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Calvinism & the Origin of Sin

by David Dunlap

The origin of sin has perplexed Christians throughout history. Many have asked: Since God is supremely good, untainted by sin, and infinitely sovereign over His universe, how is it that sin entered the world which God declared to be “very good”? It has been suggested that God could have created angels and man in a state of holy perfection, so it would have been impossible for them to sin. However, this would have resulted in reducing God’s noblest creation to mere machine-like figures void of free choice. God desires man to respond to Him through choice. God in His sovereignty gave to man a will to exercise freely as an integral part of his nature. God will not oppose His own will nor violate the nature He has designed for man. However, Scripture reveals that man’s choice is not always God’s will. How did sin enter the world? It was through disobedience to God’s revealed will on the part of the first man and woman. We read, “By one man sin entered into the world, and sin by death” (Rom. 5:12). God did not ordain it, but allowed it.

It has been rightly said that man’s freedom of will comes at a high price — war, crime, rebellion, and sin. God determined this freedom of choice given to man to be worth the price. This being said, we must never infer that the freedom of choice in man can thwart God’s ultimate will. This perfect will is the eternal purpose of God, founded upon His all-wise and eternal counsel, which is settled, ordained, and unalterable (Eph. 3:11).

John Calvin, Determinism, and the Sovereignty of God

In wrestling with this solemn question, some have sadly concluded that God Himself is the author of sin. This doctrine was set forth by overzealous followers of John Calvin, seeking to validate his theology. To their credit it must be said that John Calvin and many moderate Calvinists did not hold to this teaching. Nevertheless, its foundations are rooted in the writing and thinking of John Calvin. Calvin rightly believed in God’s sovereignty over His created universe, but then took this important doctrine an unfortunate step further. He taught that God decrees all things which come to pass. According to this teaching, called “Determinism,” there is no event, no act, no decision of man that God does not ordain and decree to happen exactly as it occurs. This includes war, political corruption, injustice, immorality, and sin. In his most important theological work, *The Institutes of Christian Religion*, which formed the thinking of his followers, John Calvin wrote:

“By predestination we mean the eternal decree of God, by which He determined with Himself whatever He wished to happen with regard to every man. All are not created on equal terms, but some are preordained to eternal life, others to eternal damnation.”

John Calvin
(1509-1564)

*"...we mean the eternal decree of God, by which He determined with Himself whatever He wished to happen with regard to every man."*¹

Following him, the intrepid reformer Martin Luther, in his classic work, *On the Bondage of the Will*, defended the view that God decrees all things, including the sinful acts of man and Satan:

*"...We do everything by God's will alone, and by a necessity that is laid upon us...so that all things still happen by necessity, as it respects us...since then God moves and actuates all things in all things, it cannot be but that He also moves and acts in Satan and in the wicked...(the wicked) hurried along by this impulse of divine omnipotency...Hence it arises, that the wicked man cannot but go astray and commit sin continually; inasmuch as being seized and urged by the power of God, he is not allowed to remain idle; but wills, desires, acts just to what he is."*²

This theological perspective continues to be taught in our present day. A. W. Pink, the hyper-Calvinist author who died in 1952, writes:

*"Nothing ever comes to pass except what He decreed."*³

Is God the Author of Sin?

The next logical step in this teaching of determinism is to declare that God is the originator of sin. After the death of John Calvin in 1564, Theodore Beza, professor of theology at the University of Geneva, became the leading proponent of this particular error of Calvinism. Through his far-reaching influence, this error became accepted as orthodoxy and spread rapidly throughout Europe. Unfortunately this doctrine, that God is the source of sin, continues to be taught by many Calvinists to the present day. This is the inevitable conclusion of the teaching that God decrees and determines everything that comes to pass. If one is to be a consistent determinist, he must believe that the God that decrees eternal salvation for the elect, must also decree the more repulsive acts that have occurred down through the pages of world history. This, according to many Calvinist writers, must also include the entrance of sin into the world.

The earnest Christian must recoil and reject the blasphemy of this God-dishonoring doctrine! One can hardly imagine that Christians would publicly teach such a doctrine, but sadly it is true. Mark the words of Calvinist professor Dr. John Fineberg of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, who writes:

*"I hold that all things are causally determined...God having made the choice, He created Adam as sinning."*⁴

This seems to imply that God not only created Adam and Eve, but that God was involved in the act of Adam's and Eve's sin. This quotation is not written in isolation; its author is one of many Calvinists who have taught that sin is a result of God decreeing it in man. A. W. Pink, presses this doctrine on his readers when he asserts confidently,

*"Clearly it was the divine will that sin should enter this world, or it would not have done so. God had the power to prevent it. Nothing ever comes to pass except what He decreed...God's decree that sin should enter this world was a secret hid in Himself."*⁵

"...We do everything by God's will alone,...so that all things still happen by necessity,...since then God moves and actuates all things in all things, it cannot be but that He also moves and acts in Satan and in the wicked...(the wicked) hurried along by this impulse of divine omnipotency...the wicked man cannot but go astray and commit sin continually; inasmuch as being seized and urged by the power of God..."

