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My Personal Views on Calvinism

It is rare today for a person to completely embrace either Arminianism or Calvinism. Sometimes Calvinism is called Determinism. Basically, Calvinism places a strong emphasis on God's sovereignty – God can do whatever He wants no matter what. Arminianism holds fast to human free will, which puts Calvinism and Arminianism at odds with each other. Some people will describe themselves as a three to five point Calvinist. The Five Points of Calvinism can be easily remembered with the word TULIP. I am going to disagree with the way each of these is stated but I do partly agree with Total Depravity and partly with Unconditional Election in a different light than normally presented.

Total Depravity – refers to man's evil and contrary nature to God. This suggests that it is impossible for man to relate to God because he is exactly opposite from God in character. It states that man is evil and cannot change without salvation, that man operates on the Evil Principle – anything that man can do is evil and he does things because they are evil.

Unconditional Election – God has chosen some to be saved. Those whom He has chosen before the creation of the world, or predestined, must become saved. Human free will is trumped by God's sovereign choice of each individual. It's like Duck, Duck, Goose! If you're a goose, you have to get up and chase God around.

Limited Atonement – Christ died only for those who will choose Him, only for the elect. His work on the cross is only effective in them. Because God chose them beforehand, He knows exactly who this atonement will work for and who it won't work for. So the atonement is only accepted on those whom God already knew would be part of the elect.

Irresistible Grace – This goes part in parcel with Unconditional Election. It is the idea that once someone has experienced God's grace, they cannot choose anything else but God. It has the idea that God's grace is so powerful that no one can resist His calling them to salvation. It also has a way of minimizing human free will.

Perseverance of the Saints – This is the idea that you cannot be an apostate, one who even though already saved, chooses to go back on their decision for Christ and lives however they wish. This is one who will always do good works for the rest of their saved life. They cannot fall away or choose to not follow Christ. This is often described as eternal security, but that is not totally accurate. It is more about doing good works until death, but the idea of eternal security easily follows.

My Responses

Total Depravity. There is evidence in the Bible of the depravity of man. Especially in Romans 3, Paul goes to great lengths to point out how evil man is. But I disagree with man always operating on the Evil Principle. As C.S. Lewis points out, man does things because he sees some good in

them. It may be an advantage or some other good, but man does not operate purely on evil. It is just that his standard is corrupted by the Fall and he must learn the correct standard to operate on. For this reason, I find it hard to admit a TOTAL depravity. As will be the case with most of Calvinism, I find it goes too far to the absolute in its affirmations.

Unconditional Election. I completely disagree with this point of Calvinism. I see man's free will all over both the Old and New Testaments. Joshua demands that the people choose who they will serve. Christ demands that we follow Him, which means He won't make us unless we choose Him. The prophets continuously call Israel back into fellowship with God. Human free will is important and cannot be neglected, especially with the most important choice of all of our existence. It is not who God predestines, it is what He predestines those who chose Him to, that is salvation. In the New Testament, the word predestination is always referring to the process of salvation, not the person to be saved. The definition of predestination is better stated: When you choose God, He will take you through the process of salvation He planned before the creation of the world. So you are only unconditionally elected if you choose it. Once you choose it, God has planned out a process you will go through to be more like Him, to be called the Elect. We do have an eternal security in that once we choose God, no one and nothing can take us out of His hand except our own will (Romans 8:28-39). At the end of this process of salvation, God has predestined you uniquely to assist the Church at large in His kingdom. This is called predestination to service and it is not very popular but it is very biblical. Once you choose Christ, you are called a disciple. A disciple is one who serves as Christ did. What you will do better than anyone else was predestined by God for you and you alone to do. One more problem I have with Unconditional Election is that if God chose some to be saved, the reverse, that He chose some to be condemned to Hell, is also true. This is not the action of a loving God. And God is indeed a loving God (1 John 4:7-8). In matters of salvation, always err on the side of love and grace rather than judgment, for it is God who judges. Our job is to spread the message and let Him do the wooing.

