

# LOGICAL-CAUSAL DETERMINISM AND SALVATION: PROBLEMS AND RESOLUTION

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Does the Triune God love all? Has He included all in His life through 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 points, but, since Augustine was apparently unaware of the Greek/Cappadocian fathers, he failed to incorporate their analysis in his understanding.<sup>1</sup> These debates resurfaced centuries later in the Dortian debates (1618-1619), i.e., five-point Calvinism,<sup>2</sup> with the theology of Jacob Arminius (1560-1609) and has been carried on into our times.

## Précis

This essay examines the theological debate between Calvinism and Arminianism regarding the doctrine of salvation. It critiques both perspectives for starting with human logic rather than God's revelation through Jesus Christ. Calvinism posits that God predestines a select group for salvation, emphasizing His sovereignty, while Arminianism argues that salvation depends on individual free will, highlighting God's love. Both are faulted for misrepresenting God's nature by prioritizing certain attributes over others, leading to a flawed understanding of the Trinity's onto-relational essence.

Both sides try to account *logically* for why an individual rejects God's salvation in Christ. Both, therefore, start their soteriology in the logical reasonings of man, not the *logic* that is in the incarnate Son, who is the *logos* of the Father.

Why do people reject God's salvation in Christ? The five-point Calvinists say this rejection is based on God's non-elective choice to "pass them by." They insist the 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 every person who has ever lived. Therefore, the *scope* of Christ's redeeming work is *limited* to the elect, 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.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> We can summarize five-point Calvinism from the Dortian debates that produced the acronym TULIP: **T**otal Depravity, **U**nconditional Election, **L**imited Atonement, **I**rresistible Grace, and **P**erseverance of the Saints. Dort, now known as Dordrecht, is a city in the Netherlands.

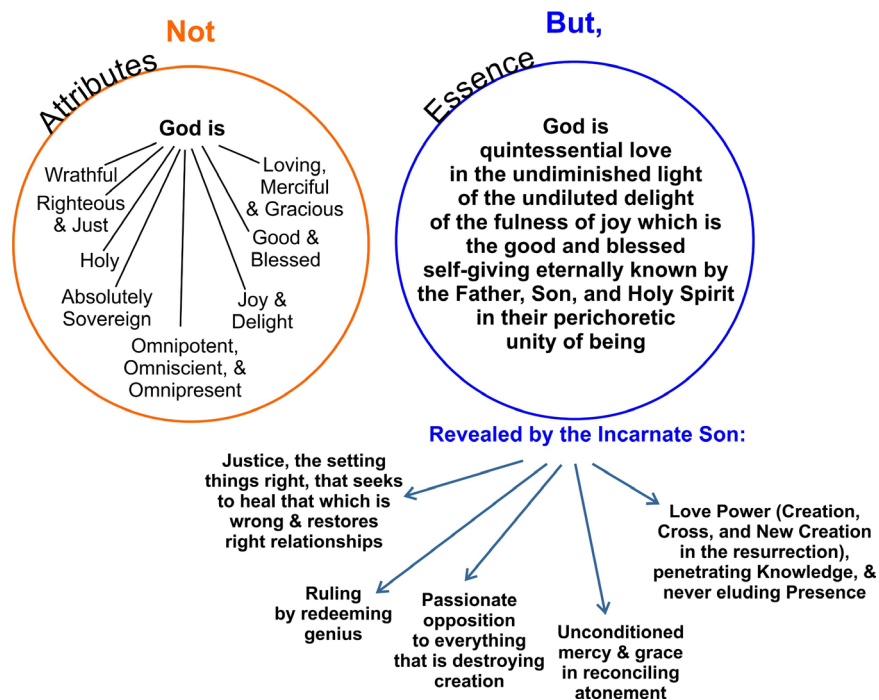
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The doctrine of God in Arminianism is governed *primarily* by the love, mercy, and compassion of God over against His sovereignty, holiness, and justice, i.e., putting the emphasis on the *relational* God rather than the *legal* God. The Calvinist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

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

Neither the Arminian nor the Calvinist starting point regarding what comprises the fundamental attributes of God reflects the truth of who God is. God is who He is in all His attributes, each flowing from the essence of who the Triune God is. To prefer His holiness, justice, and sovereignty against His love, mercy, and compassion is a falsification of who He is. Also, to prefer His love, mercy, and compassion against His holiness, justice, and

## How Do We Perceive God?



God is onto-relational, *being in communion*.

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sovereignty is a falsification of who He is. Both approaches split God into a schizoid person, an attributal bifurcation that is impossible, as the graphic illustrates.

Since the essence of God's being is loving, i.e., self-giving, relationship (God is love, according to 1 John 4:8)<sup>3</sup>, it is this communion, this fellowship known eternally in the three persons of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, that should ground our understanding of the mercy, compassion, holiness, justice, and sovereignty of God.

For example, God's wrath as the outward reach of His love,<sup>4</sup> 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 set against the killing effects of cancer. The wrath of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the One in Three and Three in One, expresses their passionate opposition to everything that is destroying creation.<sup>5</sup>

How do we perceive the holiness of God? Is it merely legal holiness or is relationship dynamics in play? To say that God is holy is to see that He is totally unlike any created thing; He is totally "other" as Matthew 11:25-30 states. This holy otherness is grounded in the beautiful love between the Father, Son, and Spirit, i.e., their *sui generis* love-knowing of each other. 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 (statement *A*), then all people must regard God in the same way (statement *B*). This is equivalent to saying in logic that:

If *A* (the antecedent) is true, then *B* (the consequent) is true, or *A* implies *B* ( $A \Rightarrow B$ ), then the converse, if *B* is true, then *A* is true, or *B* implies *A* ( $B \Rightarrow A$ ).

