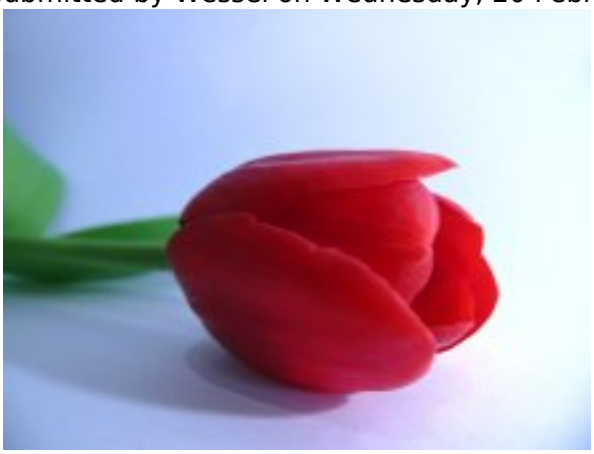
I am not a Calvinist **[1]**

Submitted by Wessel on Wednesday, 20 February 2013 - 08:15



Read time: 16 minutes
My name is Wessel.

And I am not a Calvinist.

Admitting this fact is not without trepidation. Of course, I have already "come out" of the Reformed closet in my declaration of faith [2] on this site. But given the Calvinistic milieu in which I have lived my entire life, it is daunting to make such a blatant public admission. In this article I want to lay out why it is so.

Background

What is Calvinism? In essence, within1 the Reformed tradition it is a set of soteriological beliefs. Soteriology is the "study of salvation". It can refer to the study of salvation between different religions, or of the different perspectives within the same religion. It may comes as a shock to some people, but Christians are deeply divided on how people gain salvation; and not just between Protestants and Roman Catholics. While the question "What should I do to be saved?" can (hopefully) be uniformly [3] answered [4] by all Reformed Christians, they differ on the underlying mechanisms which are at work. Amongst Reformed Evangelicals, there are two main camps: Calvinism and Arminianism. They are generally regarded as opposites of each other, but are not always so on all points as many people seem to think.

The Arminian-Calvinism debate is ongoing [5], as it has been since the late sixteenth, early seventeenth century (although there has been a renewed interest in the past decade or two). The reason why it is ongoing, is that the two theologies try to explain something which is not explicitly stated in the Bible, and tries to make sense of God, who is infinite, all-powerful, and therefore not fully knowable. Note, however, that both Calvinism and Arminianism draw on many Bible passages to support their views, which can make the Bible seem contradictory, although a good theology should not cause such confusion (and both camps claim their theology adequately explains the "opposing" passages).

The arguments which the two sides make are sometimes of philosophical nature and do not concern most "lay" Christians2. However I believe that it is important for a Christian to be clear on these things, as having an incorrect or muddled view on these matters can affect a Christian's worldview, or simply lead to confusion.

Calvinism is famously and succinctly summarised with the five points, which are remembered using the acronym TULIP:

1. **Total Depravity**: People are fundamentally sinful beings, cannot seek their own salvation and cannot seek out the one true God, unless God explicitly draws those people near to Him.
2. **Unconditional Election**: God elects (chooses/calls to Himself) someone apart from any thing which that person has done out of his or her own accord/volition.
3. **Limited Atonement**: Jesus did not die for the sins of all people, only the elect (that is, those whom God has called).
4. **Irresistible Grace**: If God calls you to Him, there is nothing you can (technically: would want to) do to resist His call.
5. **Perseverance of the Saints**: Once God has called someone to salvation, that person cannot lose their salvation. If they (apparently) do fall away from the faith, they were never saved in the first place.

Whole books can be filled discussing each of these points. But this summary should suffice for the purposes of this article.

I remember reading the above Five Points for the first time and being more horrified after reading each point[3]. But what caused the most offense was the third point: that Jesus only died for the elect. He did not die for those who are not elect. They were never considered for salvation. They never had a chance. I came to believe that it was the central point of Calvinism—that for some or other reason, this was the one point which had to stand—that all the other points support it centrally, and that if one of the points fall, they all crumble[4].

Hostility

What prompted me to write something about this subject, is the hostility, anger, and self-righteousness that I have come to associate with most Calvinists. Calvinists are arguably in the majority of Reformed Evangelical circles. That, together with the condemnation of the alternative to Calvinism—Arminianism—at the Synod of Dort in 1618–1619, I believe, has led many to believe that they must wage a crusade against the "Arminian heresy". Others think that it is trivial [6] to do away with Arminianism philosophically, while in reality applying poor logic. Debates regarding Calvinism and Arminianism frequently became heated and sometimes even emotional. It is probably true that there are also a large amount of Arminians who are hostile and boorish, but personally I have observed this behaviour mostly from Calvinists.

