

My Problems with Calvinism (Summary)

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1. There is an inadequate exegetical basis for Calvinism. Determinism is based on a relatively small number of texts which are read in isolation from their historical context and used to proof text a theological construct which is alien to the Scriptures. All Scriptures are then interpreted within this construct (point 3).
2. The preponderance of Biblical material in all genres assume: a. that God has created people with a significant degree of libertarian free will; b. that God's grace can be resisted; c. that God's desires the salvation of all (=universal salvific will); d. that the atonement is universal in scope; e. that apostasy is a genuine possibility (this is a relatively minor point in comparison to the others).
3. In order to deal with the countless Scriptures which support the concepts just outlined (point 2), Calvinists devise interpretive strategies to harmonize these texts with determinism, e.g. distinguishing a revealed versus secret/decretive will, distinguishing general versus effectual grace, and proposing a variety of options for understanding texts which affirm the universal scope of the atonement, God's universal salvific will, the meaningfulness of prayer, and the real possibility of apostasy. All these interpretive strategies are counterintuitive, contextually unsupported, logically flawed, historically unattested before the rise of theological determinism, morally problematic, and create a 'mountain of textual destruction.'
4. Calvinism destroys the foundation for any hope of real knowledge. In the course of human history people have believed and acted on a nearly infinite range of ideas, many of which we now recognize to be preposterous and often deeply destructive. If God has ordained all our thoughts, no matter how erroneous, ridiculous, evil and destructive, then we can never be certain that at any given moment we are aligning ourselves with God ordained truth or God ordained nonsense.
5. Calvinism affirms that God holds people accountable for sins and unbelief which he has ordained and scripted for them...and that God is just in condemning people to eternal conscious torment for choices that he has determined and rendered inevitable. It also affirms that that God ordains every expression of sin and evil in human experience. He accomplishes this through 'second causes', that is bringing influences to bear on a person so that they will willingly and without coercion commit the precise sins and evil that God has decreed for them (compatibilism).
6. The problems in point 5 become especially acute because since God unilaterally scripts every detail of human experience, it was entirely his choice as to the level of sin, evil and eternal judgment he ordained for the human race. God could just as easily have written a script for human history with little or no sin and evil and with all being saved in the end.
7. Calvinism renders meaningless the Scriptural affirmations that God is good and that he is love. If a human being ever acted in any way that Calvinists claim God does (as described in point 5), they would be declared an evil, moral monster of the worst kind. By analogy the same is true for the God of Calvinism and it is meaningless to describe Calvinism's God as good and loving.
8. One implication of the previous point is that God holds people to a higher moral standard than he embodies. People are called to love everyone with precisely the same quality of love. The God of Calvinism does not demonstrate the same love for the non-elect as he does for the elect.
9. One consequence of Calvinism is that we cannot trust our highest moral intuitions. The thought that God would 1. ordain every expression of sin and evil in human experience and, 2. bring people into existence with the intention to destine them to eternal torment for sins and unbelief which he himself ordained for them is morally reprehensible. Calvinists claim that we cannot trust this natural moral intuition but must accept explanations for what God has ordained which contradict our God given moral intuition (and logical thought).

