

# Calvinism: A Debate

Kel Good vs. Craig Sietsema

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## *Introduction*

by Mark M. Mattison, **Editor**

The ongoing debate between Calvinists and Arminians has become one of those classic controversies within Protestant Christendom. However, other interpretations of soteriology (the doctrine of salvation) also exist within the Church. It is my pleasure to present here a rare type of dialogue between two related schools of thought: Calvinism and Moral Government.

The story of historic Calvinism is well known. Refined from the Lutheran position and based on the writings of the sixteenth-century Magisterial Reformer John Calvin, Calvinism achieved its clearest form in the seventeenth-century response to Jacobus Arminius and the Remonstrants. Arminianism continues to the present day in the form of Wesleyanism, and Calvinism continues as the Reformed branch of Protestantism. Calvinism has produced some of the most noted thinkers and speakers in recent Church history, including George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards in the Great Awakening, the Baptist preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon, and more recently R.C. Sproul.

Another sixteenth-century soteriology, known as Socinianism, reemerged in the form of rationalism in the nineteenth century, but it was not sufficiently thought out to make a lasting impression on the Church.

A fifth Protestant view emerged in the New England Calvinism which grew out of Jonathan Edwards' writings. This "New School Calvinism" gradually drifted away from traditional Calvinism as progressive thinkers denied element after element of the historical reformed position. It reached its peak in the nineteenth century with Nathaniel W. Taylor of Yale and Charles Grandison Finney, the remarkable evangelist of the

Second Great Awakening. The New England theology was brought into the twentieth century as Moral Government Theology.

The central distinction of this theology is between God's "physical" government and His "moral" government. Moral Government Theology claims traditional theology confuses these two areas by suggesting that God can rule moral beings through force and coercion.

Craig Sietsema, representing Calvinism, and Kel Good, representing Moral Government, have done a remarkable job crafting this debate, and both are to be highly commended for suffering through the interminable editorial scrutiny of yours truly. Both presentations are sketchy and neither is comprehensive due to limited space. Nevertheless the dialogue is well worth our study and enjoyment.

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## *Calvinism*

by Craig Sietsema

Calvinism is typically known for its emphasis upon the sovereignty of God. However, Calvinism also stresses human responsibility.

Understand that this is only a brief synopsis of some of the essential strains of this Biblical perspective. Much more could be said. May God bless every reader who prayerfully assesses his or her own convictions in light of this treatise.

## **Man: The Creature**

The things which we make with our hands, lovingly shaped and crafted to our satisfaction, find their resting places amid furnishings, fingers, frames and fields crafted by Another. Indeed, the things we shape were given their original existence by that One who formed the elementary particles and energies of which all created things exist. God, the Almighty, called into being what did not exist (Heb. 11:3; Rom. 4:17; John 1:3). Now having being, the creature is creature in all its dimensions. It is creature in its length and breadth. It is creature in its height and depth. It is creature in its beginning and ending. It is creature in its directions and destiny. Under no circumstance does the creature ever escape its creaturehood. The creation was not merely the genesis of material and energies which now propel through space and time independent of creative direction. Creation even involves time and events as the Creator Himself orchestrates the existence and movements of every particle, energy and spiritual being (Acts 17:25; Isa. 40:21-26; Job 38,39; Isa. 45:7).

As creature, nothing which man does or wills ever transcends the status denominated by the word "creature." Does man will? He and his will remain "creature." Does man do? He and his doing remain "creature." As creature, man never wills nor does anything which escapes concurrence with the Almighty will of his Maker and Provider (Isa. 10:5-19; Gen. 50:20; Jonah 1:15; cf. 2:3; Acts 2:23; 2 Chr. 15:6; Job 1:21).

But how is it that man wills evil? Is the Maker culpable for man's desires and doings? No, the Maker is not culpable, and He seldom explains the intricacies and delicacies of how He so weaves the tapestry of human events (Isa. 44:24-28; 45:5-7; 2 Chr. 10:15; 11:4; 25:20). In fact, He reproaches our intrusive curiosity into such unrevealed matters (Rom. 9:19-21; Isa. 45:9,10).

