punished for their sin and not because they were simply not elected.⁷

Supralapsarianism, on the other hand, teaches that God positively decrees both faith and unbelief, not only working in the elect to nurture faith but also in the reprobate to purposely bring about sin. The basis for God's choice is still his good pleasure, but the unelected are punished because of their nonelection rather than for their sin. A disposition

⁶ E. H. Palmer, *The Five Points of Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972) 5.

⁷ The most common objection at this point is that this seems to imply that God's choices as to who are elected are arbitrary and therefore unjust. The Calvinist, however, is not saying that God has no purpose or reason for his choices but only that these reasons are not to be found in those elected or passed by. They are to be found within God himself in accordance with his good pleasure. Moreover in light of the accusation that God would still be guilty of an injustice because he did not elect everyone (cf. e.g. Marshall, "Problem" 69) the Calvinist responds by pointing out that it is only by God's grace that any are elected at all, because God would be perfectly just in consigning all people to hell.

toward sin is placed in the heart of the reprobate so as to give God a "reason" to punish them. In this view God is the author of sin and his election is completely arbitrary. As Sproul rightly argues, this is not the view of John Calvin.⁸ This is unadulterated hyper-Calvinism. Sproul insists that

to understand the Reformed [Calvinist] view . . . we must pay close attention to the crucial distinction between *positive* and *negative* decrees of God. Positive has to do with God's active intervention in the hearts of the elect. Negative has to do with God's passing over the non-elect. . . . He does not create unbelief in their hearts. That unbelief is already there.⁹

Thus Calvinism formulates election in positive-negative terms, while hyper-Calvinism does so in positive-positive terms. Although both of these views are accurately referred to as "double predestination," few non-Calvinists understand the fine distinctions between them and subsequently associate the term with supralapsarianism. Inevitably the orthodox Calvinist, affirming double predestination (in the sublapsarian sense), is held in disdain as a virtual heretic.¹⁰ A greater awareness of Calvinist doctrine could eliminate this misunderstanding.

III. CALVINISM SEEN AS ANTINOMIAN

Perhaps the worst accusation leveled at Calvinism is that its doctrines of predestination and unconditional grace provide license to sin. This is the dangerous heresy of antinomianism, which even many of the NT writers had to confront.¹¹ Again, though many hyper-Calvinists teach this heresy (and even some Calvinists fall victim to it)¹² this is not the view of John

⁸ Sproul, *Chosen* 96. Not all scholars, however, would agree that supralapsarianism is as non-Calvinist as Sproul (and others such as J. L. Girardeau, *Calvinism and Evangelical Arminianism* [Harrisonburg: Sprinkle, 1984]) seems to indicate. L. Berkhof states that "we cannot regard Supra- and Infra-lapsarianism as absolutely antithetical" (*Systematic Theology* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949] 124). He thinks that they say virtually the same thing, but from different points of view. The supralapsarians claim that God positively decreed that sin enter the world, while the sublapsarians say that God merely allows sin to enter the world. Either way, claims Berkhof, "God has willed sin" (*ibid.*). Certainly any Calvinist would agree that God has in some sense willed that sin enter his creation. Nevertheless there is a crucial distinction to be maintained, in that supralapsarians claim that God coerced man to sin whereas sublapsarians claim that God only allowed man to sin on his own.

⁹ Sproul, *Chosen* 142 (italics his).

¹⁰ McBeth, *Heritage* 176-178, would seem to make this mistake in relation to John Gill, the English Baptist theologian. He quotes several passages of Gill's *Body of Divinity* regarding double predestination, apparently convinced that these represent an heretical understanding of election and reprobation. He believes that this doctrine led Gill and his followers to reject evangelism. Though McBeth is probably correct in labeling Gill a hyper-Calvinist, his justification for doing so would seem to lie only in Gill's view of evangelism. It is not at all evident from the quotes that McBeth provides that Gill is propounding anything but the orthodox sublapsarian view of election also held by Calvin, Edwards, and many others (including Andrew Fuller, whom McBeth sets in contrast to Gill).

¹¹ Cf. e.g. 2 Peter; Jas 2:14-26; Romans 6.

¹² McBeth, *Heritage* 172.

Calvin and other orthodox Calvinists. Calvin made it clear that “we never dream of a faith destitute of good works” and that “you cannot possess Him [Christ] without becoming a partaker of His sanctification.”¹³

Calvinism teaches that when God elects someone to salvation he works progressively in that person’s life to make him more and more Christ-like. This is a key aspect of Calvinism’s fifth point (perseverance of the saints). A person that claims to be converted but never grows in spiritual maturity is not truly born again. As Sproul says: “It is a flat impossibility to be born of the Spirit and have no change in one’s life.”¹⁴ Berkhof comments: “Good works necessarily follow from the union of believers with Christ.” He continues:

The law as the standard of our moral life is a transcript of the holiness of God and is therefore of permanent validity also for the believer, though his attitude to the law has undergone a radical change. He has received the Spirit of God, which is the Spirit of obedience, so that, without any constraint, he willingly obeys the law.¹⁵

Based on the above, it becomes quite irresponsible to charge Calvinism with antinomianism. To be sure, some Calvinists have lapsed into this heresy, but Calvin and the best of the Reformed theologians have explicitly spoken against it.

IV. CALVINISM SEEN AS ELIMINATING MAN’S FREE WILL

The relationship between God’s sovereignty and man’s free will is the issue most often raised in discussions about Calvinism. It is objected that if God alone is active in salvation and man is unable to choose God for himself (as Calvinism claims) then man has no free will and is not morally responsible for accepting or rejecting God’s grace. Further, if God is totally sovereign in all of life, with nothing happening outside of his will (as Calvinism also claims), then man’s freedom is likewise eliminated.

