

Calvinism was once largely limited to Presbyterian-style churches, where its doctrines and practices were most commonly upheld. However, in recent decades, Calvinism has made huge inroads into the mainstream evangelical movement. This shift has been driven by a renewed interest in Reformed theology, influential evangelical leaders advocating Calvinist principles, and a growing number of evangelicals seeking a more robust theological framework than the “seeker sensitive” models they grew up in. As a result, Calvinist ideas have become increasingly prevalent in many evangelical circles, influencing church practices, preaching, and theological education.

Calvinism, as the soteriology of Reformed theology, emphasizes the sovereignty of God in the salvation of humanity. It is characterized by foundational beliefs often summarized by the acronym TULIP: Total Depravity (human beings are completely depraved by the fall), Unconditional Election (God's choice of certain individuals for salvation is not based on their merit), Limited Atonement (Christ's atonement is sufficient for all but only offered for the elect), Irresistible Grace (those chosen by God will inevitably come to faith), and Perseverance of the Saints (those truly saved will persist in their faith until the end).

Reformed theology, however, is broader than Calvinism itself. While Calvinism focuses on soteriology, Reformed theology encompasses a comprehensive worldview, including doctrines of God's covenant, the ordinances and order of the church, the role of government, and the lordship of Christ over all creation, to name a few.

THE LOGIC OF CALVINISM

One of the biggest selling points of Calvinism is its logical coherence. The TULIP system is highly structured and progressive, with each point logically leading to the next. For example, Total Depravity (T) asserts that human beings are completely fallen in their nature and incapable both of saving themselves and of seeking or responding to the Savior. This logically leads to Unconditional Election (U), which posits that God's choice of who will be saved is not based on any human merit, since none exists, but is required, since no one is capable of responding to the Gospel. From there, Limited Atonement (L) follows, the belief that Christ's atonement is specifically for the elect, is also essential, for why would Christ die for one who will not and cannot receive Him as Savior. Irresistible Grace (I) then asserts that those whom God has elected and for whom Christ died will inevitably come to faith, for Christ cannot fail in what He sets out to do. Finally, Perseverance of the Saints (P) assures that those who are the elect will continue in their faith until the end, which is the only point at which they know they are elect.

Each point in the TULIP system builds on the previous one, creating a logically consistent framework that appeals to many believers seeking a comprehensive theological system.

While the logical coherence of an argument like Calvinism's TULIP system can be appealing, it is important to remember that the logic of an argument is not the sole criterion for judging its merit. Logical consistency ensures that the argument does not contradict itself internally; however, it does not guarantee that the premises on which the argument is based are true. An argument can be perfectly logical yet still be founded on incorrect or incomplete assumptions. Therefore, evaluating the merit of an argument also requires examining the validity and soundness of its premises, as well as considering empirical evidence and broader contextual factors.

THE BIBLICAL “PROOF” OF CALVINISM

The five points of Calvinism, summarized by the acronym TULIP, each find support in various passages of the Bible, making what appears to be a solid case for their theological positions.

1. **Total Depravity (T):** Calvinism holds that human beings are radically corrupt and thus incapable of coming to God on their own. This is supported by **Romans 3:10**: "As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one."
2. **Unconditional Election (U):** This doctrine posits that God's choice of certain individuals for salvation is not based on any foreseen merit in them. **Ephesians 1:4** supports this: "According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love."
3. **Limited Atonement (L):** Calvinism teaches that Christ's atonement is sufficient for all but is applied only to the elect. **John 10:15** affirms this: "As the Father knoweth me, even so know I the Father: and I lay down my life for the sheep."
4. **Irresistible Grace (I):** This point asserts that those whom God has elected will inevitably come to faith. **John 6:37** provides support: "All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out."

5. **Perseverance of the Saints (P):** This doctrine ensures that those truly saved will continue in their faith until the end. **Philippians 1:6** confirms this: "Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ."

Though I have only given one passage for each of the 5 points, there are dozens of passages that could be provided for each point. It lays on the surface what seems to be an almost incontrovertible truth of the 5 points.

