

A Parable of Calvinism

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One of the issues raised by the current debate over the openness of God is what kind of God is required by the different theologies involved in the debate. For example, Reformed theologian Bruce Ware has described the God of open theism as a “limited, passive, hand-wringing God.”¹ Open theist Clark Pinnock cites Walter Kasper’s description of the God of classical theism as “a solitary narcissistic being, who suffers from his own completeness.”² If nothing else, open theism has forced evangelicals to reexamine their understanding of the nature and character of God.

I approach the doctrine of God from an Anabaptist perspective, which technically is not Arminian (since Anabaptism predated the Arminian controversy within the Reformed tradition) but is decidedly non-Calvinist. From an Anabaptist perspective, the God of Reformed theology suffers from significant limitations, although those limitations apply to his character rather than to his knowledge. Even if one agrees with Calvinists (as most Anabaptists and Arminians would) that God has exhaustive definite foreknowledge, the Calvinist understanding of salvation has significant implications for the character of God that are not often brought out. Let me illustrate this with a parable.

The kingdom of God is like a cruise ship that goes on a long voyage. The captain of the ship overhears his passengers planning to go swimming off the side of the ship. He makes an announcement to all the passengers, warning them against such an action. If they jump off the ship, they will be unable to climb back in, because the hull is too steep and there are no ladders to give access. The ship is hundreds of miles from land, so they won’t be able to swim to shore. The surrounding waters are infested with sharks. Nevertheless, despite the captain’s warnings, all of the passengers jump overboard to go swimming. They are soon in deep trouble.

Seeing their distress, the captain broadcasts a message to all of them. He says that he can rescue them all; to be rescued, all they need to do is to grab the life preservers that he will throw to them. Then he takes out a few life preservers and instructs his crew to throw them to certain individual passengers he has picked out. For the other passengers, he does nothing. He continues to broadcast his message that they need only to grab the life preservers in order to be rescued. Some of the people with life preservers beg him to help the passengers who are drowning. The captain ignores them. With his message of rescue still sounding across the water, he watches the rest of the passengers die.

A Parable of Calvinism

When asked why he didn't rescue the others, he says that they all deserved to die, and they should be grateful that he chose to save any of them.

What would we think of a captain who did these things? This is a parable of Calvinism, and the cruise ship captain is the Calvinist God. All orthodox Christians believe that human beings are in danger of eternal death because of sin, and their only hope is to be rescued by God. God provides this rescue through the work of Christ (the atonement). No one can be rescued unless God takes the initiative, reaches out to them with the offer of rescue, and enables them to receive it.

But Calvinists and non-Calvinists differ in their understanding of God's intentions and actions regarding the rescue. Anabaptists and Arminians believe that God desires to rescue everyone, invites everyone to be rescued, and enables everyone who hears the invitation to respond. People may accept or reject the invitation. Calvinists, however, believe that God issues two different invitations—a "general call" that invites everyone to be rescued (to which people are powerless to respond) and a "special" or "effectual" call addressed to certain individuals (which enables them to respond and ensures that they will). He then damns all those to whom he did not give the effectual call. The prayers of God's people have no effect on this plan that God has established from eternity.³ The "general call" to respond to the gospel is technically not a lie, since anyone who does respond is saved.⁴ However, it is certainly deceptive, because it withholds critical information and misleads people about God's real intentions.⁵ It implies that everyone can respond, when in fact they cannot. It also implies that God wants everyone to be rescued, when in fact he wants many of them to die.⁶ The distinction between the general call and the special, effectual call means that Calvinists must posit a secret will of God that is at variance with God's will revealed in the gospel.⁷

Of course, there are different versions of Calvinism that would require slightly different versions of the parable. In the supralapsarian version of the parable, the captain plans the cruise precisely in order to play out the drowning scenario. In fact, he selects most of the people for the passenger list because he wants to kill them. In the infralapsarian version, the captain learns about the passengers' plans after he has scheduled the cruise. Knowing their plans, he takes along only enough life preservers for those individuals that he has decided to save. In the sublapsarian version, the captain takes along enough life preservers for all the passengers, but he plans not to use most of them.⁸

