

WHEN WORLDVIEWS COLLIDE

# Calvinism Is Immoral

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**C**ontrary to the impression one might get after reading eight consecutive articles on the topic, Calvinism is *not* a subject with which I am obsessed. Moreover, I do not relish the opportunity to confront Calvinists; I am saddened the need to do so exists at all. This is one reason the tone of these essays has been irenic rather than incendiary, and the approach toward them has been rational and philosophical rather than emotional. That said, there are times that even a reasonable critique can feel harshly polemic.

The forthcoming articles may serve as prime examples. For example, the title of this article, “Calvinism is immoral,” is shocking. However, it was not chosen to offend. Instead, I picked it because it accurately characterizes many tenets of the Reformed scheme. First, some background, and then a few examples will serve to illustrate my point.

Whether Calvinists ascribe to the philosophically consistent version of predestination known as supralapsarianism<sup>1</sup> or to the more morally sensitive infralapsarian<sup>2</sup> version, both types claim that God sovereignly gives a special grace to certain individuals He chooses to redeem and that it is this and only this electing grace that makes their salvation possible. As Thomas Talbott points out, “The whole point of the doctrine of predestination is that

God could have chosen a different set of persons for redemption; that His decision to redeem one person and to pass over another is a matter of His own ‘good pleasure’ and hence does not depend on any characteristics, or any act of will, of the persons themselves.”<sup>3</sup> But, as such, it follows that the God of Reformed theology is One who chooses not to redeem some individuals that He could have saved.

Unfortunately, this position entails some theologically untenable and rather dark moral consequences.

Consider, if in fact there are people whom God reprobated or simply passed over rather than elected, then it is obvious and undeniable that God does not love them in the sense of seeking their ultimate and highest good

(I Corinthians 13). Moreover, if He does not love them in this sense, then He does not truly love them at all. Calvinist theologian David Engelsma openly admits this when he says, “It is not at all surprising that advocates of the free offer oppose the Reformed doctrine of reprobation, for reprobation is the exact,

explicit denial that God loves all men, desires to save all men, and conditionally offers them salvation. Reprobation asserts that God eternally hates some men; has immutably decreed their damnation; and has determined to withhold from them Christ, grace, faith, and salvation.”<sup>4</sup>

Some less full-throated Calvinists might shrink from such a position and argue that, although God does indeed love the non-elect, His love toward them is expressed through anger, judgment, and so forth. After all, “*whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth*” (Hebrews 12:6). This argument breaks, however, on the last clause of that verse. God’s wrath, anger, and judgment can only be viewed as ‘loving’ if they ultimately serve a salvific purpose—i.e., if the goal in the end is to see the person received as the Father’s child. But this is not the case for the non-elect in the Calvinist scheme. Indeed, “It makes no more sense to say of the non-elect that they are an object of God’s eternal love than it does to say of the elect that they are an object of God’s eternal hatred. In either case, words simply lose their meaning.”<sup>5</sup> It is clear, then, that in Calvinist theology, some individuals are not the objects of God’s love. If so, however, it paints a portrait of God’s character that is quite impossible to square with the Bible. As Talbott points out, it entails that

**(1) God Himself fails to love some of the very persons whom He has commanded us to love.**

**(2) The very God who commands us to love our enemies fails to love His enemies.**

By themselves, these two embarrassing consequences ought to be enough to consign Calvinism to the already massive heap of theological garbage. But it gets worse—much worse, for if it is even possible that there are some whom God does not love, then it means that

**(3) Love is not an essential property of God, not part of His essence.**<sup>6</sup>

According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “an essential property of an object is a property that it *must* have.”<sup>7</sup> So, for example, if omnipotence is an essential property of God, then it is impossible for Him to suffer weakness. If righteousness is an essential property of God, then it is impossible for Him to commit iniquity. Likewise, “if love is an essential property of God, then it is impossible for Him to act in an unloving way.”<sup>8</sup> I trust the problem is becoming clear. If some persons are not the objects of God’s love, then love is not an essential property of God. But if so, what are we to do with the inspired apostle’s claim that “...*God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him* (I John 4:16)? I suppose one might concoct an entirely new explanation for this verse, but doing so would open the doorway to a host of absurdities. For example, to allow that God need not and, in fact, does not love everyone leads to the conclusion that

**(4) God is less merciful and less gracious—less loving—than many human beings.**

Who can forget Moses who pled with God to blot him rather than the guilty Israelites from the book He had written? Paul, too, had such an intense love for his countrymen that he would have willingly died and gone to Hell in their stead if only they could be

