

Why I'm Not A Calvinist – From Someone You Might Think Should Be

By Dale W Decker

At The Dock, But Not Onboard The Ship

I was raised in a Pentecostal church that focused more on one's immediate experience of God than on interacting with the historical doctrines of orthodox Christianity. The preaching and teaching centered around biblical texts dealing with speaking in tongues, miraculous healing, prophesying, the rapture, etc. This left me with a rather truncated view of scripture and of biblical doctrine in general.

Then one day I picked up a copy of the book *The Mystery Of The Holy Spirit* by Reformed theologian R.C. Sproul. My rather parochial view of the Holy Spirit was broadened significantly. This set me off on a voracious reading frenzy of the rest of Sproul's books as well as other Reformed writers. Soon I had entire shelves of books by R.C. Sproul, John Piper, John MacArthur, Sinclair Ferguson, Timothy Keller and others. I read or listened to their sermons. I perused their websites. I saw them at conferences. I was immersed in biblical and doctrinal study from the Reformed Theology perspective.

Therefore, as a simple matter of consequence, I was exposed to the TULIP doctrines of Reformed Theology and Calvinism. However, while I agreed with the Five Solas of the Reformation, I could never get fully on board with Reformed Theology in the form of Calvinism¹. Yet, if someone looked at the streams of thought influencing my own, it would be natural to think of me as in the New Reformed movement.

So, for many years I was on the fringe of New Reformed movement but not an adherent of Reformed Theology. My reservations, in main, came from an inability to reconcile the plain reading of Scripture with the essential doctrines of Calvinism. In fact, the more I studied the scriptures using the hermeneutical skills I learned from Reformed theologians, the less I was able to accept Calvinism as a biblically coherent system.

Over the years I maintained a cordial but uncommitted relationship with Reformed Theology. I used the "fish and bones" strategy... when eating a fish, you consume the meat and spit out the bones. I continued to learn from Reformed sources, but didn't internalize those teachings for which I could not find coherent biblical support. By coherent biblical support, I mean being able to see how the teaching harmonized with the plain thrust of the Gospel message without requiring mental gymnastics to do so.

The church I attended during this time, and eventually worked on staff at, is Provisionist in its soteriology, so there was no conflict for me. However, after 20 years in that church, my wife and I moved from Kentucky to Colorado. Of course we were eager to find a new church. We settled on an independent congregation whose statement of faith, as I read it, was Reformed leaning, but didn't appear to be fully Calvinist in its stance. The church had many good qualities and I thought we could find a home there. After several months, I realized I had misunderstood their doctrinal position completely. For conscience sake, we left and found another church more in keeping with our own convictions.

I have become much more thoughtful about distancing myself from Calvinism because of that experience. Calvinism has gained a lot of traction in the last 20-30 years and is, I think, perceived as the “theological system of choice” among serious students of the Bible. Moreover, at the level of popular consumption, Calvinism becomes a self-reinforcing system with Reformed authors blurbing the books of other Reformed authors, Reformed pastors hosting conferences with other Reformed pastors, etc. In many ways, Calvinism is as insular and parochial as was my Pentecostal upbringing and fosters the same two-tier view of believers, those who have it right and those who are lacking.²

My overall rejection of Calvinism as a tenable system can be illustrated with three points – one philosophical, one theological and one biblical. Philosophically, Calvinism’s decretal understanding of reality inexorably collapses into an unlivable determinism. Theologically, the idea of total inability, as defined in Calvinism, has crippling implications for the doctrine of the Incarnation. Biblically, unconditional election renders much (if not all) of Jesus’s ministry a misinformation campaign. I’ll elaborate each point in more detail.

Determinism: A Few More Dominoes In The Chain

First, we have to acknowledge the incredible power of determinism to render life meaningless. Determinism, whether theistic or naturalistic in origin, effectively negates rationality, individuality, emotions, everything that makes us human. But before we go any further, let’s define theistic determinism for the sake of this discussion.

The Westminster Confession, in its chapter on God’s Eternal Decree (Ch 3.1), says this:

God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass...