Thus far, the parable has assumed that the passengers have ended up in the water because of their own free choices. However, if the Calvinist view of God's exhaustive controlling sovereignty is correct—that is, if Calvin is right

that God causes all things⁹—then the captain of the cruise ship actually throws his passengers in the water himself and stocks the water with sharks.¹⁰

Furthermore, according to Calvin's own perspective, the captain intentionally gives some of the drowning passengers faulty life preservers. They cling to them gratefully, thinking they are safe, only to find that after a while the life preservers deflate and they drown. According to a passage in Calvin's *Institutes*, some of the reprobate experience a "lower working of the Spirit" by which God grants them a sense of his goodness and favor and even gives them the gift of reconciliation, so that they think they're among the elect. But God never regenerates them. After a while he withdraws from them, allows the light of his grace to be extinguished, and damns them. God does this "to render them more convicted and inexcusable."¹¹ Wesley dubs this notion "damning grace," because God's intention in bestowing blessings on the reprobate is to increase their condemnation.¹²

It might be objected that the cruise ship parable makes the passengers seem too innocent. After all, human beings are in rebellion against God and are God's enemies. So let's change the parable. . . .

Two countries are at war with one another. The captain of a destroyer has been patrolling an area of the ocean where he knows an enemy submarine has been sighted. He knows that this submarine would destroy his ship if given the chance. However, he comes upon the crew of the enemy submarine in the water amid the wreckage of their ship, which has been destroyed through their own incompetence. The captain has his enemies in his power. Although he has the time and resources to rescue them all, he tells his crew to pick a certain few of them out of the water, and he watches the rest drown. What would we think of a captain who did this? Under the terms of the Geneva Convention, he could be tried as a war criminal.

Reformed theologians will often say that we cannot judge God's behavior by our own ideas of right and wrong.¹³ God's will determines what is good, so whatever he does or commands is good by definition.¹⁴ Since God is the sovereign of the universe, no one can call him to account.¹⁵ His ways, after all, are not our ways (Isa. 55:8-9). The clay has no right to question the potter (Rom. 9:20).

However, Scripture has not left this avenue open to us. We are repeatedly called to model our ethics on the character and behavior of God, especially as exemplified in Jesus Christ. "You shall be holy, for I am holy" (Lev. 11:45; NRSV). "Consider what you are doing, for you judge not on behalf of human beings but on the Lord's behalf; he is with you in giving judgment. Now, let the fear of the Lord be upon you; take care what you do, for there is no

A Parable of Calvinism

perversion of justice with the Lord our God, or partiality, or taking of bribes" (2 Chr. 19:7). "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). "But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36). "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (John 13:34). "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1). "Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us, and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Eph. 4:31-5:2). "Whoever says, 'I abide in him,' should walk just as he walked" (1 John 2:6). Isaiah observes that God's ways are not our ways precisely because God will show mercy and will abundantly pardon (Isa. 55:6-7). God teaches Jeremiah at the potter's house that he shapes his behavior toward his people in accordance with their response to him (Jer. 18:5-11). God takes no delight in the death of the wicked (Ezek. 33:11). If God calls us to model our ethics on his and then doesn't follow his own rules, how can we trust him in anything?

The God of Calvinism has a secret will that contradicts his revealed will. He commands one thing and then does the opposite himself. He practices deception in his announcement of the gospel message. He derives equal glory from the redemption of the elect and the damnation of the reprobate. Calvin's God even likes to toy with the reprobate before damning them.