### **Man: The Fallen**

By some mystery of Divine design the first man fell into sin. He brought severe and cursed consequences upon himself and all his posterity. He now stood *legally* condemned before God, making him liable to temporal and eternal punishments. As grievous as this is, this was not all. Something happened *spiritually* to man as well. He chose a path that affixed his desire in the way of evil, against God (Jer. 13:23; Prov. 27:22). He darkened his perceptions (Rom. 1:18-23; 1 Cor. 2:14), not absolutely, but sufficiently so as to render himself incapable of ever returning to God without Divine assistance (Heb. 11:6; John 3:17-21; 6:44; Rom. 8:2-8; Eph. 2:4,5; Acts 11:18; 2 Tim. 2:25; I Cor. 1:29-31).

But why cannot a man change of his own accord and begin to serve the living God? Is man really so blind and obstinate that nothing can bring his soul to conversion except regeneration wrought by the Holy Spirit? Yes, it is true. Apart from the irresistible, but largely hidden, operations of the Spirit of God, none would be saved (John 3:3-8; Tit. 3:3-7).

### **Man: The Responsible**

This is not to say that the Scriptures neglect the importance of human responsibility. Even though it is impossible for man to return to God apart from Divine assistance, he yet remains responsible to believe and obey. In fact, at times the Scriptures seem to speak as if man's well-being depended merely upon his own behavior (2 Chr. 15:2,4,15; Isa. 1:18-20; 55:6,7). However, such texts do not negate others which clearly teach the sovereignty of God in saving man. Rather, they display the glory of God. The Almighty is so transcendent that He can order the footsteps of man without violating the free agency of man (Prov. 16:9; 20:24; Jer. 10:23). "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, And My thoughts than your thoughts" (Isa. 55:9).

## **God: The Savior**

Hence, mankind is doubly crippled. It is crippled legally before the bar of God. It is crippled morally through willful enmity against God. O wretched condition! How might this crippled race be healed? The irrevocable demands of Divine justice must be satisfied. Who will satisfy them?

Because there was no man (Isa. 59:16), God Himself worked salvation in the Person of His Son, Jesus Christ. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son" (John 3:16). God sent His Son, His only begotten Son, to suffer and die under the wrath of the Divine curse in propitiation for the sins of mankind. All the benefits of Christian salvation issue from that historical redemptive work of the Savior. His work effects an irresistible and indestructible deliverance for all who are saved. The saved receive an effectual call, regeneration, justification, sanctification, preservation and perseverance in the way of holiness, and final glorification at the great day of Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:28-39).

Are all saved? No. The Bible clearly teaches that not all will be saved (Rev. 21:7, 8). "Many are called, but few are chosen" (Matt. 22:14). Many of the lost receive a clear call to believe and repent. There are many conditional appeals in the Scriptures. But given the deaf, blind, dead and beast-like condition of the human soul, such calls would all go unheeded apart from the grace of God. Salvation does involve certain elements which are experientially realized by our faith and repentance. However, the whole of salvation, from beginning to end, including faith and repentance, is provided for entirely in the grace given through the Person and work of Jesus Christ. And this grace is not given to all.

What determines who will be saved, then? If man does not ultimately choose, then who does? God chooses (Eph. 1:4,5; Rom. 9:8-18). Just as God chose Israel to be His special people in the Old Testament, so He chooses all those who will receive the grace provided in Jesus Christ. It is this element in particular which degrades man's pompous pride, "that no man should boast before God. But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, that, just as it is written, 'Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord'" (1 Cor. 1:29-31).

This brings us full circle. We are creatures and are dependent upon God for all we possess, even the salvation received through Jesus Christ. "What do you have that you did not receive? But if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?" (1 Cor. 4:7) "Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come" (2 Cor. 5:17). "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10). "So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth" (1 Cor. 3:7).

The glory of this portrayal of Biblical Christianity, termed "Calvinism" by some, is that it strongly maintains man's creaturehood and emphatically exalts the glory of the transcendent and holy God.