There is a fallacy that many Christians have succumbed to, which I'll call the "show me a verse" fallacy. This fallacy is flawed for two primary reasons:

1. It lends itself to proof texting. Proof texting is the practice of taking verses out of context to support a particular doctrine or belief. This approach can lead to misinterpretation and misapplication of Scripture, as it ignores the broader context and the intended meaning of the passage.
2. It ignores the fact that many solid doctrines don't have a specific chapter and verse to back them up. This oversight highlights the importance of building doctrine from the full counsel of God, taking Scripture rightly divided, rather than relying on a single (or even a dozen) proof texts. We must consider the entirety of Scripture and how different passages interrelate to form a comprehensive understanding of theological truths.

THE HUGE ASSUMPTIONS

Calvinism is built on a system of covenants central to Reformed theology, often referred to as "Covenant Theology." Covenant Theology posits that God has established specific covenants with humanity, structuring His relationship with mankind. The primary covenants in this system are:

1. **The Covenant of Works:** This was the covenant God made with Adam in the Garden of Eden, promising eternal life for obedience and death for disobedience.
2. **The Covenant of Grace:** After the fall, God established a covenant of grace, promising salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. This covenant is progressively revealed throughout the Old and New Testaments.
3. **The Covenant of Redemption:** This is the eternal agreement within the Trinity, where the Father plans, the Son accomplishes, and the Holy Spirit applies the work of salvation.

These covenants form the backbone of Calvinist theology, framing the understanding of God's interactions with humanity throughout history.

There is even a grand debate over the order of covenants in Calvinism—an intellectual pastime that could rival the most intricate chess games. In the lofty echelons of Reformed theology, there's a delightful squabble over whether the Covenant of Works, the Covenant of Grace, or the Covenant of Redemption should take precedence. And, of course, they have fancy Latin terms for these orders: "supralapsarianism" and "infralapsarianism." Because why use simple words when you can sound erudite?

Supralapsarianism posits that God's plan for the elect was determined before the fall of man (hence "supra" meaning "above" or "before"). Infralapsarianism suggests that God's election occurred after the fall (with "infra" meaning "below" or "after"). Just imagine theologians in their ivory towers, sipping tea and debating the sequence of hypothetical covenants that don't actually appear explicitly in the Bible.

The humor lies in the fact that these covenants are entirely fabricated by theologians. It's like arguing about the chronological order of events in a fictional story that you wrote yourself. But hey, if you're going to invent covenants out of thin air, why not have a spirited debate about which came first? It's theological entertainment at its finest!

The first huge assumption is that of God's covenants within the godhead with mankind. The second is the initial link in the Calvinist chain, Total Depravity.

The concept of "original sin" was first formulated by the early "Church Fathers" and became a cornerstone of Catholic doctrine. It posits that humanity inherited a sinful nature due to the transgression of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. This doctrine insists that all humans are born with an inherent sinfulness and guilt.

When the Protestant Reformation occurred, the reformers modified Catholic doctrine but did not entirely abandon the idea of original sin. Protestant theology still holds that humanity is affected by Adam's sin, though interpretations of its implications vary among different denominations.

However, the question remains: Did the nature of humanity fundamentally change upon Adam's sin? This traditional teaching is often asserted but rarely supported with solid biblical evidence. I personally argue that Adam introduced sin and death into the human experience, but that we are not inherently guilty of his specific sin. Instead, we are inherently separated from God.

This perspective suggests that while Adam's sin brought about a fallen state, individual guilt is not inherited. Rather, each person is responsible for their own sins and choices. The primary issue is our separation from God, not an inherent guilt from Adam's transgression.

ARGUING WITH A CALVINIST

Calvinism has a reputation for a certain degree of arrogance. This is not surprising, given their lofty view that they were chosen by God before the foundations of the earth to be one of His elect, to serve Him for eternity. Such a view fosters a certain degree of pride, which is often evident within Calvinism.

In addition to this arrogant spirit, a Calvinist often sees himself and the Reformed community as the “holders of truth” from which others have been blinded to seeing.

Because of this sometimes-arrogant spirit and attitude that they see truth while others do not, arguing theology with a Calvinist is a tall order.

Here are three starting points you may be able to use with some Calvinists to begin a legitimate discussion.

TRUE FREEDOM AND PREDETERMINED CHOICE

True freedom, in its most genuine sense, is the capacity to make choices without external compulsion or predetermined outcomes. It involves the ability for an individual to weigh options and decide based on their own will and desires. When considering the concept of freedom in a theological context, it raises questions about the nature of human agency and divine sovereignty.