Could God fail to love some of the very persons whom He has commanded us to love?

saved. Are we really to believe that Paul, who, by the way, was manifesting the Spirit of Christ, could love them to that degree while God Himself, who actually had the power to intervene, simply passed them by? Seriously? It's unthinkable! And yet, "if God has no love at all for the non-elect, as the doctrine of predestination implies, then both Moses' and Paul's love was far greater than God's."<sup>9</sup> To take this problem further, it might be asked how we would react to the knowledge that God might not love those whom we love? John Piper responded to that exact question as follows:

"I am not ignorant that God *may* [sic] not have chosen my sons for his sons. And, though I think I would give my life for their salvation, if they should be lost to me, I would not rail against the Almighty. He is God. I am but a man. The Potter has absolute

rights over the clay. Mine is to bow before his unimpeachable character and believe that the Judge of all the earth has ever and always will do right."<sup>10</sup>

Setting aside the ridiculous implausibility of his answer, Piper is essentially conceding the point that Calvinist theology teaches that God might not love our children as much as we do.<sup>11</sup> Such a position can hardly be called Christian.

"If there be a single loved one of mine whom God *could* [sic] redeem but doesn't—if it should turn out, for instance, that God fails to love my own little daughter—then I can think of no better response than a paraphrase of John Stuart Mill: 'I will not worship such a God, and if such a God can send me to hell for not so worshiping him, then to hell I will go.' Of course, this may mean simply that I am not one of the elect, or, if I am one of the elect,

that God will someday transform my heart so that I can be just as calloused toward my loved ones as he is."<sup>12</sup>

The whole concept of such a 'God' is appalling; and for those such as Piper to sanctimoniously rejoice in their own salvation without offering so much as an indignant grunt of moral outrage over those whom God has not 'chosen,' illustrates as little else could "the selfishness built right into the very heart of Calvinistic theology."<sup>13</sup> To summarize I can do no better than to offer the criticism of Jerry Walls, "The nasty, awful, 'deep-dark-dirty-little-secret' of Calvinism is that it teaches there is one and only one answer to why the lost are not saved, and it is that God does not want them saved."<sup>14</sup> Although He has the ability to bring salvation to all, He has chosen not to do so. Such a system is not only illogical and unnecessary, it is immoral, as well. **BT**

<sup>1</sup>Supralapsarianism ("before the lapse") puts God's alleged decrees in the following order: (1) God decreed the election of some and the eternal condemnation of others, (2) God decreed to create those elected and eternally condemned, (3) God decreed to permit the fall, and (4) God decreed to provide salvation for the elect through Jesus Christ. Supralapsarianism focuses on God ordaining the fall, creating certain people for the sole purpose of being condemned, and then providing salvation for only those whom He had elected. Cf. <https://www.gotquestions.org/lapsarianism.html>

<sup>2</sup>Infralapsarianism ("after the lapse") puts God's alleged decrees in the following order: (1) God decreed the creation of mankind, (2) God decreed mankind would be allowed to fall into sin through their own self-determination, (3) God decreed to save some of the fallen. Cf. *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup>Thomas B. Talbott, "On Predestination, Reprobation, and the Love of God," 33, no. 2 (1983), 12.

<sup>4</sup>David Engelsma, *Hyper-Calvinism and the Well-Meant Offer of the Gospel* (Grandville, Mich.: Reformed Free Pub. Association, 1994), 58.

<sup>5</sup>Talbott, *On Predestination, Reprobation, and the Love of God*, 13.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup><https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/essential-accidental/>; accessed 1/26/2017.

<sup>8</sup>Talbott, *On Predestination, Reprobation, and the Love of God*, 13.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 14

<sup>10</sup>John Piper, "How Does a Sovereign God Love: A Reply to Thomas Talbott," *Reformed Journal* 33, no. 4 (1983), 13.

<sup>11</sup>Kenneth Keathley, *Salvation and Sovereignty: A Molinist Approach* (Nashville, Tenn.: B&H Academic, 2010), 47.

<sup>12</sup>Talbott, *On Predestination, Reprobation, and the Love of God*, 14.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup>Jerry L. Walls and Joseph Dongell, *Why I Am Not a Calvinist* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004). Cited in: Kenneth Keathley, *Salvation and Sovereignty: A Molinist Approach* (Nashville, Tenn.: B&H Academic, 2010), 58.

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