Reformed theologians further elaborate this to mean that God determines or causes everything that happens; nothing happens without God being the decisive factor. This includes not only physical events, but also the thoughts, feelings and decisions of human beings. As Reformed theologian Edwin H. Palmer states:

Nothing in this world happens by chance. God is in back of everything. He decides and causes all things to happen that do happen. He is not sitting on the sidelines wondering and perhaps fearing what is going to happen next. No, he has foreordained everything “after the counsel of his will” (Ephesians 1:11): the moving of a finger, the beating of a heart, the laughter of a girl, the mistake of a typist – even sin.³

The Westminster Confession goes on to state that, though God ordains everything that comes to pass, he does so without causing one’s sin, violating one’s will, or otherwise infringing upon one’s liberty. Holding to theistic determinism (God causes everything to happen) and human liberty (we are responsible for our actions) inevitably requires one to engage in a vigorous form of cognitive dissonance. Holding to two opposing

propositions simultaneously requires compartmentalization of the mind. This exercise in cognitive dissonance is generally dumped in the box of “mystery” by Reformed theologians.

My contention is that no one can act in accordance with theistic determinism, or naturalistic determinism for that matter, because to do so is really and truly impossible for human beings. Let me demonstrate the erosive power of determinism on any rational discourse. If I state the following – “I believe in determinism” – and determinism is true, then my statement becomes nonsense because I am incapable of actually “believing” anything. Whatever I say, think, feel, or do is being said, thought, felt, or done because God (or nature) has determined me to produce it. In fact, it’s difficult (if not impossible) to maintain that there’s even an individual “me” involved since determinism makes human beings mere transmitters of states of being and not originators of thought, emotion, and behavior. One is merely a sophisticated mechanism and any concept of inner deliberation or selection between perceived available options is illusory.

If you disagree with what I’ve just said, and determinism is true, you haven’t really disagreed with me, you’ve only expressed the state of being that has been determined for you. In fact, my statement and your response are not logically connected at all. Determinism is so foundationally erosive to rationality that it is difficult to even entertain its truth because it renders any discussion vacuous. It is like having a discussion on the statement “words have no meaning”. Whoever accepts this statement as true immediately contradicts himself as soon as he begins using words to defend the truthfulness of the statement.

Determinism renders life meaningless. Not only meaningless, but incomprehensible and, ultimately, unlivable, which is why no one who believes in determinism actually lives consistently with its implications. Since no one can truly live in accordance with theistic determinism, the result is cognitive dissonance.

Perhaps a more particular example will help illustrate the cognitive dissonance required to accept both theistic determinism and human liberty. Sometimes a critique of Calvinism’s second petal of TULIP, Unconditional Election, comes in the form of “If God has already decided who will be saved, then why witness to anyone?” The Calvinist response generally comes in one of two forms, either “God has commanded us to be witnesses, so we must obey” or “In salvation God has ordained the means as well as the ends.” I want to take a closer look at this second response.

The critique suggests that if someone has been decreed by God to be saved, then it will happen regardless of anyone else’s action or inaction. The questioner is wondering what significance, if any, does one’s behavior, such as prayer, witnessing or other evangelization efforts, have with regards to the lost. If something is fated to happen, then how does any action, one way or the other, have any significance?

With regards to the salvation of any particular individual the Calvinist seeks to assuage this perceived meaninglessness by referencing the antecedent chain that seemingly leads to salvation. God ordains the means as well as the ends. God has predetermined both the event and all the things prior to the event. The Calvinist is saying, "Yes, the fate of the one unconditionally elected by God for salvation has been pre-determined from all eternity. But take heart, all the actions leading to that salvation, of which you may be a part, have also been predetermined."

So God has arranged a chain of events that precedes an individual's salvation event and if one is a part of that chain, then... what? Saying that God ordains the means as well as the ends does not add meaning to the meaninglessness of determinism. One cannot add meaning to the last domino in a chain by inserting more dominoes ahead of it. However, the most important thing about this discussion is missed by the Calvinist; the entire episode – question, response, and everything in between – is only occurring because it has been determined to occur. Determinism is a very sharp knife that cuts the meaning out of everything it touches.

Total Inability: The Island of Dr. Moreau

In H.G. Wells 1896 book, *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, the doctor, in his secluded laboratory, uses vivisection to create semi-human creatures out of animals. The creatures he produces in attempting to mimic free and rational human beings inevitably succumb to their inherent instincts and revert back to animals. The Calvinist understanding of the workings of the human will attempts to do the opposite, turn free and rational (though fallen) human beings into creatures of mere instinct, capable only of following their strongest desires.