By contrast, Anabaptists believe that the character and plan of God are revealed most fully in his son Jesus Christ. As sixteenth-century Anabaptist Pilgram Marpeck observes: "God is a God of order and not of disorder, and He has firmly united His own omnipotence to His will and order. It is not as the predestinarians and others say, without any discrimination, that God has the right to all salvation and damnation. He has, certainly, but not outside of His order and will, to which His power is subordinated. . . . [One should not] preach the power and omnipotence of God outside the order of God's Word. . . . For God Himself is the wisest order in and through His Word, that is, Jesus Christ His only begotten from eternity."¹⁶ The question is not what God can do or what God has the right to do, but what God has chosen to do. As Marpeck states, God has chosen to reveal his plan of salvation in Jesus Christ. The God revealed in Christ has acted in love toward the world to offer new life to everyone who believes (John 3:16). Which captain would you rather have at the helm of the universe?

ENDNOTES

¹ Bruce A. Ware, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), 216.

² Clark H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 6; citing Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ* (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 306.

³ John Wesley proposes a similar parable. Addressing Calvinists, he notes: "You suppose [God] to be standing at the prison-doors, having the keys thereof in his hands, and to be continually inviting the prisoners to come forth, commanding them to accept of that invitation, urging every motive which can possibly induce them to comply with that command; adding the most precious promises, if they obey, the most dreadful threatenings, if they obey not; and all this time you suppose him to be unalterably determined in himself never to open the doors for them! even while he is crying, 'Come ye, come ye, from that evil place: For why will ye die, O house of Israel!' . . . Alas! my brethren, what kind of sincerity is this, which you ascribe to God our Saviour?" John Wesley, "Predestination Calmly Considered," in *The Works of John Wesley* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1872), 10:227.

⁴ John Calvin argues that the gospel promises are extended to everyone who has faith—and God gives faith only to those individuals he has predestined for salvation. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 3.24.17.

⁵ Some Calvinists believe that the church should follow God's lead in deception and publicly preach "whosoever will" while privately teaching unconditional particular election. Bruce Demarest calls this the "biblical differentiation" between "kerygmatic universality" and "didactic particularity." *The Cross and Salvation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1997), 142, using terms from Paul K. Jewett, *Election and Predestination* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 118. Calvin himself seems to advocate preaching both the universal call and the doctrine of unconditional particular election: "Christ commands us to believe in him. Yet when he says, 'No one can come to me unless it has been granted him by my Father' [John 6:65], his statement is neither false nor contrary to his command. Let preaching, then, take its course that it may lead men to faith, and hold them fast in perseverance with continuing profit. And yet let not the knowledge of predestination be hindered, in order that those who obey may not be proud as of something of their own but may glory in the Lord" (*Institutes*, 3.23.13). However, Calvin cautions against preaching reprobation publicly because it could encourage wickedness (3.23.14).

A Parable of Calvinism

⁶ Calvinists seem to believe that God's glory would be diminished if he should offer salvation to everyone and give everyone the opportunity to respond. Calvin argues that God has predestined the reprobate to damnation so that they will "glorify his name by their own destruction" (*Institutes* 3.23.6; see also 3.24.14). Apparently God must damn some people in order to show that he can.

⁷ In his comment on 2 Peter 3:9, which says that God is unwilling for anyone to perish, Calvin states: "But it may be asked, If God wishes none to perish, why is it that so many do perish? To this my answer is, that no mention is here made of the hidden purpose of God, according to which the reprobate are doomed to their own ruin, but only of his will as made known to us in the gospel. For God there stretches forth his hand without a difference to all, but lays hold only of those, to lead them to himself, whom he has chosen before the foundation of the world." *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, ed. and trans. John Owen, Christian Classics Ethereal Library edition; available from http://www.ccel.org/c/calvin/comment3/comm_vol45/htm/vii.iv.iii.htm; Internet; accessed 1 November 2003.

⁸ In supralapsarian Calvinism, God's decree to save some and damn others takes priority over his decree to create the world. He therefore creates the reprobate precisely in order to damn them for eternity. In infralapsarian Calvinism, God's decree to save some logically follows his decrees to create the world and permit the fall. He chooses some to save and leaves the rest to their damnation. He provides atonement in Christ only for those he has decided to save. Sublapsarian Calvinism resembles infralapsarian Calvinism except that God provides atonement in Christ that is sufficient for the world, even though he will apply it only to certain elect individuals. For a discussion of these three varieties of Calvinism, see Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 842-843.