10. Genuine relationship requires that the two persons in the relationship have a significant measure of freedom in choosing how to respond to each other. With its denial of libertarian freedom Calvinism eviscerates the Scriptural portrayal of the 'God – person dynamic' as one characterized by genuine, freely chosen, relationship.
11. Determinism was first introduced into Christian theology by Augustine around A.D. 400. Even though Christians would have been familiar with determinism because of Stoic philosophy, no theologian prior to Augustine found determinism in the Scriptures. This is an indicator that Augustine brought deterministic assumptions to Scripture rather than deriving them from Scripture. It is worth pointing out that Augustine was wrong on many other points: e.g. baptismal regeneration of infants, relation of state and church, justifying the use of force (the sword) against heretics, the allegorical method.
12. There is no evidence for determinism in second temple Judaism (with the possible exception of some aspects of Essene thought). This is an indicator that Jews themselves never understood the Old Testament texts commonly used by Calvinists as an expression of theological determinism. Furthermore if Jesus and the early church took a different view, they would have had to clearly state that, in contrast to contemporary Jewish theology, they were teaching determinism.
13. Every aspect of human experience is premised on the assumption that libertarian freedom is real: e.g. responses of joy, grief, moral outrage; the entire social order; the legal system; advocacy on behalf of just causes, etc. Calvinism both affirms that assumption of libertarian freedom is an illusion and demands that we live *as if* we did have libertarian freedom. It is analogous to the position of atheists who simultaneously affirm that there is no such thing as universal moral principles and that we must live *as if* moral norms had validity. Calvinism assumes that we can trust our intuitive belief that moral norms are real but we cannot trust our intuitive belief that libertarian freedom is real.
14. The magnitude of evil in the world is consistent with either atheism or free will theism...but inexplicable on the assumptions of theistic determinism.
15. Many contemporary atheistic philosophers are determinists in that they can find no rational basis for libertarian free will. Theism is the only solution to atheistic determinism in that a personal God is able to bring people into existence who have a significant measure of libertarian free will. The Scriptures provide ample evidence that this is precisely what God has chosen to do. It is problematic that Calvinists ignore this evidence and instead construct a theistic version of atheistic determinism.
16. A number of specific Calvinist perspectives are exegetically, logically and ethically challenged: 1. that complete regeneration precedes the initial expression of faith; 2. that God ordains sin and evil so as to enhance his own glory; 3. that God requires the eternal torment of a portion of humanity in order to demonstrate the full range of his divine attributes; 4. that the eternal torment of the damned serves to increase the gratitude of the elect that God has chosen to save them; 5. that God does not love the non-elect. Points 2-4 create a picture of God as a cosmic (& sadistic) narcissist (e.g. John Piper's Calvinism). I realize that not all Calvinist affirm each of these positions...but they are all well attested.
17. While not a core critique, in my opinion Calvinism is a theology for those who are successful in life and have a vested interest in perpetuating the status quo. If everything is as God ordained it to be, then those in 'successful positions' can consciously or unconsciously find some assurance that God has ordained their privileged circumstances. Calvinism also appeals to our natural narcissism ('I am special') and relieves us of moral responsibility (God has ordained whatever choices I make). Responsible Calvinists would of course not draw these conclusions.

The best critiques of Calvinism are:

Olson, Roger. *Against Calvinism*. Zondervan, 2011.

Walls, Jerry; Dongell, Joseph. *Why I Am Not a Calvinist*. InterVarsity Press, 2004.

Fischer, Austin. *Young, Restless, No Longer Reformed: Black Holes, Love and a Journey In and Out of Calvinism*. WIPF Stock Publishers, 2014.

Sanders, John. *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Divine Providence*. 2nd ed. InterVarsity,

2007. (While I do not subscribe to his 'open theism', this is a wonderful book)

Pinnock, Clark; Wagner, John D, eds. *Grace for All*. WIPF Stock, 2015. (Especially the chapters by David Clines, *Predestination in the Old Testament*, I.H. Marshall, *Predestination in the New Testament*, Grant Osborne, *Exegetical Notes on Calvinist Tests*, Roger Olson, *Arminianism is God-Centered Theology*; Glen Shellrude, *Calvinism and Problematic Readings of New Testament Text*; Grant Osborne, *Soteriology, Perseverance and Apostasy in the Epistle to the Hebrews*).

Juncker, Gunther H. 'The Dilemma of Theistic Determinism,' *Journal for Theology and Ministry* 12.2 (Fall 2015) 15-22.

Also: Society of Evangelical Arminians: <http://evangelicalarminians.org> (They have a massive database of resources).