

The Nub of Calvinism

There are books and papers galore explaining the essential truths of Calvinism; why it is Biblical, why it is historic orthodoxy, how it differs from Arminianism and so forth. But, at the end of the day, the matter can be reduced to a few simple statements and a clear exposition of just one Bible passage. Several other texts could be chosen, but here I wish to expound part of Ephesians chapter 2.

The essence of the matter

The argument over what happens at conversion can be reduced to three simple questions:

1. Does man, in his natural sinful state, contribute anything at all to his salvation?
2. Does man contribute to his salvation, after receiving some nebulous universal common grace, and then co-operate with God?
3. Or does God claim total sovereignty in salvation?

In theological terms, the first proposition is termed Pelagianism, the second Semi-Pelagianism or Arminianism and the third Calvinism. The essence of Reformed doctrine (Calvinism) is that God is totally and completely sovereign in salvation. Man contributes nothing of himself but only what is given to him by grace, including faith and repentance. Man can only respond to the Gospel if God does something within him first. As in the case of Lydia: **The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul.** (Acts 16:14). If God hadn't opened Lydia's heart, she could not have received the Gospel.

In this we are simply agreeing with the Lord Jesus when he stated that:

"No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Therefore everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to Me." ... And He said, "Therefore I have said to you that no one can come to me unless it has been granted to him by My Father." (Jn 6:44-45, 65)

Since people only hear when God calls and believe if God gives them faith, and since not everyone believes, it is clear that only those God chooses to believe are converted. As Paul saw on his missionary travels: **'as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed'** (Acts 13:48). Only those chosen by God can come to God. The Holy Spirit makes this crystal clear early in Paul's Ephesian letter: **'He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will'** (Eph 1:4-5). Notice that the choice by God is according to his own good pleasure, not any foreseen decisions by us.

Historic Errors

Pelagianism teaches that natural man has the ability to be converted without a prior change to his nature. He is not so sinful that he cannot find God for himself. Clearly, all evangelicals believe this to be heresy; man needs a saviour from sin. A version of this (Semi-Pelagianism) teaches that man is not quite that able, but must have a slight touch from God first. A nebulous grace hovers around everyone to help those who want to respond to the Gospel. Some varieties hold that this prevenient grace (grace that comes first) is mediated through the baptism of babies or the ordinances of the church. Those who choose to can tap into this grace and then reach out to God, where they receive even more grace. In both systems the starting point is man's will to accept the offer of grace in the Gospel. Roman Catholicism and Wesleyan Methodism are types of Semi-Pelagianism.

This system champions a free will unaffected by the fall, and rejects God's choice of those who believe; God loves everyone and wants to save everyone. Human choice is promoted so that divine grace works only in conjunction with man's free will to choose God.

Arminianism is a form of Semi-Pelagianism and is the dominant underlying principle in most evangelical preaching today. It teaches that man is not so sinful that he cannot respond to the Gospel call, he can reach out for grace by himself, unaided. God foresaw in eternity all who would choose to believe and helps these people find grace. Man thus has the free will to choose God. Christ died for everyone, freely offers grace to everyone, loves everyone and wants everyone to be saved. Man has the ability to accept or reject this universal grace. What starts with man can end with man - those who do believe must keep going on in grace or they can fall away and be lost.

The whole system is man-based and does not explain how God can fail since Jesus dies for many people who then go to hell. It fails to explain how mere man can defeat an omnipotent God by rejecting the salvation provided – God so wants people to get saved but they often refuse him! It teaches a shoddy love of God – he loves people, offers them salvation but then sentences them to wrath when they do not believe. Can God do something and fail? But worst of all it shows Jesus shedding his blood and wasting it on a large proportion of the human race who reject him – he died for nothing in their case.

Historic truth

In opposition to all these ideas, Calvinism teaches that God alone is the author and finisher of salvation. Man is so seriously inured in sin that he is powerless to do any spiritual good, he is not even able to accept Christ or believe. For man to be saved, the action must start with God who gives both faith and repentance when he draws a person to Christ. The starting work is done in the heart by God. As the heart is changed by the action of the Holy Spirit, the person receives grace to believe the Gospel, repent of a sinful life and decide to follow Christ as Lord and master. Those whom Christ died for are truly saved and will continue to the end, preserved by God's grace to perform good works.

A sample passage of scripture

Having seen the summary of the various positions, what does Ephesians 2 have to say?

- 1 And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins,
- 2 in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience,
- 3 among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others.
- 4 But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us,
- 5 even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved),
- 6 and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,
- 7 that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.
- 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God,
- 9 not of works, lest anyone should boast.
- 10 For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

1. Man is dead in sin

Man's brain isn't dead – he can still think. Man's body isn't dead – he can still bleed. Man's organs are not dead – he still breathes. Man is dead towards God, spiritually dead. The day that Adam rebelled, he died and was alienated from God.

Man can do no spiritual good work; he is dead in sins. His world is a world of sin. God is holy and can only be approached in righteousness. Man cannot approach God since he is sin. Man cannot 'decide for Christ' because that is a good spiritual work, a work man is incapable of.