Click here for [Kel Good's Response](#).

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## ***Moral Government***

by Kel Good

Life is about questions. There are no questions more critical than the ones we ask about God and salvation. Soteriology has traditionally been examined by attempting an answer to five questions: 1) What is wrong with people? 2) Why does God choose to save people? 3) Whom has God chosen to save? 4) How does God save people? and 5) When are people truly saved? The theological terms for these questions are depravity, election, atonement, grace, and perseverance.

### **What Is Wrong With People?**

It is not their upbringing, their environment, or their genetic makeup alone that explains the state of people's lives. Much modern psychology has attempted to tie human behavior to these things as causes. Although all these are influences, they do not provide an adequate explanation. People with the same upbringing end up different. What makes one person end up one way and another person quite different? The Bible's answer is, people sin.

What is sin? Sin is a failure to love God. It is a failure to put God first in our lives. Isaiah 53:6 says it is to go "our own way." Romans 1:21-23 tells us it is to worship created things instead of the Creator. Romans 8:5 describes it as a mind "set on natural desires" instead of the things of the Spirit. 1 John 3:4 calls sin "lawlessness." Everywhere sin is represented as a choice. It is an informed, ultimate intention contrary to the moral law of love. The Bible represents people to have made this choice and to have continued in it throughout their lives. Even though God made them upright (Eccl. 7:29), they have "gone astray" (Isa. 53:6), and "become corrupt" (Psa. 14:3).

This is what is wrong with people. They voluntarily choose to deny God His loving, rightful place in their lives. All "sins" flow from this root voluntary state of heart, from "sin."

## **Why Does God Choose To Save People?**

No one deserves to be saved. God did not have to save anyone. Nothing anyone did made God choose to save them. God saves people out of the goodness of His heart. God is love. God showed just how much He loved us in that Christ died for us while we were still sinners (Rom. 5:8). This is what theologians call unconditional election. It is the fact that God does not choose to save anyone because of anything they do or have done. As we recognized above in expounding what is wrong with people, people were busy denying God his loving, rightful place in their lives. God chose to save them while they were still actively pursuing this course. Ephesians 1:3-14 tells us God chose us "in him." Salvation is unconditional in the sense that God did not wait for us to do anything to commend ourselves to Him before deciding to save us. He provided our salvation "in Christ" simply because He loves us. Then He offered it to us.

## **Whom Has God Chosen To Save?**

Jesus died for everyone. No one is excluded from the love of God. 1 Timothy 4:10 puts it succinctly when it tells us Christ is the savior of everyone, especially those who believe. The death of Christ was designed to make the salvation of all people possible (1 John 2:2). It makes it consistent for God to extend an offer of pardon to all sinners. It shows God taking sins seriously, even though He is forgiving instead of judging (Rom. 3:25-26). To have forgiven without atonement would have destroyed the authority of His law and endangered the moral universe. Jesus' death secures the dignity of the law and makes pardon possible. God has chosen to save everyone He can.

## **How Does God Save People?**

God is a gentle lover who woos people to Himself. He made people free. They are free in their rebellion and they must be free in their return to the lover of their souls. God is active in seeking to draw people back. This is grace. It is undeserved but is what love does. God's love leads us to repentance (Rom. 2:4). Loving grace is the power of moral transformation. Grace teaches us to say "no" to worldly desires (Tit. 2:12). Because the change being wrought is a moral change, it is attributed to many influences. We are told God raised us from spiritual death (John 1:15). Paul claims to have given birth to the Corinthians through the gospel (1 Cor. 4:15). Peter calls his audience to save themselves (Acts 2:40). James asserts God begot us through His word (Jas. 1:18). If grace is an irresistible force that cannot fail to obtain its desire, none of this could be true. Since sin is a voluntary mind set, and repentance a change of mind, it is only natural that all this is the case. The way God saves people is through gracious, loving moral influence.