When  $A \Rightarrow B$  and  $B \Rightarrow A$  we have logical equivalency, written  $A \Leftrightarrow B$ . Asserting this, though, is not necessarily true (although it may be true). What we have done is to commit the formal logical fallacy of asserting the consequent, also known as the converse error. Since both the Calvinist and the Arminian are trying to account for why people reject God's salvation in Christ, one side determines the reason lies in the court of man, while the other in the court of God. Both are concluding something about God based upon the responses of individual

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<sup>3</sup> It is enlightening to realize that in John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, there is *no* reference to 1 John 4:8, a telling omission.

<sup>4</sup> The English word wrath is the translation of the Greek word *orges*, coming from *orego*, meaning to stretch out especially with the hands, to snatch, to long after, to gain back.

<sup>5</sup> The Greek word *thymos*, meaning "strong passion," is often translated into English as "wrath" which I posit to be a wrong translation.

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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 He thinks and what He does. *Only God can reveal God*; we start with God's revelation of Himself, in His incarnate Son (John 1:18), 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, causal, 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 cannot 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 give him money. Maybe it was in my plan to give the money to John, regardless of whether or not John asked for it. 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 unconditioned grace means, regardless of whether or not John asked for it.

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 the person of 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, point I in TULIP. 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.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> 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 the 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." 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 rarely engaged by those entangled in its framework, unless you read

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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 independent of Christ,<sup>7</sup> 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 self-projected 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/relational<sup>8</sup> 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 resisted<sup>9</sup> or received<sup>10</sup>, i.e., two different stances of regard.<sup>11</sup> In contrast with the independent choices of man, it is Christ who has made the ultimate choice for God in His vicarious humanity.<sup>12</sup> 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.

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Calvinists like Arthur W. Pink (1886-1952), who had no problems, no internal angst, by the revelation of this black abyss in his perception of the character of God. See his unabridged work *The Sovereignty of God*. The most popular Calvinistic writers of the late 20<sup>th</sup>/early 21<sup>st</sup> century are not as blunt as Pink. I include in this number James I. Packer, John MacArthur, John Piper, and R. C. Sproul (Note: R. C. Sproul, Jr., Sproul Senior's son, is as straight-shooting as Pink. See his book *Almighty Over All*.) Are we therefore to negate everything these men write or teach? Not necessarily. However, we must always keep in mind the framework of their thinking. If this framework has cracks in its foundation, i.e., who they think God is, then we must expect consequent problems. If you button your shirt by putting the top button in the wrong hole, you have a major problem at the end. But even though their framework is broken, a broken clock will still tell the right time twice a day. (Note: I still would not use such a clock as a trustworthy reporter of time.)

<sup>7</sup> This is exactly what Calvinists say in their decretal schemes, either supralapsarian or infralapsarian, where they attempt to read what was in God's mind before the foundational of the world, a reading that is outside, or behind the back of, the revelation of God in Christ. They dangerously downgrade Christ, the incarnate Son, who is *the* revelation of the Father (John 1:18) into a revelation of the Father. Behind the back of the revelation the incarnate Son gives us of the Father-Son relationship in the communion of the Holy Spirit there is another G-O-D that is really "calling the shots," arbitrarily electing or reprobating individuals, a G-O-D that is primary to, outside of, and independent of Christ.

<sup>8</sup> 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.

<sup>9</sup> Acts 7:51; Ephesians 4:30; Luke 7:30; 2 Peter 2:1.

<sup>10</sup> 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.

<sup>11</sup> These states of regard determine proximate and ultimate destinies: heaven, the life of joyful fellowship inside the life and self-giving love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, or hell, the death of living in contradiction to the reality of Trinitarian love.

<sup>12</sup> 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. See James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, and James B. Torrance, "The Vicarious Humanity of Christ," in *The Incarnation: Ecumenical Studies in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed A.D. 381*, Thomas F. Torrance, ed.

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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; 2 Corinthians 5:14-6:2). Although the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit do not need us, the One in Three and Three in One wanted us to include us in their radiant life of self-giving love. The objective nature of this reality calls for an individual response; it calls for a response of participation in the grace of the Father accomplished through the faith of Christ (Galatians 2:20)<sup>13</sup> by the Spirit.

*Whether or not a man participates in this salvation, 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 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; 1 John 4:7-10).

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<sup>13</sup> Carefully read the Galatians 2:20 Greek text and compare versions, King James, N. T. Wright's *The New Testament for Everyone*, (3<sup>rd</sup> edition), or Young's Literal translations with the popular 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. For more study, see Richard B. Hayes, *The Faith of Jesus Christ* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition), Michael F. Bird and Preston M. Sprinkle, ed., *The Faith of Jesus Christ: Exegetical, Biblical, and Theological Studies*, Morna Hooker, "Πιστις Χριστοῦ," in *From Adam to Christ: Essays on Paul*, and Thomas F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*. The main issue involved is the way, for example, translators render the Greek phrase in Romans 3:22, *pisteōs Iesou Christou*. The translator must make a choice of either understanding the grammar of this phrase as being the objective genitive, "faith in Jesus Christ" (emphasizing Christ as the object of faith) or the subjective genitive, "faith of Jesus Christ" (emphasizing the faithfulness of Christ as the ground of the believer's trust). The translator's choice is often governed by the theological presuppositions of said translator.