Man isn't just sick, incapacitated, weakened or wounded – he is dead. Dead people cannot do anything in the world they are dead to. A deceased man in a coffin cannot help himself get out of it. A spiritually dead man cannot help get himself into God's kingdom by a decision or a prayer. Even if there were a nebulous preparatory grace hovering around waiting for men to grab it (a concept unknown in scripture), man would be unable to even do this spiritual work, because he is dead.

Man cannot perform any spiritual good since God sees him as a corpse. That's why conversion is called in the Bible 'regeneration', being 'born again'. Man needs a resurrection, not an exhortation to make a decision.

2. God makes us alive

The change at conversion begins when God indeed resurrects this dead man. He does this by joining us to Christ. He '**made us alive together with Christ ... and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.**' The initiative is taken by God, not man. The beginning of conversion is not a decision made by us but a resurrection empowered by God. There is no sense of co-operation here, rather there is a sovereign act of mercy and power.

3. By grace you have been saved

To emphasise this Paul adds the statement that salvation works by grace. When God makes us alive, it is an act of kindness and mercy; an act which gives us the power to believe, repent and worship. If man has some involvement, if the trigger is man's decision, then this is not grace but a co-operative work. Instead Paul insists that this whole work is of God not man, it is an act of grace.

4. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves

Paul makes this point over and over. Salvation is a gift of God. If man is partly involved then it cannot be a gift. It is '**not of yourselves**'; how can the writer be plainer. We contribute nothing, except by responding to God's grace.

The first thing we do is to believe. Yet Paul plainly states here that this faith to believe is a gift: '**you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God.**' The ability to believe cannot be worked up by man if it is a gift of God. God empowers a person to believe the Gospel after he has worked grace into their hearts by His Spirit. After believing the Gospel, the person repents of his former life and chooses to follow Christ. Yet scripture elsewhere states that this also is a gift of God (Acts 5:31, 11:18; 2 Tim 2:25-26). The two components of conversion are faith and repentance – both are given by God to those whom he chooses (Eph 1:4-5).

5. Not of works, lest anyone should boast

Over and over Paul is emphasising that conversion is not within the ability of man. Being saved is not a human work, is it a gift of God. When a man prays in faith to submit to Christ, when he confesses his sin and repents, God has enabled that man to accept the Gospel. That man did not work up the ability or the inclination, he responded to God's grace in his heart which gave him the power to receive Christ.

6. We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand

In his final statement, Paul reveals that the whole work of salvation and conversion is the workmanship of God. But further, he declares that this is all part of God's plan which has been operative from before time began. God chose a group of people to be a gift for his Son (Jn 17: 2,6,11,24). These would do the good works which God decreed in eternity. At the right time, God arrests these people and gives them resurrection life, converting them from sinners into saints. The basis of this choice of people is God's good pleasure, not anything these people may subsequently do.

Conclusion

Clearly the Arminian position is unbiblical. It posits that man is not dead enough to be prevented from making a decision for Christ and exercising faith. It completely rejects the idea that God chooses those who are saved, even though there are many clear texts which state this (Deut 10:14+; Ps 65:4; Mt 11:27, 22:14, 24:22+; Lk 18:7; Rm 8:28-33, 11:28, 9:10+; Eph 1:4-5; 2 Tim 1:9; Acts 13:48; 2 Thess 2:13 to name a few).

Arminianism demeans the grace of God by ignoring that faith is a gift, that salvation is God's workmanship, that conversion results from a resurrection not a decision. It exalts man to a position of co-working with God in conversion, when God states that it is not of human works in any way. Worse still, it posits a god who is very different from the God of the Bible. The god of Arminians is not sovereign. He does not fully achieve his will since he wants all to be saved and they are not. He sends his Son to do work that is not fulfilled – much of his blood is wasted if really meant for all. He loves people then stops loving them. He does not preserve his people to the end, but they often fall away forever. This is not the God revealed in scripture.

The fact that most Evangelical Christians today are Arminian (even if most of them don't know it as such) is a tragedy and a dishonour to God. The main reason for this is the fear of condemning to hell those who are not chosen. Well, this is not a matter for us. Our job is to believe God's word and honour him. If we deny God's word here, we will later deny more and more of the Bible, and this has happened throughout history. Our job is to reach out to sinners everywhere with the good news of the Gospel, not ponder the fate of those who reject it. Furthermore, there will be no sinner in hell who would have chosen Christ if he had been given more time. Everyone in hell chose to sin on earth and wanted no part of Christ. God is just and does nothing imperfectly. We must leave men's fate to him. The wonder is that any of the rebellious races of men are saved at all. God was under no obligation to save any of us – especially at such a huge cost to himself.

Ephesians clearly teaches what is commonly described as the Calvinist position and shows that Pelagianism, Semi-Pelagianism and Arminianism are false and erroneous. Many other Bible chapters teach the same thing but from a different standpoint (e.g. Rm 5, 8, 9, Jn 3, 6). If we want to obey God and be true to the clear Biblical teaching, we must condemn error (as Jesus and the apostles did vehemently) and abandon false ideas. Finally, it is crucial that we understand this if we are to present the Gospel properly to sinners. We cannot expect God's blessing if our Gospel is a lie.