

Sin, Will, and Salvation

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Christian theology plays a very important role in helping us understand our Sovereign Creator. It is imperative, however, that one makes a clear distinction between what is *essential* and *non-essential* Christian doctrine. The principle should be focused on the clear historical aspects of what Scripture has already revealed to us in regard to Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection. On the other hand, all Scripture must be followed by the application of basic hermeneutical rules and an unbiased exegesis. In a nutshell, there are plain things in Scripture that require no interpretation, as well as those gray areas in Scripture that require a little closer look. One thing is certain—the demarcation of Christendom is divided between orthodoxy and heresy.

Without exception, the doctrine of Predestination is an important element for understanding God's will and purpose for our lives. Understanding this doctrine requires a close look at different facets of what we'll call *salvific determinism*; more specifically, the implications of sin, the role of our will, and the sovereign plan of our Lord and Savior.

Sin

Presupposing that sin is understood by most people to be the position of man's fallen nature, the depravity of righteousness, antinomianism, or the unwillingness to do good, then it is in fact, the culprit in achieving salvation. In its original meaning (Heb.-*châtâ*), sin means to miss the mark. In context, the word evil (Heb.-*Ra'*), however, is defined as unrighteousness, wickedness, and perverseness, which in turn would imply that our sinful nature draws in a propensity to do evil. Analytically, to sin intentionally is evil. Thus, since sin is inevitably in our nature by inheritance—and is justified in our inability to change that, sin would not necessarily be the primary reason for our damnation. Rather, it would be an act of free will (naturally, *evil*). There is, however, another problem; how can we be made responsible for our actions if they are predetermined by a natural inheritance? It can be argued that:

- 1) **Sin** is our *condition*.
- 2) **Evil** is its *projection*.

Arguably, we are not sinners because we sin; rather, we sin because we are sinners!

The scriptures reveal that the sinful nature of man is a direct cause of Adam's disobedience (Romans 5:12). However, angels sinned before Adam's entrance into the primordial garden (2 Peter 2:4) and Satan's fall due to jealousy and pride (Isa. 14:12-20; Eze 28:17). In essence, Satan acted on his own free will. Now, God's foreknowledge does not mean He "foreordained;" it is a *non-sequitur* argument to say that because He knew something, He caused it—or had to intervene. After all, Scripture says: "all things

work together for good to those who love Him" (Romans 8:28). But it is yet more complicated than that.

To understand the origin of sin, it is imperative we look at it not from its more conventional meaning; instead, we must look at it from an objective understanding. Let me explain. If sin exists at all it must have been preconceived. So in essence *sin* began as a reflection. *In order to understand righteousness, we must first know evil, and visa versa.* The problem of original sin isn't that it exists, rather that it must exist! Like the two opposite constants that govern our universe, negative and positive, so too—sin inevitably follows righteousness. Equally, in making a wholly good law—a wholly bad one follows in order that the good may be followed freely. As a final point, the only thing that separated us from sin was the knowledge of it!

The question is—then; why did Eve choose to sin? Why was her inclination to sin stronger than *not* to sin? We can conclude that:

- 1) Satan possessed privileged knowledge of *good and evil* (Eze 28:12-16).
- 2) Humans did not possess this knowledge, otherwise, God would not have placed the tree of knowledge of *good and evil* amidst the primordial garden (Gen 2:17).
- 3) Satan possessed the power of coercion (Gen 3:1).
- 4) Satan possessed the power to deceive (Gen 3:13).
- 5) Not having the knowledge of *good and evil* warranted Eve's inability to discern, thus making her vulnerable to deceit.
- 6) The statements made by God in Gen 2:17 would be morally/logically parallel to Satan's statements in Gen 3:4-5 if in fact Eve was unable to discern *right* from *wrong*.
- 7) *The will is free and determined*: A choice must be desired to be a choice at all (also known as *self-determinism*).
- 8) The will must be motivated (*must have a reason*) in order to bear any moral significance.
- 9) Enticement was Eve's motivation (*disobedience was the result*).
- 10) Eve's inclination was not toward sin, but to the fulfillment of her desire (Gen 3:6-7). Sin inexorably followed.

A good and final question would be: Why do we carry the burden of another man's sin? There are two possible answers,

- 1) Adam was the representative of mankind (Rom 5:12-13).
- 2) Sin having entered into the world is irreversible and an inevitable domino effect (i.e. by *transmittable awareness*).