In an attempt to explain theistic determinism in a way that preserves God from being responsible for the sin of humanity, Reformed theology defines freedom of choice as doing what you want to do without external coercion. According to Calvinism, the human will does not possess a libertarian nature with the power of otherwise choice, at least not since Adam sinned in the garden. Instead, the human will is controlled by its greatest desire. And, though a human being always compulsorily chooses according to his greatest desire, he is free, despite the fact that he could not have chosen differently given his theistically determined antecedent state. I am going to call these distinctions of will "libertarian will" versus "compulsory will". The compulsory will is used to define human freedom as "compatible" with theistic determinism.

According to Calvinism, because human beings possess a compulsory will as well as a sin nature that desires only evil, then human beings are totally unable to come to God without a change in their desires. Constitutionally, one cannot respond to any offer of the Gospel unless one's desire has been divinely changed first. This state of the fallen will, as it were, comes under the rubric of Total Inability in Reformed theology

However, whether or not humans currently possess the power of otherwise choice is not the most crucial question to ask, but rather how does the Calvinist understanding of the

compulsory will affect the doctrine of the Incarnation? Let's look again to the Westminster Confession and see its description of Christ The Mediator (Ch 8.2):

The Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, being very and eternal God, of one substance and equal with the Father, did, when the fullness of time was come, take upon Him man's nature, with all the essential properties, and common infirmities thereof, yet without sin...

So, the Son of God took upon himself man's nature with all its essential properties, yet without sin. What kind of human will did Jesus possess, libertarian or compulsory? I think we can agree that the human will is an essential property of being human. Some Calvinists maintain that humanity's will was created libertarian and became compulsory and others say it has always been compulsory. However, both cases render human beings as now possessing compulsory wills, and each has a deleterious effect on the understanding of the Incarnation.

Taking the first case, that humanity was created with libertarian will and came to have compulsory will after the fall, is the essential human nature from pre-Fall to post-Fall the same or different? Pastor Ronnie Rogers answers this question this way:

If one proposes a change in this essential component from pre-fall to post-fall, it is to change the very nature of man. This to the point that the man who fell in the garden is not the same (essentially) as mankind after the fall; to wit, the being before the fall may be classified as human, or the being after the fall may be so classified, but they cannot both be so classified since they are essentially dissimilar. We can understand one of them as being human, but not both of them since their natures are mutually exclusive.⁴

If the essential nature of humanity is different pre-Fall to post-Fall, then which type of will, libertarian or compulsory, did the Son take upon himself? If libertarian, then he is essentially different from the ones he came to save. This would seem to call into question a crucial element of the Incarnation, that Jesus was like us in all ways, except for sin, unless one is willing to state that there is no essential difference between libertarian and compulsory wills.

However, the alternate view doesn't solve things. If Jesus took upon himself a compulsory will, what does that look like? If all that Jesus did was because he could not do otherwise given his determined antecedent state, how would that change our understanding of just the following small sampling of scriptures?

For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father. ~ John 11:17-18

And he said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will." ~ Mark 14:36

And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. ~ Philippians 2:8

[Jesus] gave himself for us... ~ Titus 2:14

I'm not sure anyone would be comfortable saying that Jesus only had the illusion of choosing obedience to his Father, the illusion of choosing to lovingly giving himself as an atoning sacrifice, but all the while was really only acting in a pre-determined way without otherwise choice. As I see it, the Reformed understanding of humanity's compulsory will creates severe problems for the doctrine of the Incarnation.

Unconditional Election: Is Jesus the Press Secretary for God?

The job of press secretary many times appears to be providing political camouflage for a president by obfuscating the truth of what is happening in an administration. Deflective statements, half answers, and misleading information are the tools of the trade. Calvinism's doctrine of Unconditional Election, if true, renders the core of Jesus' ministry a misinformation campaign worthy of any savvy administration.

Jesus told Pilate, "*For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world – to bear witness to the truth.*" What truth is he bearing witness to? The truth his Father in heaven sent him into the world to proclaim. Jesus told the people, "*For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has given me a commandment – what to say and what to speak... I say as the Father has told me.*" And Jesus affirms that what his Father says is the truth – "...*your word is truth.*" (John 18:37, John 12:49-50, John 17:19, ESV)

Therefore, we would expect that at the core of Jesus's ministry would be a declaration of the truth of God without any double-talk, misdirection, half-truths, or serious omissions. Right? And I think Jesus's "I Am" statements are a good representation of the core of his ministry, so let's take a look at some of them.

Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh. John 6:47-51 (ESV)

I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. John 8:12 (ESV)

Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. John 10:7–9 (ESV)

I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this? John 11:25–26 (ESV)

In these four statements, Jesus is declaring the truth of salvation in and through himself. He is the provider of what is needed – life, light, acceptance, resurrection. This is the truth he has heard from his Father and has been sent into the world to proclaim.

In addition, in each of these declarations, there is also a statement of reciprocation – who is to be the recipient of this provision. The recipient is identified as the one who trusts in the provision of Jesus for salvation. *Whoever believes in me, whoever follows me, if anyone enters by me* – a plain reading indicates that only a trusting response is required to be the recipient of Jesus’s provision.

Unless Calvinism is true. Calvinism includes the belief that God has pre-selected (unconditionally elected) those who will be permitted to respond to the provision of Jesus. Here’s how John Piper defines this idea:

Unconditional election is God’s free choice before creation, not based on foreseen faith, to which traitors he will grant faith and repentance, pardoning them and adopting them into his everlasting family of joy.⁵

If Calvinism is true, then those whom God has not selected, those to whom God will not grant faith, can never respond to the truths Jesus has revealed about himself in the four “I am” statements. However, the phrasing that Jesus uses, on a plain reading of the text, seems to indicate that anyone can respond. If Calvinism is true, then Jesus is being less than truthful to those who hear him.

Now I’ve heard that in saying “whoever believes” Jesus is not giving any indication of who it will actually be who believes. So he’s not really being dishonest. Yet if he’s saying “whoever” and “if anyone” but all the while he knows that it’s only the elect who will be granted the ability to believe, then by leaving that detail out he is obfuscating the truth, not bearing witness to the truth.

Perhaps an illustration would be helpful at this point. Suppose I am throwing a party and I send out an invitation to every house in the neighborhood. The invitation says “I am throwing a party at my house, whoever wants to can come. Anyone who receives this invitation can come.” Unbeknownst to my neighbors, I have determined beforehand that I am only going to let in those who lived on my particular street. Everyone else will be turned away at the door. Is my invitation truthful?

Before you begin to pick apart my illustration as not accurately representing the condition of mankind after the fall - yada, yada, yada – remember I'm concerned with the truthfulness of the invitation, not the condition of the recipients. Whether or not they want to come or can come, etc. is not what's in question. Am I being truthful by saying "anyone" when I have predetermined it not to truly be anyone? No, I am not being truthful. Therefore, if the Calvinistic tenet of unconditional election is true, then the core of Jesus's ministry is a misinformation campaign because it obfuscates the truth.

Sailing On The Good Ship TEP – Traditional Extensivist Provisionism

I am indebted to many theologians and pastors in the New Reformed movement for parts of my theological education. But I simply can't get on board with Calvinism as the best system for understanding biblical doctrine. Any valid system of theology must give way to the plain reading of scripture when there is a conflict. Any valid system of theology must support, not call into question, the orthodox understanding of Christ's person and work. Any valid system of theology must have an understanding of humanity as created in the image of God, though with a fallen nature, that fits with how we actually experience life. In attempting to square parts of its soteriological precepts with scripture, Calvinism seems to me to undercut the authority of the Bible, to muddle the concept of the Incarnation, and to render life meaningless.

I am very grateful for the work of Soteriology 101 and the resources it brings into the debate with Calvinism. Whether you call it Traditionalism as does the SBC, or Extensivism as does Pastor Ronnie Rogers, or Provisionism as does Dr. Leighton Flowers, it is this soteriological system that promotes the Father's love, Christ's sacrifice, and the Holy Spirit's drawing power and most closely aligns with the biblical record.

¹ While Reformed Theology and Calvinism may not be strictly equivalent terms, I think they are essentially equivalent in common usage. I use the terms interchangeably in this article.

² For example, consider this video clip of Calvinist pastors answering the question "*Why are so many against reformed theology?*" at www.youtube.com/watch?v=yorGsechzrl

³ E.H. Palmer, *The Five Points of Calvinism*, Grand Rapids, Baker, 2009, p. 30

⁴ Ronnie W. Rogers, *Does God Love All Or Some*, Eugene, Wipf & Stock, 2019, p. 32

⁵ See <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/five-reasons-to-embrace-unconditional-election>

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