## **When Are People Truly Saved?**

Salvation is more than forgiveness, though it starts with that. It is a remarriage (Hos. 3:1). It is returning to the lover we had betrayed. Salvation is a relationship. Relationships can be "up and down." While they are never destroyed through a moment's inconsistency, they also require continual maintenance and attention. Persistent neglect destroys them. A troubled marriage ceases to be in trouble only when the parties to the marriage restore their commitment to their relationship and again sustain it on a daily basis. While there is a legal dimension to marriage, without the relational core legal relationship is a farce, and divorce inevitable. Only through a return to continual commitment and consistency is a marriage that was "on the rocks" saved. Such a saved marriage can become lost again. People can again neglect their commitment. They can fail to do the things they have done in the past. If this happens, nothing they have done before matters (Ezek. 18:24). They must again return to their first love (Rev. 2:4-5) or their relationship is lost.

We must add that this very relational dynamism is what makes a relationship difficult to lose. When two people are committed to one another in a loving relationship, it is very hard to leave it or neglect it. Love holds people's hearts. Peter tells us we are kept by the power of God through faith (1 Pet. 1:5). It is our loving commitment to God, driven by His loving commitment to us, which keeps us. As we add to faith all the virtues Peter describes, we make our calling and election sure (2 Pet. 3:10). The possibility of falling away from our love of God is not something to be feared as if it were an easy thing to happen. It is something to guard against through continual diligence because we do not desire to see our love fade (Heb. 6; 10; 12). People are truly saved only as they continue in their commitment and dynamic relationship with their divine lover.

## **Conclusion**

Moral Government Theology recognizes that God rules His moral universe through moral means. Love drives His kingdom. Salvation from beginning to end is consistent with this fact. At no time does God coerce people's hearts. Salvation is about relationship with God. As such it is entered voluntarily. It is maintained voluntarily. It will continue for eternity as a growing, ever deepening love affair with God. Anything short of this would not be salvation.

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## ***Response to Moral Government***

by [Craig Sietsema](#)

None can deny "that God rules His moral universe through moral means." The Scriptural support for this kind of rule is overwhelming and every well-known Calvinistic confession embraces this truth. For this reason, my rebuttal will not focus upon texts which Kel uses to support his belief in God's moral government. Here, there is no debate.

Many of Kel's convictions match those of Calvinism. We agree: Sin is lawlessness. We agree: God woos sinners. Nevertheless, our convictions separate over one fundamental question: Does God use supernatural means to transform the sinful soul of man? More specifically, does God use creative power to change man's heart? Does God interfere with man's "freedom" to continue in the downward spiral of sin? Calvinism answers "yes." Moral Government Theology answers "no."

## **Depravity**

One obstacle we have in resolving our divergent views is our differing convictions over Biblical metaphors regarding man's plight. Do metaphors like "dead" and "slave" indicate absolute moral inability when applied to the human heart? In other words, is being "dead in your trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1) the moral equivalent of physical death? Yes! The same supernatural power that resurrected Lazarus, attended by moral command, is needed to resurrect dead "walks" and "lives." Paul writes "For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness" (Rom. 6:19). Slavery to sin and freedom from righteousness are paralleled here. Weaken one metaphor and you undercut the other.

God highlights the seriousness of man's plight in many ways. Consider, for instance, the rhetorical questions of Matthew 7:16 and Jeremiah 13:23. Consider also Romans 8:6,7.

## **Choice**

What is the nature of God's choice? Is election a choice to save only a corporate body, or selection of individuals who together form a body? In Romans 9:11, God chose the individual Jacob before he was born. In 1 Corinthians 1:18-31, God chose individuals least responsive to moral persuasion to shame "wise" and "strong" individuals. This choice resulted in a salvation "in Christ" which was "by His (God's) doing" and which nullified all boasting over human effort.

The choosing of Paul is a wonderful portrayal of this truth. In his obstinate rebellion, Christ visited him. In Acts 9:15, Christ calls him a "chosen instrument." In Acts 26:16, Christ appeared to him while unconverted "to appoint" him "a minister and a witness." How early was Paul chosen in his own inspired estimation? Galatians 1:15, he was "set... apart, even from my mother's womb."