Free Will

In theology, the term *free will* helps us to understand that our propensity to sin does not mean we have the necessity to sin. The obvious question would be: how truly free is our free will? A label used to identify those who reject *theistic determinism* is called ¹*natural freedom of self-determination*, and it is defined as having genuine free will and a true moral responsibility. Although most people accept this view, it requires further examination. From a philosophical viewpoint, a truly free agent cannot be bound by the propensity to sin—because the moment the partiality befalls into an action of malevolence, it is no longer an act of free will, but an act of the agent’s inherited natural condition. This condition is called *circumstantial freedom of self-realization*. It is important to recognize, however, that it is not *theistic determinism* that dictates malice, rather, the act of original disobedience.

Since free will is not neutral but motivated, free will is essentially a paradigm shift from our propensity to sin and the actual act of malevolence. As Paul so aptly put it, “*As it is written, there is none righteous, no, not one: [11] there is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God*” (Romans 3:10-11).

Furthermore, if the establishment of the Kingdom of God is left to the dictates of the free will of man, then it may follow that the kingdom may not be established if man chose to live a life of rebellion rather than repentance. It is to our greatest advantage to understand that *our will is subordinate to God’s will*. Conclusively, the noetic effects predetermined by our condition (namely, our sinful nature) infused with our inability to respond to God’s holiness (*unless we are drawn*) is the reason for our need of a Savior!

Salvation

I have defined *salvific determinism* as being God’s ultimate authority over whom He wills to be saved. I have used this label in order to avoid the long-overused *doctrine of divine election*. Not only is divine election widely used, but it has also taken on a great number of connotative meanings (e.g. ¹Chosen But Free, ²Elect in the Son, etc.) Salvific determinism is clear and harder to pour a different meaning into, allowing no room for misinterpretation. Although most people would feel uncomfortable with the idea of being “forced” onto our knees by the strings of a cosmic puppeteer, how is it that these same people are fine with the idea of being bound by original sin? This not only gives credence to Satan, but it also belittles the Glory of God! Could our free will be the means to salvation? Could synergism?

¹ This view is not to be confused with *autonomy*. God cannot be sovereign with an autonomous person running about. In fact, a person can be considered a free agent without being self-governed.

The Bible makes explicit soteriological statements about God's grace upon His elect. For example, Revelations chapter 7, verse 10 reads, "...and crying out with a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!'" The Lord Jesus Christ makes a clear enunciation of our limitations, "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day" (John 6:44). Again, Paul's letter to the Ephesians begins in chapter 2, verses 8-9 saying, "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: [9] Not of works, lest any man should boast." The Bible is replete with statements such as these (*for further study read*, Exodus 33:19; Joel 2:30-32; Matthew 20:16; Mark 13:20; Luke 18:7; John 6:37; John 13:18; John 15:16-19; Acts 4:12; Acts 13:48; Acts 22:14; Romans 9:21; 1 Corinth. 1:26-30; Ephesians 1:4; Ephesians 1:11; Ephesians 2:10; Philippians 2:13; Col 3:12; 2 Thes 2:13; 1Tim 5:21; 2 Tim 1:9; 2 Peter 1:10; Revelations 17:14). Essentially, being *chosen* then is the begotten ability to respond to righteousness.

The logical question is; why does God only save some and not others? First, we must as Christians maintain that God is neither capricious, nor unjust. It is safe to say that with or without *theistic determinism*, God does not save all men. We know that,

- 1) All are reprobates.
- 2) God calls (regenerates).
- 3) God draws.
- 4) God saves.

Why some are chosen is an assurance for the establishment of His kingdom. One thing is certain: the establishment of the kingdom cannot be left in the hands of reprobates. There would be just too much at risk!

There are two views on the doctrine of predestination which deal with the decrees of election and reprobation. *Supralapsarianism* maintains that God decreed both election and reprobation before the fall. In other words, Adam's fall was included in God's eternal decree. *Infralapsarianism* holds to God's foreknowledge that sin would occur. Both views agree that God allowed (not caused) sin to occur; the distinction is on the logical order of the decrees. Did God decree both election and reprobation before the fall, or did he decree only election with the foreknowledge that sin would occur? *Infralapsarianism* argues for this order:

1. God decreed the creation of mankind—a good, blessed creation, not marred or flawed. Gen. 1:31
2. God decreed mankind would be *allowed* to fall through its own self-determination. Gen 3:6-7
3. God decreed to save some of the fallen. Eph 1:4
4. God decreed to leave the rest to their just fate of condemnation. Matt 22:14
5. God provides the Redeemer for the elect. John 6:37

6. God sends the Holy Spirit to realize redemption among the elect. Eph 4:30

Although this view holds to the order of decrees of election to salvation *after the fall*, its basic tenets are more reasonable and preclude the threat of God being the author of sin. A more sound perspective would hold to these tenets with the contention of election *prior* to the fall. Elwell, 560-561.

