

LOGICAL-CAUSAL DETERMINISM AND SALVATION: PROBLEMS AND RESOLUTION

Does the Triune God love all? Has He included all in His life by the finished work of His Son, Jesus Christ? Has the God revealed in Jesus purposed to save only some and damn the rest? These questions have been surrounded by polemics since the time of Augustine (354-430). His debates with Pelagius (354-420) highlight some of the points, but, since Augustine was apparently unaware of the Greek/Cappadocian fathers, he failed to incorporate their analysis in his understanding.¹ These debates resurfaced centuries later in the Dortian debates, i.e., five-point Calvinism, with Jacob Arminius (1560-1609) and carried on into our times.

Both sides try to account logically for why people reject God's salvation in Christ. Both, therefore, start their soteriology in man.

Why do people reject God's salvation in Christ? The five-point Calvinists says this rejection is based on God's non-elective choice to "pass them by." They insist that Scriptures teach that when Jesus Christ laid down His life as a substitutionary sacrifice for sin, He did so to atone *only* for the sins of His people, His elect. He died for those chosen by His Father before the foundation of the world. The death of Christ was for a particular people, not for each and every person who has ever lived. Hence, the *scope* of Christ's redeeming work is *limited* to the saved, even though the *power* and efficacy of His redemption are *unlimited*, and its influence benefits *all* humanity.

The followers of Arminius counter by stating that Christ's death is universal; i.e., He died to make salvation *possible* for everyone, but the hinge pin of making that salvation *effective* resides in the individual, in his free will, who makes a choice of faith.

The doctrine of God in Arminianism is governed *primarily* by the love, mercy, and compassion of God over against His sovereignty, holiness, and justice; i.e., on the *relational* God rather than the *legal* God. The Calvinist rejoinder is that, in the Arminian system, salvation is in man's court; he decides whether he is saved or not and this is unacceptable.

The doctrine of God in five-point Calvinism is governed *primarily* on the holiness, and justice of God over against His love, mercy, and compassion; i.e., on the *legal* God rather than the *relational* God. For the Calvinist the salvation of the individual man is in God's court *where His sovereign choice in election trumps all*; He decides whether a man will be saved or not. God

¹ James M. Houston, "Spirituality and the Doctrine of the Trinity," in Trevor A. Hart and Daniel P. Thimell, ed., *Christ in Our Place: The Humanity of God in Christ for the Reconciliation of the World* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1989), p. 53.

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predestined salvation for a select group of individuals to glorify His grace in redemption, but He passes over the rest to glorify His justice in condemnation.

In reality, neither the Arminian nor Calvinist position on the fundamental attributes of God reflects the truth of who God is. God is who He is in all of His attributes. To prefer His holiness, justice, and sovereignty against His love, mercy, and compassion is a falsification of who He is in Himself. And, to prefer His love, mercy, and compassion against His holiness, justice, and sovereignty is a falsification of who He is in Himself. Either approach splits God into a schizoid person, an attributal bifurcation that is impossible.

Since the essence of God's being is loving relationship (God is love; I John 4:8), it is this communion, this fellowship, that speaks to our understanding of His mercy, compassion, holiness, justice, and sovereignty.

For example, we see God's wrath as a reflection of His love, His set will to oppose, to say "No" to all that defiles and pollutes the *imago Dei*. We can illustrate wrath, in human terms, in the anger of a person against the killing effects of cancer.

We also understand the holiness of God, not in a legal sense, but relationally. To say that God is holy is to see that He is totally unlike any created thing; He is totally "other." This holy otherness is grounded in the beautiful love between the Father, Son, and Spirit. It is this self-giving love that sets the Triune God apart from any of our finite, human conceptions.

Both the Calvinist and the Arminian assert, as a root presupposition, that if God regards all people in the same way, then all people must regard God in the same way. This is equivalent to saying, in logic, that $A \Rightarrow B$ is the same as, or is logically equivalent to, $B \Rightarrow A$. But, this is the formal logical error of asserting the consequent, or the converse error. Since both sides are trying to *account logically* for why people reject God's salvation in Christ, one side determines the reason lies in the court of man, the other in the court of God. Both are concluding something about God based upon the responses of individual people; i.e., if this person is saved, it is because of his God-given free will faith response or it is because of God's choice of election and subsequent application of irresistible grace.

The problem with both positions and the problem is more glaring on the Calvinistic side, is that statements of truth that are sound and Biblical must be grounded in *who* God is, what

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He thinks and what He does. *Only God can reveal God*; we start with God's revelation of Himself, in Jesus, and *not with man's response*, either "for" or "against."

Human response can never be our starting point when we think about God and His salvation purposes. What, then, is the *link* between God and individuals? For the Calvinist, the link is logical, casual, and, unfortunately, deterministic on God's side and for the Arminian the same goes, but from man's side. The relationship between God and man is *not* logically equivalent; i.e., $A \Rightarrow B$ and $B \Rightarrow A$ or $A \Leftrightarrow B$ is *not* true.

