

When Worldviews Collide

Calvinism Is Idolatry

Pastor Josh Merrell | Understanding the Times

More than a few people have begun to wonder if this series on Calvinism was ever going to end. I sympathize! In fact, I can assure you that no one is more ready to be done with the discussion than I. Thankfully, this is the final installment. I do not, however, regret the time invested. The pathogens of Reformed Theology are so damaging and contagious that it is necessary to inoculate ourselves against them lest we be infected in the pandemic currently sweeping through evangelicalism.

In the long course of our journey, Calvinism has been shown to be illogical, inconsistent, immoral, thoroughly unbiblical, and

utterly unnecessary. Depending on which brand of Calvinism one subscribes to, it entails either the violation of God's self-sufficiency—His aseity—or worse, it contradicts the holy, loving character He has so clearly revealed in Jesus. These problems are not minor points of disagreement on peripheral issues. They are profound; of such a nature, in fact, as to call into question whether the 'god' of Calvinism and the God of the Bible are one and the same. I am persuaded they are not. This, of course, is not a charge I make lightly, but lest I be accused of exaggerating for effect, consider the complaint of Calvinist *par excellence*, John Piper:

"I had relished three of [George] MacDonald's novels and the Anthology compiled by C.S. Lewis [but] then I read this sentence, and the budding friendship collapsed. 'From all copies of Jonathan Edwards' portrait of God, however faded by time, however softened by the use of less glaring pigments, I turn with loathing.'¹ I was stunned. George MacDonald loathed my God! ... Can Christian fellowship have any meaning when we view each other's God like this? I hope some wiser reader than I will write and tell us how we can be brothers in Christ and loathe each other's God."²

As this excerpt implies, Piper himself sees the divide between the two views as an impassable chasm. The two portraits of God are so dissimilar that we each find the other's characterization of God repugnant.³ It's difficult to understand how Christians could read the same Bible and come to such wildly different concepts of God's nature. Perhaps the explanation lies in a difference of emphasis. In his short but remarkably insightful book, *The One, the Three and the Many*, British theologian Colin Gunton highlights crucial points at which he believes particular Christian doctrines went awry. Of note for our purposes is his claim that in Western theology since Augustine, "the theme of love" (i.e. the expression of God's character) "becomes subordinate to that of will" (i.e. the expression of God's power).⁴ Obviously, the Scriptures speak both of God's will and His love (1 Peter 3:17; Romans 5:8), but which of the two is primary? Which should receive the emphasis? A telling illustration of how Calvinists answer this question can be seen in the following quotation from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary President Albert Mohler:



“The God of the Bible is the holy, ruling, limitless, all-powerful God who makes nations to rise and to fall, who accomplishes His purposes and who redeems His people. Arminianism—the theological system opposed to Calvinism—necessarily holds to a very different understanding of God, His power and His government over all things.”⁵

Here Mohler not only hints at the completely different concepts of God entailed by the different systems, he also states the issue that, in his mind, sets them apart—His *power*. While I certainly accept and can appreciate God’s omnipotence, it seems to me beside the point. If power were the governing factor in the equation, I would be the first to affirm that God *could* create a world in which He sovereignly determined all things. The problem, however, is that given His *character*, if He were the direct or even the indirect cause of everything that happens, He *would not* produce a world like ours that is filled with suffering and in which billions die and are eternally separated from Him in Hell.⁶ The God of the Bible so wonderfully revealed in the person of Jesus Christ would not do that.

In my mind, this fundamental difference in emphasis is the watershed issue. Is God most accurately conceived in terms of His loving *character* or His sovereign *power*? Asked differently, is it best to question how a sovereign God would express love or how a loving God would express His sovereignty?⁷ To answer this, consider for a moment the image of God that emerges from the following scenario.

“Imagine a parent who is able to control each and every action of his children, and furthermore is able to do so by controlling their thoughts and inclinations. He is thus able to determine each and all actions taken by those children. He is also able to guarantee that they desire to do everything that they do, and this is exactly what he does. He puts them in a special playroom that contains not only toys but also gasoline and matches, and then he gives them explicit instructions (with severe warnings) to avoid touching the gasoline and matches. Stepping out of sight, he determines that the children indeed begin to play with the gasoline and matches. When the playroom is ablaze and the situation desperate, he rushes in to save them (well, some of them). He breaks through the wall, grabs three of his seven children, and carries them

to safety. When the rescued children calm down, they ask about their four siblings. They want to know about the others who are trapped inside, awaiting their inevitable fate. More importantly, they want to know if he can do something to rescue them as well.

