

A Tale of Two Gods: How Calvinism's God & the Bible's God are Two Very Different Gods

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One very popular denominational preacher and writer, John Piper, is famous for saying that “all things” - even down to the subatomic level - “are ordained, guided, and governed” by God.¹ The idea that God determines *everything* can be traced back to Augustine of Hippo in the 5th century and is particularly popular among a branch of Protestantism known as Reformed theology.

Reformed theology, more commonly known as Calvinism² (we will use these words interchangeably), is a religious philosophy that follows the teachings of John Calvin and other Protestant theologians from the Reformation era. It should be noted that **Reformed theology, or Calvinism, is experiencing a resurgence in America today**. So popular is Reformed theology that any Christian who reads relatively conservative denominational literature is well acquainted with famous Calvinistic authors. Understandably, younger preachers thirsty for truth tend to be particularly fond of their writings because of their often passionate, yet conservative, approach to many Biblical issues. (And as a result, their Calvinistic influences sometimes unknowingly creep into the young preacher's respective

pulpit.)

The reason it is important to examine Calvinism as it relates to this study is because Reformed theology has traditionally emphasized God's sovereignty and predestination over everything else. In fact, the idea of the sovereignty of God is the basis of Calvinism itself. **Reformed theologians take great pride in the lofty ways in which they talk about God.** Ben Warburton writes, "The one rock upon which Calvinism builds is that of the absolute and unlimited sovereignty of the eternal and self-existent Jehovah."^[3]

But herein lies the problem: The sovereign God of the Bible and the sovereign God of Calvinism are two very different Gods. Calvinists have redefined the meaning of the word *sovereignty*. To the Bible-believing Christian, *sovereignty* simply means God's ability and right to rule the world (chapter 5 of *You Are A Theologian: Thinking Right About God*). However, to the devoted Calvinist, *sovereignty* means "divine determinism." **Divine determinism** is the belief that God determines, causes, and orchestrates *everything* in history according to His preconceived plan, *including sin and evil*.

Calvinists erroneously believe that God is the *reason* for sin, since - according to Calvinism - "**sovereignty**" is somehow synonymous with "**total control**." Thus, they create a false dichotomy,^[4] claiming that if God is *sovereign*, He must orchestrate and control *everything that ever happens* - and if He does not control everything, He supposedly cannot be sovereign. Arthur Pink, a famous Calvinist, writes, "Only two alternatives are possible: God must either rule, or be ruled; sway, or be swayed; accomplish His own Will, or be thwarted by His creatures."^[5] In the words of Jack Cottrell, Calvinists "equate sovereignty with *causation*, and say that the only way for God to be sovereign is if He is the sole, ultimate cause or originator of everything that takes place, including events in the natural world as well as human decisions." Consequently, Cottrell continues, "there is no truly free will"^[6] for mankind in the Calvinist worldview.

As a result, according to Calvinism, if someone commits a horrible atrocity, it is ultimately because God must have *willed* it to happen in the first place. Edwin Palmer, a well-known Calvinist, said it bluntly: God "has foreordained everything [...] - *even sin*."^[7] How horrifying a thought. R.C. Sproul Jr., another leading Calvinist today, terrifyingly said, "God in some sense desired that man would fall into sin [...] *He created sin*."^[8] Chilling, right?

Just as egregious is the Calvinistic idea that God subjectively causes individuals to have faith. To the Calvinist, the words "I have personal faith in Christ Jesus" have no real meaning because God is supposedly the *cause* of all things. To the Calvinist, you cannot *choose* to have faith; God must put it in you. According to the *Synod of Dort*,^[9] God chooses

who will believe in Him and who will not.^[10] This, of course, makes the words of Jesus powerless: “whoever believes in Him may have eternal life” (John 3:16). Why? Because you can’t “believe in Him” without God *causing* you to believe in Him! To call this cruel would be an understatement. It is like dangling crutches at the top of the stairs, saying to a paraplegic below, “Come and get them!”