Martin Luther
(1483-1543)

Calvinist theologian R. C. Sproul, Jr., argues along the same line of reasoning, but he takes it one step further. Amazingly, he argues that God must be the “creator” of sin! He writes:

Every Bible-believing Christian must conclude at least that God in some sense desired that man would fall into sin...God wills all things that come to pass. It is in His power to stop whatever might come to pass. It is within His omniscience to imagine every possible turn of events and to choose that chain of events which most pleases Him...But wait a minute... Isn't it impossible for God to do evil? He can't sin. I am not accusing God of sinning; I am suggesting that He created sin. ⁶

Is this what the Bible teaches? How did sin enter the world? Using the Scriptures as our divine compass, we find they clearly teach that God is not the author of sin, nor will He entice man to sin. James 1:13 states, “Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth He any man.”

In another place we read, “Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity” (Hab. 1:13). The careful student of Scripture will conclude that God has never caused anyone ever to sin, for sin is always the result of rebellion against God. “From whence come wars and fightings among you? Come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members?” (Jas. 4:1).

Beyond a doubt, God is sovereign, holy, faithful, just, good, unchanging, all-powerful, unequalled, above all. Therefore, to ascribe, surmise, or to insinuate in any way that God is the author of sin is to besmirch and malign the surpassing greatness of his name. In setting forth the seriousness of this error, Bible teacher Harold Mackay passionately writes:

*“Does God foreknow all things? Absolutely! Does God permit all things? Yes! Did God decree all things? No! There is no question but that all God's eternal plans and purposes will be ultimately and completely fulfilled. But this is not to say that God decreed all the intervening happenings in the history of mankind. To infer that all the crimes, corruptions, atrocities, tragedies, and wars that have stained the pages of human history were according to God's eternal decree is too horrible a thought to entertain for one moment.”*⁷

The Biblical Balance between the Sovereignty of God and Human Responsibility

How then does Scripture reconcile God's sovereignty with the entrance of sin? We find that God certainly, by virtue of His foreknowledge and omnipotence, has the power to know all things and ordain all things; yet the Bible teaches that He allows certain events and decrees others, but does not decree all things.

Though Scripture plainly teaches that man can oppose both the will and plan of God (Lk. 7:30; Mt. 23:37), mortal man cannot hinder or thwart God's ultimate plan for this world. However, individually, man can decide not to have a part in it. The Lord Jesus Christ will come again to rapture the Church — this is His sovereign plan; but some may choose not to have any part in it. The Scriptures repeatedly state that man can exercise a will given to him by God, and with that will reject the desires, blessings, and privileges that God has for him.

“Sin is something God meant to happen. He planned for it, ordained it—or in the words of the Westminster Confession, He decreed it. Evil and all its consequences were included in God's eternal decree before the foundation of the world.”

John MacArthur



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C. H. Spurgeon draws together in a sermon the importance of these two lines of biblical truth:

Man is a free agent, a responsible agent, so that his sin is his own willful sin, and it lies fully with him and never with God. Yet at the same time, God's purposes are fulfilled, and His will is done even by demons and corrupt men—I cannot comprehend it: without hesitation I believe it, and rejoice so to do; I never hope to comprehend it...I worship a God I never expect to comprehend. ⁸

Human freedom is not contrary to God's sovereignty. God sovereignly gave man his freedom by creating him a free creature, and God sovereignly continues to allow man to exercise his freedom moment by moment. Thus the sovereignty of God is not thwarted by human freedom, but glorified by human freedom. For God gave man a free will, He sustains man so he can act freely, and He brings about all His purposes without violating man's free will.

Conclusion

Why is it that sin entered the world? It is the same reason that some men perish and others believe in Christ unto eternal life — the decision of man to act in rebellious disregard to God's will. We must set aside the notion that sin entered the world by any desire of God; and in like manner, we reject the notion that God does not desire to save all, for Scripture tells us that He "will have all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4).

Endnotes

1. John Calvin, *Institutes*, Vol. 2, Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 1952, p. 206
2. Quoted by G.H. Lang, *World Chaos*, London, Paternoster, 1950, pp. 60-61
3. A.W. Pink, *Gleanings from the Scriptures*, Chicago, IL, Moody, 1964, p. 206
4. John Fineberg, *Predestination and Free Will*, Downers Grove, IL, IVP, 1986, 24
5. A.W. Pink, *Gleanings from the Scriptures*, Chicago, IL, Moody, 1964, p. 207
6. R. C. Sproul, Jr. *Almighty Over All*, (Grand Rapids, MI, Baker Books, 1999), 53
7. H.G. Mackay, *Biblical Balance*, Toronto, Everyday Publications, 1978, p. 55
8. C. H. Spurgeon, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 16, (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1907), p. 501