I am generally happy to let the debate be. I attend Calvinistic churches and the vast majority of my friends are Calvinists. Our theology agrees about 95%[5]. My friends who know my position are generally understanding and sympathetic. *In necessariis unitas, in dubiis libertas, in omnibus caritas*. I actually believe that neither of us know the exact truth. I wholly affirm the following declaration from Got Questions? [7]:

> Ultimately, it is our view that both systems fail in that they attempt to explain the unexplainable.

It is so that I do get uncomfortable when one or more of the Five Points are raised from the pulpit, but I am not prepared to become part of a schism over it. However sometimes I do get in a debate or come across statements from influential church leaders which I find to be openly hostile to my views.

What really gets me is the matter-of-fact, non-negotiable air of superiority which many Calvinists have about them. One thing which greatly irks me in particular are self-righteous claims that Calvinists have a monopoly [8] on prayer [9]. And despite openly sharing on social media, these evangelical celebrities rarely, if ever, respond when called to account for such brash comments. They are erroneously concluded from the Five Points as listed above. Other "offending" celebrities include John Piper and Don Carson, to name but a couple. Their theology is so deeply entrenched in Calvinism that I sometimes think it is damaging[6,7].

In the typical (lay) Calvinism-Arminian debate, the following points are usually argued: the Calvinist would attack the Arminian and accuse them of not believing in the sovereignty of God[8], while the Arminian would accuse the Calvinist of believing that God is some grand puppet master and that there really is no purpose to life, as God could just as easily have sent people to heaven or hell without the intermediary step of life on Earth. The former accusation is that Arminians are prideful and reduce the importance and significance of God. The Calvinist would argue that Arminians want to "earn" their salvation, almost apart from God. The latter accusation centres around the issue of free will. The issue of free will (does God decide everything for everybody, or do people have a genuine free will) is a direct consequence of holding to either belief system. However I believe that both of these accusations are misguided. Arminians (could and certainly should) believe that God is as sovereign over their lives as Calvinists do. It does not contradict their system of beliefs (more on this later). And Calvinists believe in (a form of) free will, called soft-determinism or compatibalism. In a nutshell, Calvinists believe that God influences people *internally*, through their reasoning and emotions, to *freely want to* accept God and Jesus. This might sound counter-intuitive to what a free will is, but for the sake of the current discussion I am going to grant this definition of free will in this article.

Why Not Calvinism

Rather than being about God's sovereignty or free will, I believe the Calvinism-Ariminian debate is about God's character, as pointed out by Jerry L. Walls [10][9]. This ties up with what originally caught my attention about Calvinism (the point on Limited Atonement): if compatiblism is true, why does God not love everyone? Why are not all people elected for salvation? Do we believe in a God which is only selectively loving, One who does not deeply desire the salvation of all His creation? Some argue that for God to be fully glorified, some people *need* to be damned. There are at least two problems with this line of thinking. The most obvious is that God is in need of something. This is simply wrong, the sovereign God needs nothing from mankind, especially not in regard to His glory! The second problem is why there are so many unsaved people. The majority of the Earth's population is not Christian. Would the damning of billions of people truly be needed to glorify God? I am appalled by the idea; that each soul lost would not rather inflict some grief rather than pleasure.

Another (although related) problem for Calvinism is the problem of evil [11]. The philosopher and theologian Alvin Plantinga argued that the fact of evil does not contradict the existence of God because of (essentially, libertarian) free will. Compatibilism cannot adequately explain the problem of evil away.

Not Calvin, Calvinism

I must mention that I am against Calvinism, not John Calvin. That might sound strange, but Calvinism—as a formalised creed—was only established *after* Calvin's death. Calvin built upon the theology of generations of great theologians before him. While the Five Points were based on theology which Calvin believed and taught, strictly speaking (and ironically) he cannot be called a Calvinist. And doing so is not helpful, as a friend has pointed out [12] in the past[10]. Calvin was not just TULIP. His teachings and theology was much more than that. And that I can respect. His life, his attitude, his great love for God—these are all things which I admire about John Calvin. I am not reluctant to admit that. I do not believe that it compromises my position. Calvin loved God. I love God. Therein we find our common ground; much more than anything can ever divide us. Neither of our, nor any mere person who ever lived or ever will live, will have a perfect theology.

My View

As I have mentioned in my declaration of faith [2], I am a Molinist. Molinism has been called a "philosophically sophisticated"[11] Arminianism. In short, Molinism claims that God has a specific kind of knowledge—called Middle Knowledge—which includes knowledge about counterfactuals. Counterfactuals are "what-ifs": things which are not true, but could have been true in another world

(e.g. how would the world have been different if I wore a blue shirt today instead of a red shirt, or if John F. Kennedy had not been assassinated in 1963). This allows God to know, before the creation of the world, all the possible scenarios of all possible free-will choices (and scenarios where He intervened or not), and *then* predestine (choose) a path for history to play out.