The misconception at this point is not with the teaching of Calvinism but with the nature of free will itself. Some Arminians and other non-Calvinists claim that for people to have free wills they must be able to choose from a neutral disposition, uninfluenced by external factors. This view is commonly referred to as indeterminism. Calvinists object to this view, saying that, if indeterminism is correct, then man would be unable to choose at all. Jonathan Edwards made this clear when he argued that an indifferent disposition is insufficient for making choices. Such an idea would violate the law of causality in that it postulates an effect without a sufficient reason for such an effect.¹⁶ Moreover, as John Feinberg shows,

¹³ J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Christian Education, 1936), 3. 16.1.

¹⁴ Sproul, *Pleasing God* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1988) 153.

¹⁵ Berkhof, *Theology* 543.

¹⁶ J. Edwards, “Freedom of the Will,” in *Works of Jonathan Edwards* (London: Yale University, 1957), 1. 180-185.

even if such a choice could be made it would be made arbitrarily and therefore without moral significance. He writes that "the only actions worthy of moral praise or blame are intentional acts" and that if an act is committed arbitrarily "moral responsibility cannot be assigned."¹⁷ Ironically the indeterminist winds up where he accuses the Calvinist of being: excusing man's responsibility for sin. Most indeterminists recognize these problems and have modified their view somewhat to state that choices do have causes but that the causes are internal to the person. In other words, actions are self-caused.¹⁸

Nevertheless it is not the purpose of this paper to decide whether the non-Calvinist view of free will is wrong but only to assert that there is more than one way to legitimately understand free will.¹⁹ Calvinists generally formulate free will in such a way as to make it compatible with Scripture's teaching on the sovereignty of God. This view is called "soft determinism" or "compatibilism." Thus Jonathan Edwards defined free will as the power to choose what one wants. He stressed a close connection between desire and choice, writing that "a man never, in any instance, wills anything contrary to his desires, or desires anything contrary to his will."²⁰ In other words, rather than choosing on the basis of indifference or neutrality a person actually chooses that to which his desires incline him. R. C. Sproul restates Edwards' view thus:

Our choices are determined by our desires. They remain our choices because they are motivated by our own desires. This is what we call *self-determination*, which is the essence of freedom.²¹

On this basis Feinberg writes that "an action is free even if causally determined so long as the causes are nonconstraining . . . [that is] that the agent is causally determined to act as she or he wants to anyway."²² So, if properly understood, Calvinism in no way diminishes man's ability to make a free choice nor his moral responsibility.

¹⁷ J. Feinberg, "God Ordains All Things," in *Predestination and Free Will* (ed. D. Basinger and R. Basinger; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1986) 36-37.

¹⁸ Ibid. 21. See also N. Geisler and P. Feinberg, *Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980) 193-205, for a discussion of this and other views concerning the nature of free will.

¹⁹ Feinberg comments: "Indeterminists usually think no other definition of freedom than their own is possible . . . [but] I claim that there is room for a genuine sense of free human action, even though such action is causally determined" ("God Ordains" 24). Sproul also complains that people often think that in order for man to be free he must be autonomous (i.e. free from any and all restrictions on his will or actions). Yet autonomy is true of no man. Only God is autonomous. "We are free," writes Sproul, "but there are limits to our freedom. The ultimate limit is the sovereignty of God" (*Chosen* 42). If, as some say, God does not limit human freedom, then the Calvinist has only to reply that man's inability to fly on his own power, breathe underwater, etc., is ample evidence of restrictions on man's freedom. Furthermore if God does not limit man's freedom, then what are the Ten Commandments, or the commands of Jesus? God not only can and does limit human freedom but also has every right to do so.

²⁰ Edwards, "Freedom" 139.

²¹ Sproul, *Chosen* 54 (italics his).

²² Feinberg, "God Ordains" 24-25.

In the Reformed view, before regeneration by the Spirit a person has no desire for God or Christ. Rather, his every desire is for sin (cf. Rom 3:10-18). Because of this disposition he is unable to choose God.²³ If choice is determined by desire, as indicated in the above discussion, and man has no desire to choose God, then it follows that he is morally incapable of choosing God. Instead he will willfully and freely reject God. This is what Luther called the "bondage of the will." For him, "to say: man does not seek God, is the same as saying: man cannot seek God."²⁴

Calvinism teaches that for a person to choose God, the Holy Spirit must first regenerate his heart and so give him a desire for God. This is part of what the Calvinist means by irresistible (or effectual) grace. By this Spirit-given desire the sinner is drawn irresistibly to God. In no way is man's freedom impaired. He always chooses what he desires most: in the one case sin, in the other God. It will not do to simply object that this still eliminates man's freedom in any case. To do so one must (1) prove that the indeterministic definition of free will is the only possible view and (2) show that God cannot create the causal means to incline one's will toward his purposes in a noncoercive way so that "the act God has decreed is the act she or he [i.e. the human person] wants to do."²⁵

V. CONCLUSION

Many other questions related to Calvinism have obviously not been addressed in this paper. I have simply endeavored to identify and resolve several objections to Calvinism that arise not from Calvinism *per se* but from others' false perceptions of its basic doctrines.

²³ This of course refers to moral inability, not natural inability, as distinguished by Edwards ("Freedom" 295-301).

²⁴ M. Luther, *On the Bondage of the Will* (Westwood: Revell, 1957) 281.

²⁵ Feinberg, "God Ordains" 26.