

Calvinism Summarized

by Jack Cottrell

Someone writes, “I have been following the modern reformed church for some time now as a means for modeling a church plant. I see great success in converts and in the growth and life of the church through modern reformed preaching and practices (not to be confused with emergent church). The one thing I am struggling with is [how to] pick between the theological schools of thought called Calvinism and Arminianism. Can you clarify the key differences, or point me to a book that would be helpful but as minimally biased as possible? I feel like no matter which side you choose, it should not cause division in the church; so I would just like to see both sides equally and go from there. Another question: could you compare and contrast propitiation and expiation?”

My brief answer:

FIRST OF ALL, you seriously underestimate the differences between Calvinism and Arminianism if you think you can choose between them and not “cause division.” The only way you could do this is to think that doctrinal truth is not very important. Among those who believe the Bible is the Word of God, there could not be greater opposites than Calvinism and Arminianism (or non-Calvinism). They have very different views of God, man, sin, salvation, and baptism. Wherever the two are doing church work together, one or the other is making serious compromises (maybe both are).

THE MOST SERIOUS CONTRAST regards the nature of the sovereignty of God. Calvinists say that God is truly sovereign only if he is the ultimate CAUSE of every single thing that happens. The result is that human beings CANNOT have a genuinely free will. Whenever Calvinists affirm “free will,” they are using a redefined version of it called “compatibilism.” I.e., free will is redefined in such a way that it is compatible with this omnicausal view of sovereignty. In such a case the will is not truly free. So if you want to hold to a concept of truly free will, you simply cannot be a Calvinist. True Biblical

sovereignty means that God CONTROLS everything, which is not the same as CAUSING everything. (I have discussed this in my book, “What the Bible Says About God the Ruler,” and in my essay, “The Nature of the Divine Sovereignty,” in the book “The Grace of God, the Will of Man,” ed. Clark Pinnock.)

NEXT IS THE CONTRAST between the two views of sin and salvation, which for Calvinists are summed up as the “five points of Calvinism,” known as T-U-L-I-P.

The T stands for Total Depravity. In addition to denying truly free will in all human beings as the result of their view of divine sovereignty, Calvinists also believe that as the result of Adam’s sin every human being is born totally depraved, the essence of which is the bondage of the will. I.e., even if there USED to be truly free will, ever since Adam it no longer exists. What this means specifically is that NO ONE is able to respond in faith to the preaching of the gospel. There is a total inability to choose to accept God’s offer of salvation. This means NO ONE can be saved without the following:

The U stands for Unconditional Election. Since no human being is able to choose God, if anyone at all will be saved, God must do the choosing. In fact, according to Calvinists, this is exactly the way it happens. From pre-creation eternity God already elected (chose, predestined) certain specific individuals who would come into existence in the future created universe. He elected them UNCONDITIONALLY, i.e., he did not say something like, “Whoever believes in Jesus will be chosen.” No conditions must be met; in fact, because of total depravity, even if God DID lay down certain conditions, no one would have the free will to meet them. So in the end God alone decides which human beings will become believers and have eternal life. That means God alone also decides which human beings will suffer in hell for eternity.

The L stands for Limited Atonement. I.e., Jesus actually dies on the cross for the ELECT ONLY. Since God is pre-programming all of human history, and is personally selecting certain individuals for salvation, he knows ahead of time just how much suffering Jesus will have to endure on the cross. Jesus does not die for the non-elect.

The I stands for Irresistible Grace. Since sinful human beings have no truly free will, there can be no sincere offer of salvation (via evangelism and preaching) to human beings in general. NO ONE has the ability to respond to the gospel. But God has chosen to save some, and Jesus has died for that limited number. So how is salvation actually bestowed on that person? By a sovereign, irresistible, efficacious changing of the selected sinner's heart by a secret, inner working of the Holy Spirit (regeneration the new birth). At a moment chosen by God, the Spirit "zaps" the selected sinner, and GIVES him the gift of faith and the gift of repentance. That is when the person is saved; and he will never become unsaved, because this happens only to those whose eternal salvation is already predetermined.

The P stands for Perseverance [or Preservation] of the saints. This is what we usually call "once saved, always saved." This doctrine is the logical consequence of the T-U-L-I doctrines. Since there is no truly free will, and since God is pulling all the strings, he simply causes the faith bestowed on the elect person to remain intact forever.

THE LAST CONTRAST I will mention is about baptism. Modern Calvinism (ever since the time of the Swiss Reformer named Huldreich Zwingli) has repudiated any real connection between baptism and salvation. This follows logically upon the idea that salvation is bestowed unconditionally, apart from the sinner's own free-will choice, at the time God sovereignly decides. Thus most Calvinists believe that baptism is something the irresistibly-saved person does as a testimony to his already-existing salvation status.

I WILL NOT attempt to refute all of these points here. Suffice it to say that the non-Calvinist view is the very opposite of what is outlined above: sinners have free will and can choose to accept or reject the gospel; God specifies certain conditions that sinners must meet in order to receive salvation; Jesus literally died for the entire human race; salvation is bestowed as a result of the sinner's own choice to accept the gospel offer; the saved person still has free will and can use that free will to repudiate his faith and lose his salvation. Also, the New Testament clearly links baptism with salvation.

I HAVE DISCUSSED these doctrines in the sources mentioned above (“God the Ruler,” “Nature of Sovereignty”). They are also discussed at specific points in my systematic theology, “The Faith Once for All,” and in my commentary on Romans (both from College Press). A more detailed discussion is my lengthy essay on the Arminian view of predestination in the volume “Perspectives on Election: Five Views,” ed. Chad Brand (Broadman & Holman). I also wrote a four-part explanation and refutation of Calvinism for “Christian Standard” in early 2007; it is available from “Christian Standard” under the title, “Considering Calvinism.”

P.S. Propitiation is the turning away (from us) of God’s wrath by Christ’s offering of himself on the cross as our substitute. Expiation is the covering of our sins so they are hidden from God’s (active) sight. The former is the cause of the latter. Some try to substitute expiation for propitiation, because of their aversion to the idea that God can be wrathful; but that is like trying to have an effect without a cause. On the wrath of God and the idea of propitiation, see my book, “What the Bible Says About God the Redeemer.”