There are many objections to Molinism. I would say that at the moment it seems to me as if most intellectuals are "hostile" towards the idea. But it has not yet been defeated; that debate [13] is also still ongoing [14]. Some of the arguments brought against it are complicated at a low level; I am not going to pretend to understand all of them at this stage. I still need to investigate for myself. However at a high level it seems logical and coherent to me. I look forward to exploring the issue in depth at a later stage.

Conclusion

A woman's father died. She loved him very much. He was not a Christian. She is a Calvinist. What is the difference between Arminianism and Calvinism? I believe that God loved her father. Ultimately, she does not.

In this article I provided a series of hopelessly terse summaries on the Calvinism-Arminian debate. I briefly argued against it, as well as the "face" of it—the behaviour of most of its adherents. I also outlined my position in the debate. At another time I may delve into more depth in any of the points raised. In that case this article serves as a starting point for future discussions. However I do not want to dwell on the issue too much: I have said my peace for the time being and hope that, going forward, my Calvinistic brothers and sisters in Christ and myself can build on what we have in common to further the Kingdom of God.

- 1. Calvinists try to claim a monopoly on the word "Reformed", but its alternative—which will be discussed shortly—also falls within the Reformed Tradition. Do not allow yourself to be terminologically bullied.
- 2. This is true in general; or, at least, it is thought so in general by most teachers and therefore I think many Christians simply are not exposed to what Calvinism truly is. (We are also far removed from the times when theology was openly and vigorously discussed by the laity during the Reformation and earlier [15].) I spent more than 20 years in four churches across two denominations, both Calvinistic, before I was exposed to what Calvinism is by attending an open lecture at a Bible collage. But I think it is important for Christians to fundamentally understand the doctrines to which they subscribe, as it actually influences how you relate to other people, especially those who are not saved.
- 3. I have since come to accept a modified form of the first point—this is in line with "old" Arminianism.
- 4. There are so-call "Four-Point" or "Three-Point" Calvinists, who accept some of these points, but reject the others. It might be that the majority of "Calvinists" are like that. However I maintain that if one of these points fall, then the rest crumble.
- 5. As seen from space, I believe that evangelical Calvinism and Arminianism—apart from soteriology—are nearly indistinguishable. That is why Arminianism is part of the Reformed Tradition.
- 6. I was happy to find, after careful scrutiny, that Mark Driscoll's "Doctrine" [16] series, despite a couple of close skirts with TULIP, did not teach anything regarding Calvinism as essential Christian doctrine. While I think it is an important issue, I do not believe that a stance either way is *essential* for anyone to believe in to be saved.
- 7. While I am admittedly slightly at fault over this as well because of what I just said, something else which I have observed is that some Calvinists almost completely dismiss church leaders, thinkers and apologists because they hold an Arminian view. I have noted this in particular of Norman Geisler (although he admittedly has also drawn heavy criticism from others things which he has said and done recently).
- 8. I have seen this argument go as far as accusing Arminians of being Open Theists [17], which is a heresy stating that God does not know what the future holds. Other favourite accusations against Arminians are that they really are Pelagians or semi-Pelagians (both

heresies which the church has condemned for centuries).

- 9. Walls, Jerry L., and Joseph R. Dongell. Why I am not a Calvinist *[18]*. Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 2004.
- 10. Consider also the following extract from Histories and Fallacies *[19]* by Carl R. Trueman (pp. 186–187), which deals with general historical analysis and considers Calvin and Calvinism as an example:

> The other type of reception, of ideas and concepts, is far more difficult to analyze; and this is particularly problematic when it comes to Calvin. The main reason for this, of course, is that Calvin's theology is not original with him but represents rather the expression of a number of traditions that neither originated with him nor were made confessionally normative by him or his writings.
>
> It is worth noting that such reception can only be assessed with any accuracy when the ideas are so unique as to be traceable to a single unique source or where peculiar linguistic forms might be used that seems to originate with Calvin. Such is simply not the case with the vast majority of Calvin's theology. In this context, we have been ill-served by the term "Calvinism" and its cognates, with its implication that Calvin had a unique doctrinal status and made unique doctrinal contributions; even more so has the identification of the four heads of Dordt as the five points of Calvinism proved a hindrance to understanding Calvin's place in the intellectual development of Western theology. Indeed, the whole reification of "Calvinism" as a body of doctrine positively and uniquely connected to a single individual is counterproductive to careful historical analysis.

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- 11. See http://www.gotquestions.org/molinism.html [20].

Categories:

- Updates [21]

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[4] http://www.gotquestions.org/how-can-I-be-saved.html

[5] http://eyeonapologetics.com/blog/2011/07/01/video-the-calvinism-debate-phil-fernandes-vs-chris-comis/
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[13] http://www.leaderu.com/offices/billcraig/docs/grounding.html
[14] http://turretinfan.blogspot.com/2007/09/william-lane-craigs-middle-knowledge.html
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