⁹ "Since he foresees future events only by reason of the fact that he decreed that they take place, they vainly raise a quarrel over foreknowledge, when it is clear that all things take place rather by his determination and bidding" (*Institutes* 3.23.6). See also 1.16.3; 1.18.1.

¹⁰ Calvinists have always had a hard time explaining how God can cause everything and yet not be the author of sin. Louis Berkhof states candidly: "It is said that if the decretive will of God also determined the entrance of sin into the world, God thereby becomes the author of sin and really wills something that is contrary to His moral perfection. . . . Reformed theologians, while maintaining on the basis of such passages as Acts 2:23; 3:8; etc., that God's decretive will also includes the sinful deeds of man, are always careful to point out that this must be conceived in such a way that God does not become the author of sin. They frankly admit that they cannot solve the difficulty. . . ." *Systematic Theology*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 78-79. Berkhof says that

it is acceptable to think of God permitting rather than causing sin, as long as one remembers that "God's will to permit sin carries certainty with it" (79). Calvin himself acknowledges that God is the author of sin; his main concern is to show that sinners are not thereby absolved from guilt (*Institutes* 3.23.3). He declares that both God's secret decree of predestination and humankind's own wickedness caused the fall: "Accordingly, man falls according as God's providence ordains, but he falls by his own fault" (3.23.8). In responding to the charge that God's secret will (to cause sin) contradicts his revealed will (which prohibits sin), he appeals to mystery: "When we do not grasp how God wills to take place what he forbids to be done, let us recall our mental incapacity, and at the same time consider that the light in which God dwells is not without reason called unapproachable [I Tim. 6:16], because it is overspread with darkness" (1.18.3). Bruce Ware argues that God causes evil (*God's Lesser Glory*, 204-205) but is not the direct agent of evil: "God ordains evil, uses evil, and accomplishes infinitely good purposes through evil, but he never *does* evil" (212). So God avoids responsibility for evil by sub-contracting it.

¹¹ Calvin, *Institutes* 3.2.11-12. Modern Calvinists generally have not had the nerve to follow Calvin on this point.

¹² Wesley, "Predestination," 10:229.

¹³ Calvin notes: "For as Augustine truly contends, they who measure divine justice by the standard of human justice are acting perversely" (*Institutes* 3.24.17).

¹⁴ "For God's will is so much the highest rule of righteousness that whatever he wills, by the very fact that he wills it, must be considered righteous" (Calvin, *Institutes* 3.23.2). This is sometimes known as the "divine command theory of ethics." Both Luther and Calvin appealed to this view to support their belief in predestination. Jerry L. Walls, "Divine Commands, Predestination, and Moral Intuition," in *The Grace of God, the Will of Man: A Case for Arminianism*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 261, 264-265.

¹⁵ R. K. White has a stunning answer to God's role in the problem of evil: God causes evil but is not responsible for it because he is not answerable to anyone. God is responsible for evil in that he "created a world in which evil was inevitable," he allows evils to continue to exist, and he preserves the world "in such a way that evils continue." Nevertheless, "God is not responsible for evil in the sense that he is not answerable to anyone. On the contrary, the sinner is answerable to God." *No Place for Sovereignty: What's Wrong with Freewill Theism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 201. In other words, God cannot be held responsible for evil because nobody is powerful enough to hold him accountable. For God, might makes right. Wright acknowledges that the omniscient God might seem to be the being most culpable for evil, because greater

A Parable of Calvinism

knowledge entails greater responsibility. Nevertheless, "there is no one for him to sin against, for his will is the standard of the good" (201).

¹⁶ *The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*, ed. and trans. William Klassen and Walter Klaassen (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1978), 341.