Limited Atonement. I have a huge problem with this point. Clearly the Bible teaches that Christ died for all of mankind (John 3:16; 2 Corinthians 5:14). The pain for Him is that not everyone will choose His Son, His way of salvation. Christ died for sinners also (Romans 5:6). This is clearly an unbiblical statement that makes Christ's work less than what it was. The whole point of dying for even those who would reject Christ is that He loved in such a way that He did die for them even though they rejected Him. That's the sting of the gospel that draws us in, isn't it? That this guy who is the Messiah died for me 2,000 years ago to set me free and for my whole life I've rejected His loving sacrifice? I believe this is the very core of our message, bringing the attention of sinners to their neglect of the only way out.

Irresistible Grace. God's grace is not completely irresistible. It is of course the best deal anyone will ever get for eternal life. It is the only offer we have or will receive from God for eternal life. It is perfect. But people can reject God's grace and choose something else, otherwise everyone would choose the free gift of salvation. There is a minimizing of human free will and choice as well as demonic influence on a person, which are both clearly biblical reasons why someone would not choose grace. Once again we see the same absoluteness that seems to crisp and clean to be genuinely true.

Perseverance of the Saints. The whole New Testament and even parts of the Old center around the issue of eternal security. The letters in Revelation (Chapters 2-3) alone talk of entire churches that have “lost their first love.” It is very possible to lose your salvation. The good news is that only you could choose such a devastating decision. The real scare is what does it take to lose your salvation? Is it what you think? What you say? What you do? I personally believe it is a matter of the heart, which makes it a lot harder for us to judge whether a person is “still saved” or not. But then again, it’s not up to us to judge others, especially other believers, is it? Your walk is between you and God. So others’ walks are between them and God. There are times when blatant disobedience calls us to confront them with the decision they are close to making. This is what the prophets did in the Old Testament. This is what the latter books of the New Testament were written for. As for always doing good works, it is hard to go days without sinning, so I put almost no stock in us being perfect in the works area even after we are made new creatures. Someone has to admit it: we still struggle with sin and our sinful nature. God doesn’t just turn it off for us. We must choose to do good everyday.

The biggest problems with Calvinism are

1. It neglects the conditions in the Bible that make choice more apparent. All of those If...Then statements are important and are also usually ignored by Calvinists. Some of these are John 15, the later New Testament books (usually the last 9), Hebrews especially, Paul’s use of the phrase “in Christ,” etc.
2. There is such a need to prove God’s sovereignty that they would go so far as to give God control over every molecule. What a defense for God’s sovereignty. Kudos to them for that, but let’s keep it biblical. God has created natural orders and laws to govern this world. Although I fully admit God can do whatever He wants, that doesn’t mean He does. An Arminian principle I do find fascinating is the idea that God limited Himself in some way(s). This is incredibly complex but something to think about. Calvinists are partly right about some of their principles. God’s grace is incredible. God does have complete control over everything. But He may not utilize such control at all times. There’s a certain power in God to limit Himself and trust humans to make their own choices to serve Him. That is true power because it is latent or passive power. He’s not afraid to give it up to see us freely choose Him, for that’s what He really wants: someone to freely be in relationship with Him. You see, God has angels to worship Him unconditionally and do His bidding. Humans were created to do what angels do completely by volunteer.
3. There is an absoluteness about it that misrepresents the struggle in the Bible as to the relationship between free will and God’s sovereignty. Rest assured, anytime we use absolute statements, we must be extra careful to make sure that they are indeed absolute truths that are universally agreed upon. Is it so black and white? I, a perfectionist, live by the black and white literal rules of Scripture and Scriptural principles, can tell you that I don’t think it is always black and white. Living the Christian life is easy yet not so easy, because God is involved. He is easy to understand, yet so difficult to understand. Would salvation, His plan for humanity, be any different than His character, for it came directly from Him? I think not. It is easy enough for a child to accept Christ, but hard enough to cause theologians to stumble over the details. How much like God that really is!