The Bible presents a view of humanity that includes a degree of free will. For instance, in **Deuteronomy 30:19**, God says, "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live." This passage, along with many others, suggests that humans have the capacity to choose their own path, displaying a level of freedom granted by God.

If a choice is predetermined by an external party, it ceases to be a genuine act of free will. In the context of Calvinism, the doctrine of Irresistible Grace insists that those whom God has elected will inevitably come to faith. This raises a critical question: if individuals are predestined to choose God, can their choice be considered truly free?

A predetermined choice, by definition, is one in which the outcome is already decided, irrespective of the individual's desires or decisions. This concept challenges the notion of true freedom because it implies that individuals are not genuinely free to choose otherwise. Instead, they are following a path that has been set for them, which contradicts the essence of freedom.

From a philosophical standpoint, true freedom is often contrasted with determinism. Determinism is the idea that all events, including human actions, are ultimately determined by causes external to the will. If human choices are entirely determined by an external force (in this case, divine predestination), then individuals lack true freedom.

Theologically, the question of true freedom versus predetermined choice has deep implications for understanding God's nature and human responsibility. If God has given humans true freedom, it means He respects their autonomy and allows them to make meaningful choices. This view aligns with the idea of a loving and just God who desires a genuine relationship with His creation.

Conversely, if choices are predetermined, it raises questions about the nature of God's justice and love. How can God hold individuals accountable for actions they were predestined to take? This tension highlights the importance of reconciling the concept of true freedom with divine sovereignty.

The crux of the matter when it comes to freedom is this: If our salvation or damnation is predetermined by God, are we really free in any sense?

GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY

For the second area of argumentation, seek to explain that God's sovereignty, a topic loved by Calvinists, is bigger than “God always has to get His way.” Such a view is sophomoric and limited. God's sovereignty is so grand that He is not shaken at all by the rejection of His creation.

A grander view of sovereignty recognizes that God, in His infinite wisdom and power, has chosen to create beings with genuine freedom. This means that He allows His creation to make real choices, even if those choices include rejecting Him. This perspective does not diminish God's sovereignty but rather magnifies it, showing that He is so

powerful and assured in His rule that He can allow for human autonomy without compromising His ultimate plan or authority.

God's sovereignty encompasses His ability to work through all human choices, whatever they may be. This view celebrates the complexity and depth of God's rule, highlighting His capacity to bring about His will in ways that go beyond mere control or compulsion. It shows a God who is relational, engaging with His creation in a dynamic way that respects the freedom He has granted.

In this grander view, God's sovereignty is seen not as a rigid imposition of His will but as a masterful orchestration of history, where human freedom and divine purpose coexist. It affirms that God's ultimate plans will come to fruition, but not at the expense of human dignity and choice. Instead, it is through the interplay of God's sovereignty and human freedom that God's glory and wisdom are most profoundly displayed.

DEALING WITH ORIGINAL SIN

The third issue to address is the doctrine of original sin and total depravity. I encourage you to read the Bible without preconceived notions and ask yourself whether these doctrines are truly biblical. Consider whether the traditional teaching that humanity inherited guilt and a sinful nature from Adam is supported by Scripture, or if it is an interpretation that has been influenced by theological traditions over time.

Historically, there have been three primary ways of addressing the issue of original sin:

1. **Baptism (Catholic View):** The Catholic Church teaches that original sin is washed away through the sacrament of baptism. This rite is believed to cleanse individuals from the inherited sin of Adam, making them capable of receiving God's grace.
2. **Election (Calvinist View):** Calvinism asserts that original sin is overcome through God's sovereign election. According to this view, God chooses certain individuals for salvation, and through this election, they are regenerated and enabled to receive what God offers.
3. **Prevenient Grace (Arminian View):** The Arminian perspective asserts that prevenient grace is the means by which original sin is addressed. This grace, bestowed by God, enables all individuals to respond to the Gospel and choose salvation, counteracting the effects of original sin and restoring their ability to seek God.

But what if Original Sin doesn't need to be overcome because it only exists in the minds of theologians? What if God is simply offering a gift to all of fallen humanity, overcoming the separation by sending His only begotten Son to become the Savior?

Truly good news doesn't require baptism, doesn't require an election that the individual cannot bring about on their own, and doesn't require God to spread a cover-up to overcome guilt. Rather, it simply requires truly free will, forgiveness for sins, payment by Christ's blood, and a gracious gift offered by God through Jesus the Savior.