Historically, Christians have distinguished between God’s sovereignty **de jure** and **de facto**. *De jure* is a Latin word which in this context refers to God’s right to rule; *De facto* is a Latin word which in this context refers to God’s meticulous control over all events. Ardent Calvinists see this distinction as a mere formality; they believe God is both sovereign *de jure* and *de facto* all the time. Yet, New Testament Christians have always acknowledged that God is always sovereign *de jure* and chooses to limit His sovereignty *de facto*. In other words, God has the ability to meticulously control everything, but in His wisdom and love for mankind, He has chosen *not* to determine everything *yet*.

We find the distinction between God’s sovereignty *de jure* and *de facto* when Christ taught His disciples to pray, “Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). If God is already micro-managing every detail of history, why would anyone need to pray for God’s will to be done on earth? If God is sovereign *de facto*, it would already be done.

Any honest observer must acknowledge that the Bible is permeated with the implication that God has given men the choice to serve Him. We could fill this book with examples of God giving mankind the freedom of choice. How otherwise could God extend His kindness if people are unable to choose repentance (Rom. 2:4)? How otherwise can we be commanded to “grow in the grace” of the Lord Jesus Christ if are unable to choose to do so (2 Pet. 3:18)? Why would Joshua tell the Israelites to choose whom they would serve if they could not actually choose (Josh. 24:15)? How could God not “show partiality” if He individually chooses on whom to force faith (Acts 10:34)? How calloused is God if He “commands all men everywhere to repent” if they are unable to repent (Acts 17:30)?

The Bible does, in fact, teach that God is sovereign, but it certainly does not teach that God determines mankind’s decisions and preordains mankind’s actions. **Let’s be very clear: You can be entirely dedicated to the doctrine of God’s sovereignty while simultaneously being absolutely sure of mankind’s free choice.**

An excerpt from my book, *You Are A Theologian: Thinking Right About God*.

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Sources

[3] Ben A. Warburton, *Calvinism*, p. 63

[4] A *dichotomy* (pronounced "die-kot-uh-mee") is the division of two mutually exclusive things or ideas. Thus, a *false dichotomy* is the division of two things or ideas that are not necessarily mutually exclusive. For example, it is a false dichotomy to say, "You either like bacon or sausage." Why? Because real men like both bacon and sausage.

[5] Arthur Pink, *The Sovereignty Of God*, p. 14

[6] Jack Cottrell, *The Faith Once For All*, p. 81

[7] Edwin H. Palmer, *The Five Points Of Calvinism*, p. 25, emp. added.

[8] R.C. Sproul Jr., *Almighty Over All*, p. 53

[9] The *Synod of Dort* was a very important meeting in denominational history ultimately deciding the future of Calvinism. It was held between the years 1618-1619 in the town of Dordrecht ("Dort") in the Netherlands. The Synod of Dort was held to silence honest, Scriptural challenges to Calvinism, and at its conclusion, the traditional five points of Calvinism were formalized, namely: Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace, and the Perseverance of the Saints.

[10] See Article XIV of *The Articles Of The Canons of Dort* (1619). "Faith is the gift of God; not in that it is offered to the will of man by God, but that the thing itself is conferred on him, inspired, infused into him. Not even that God only confers the power of believing, but from thence expects the consent, or the act of believing: but that He, who worketh both to will and to do, worketh in man both to will to believe, and to believe itself, [...] and thus He worketh all things in all." (Translated By Thomas Scott, p. 301).

Footnotes

1. John Piper, "Confronting The Problem Of Evil," DesiringGod.org
2. Calvinism, also known as *Reformed theology*, is basically the body of religious teachings and traditions started by John Calvin (1509 - 1564 A.D.) and other Reformation-era theologians such as Ulrich Zwingli and Jonathan Edwards. Calvinism can be summarized in five false religious ideas: (1) Total Depravity (babies are born guilty of the sin of their

parents), Unconditional Election (God arbitrarily chooses – independent of any known standard – who will be eternally saved and who will be eternally damned), Limited Atonement (Christ did not die for everyone), Irresistible Grace (you do not have a choice as to whether or not you will obey the gospel), Perseverance of the Saints (it is impossible for a Christian to rebel against God).