Other readings of Scripture only appear to contradict these passages. For example, John chapter 3, verse 16 reads, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that *whosoever* believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." And Mark chapter 16, verse 16 which states, "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned." And further, Acts chapter 2, verse 21, says this: "And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved." These verses are not contradictions, rather *affirmations*. Doubtfully, any given text is intended to contradict other passages. Take for example the word "*whosoever*," in its most denotative meaning—the word is limited to those whom he has drawn, as in John 6:44. If in fact no man can come unto Him unless he is drawn, "*whosoever believeth*" are the very elect (or those whom are drawn)! From this analysis of the passages in Scripture, the reader can draw the very same conclusions that appear to contradict those that are plain and clear.

Objections

1. It is often said by Calvinists that dead men can't respond. As you say, "you are dead in your trespasses & sins." Eph. 2:1.

In Romans 6, it says that "in the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus."

If being dead in sin means one can't respond to God then does being dead to sin mean that the Christian cannot respond to sin?

Response: Actually, further down it clearly states that, "Even when we were dead in sins, [*He*] hath *quickened* us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) (Ephes. 2:5)..." This is a clear indication of His intervention in "making us alive" in Christ Jesus. In Romans 6, we are looking at the very same type of expression; however, this particular passage is used as an indication that although we are saved by grace, we are not to continue in sin as to lose our communion with God (*not our salvation*). The Scripture later gives the importance of baptism as an expression of dying to our old selves.

2. Even though God does perfectly know all human thoughts, can man have thoughts that have never been thought before (i.e. ex-nihilo thoughts)?

If these thoughts are not free (e.g., they are determined) then has God caused all thoughts, including evil ones, which would make God the author of sin and evil and man not responsible?

If, on the other hand, these thoughts are free, then how can God remain sovereign according to the Calvinist definition of sovereignty?

Response: First let me begin by saying that there is nothing new under the sun and nothing God does not know (1 John 3:20 KJV). Second, the Bible states, “The Lord hath made all things for himself: yea, even the wicked for the day of evil” (Proverbs 16:4 KJV). He created sin indirectly by creating the very angel who acted on disobedience and pride. However, we must not confuse *authorship of evil* with a person’s exercise of volition; Psalm 5:4 precludes that possibility, “For thou art not a God that hath pleasure in wickedness: neither shall evil dwell with thee.” As I have written above in this article, God’s foreknowledge (of our thoughts) does not mean He “foreordained;” it is a *non-sequitur* argument to say that because He knew something, He caused it—or had to intervene. Ex-nihilo thoughts may be conceptualized by a free agent, but they are not new to our Father in heaven, this does not mean He caused you to say them, rather He knew that you would. In any case, how would this mar His sovereignty?

3. The Bible says in 1 Timothy 2:4, "God our Savior wants all men to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth."

It also states that God wants all men to be saved in 2 Peter 3:9, Matthew 23:37 and in Ezekiel 33:11 and 18:30. Obviously not all men are saved.

How does Calvinism explain this? Does the God of Calvinism have two wills that are in direct contradiction and hence have a multiple personality disorder?

Response: I am not a Calvinist, I am a Christian who’s not bound by labels, but I do adhere to reformed theology. The Bible teaches that no man comes unto Him unless he is drawn (Grk. *Haireomai*- to drag) by the Father. The book of Revelations Chapter 7, verse 10 affirms, “Salvation belongs to Him and to the Lamb.” There is no contradiction here; “all” these men must obviously first be drawn by Him, thus, giving Him the final word of arbitration.

4. Calvinism excludes individual faith from the salvation process, classifying such faith as a work.

How can Calvinists classify faith as a work when Paul specifically excludes faith from works in Romans 3:27-28 and 4:5?

Response: The orthodox Christian view is that we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, and I would further argue then that Calvin probably contradicted himself. In *The Institutes of The Christian Religion* Calvin writes: “there is no nation so barbarous, no race so brutish, as not to be imbued with the conviction that there is a God.” God delivers His faithful—who also have been preordained unto Christ (as in John 6:37).

5. Jonah 2:8 says that "those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs."

If, as Calvinism teaches, God determined before time began who would be reprobates, and therefore does not extend the grace to them by which they could be saved, how logically can we understand this verse's statement that these reprobates, "forfeited the grace that could be theirs.?"