## Salvation

God does use moral means in salvation. When moral means are mixed with Divine power, salvation results. "And my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God" (1 Cor. 2:4,5). See also 1 Corinthians 3:5,6 and 1 Thessalonians 1:4,5.

Likewise, moral means and divine power are necessary for Christian perseverance. See Philippians 2:12,13. Christians must "keep" (Jude 21), but Christians are also "kept" (Jude 1).

## Conclusion

The sum is this: God *gives* salvation to His people. He gives *every part* of salvation to His chosen ones (John 6:65; Acts 11:18; Rom. 8:29-32; 1 Cor. 4:7; 15:57; Phil. 1:29; 2 Tim. 1:9). The result is a thankful throng who boast in God alone.

This is the heartbeat of Calvinism. Every other strain of Christian thought reserves some element of human self-dependence in salvation. The Bible renounces all self-dependence and calls us to cast ourselves wholly upon Him who is able to save to the uttermost.

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## *Response to Calvinism*

by [Kel Good](#)

It is exciting to see how God works! Nothing happens outside of His divine permission. Although Joseph's brothers meant to harm Joseph, God allowed this to happen so something better could come (Gen. 50:20). Isaiah speaks of the pride of the King of Assyria, who failed to recognize he was acting out the will of God in judgment upon Israel (Isa. 10:5-19). Although his shipmates threw Jonah into the sea, Jonah knew it was God who hurled him there (Jonah 1:15; 2:3). God handed Jesus over to his captors (Acts 2:23). Nations distress one another because God troubles them (2 Chron. 15:6). In everything it is the Lord who gives, and the Lord who takes away (Job 1:21).

Need we deny God's intimate involvement in His creation to advocate significant creaturely freedom? Is it possible to accept that God works through actions like those of Joseph's brothers, and still assert they determined their own destinies? Would God have been unable to save us without Jesus' betrayal, or did God simply work disappointing behavior to good? Perhaps He permits what He would not have willed. If God allows

freedom for His creatures, does this imply a lesser or greater view of sovereignty?  
Kenneth J. Foreman, quoted in *Divine Sovereignty And Human*, answers this question:

Let us imagine two horsemen. One sits on a horse every movement of which he controls absolutely. The horse does not move a fraction of an inch in any part unless the rider decides it shall so move and sees to it that the movement is made. Here we see absolute control. Another man sits on another horse. This horse makes various movements of which the rider does not commend, does not initiate, cannot even predict in detail. But the rider is in control. The first horse is a hobbyhorse; the second is a spirited five-gaited showhorse. But which is the better horseman? Little Willie, operating his mechanical horse in the corner drugstore, or the prize-winning rider at the horse show? Is it actually more to the credit of God that He shall ride this universe like a hobbyhorse, or like a real, living creature of intelligence and spirit?...We Christians will not give up believing in the sovereignty of God....We need not have to suppose that God cannot be sovereign without robbing His creatures of all their freedom.<sup>1</sup>

But how can man be free if he is fallen? Do not men love the darkness instead of the light? The mind of sinful man is death. By nature man is dead in sin, an object of divine wrath. Unless God grants repentance, who can be saved from such a state?

But wait. Paul tells us why the sinful mind is death. Such a person has his mind set on the flesh. He cannot obey God because a mind set on sin has no hope of pleasing God (Rom. 8:5-8). Here is a choice. A mind set. Something voluntarily entered into and sustained. We were dead in sin, and by nature objects of wrath, not because we were born that way, but because we followed the ways of this world (Eph. 2:2). We determined our moral nature by how we were living. The choice. Is God granting us the ability to choose to repent, or is God granting us the *opportunity* to use the choice we have to repent? It must be the latter. We were dead in sin because of how we were choosing to live. We were in stubborn rebellion against God. He could have left us there. Instead, because He is rich in mercy, He has granted us repentance through faith in Christ.

## Note

<sup>1</sup>Fisk, Samuel, *Divine Sovereignty And Human Freedom*, Loizeaux Brothers, Neptune, New Jersey, 1981, pg. 55.