When asked about the situation, their father tells them that this tragic occurrence had been determined by him, and, indeed, that it was a smashing success—it had worked out in exact accordance with his plan. He then reminds them of his instructions and warnings, and he reminds them further that they willingly violated his commands. They should be grateful for their rescue, and they should understand that the others got what they deserved. When they begin to sob, he weeps with them; he tells them that he, too, has compassion on the doomed children (indeed, the compassion of the children for their siblings only dimly reflects his own). The children are puzzled by this, and one wants to know why such a compassionate father did not rescue the others (when it was clearly within his power to do so). His answer is this: this happened so that everyone could see how smart he is (for being able to know how to do all this), how powerful he is (for being able to control everything and then effectively rescue them), how merciful he is (for rescuing the children who broke his rules), and how just he is (for leaving the others to their fate in the burning playroom). And, he says, ‘this is the righteous thing for me to do, because it allows me to look as good as I should look.’”⁸

This, Calvinism teaches, is how a sovereign God loves. Moreover, at this point there is no retreat left to them for arguing either (a) that God *must* cause such evil in order to display His glory⁹ or (b) that He has no love for the ‘non-elect.’¹⁰ This moral monster *is* the portrait of God painted by Calvinism. It is not hard to see why George MacDonald would describe such an image as loathsome. A ‘god’ who would choose to put cradles in Hell for His own ‘glory’ is sick—it’s not the God I know. Nor, thankfully, is it the God of the Bible. As revealed in Scripture, the essential nature of God is that of holy love (I John 4:8). This is foundational, as the members of the triune Godhead enjoyed a fellowship of love *from eternity*—long before there existed anything over which to rule.¹¹ Perhaps this is why I have such a visceral reaction to Calvinist teaching: it slanders the character of God. It

transforms the One who revealed Himself to Moses as *merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin...* (Exodus 34:6–7) into a tyrant who elects some and condemns others *according to the good pleasure of his will* (Ephesians 1:5). By emphasizing His sovereignty rather than His love, Calvinism fails to represent God as He truly is. Instead, it creates a caricature that is both

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unflattering and misleading. In short, there is no ‘god’ who behaves as Calvinists claim. Thus, Calvinism is idolatry.

Over the course of these articles, I hope to have argued cogently that (1) Calvinism is misguided, for if God needs the world with its evil to manifest His glory, grace, and wrath, then His aseity and thus His sovereignty itself are destroyed. On the other hand, if He does not need these things to benefit (i.e. glorify) Himself, then we are left with the absurd conclusion that damning sinners to Hell for all eternity is for their good. Moreover, it takes an inconsistent position on human freedom vacillating between libertarian and compatibilist definitions of the term depending on how it is being attacked. (2) Calvinism is unnecessary because Molinism with its doctrine of middle knowledge offers an equally robust account of God’s sovereignty without compromising human free will or God’s genuine desire that all be saved. (3) Calvinism is immoral because it teaches that God does not want the lost saved. (4) Calvinism is unscriptural because it entails the explicit denial of foundational precepts taught in the Torah and by Jesus Himself. (5) Finally, Calvinism is idolatrous because it leads men to worship a gross distortion—a twisted parody of the God revealed in Jesus. These are strong reasons for rejecting Calvinism and the Reformed worldview that undergirds it. **BT**

1) George MacDonald and George MacDonald, *Creation in Christ*: Wheaton, Ill.: H. Shaw Publishers, 1976, 1976), 81. 2) <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/how-does-a-sovereign-god-love> 3) The language of “two views” is *not* meant to imply the oft-repeated Calvinist charge that one is either an Arminian or a Calvinist. There is a biblical path (e.g. Molinism) that avoids the ditches on either side. My point is simply that to a non-Calvinist, the Calvinist view of God is offensive and vice versa. 4) Jerry L. Walls and Joseph Dongell, *Why I Am Not a Calvinist* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 218. 5) <http://www.albertmohler.com/2009/07/16/the-reformation-of-doctrine-and-the-renewal-of-the-church-a-response-to-dr-william-r-estep/> Cf. Ibid, 217. 6) Ibid. 218. 7) Ibid. 219. 8) Thomas H. McCall, “We Believe in God’s Sovereign Goodness: A Rejoinder to John Piper,” 29, no. 2 (2008), 241–241. 9) Contra John Piper, “Are There Two Wills in God: Divine Election and God’s Desire for All to Be Saved,” in *Grace of God, the Bondage of the Will, Vol 1* (Grand Rapids: Baker Bk House, 1995), 126. See article three of this series. 10) Contra David Engelsma, *Hyper-Calvinism and the Well-Meant Offer of the Gospel* (Grandville, Mich.: Reformed Free Pub. Association, 1994), 58 See articles 9–10 in this series. 11) Sovereignty, unlike love, is a contingent property that lacks expression apart from the existence of something that is not ‘God.’ Cf. Miroslav Volf, “God is Love,” *Christian Century* 127, no. 22 (11/02, 2010), 31.