Response: Actually, the Scriptures read more aptly like this, “They that observe lying vanities forsake their own *mercy*. [9] But I will sacrifice unto thee with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay that that I have vowed. Salvation is of the Lord” (Jonah 2:8-9, KJV). The ESV translates, “Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love.” The word used in Scripture (Heb. *checed*) for *mercy*, is a word used to reveal God’s favor over the obedient, as opposed to those who “worship worthless idols.” Nevertheless, this particular passage clearly states that God has the final word over whom He chooses to save, “...I will sacrifice unto thee with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay that that I have vowed. **Salvation is of the Lord**” (*emphasis added*).

6. The Bible says in John 6:44, "no one can come to me unless the Father who sent Me draws him." The same word "draw" is used in John 12:32 which says, "But I, when I am lifted up from the earth will draw all men unto myself." Matthew 23:37 says that men can resist God's will.

How do you answer this problem in Calvinism?

Response: First off, the doctrine of *irresistible grace* refers to God’s will over the regeneration of His elect. In this passage our Lord Jesus Christ is referring to disobedience. He does not make choices for people capriciously; we make those choices on our own will and integrity.

7. You say that even the "good" acts of sinners are "bad" because they come from a completely depraved nature. Is it a "bad" act to rationally apprehend the truthfulness of apologetics?

If so, why has God commanded us to practice apologetics to sinners, which causes them to do a bad act? Doesn't that mean that God causes sinners' bad acts?

If you say "yes," doesn't that make God a bad guy?

Response: This type of argument does not follow. The ascribed illustration is simply wrong. Biblically speaking, no amount of "good" acts can save the reprobate. Scripture reads, "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: [9] Not of works, lest any man should boast (Ephes. 2:8-9). However, why would any rational Christian ascribe "bad" to the apprehension of apologetics?

8. When Calvinism is shown to have logical contradictions, Calvinists usually reply that God's thoughts are unsearchable, and therefore the logical problems that Calvinism has, for example divine election and human responsibility, exhaustive sovereignty and human free will, and God's having two contradictory wills, are solved by invoking the phrase, "well that's a mystery."

If you can solve your logic problems by copping out with the term mystery, why can't the Arminian types, atheists and others pull the same move?

Response: This type of contention demonstrates a lack of understanding of what Calvinism teaches. I am not sure how many Calvinists would answer with, "well that's a mystery," but surely this is not a generalization, right? Would it be safe to say then, based on this logic, that all Arminians make an oracular use of Scripture?

9. The Bible says in 2 Thessalonians 2:10 that reprobates "perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved."

From your Calvinistic worldview, how can it logically be said that a reprobate refuses to love the truth and so be saved, when your God determines that the reprobate can't love the truth, can't be saved, and therefore doesn't refuse God at all?

Response: In this case the missing portion of the passage should clear up any confusion. "But we are bound to give thanks always to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning *chosen* you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of

the truth..." (2 Thes. 2:13). The passage used is a clear affirmation of what has already taken place (i.e. the wicked were deceived by the son of perdition for they love not the truth), and later affirms the salvation of those whom He chose and sanctified through the Holy Spirit *in truth!*

10. You have said that nothing thwarts the will of God, and you also have said that a man's will cannot be free or else God would not be absolutely sovereign.

Doesn't this mean that God determines (or is the cause of) evil and the evil acts of men for his sovereign pleasure?

Response: This is a clear misrepresentation of Calvinism and the reformed view of "free will." However, it is true that, as it is addressed, "*nothing thwarts the will of God.*" Anybody that says any different should take it up with Him! *See paragraph on free will.*

11. In Romans 9 where God says, "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy" why do you automatically assume that God does not want to have mercy on all but only have mercy on the select few when God clearly tells us in Romans 11:32 that, "God has bound all men over to disobedience so that He may have mercy on them all?"

If you say that all means all classes of men, but not all men in every class, then why does it not mean all classes of men but not all men in every class in Romans 3:23 where it says, "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God?"

Does this mean some have not sinned? Perhaps, for instance, the Virgin Mary?

Response: This passage, if read in its entirety (beginning with chapter 9) is an obvious introduction to what we call *the doctrine of justification*. It is referring to His chosen, namely, the Israelites, and their justification through faith in Jesus Christ. They looked forward to the coming to the Messiah as we look back at His death and resurrection for the regeneration of His elect. True, we are all sinners (including the elect) and come short of His glory; however, sin is not our damnation. As I have previously argued,

- 1) **Sin** is our *condition*.
- 2) **Evil** is its *projection*.

If in fact we are damned by our condition, then we *will* all perish and have no hope in Christ Jesus! Our condition remains, while atonement provides complete

remission, delivers us from our propensity to sin, and grants us the ability to respond to God's holiness.

Sources:

Bible (ESV, KJV)

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¹ *Geisler, Norman - Chosen But Free, 1999.*

² *Shank, Robert - Elect in the Son, 1998.*