Logical-causal determinism is false because it fails to account for the *difference* between God's action and human action. It is also false regarding human-to-human actions. For example, if I gave John some money at John's request, this does *not necessarily* mean that John's request *caused* me to do so. It could be that it was in my plan to give the money to John, regardless of whether John asked for it or not. Likewise, in God-to-human action, if God gave John salvation at John's request, this does *not necessarily* mean that John's request *caused* God to do so. It could have been in God's plan to give salvation to John, and this is what unmerited and unconditional grace means, regardless of whether John asked for it or not.

Therefore, we must be careful that our doctrine of God *declares the truth of who God is*, the reality of what God has done for humanity in Christ, and His current relationship with humanity. Any theological statement that assumes that humans are autonomous in their self-will or deterministic recipients of irresistible grace is, therefore, missing the point. To the Arminian, man makes a *relatively* independent choice for God. For the Calvinist, God *forces* man to make a choice for Him by grace that is irresistible. Statements like these suggest either (1) that humans are *relatively* independent of Christ or (2) that humans are *relatively* automatons, mechanically forced into a love relationship with Christ by a decretal decision before time.²

² The Calvinist attempts to get around determinism, this force of grace, by his doctrine of regeneration. A man dead in Christ *cannot* do anything, let alone choose Christ. Therefore, God must raise him from the dead in regeneration. The only ones raised in this manner are those chosen by God before the foundation of the world. By this regeneration, man is now able; i.e., given to power, to make a free-will choice for Christ. This scheme is still determinism, albeit a soft-core version of it, the determinism of irresistible grace. In effect, we have this view of God, "I am sovereign. You will be regenerated. Resistance is futile." Conversely, for those not included in the elective choice of God, God says, "I am sovereign. You will not be regenerated. There is nothing you can do about it." This dark side of Calvinism, the hopelessness of the non-elect, is very rarely engaged by those entangled in its framework, unless you read Calvinists like Arthur W. Pink (1886-1952), who have no problems, no internal angst, by the revelation of this black abyss in their perception of the character of God.

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When a theological statement suggests that man is independent of Christ or dependent upon some arbitrary decree made behind the back of Christ and thereby independent of Christ, these statements assert a reality on equal or greater standing with what God the Father has revealed in God the Son. Because these statements are not founded on God's self-revelation in Christ, they are myths.

Is God's salvation for man dependent upon man's choice? Is God's salvation for man dependent upon a static choice by God before the foundation of the world? A Biblically sound theological statement will assert that the saving work of God the Father through God the Son in God the Spirit is a dynamic, ontological/relational³ reality instituted objectively by God Himself. In contrast to a static choice that forces an irresistible decision, the relationship between God and man is relational and dynamic in the workings of the Spirit, who can be resisted⁴ or received⁵, i.e., two different stances of regard.⁶ In contrast to the independent choices of man, it is Christ who has made the ultimate choice for God in His vicarious humanity.⁷ Any human response for Christ is *never an independent one*; it is always tied to Christ's responses as the New Man, the Second Adam who effectively undoes the choices of the First Adam.

Salvation is a reality based on who the Father is and what He has done in Christ by the Spirit. His plan, from eternity past, has always been a desire for inclusion, to adopt all humanity into the circle of His beloved and dynamic fellowship (Ephesians 1:3-5; II Corinthians 5:14-6:2). The objective nature of this reality calls for an individual response; it calls for a response of participation in the grace of God accomplished through the faith of Christ (Galatians 2:20)⁸ by the Spirit.

Whether a man participates in this salvation or not, the Triune God revealed in Jesus is of one mind and purpose toward all people. Even if all people do not regard God in the same way, God regards all

³ Ontological/relationship means a relationship of being with being, person with person. Relationships are never static; they are always dynamic, requiring reciprocal responses that are authentic.

⁴ Acts 7:51; Ephesians 4:30; Luke 7:30; II Peter 2:1.

⁵ The injunction in the book of Acts to *receive* the Spirit means to "make room for Him" and His active, dynamic work. See John 6:21 for how the Greek word (*lambano*) for receive is used ... the disciples make room for Christ in the boat.

⁶ These states of regard determine where ultimate destinies: heaven or hell.

⁷ For example, Christ's baptism (Matthew 3) fulfills all righteousness, the obverse of sin. In baptism, Christ did the right thing for man as man even though there was no need for Him to repent of any sin.

⁸ Carefully read the Galatians 2:20 text and compare versions, King James or Young's Literal translations with the more modern translations (e.g., NASB, NIV, ESV). Compare these verses also: Romans 3:22, 26; Galatians 2:16; 3:22; Ephesians 3:13; Philippians 3:9.

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people in the same way. He loves all in truth, not because of what they have or have not done, but because of who He is and what He has done in Christ by His Spirit (John 3:16; I John 4:7-10).