



"What Calvinism And Arminianism Have In Common

***Lost in a thicket of Arminian and Calvinist debate,
we sometimes lose sight of the grand truths
we hold in common...***

By Edward Fudge

What does it mean that Jesus died for all? The question is beguilingly simple. You would not know from the face of it that the question has been at the center of a heated and sometimes vociferous debate. For almost two thousand years, Christians have struggled to understand the effect of Jesus' death and the scope of its saving power. With the publication in recent months of a number of books by evangelicals on the fate of the unevangelized, larger questions about the scope of the Atonement are gaining renewed currency. Does "all" refer to individual human beings, or nationalities and peoples, or just the elect?

Within the Reformation mainstream, two contending viewpoints have emerged, which observers often label *Calvinist* (after John Calvin), on the one hand, and *Arminian* (after Jacob Arminius, an early Dutch opponent of Calvin) or Wesleyan (after John Wesley), on the other. On the Calvinist side of the debate, you have Augustine, Calvin, and their followers. They argue (with varying degrees of explicitness and forcefulness) that the "all" refers to the elect: Christ died to save only those whom the Father had predestined to eternal life.

On the Arminian side, represented also by Wesley, believers argue that Christ in his atonement intended to make salvation available to everyone. It is faith (or, in some versions, obedience) that makes the saving work complete. The debate includes a host of related questions. What are we to make of this preposition "for"? If Jesus died "for" every human ever born, can anyone finally be lost? Does a yes to that question mean Christ's death was somehow ineffective? And just who are these "elect"? Does this scriptural term refer to an indeterminate and nameless mass of people (as Arminians would tend to argue), or does it describe specific individuals with faces (as Calvinists would suggest)? Do we speak of Jesus' death making salvation possible for all people, or, as the traditional query phrases it, does a "particular" atonement necessarily exclude those who are not saved?

The question is also sometimes phrased in terms of those who have never heard of Jesus. Will they all be lost? If so, why? Because they never heard -- or for some other reason? Does Scripture allow (or even encourage) one to conclude that, based on Jesus' atonement, God might finally save still others who in life never knew what Jesus had done on their behalf?

For those who take Scripture seriously, these distinctions represent more than abstract theories. These "theories" express convictions. And they may collide with

the convictions of other Christians -- people as sincere and informed and committed as we are. When concern for people and for theological integrity seem to clash, the anguish only increases. Sometimes people from the different camps lose sight of their brothers or sisters in the doctrinal thicket.

I was trained through graduate school in the Arminian viewpoint as expressed by the Churches of Christ. Later, I studied under Calvinists at Covenant Theological Seminary in Saint Louis, Missouri. These queries thus reflect the honest uncertainties of one who has been the lone Arminian in a classroom of Calvinists and a suspected Calvinist in a fellowship where that term is no compliment. Today, some 20 years downstream [40 years in 2010], I am certain that neither "side" has the whole truth in its pocket and that no human analysis can fully contain or explain what God accomplished for sinners in Jesus of Nazareth.

Yet we can speak truthfully even when not exhaustively. Convinced that evangelicals of all stripes share more than they generally realize, I propose the following seven couplets as a modest attempt at bridge building. Of course, this is only a step. But perhaps we can at least survey the terrain, establish some boundaries, and drive a few stakes. Doing so is surely better than defending our doctrinal turf while firing volleys of proof texts at each other.

Couplet 1:

- Every accountable person deserves to be lost.
- No accountable person deserves to be saved.

On this point Scripture is transparently clear: "All ...are under the power of sin...that...the whole world may be held accountable to God" (Rom. 3:9, 19). "[A]ll have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23).

God requires absolute obedience, and not one of us has presented it. The mystery is not that some are finally lost but that any are finally saved. Every person finally lost will receive justice, whereas every person finally saved will receive mercy grounded only in its giver (Rom 1:18-20, 32; 2:5; 3:4-8).

There are important differences between Augustine and Pelagius, between Calvin and Arminius, between Whitefield and Wesley. But this is not one of them. Every careful Calvinist insists that God deserves no blame for the fate of the lost. Every careful Arminian affirms that God deserves all glory for the salvation of the redeemed. Stressing each of the two points in the couplet can help us minimize needless misunderstanding, define genuine differences with sharper clarity, and cultivate a fraternal climate in which to study jointly the Word of God.

Couplet 2:

- God takes no pleasure in the final destruction of any.
- God finds pleasure in the salvation of every person who is saved.

God finds no joy in the death of any sinner. "Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and

live?" he asks rhetorically in Ezekiel 18:23 (see also Eze. 18:32; 33:11). He is not vengeful or vindictive. The Creator does not delight in the destruction of any person he has made, not even his enemies. He desires "all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4). Whoever is finally lost will not see God smiling as a result. Indeed, the Son of God says, there is celebration in heaven over every sinner who repents (Luke 15:7,10).

Couplet 3:

- No one can come to Jesus unless the Father draws him or her.
- Every person whom the Father has given to Jesus will come.

These statements did not originate with Calvin, Augustine, or even the apostle Paul, but with Jesus himself (John 6:37, 44). The assurance that God is in control should stimulate courage rather than contention; it should inspire hope and not harangues. To know that God has a plan and a people emboldens us to proclaim the gospel to every person we meet (Acts 18 : 9-10) . What God initiated in eternity he will consummate in his own good time (Eph. 1:1-14; Rom. 8:28-31).

If we recoil at the prospect of divine sovereignty, as though God's gracious choice of some requires his unilateral rejection of others (a notion sometimes described as "double predestination"), we may rejoice that Scripture here is "splendidly illogical," to borrow a phrase from biblical commentator A. M. Hunter. For, as Hunter notes, "the opposite of election is not predestination to destruction; it is unbelief a self-incurred thing." Many Calvinists urge the same point. Instead of charging them with "doublespeak," Arminians should welcome the unexpected common ground and rejoice. Until one claims to know everything personally, there is room to tolerate paradox in others. The hallmark of a Christian is not logic, but love. The proclamation of God-who-acts-to-save is as old as Exodus and as relevant as next Sunday's sermon in our day of positive-attitude platitudes and self-help schemes. It ignites holy boldness even as it smites our pride. That God is sovereign means that none can come to Jesus -- despite our clever phrases, latest methods, and polished salesmanship -- unless the Father draws him or her. At the same time, it assures us that every person the Father has given to Jesus will come -- without exception, and despite our own faulty choices and often stumbling work. If prophets are mute, donkeys can speak. If disciples remain silent, the stones can cry out. If the church should prove unfaithful or disobedient, God's plan still will see its intended end.

Couplet 4:

- The ultimate basis of condemnation is the lost person's own works.
- The ultimate basis of salvation is the work of Jesus.

Calvinists and Arminians already agree that every person finally saved will enjoy salvation only because of what God did in Jesus. "No one comes to the Father," said Jesus, "but by me" (John 14:6). "There is salvation in no one else" (Acts 4:12). All who "receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness" will do so "through the one man Jesus Christ" (Rom 5:17) . It is his "act of righteousness" alone that "leads to acquittal and life" (Rom 5: 18).

These truths apply equally to those who lived before Jesus and to those who lived after, to Jew as well as to Gentile, to those who hear the gospel and to those who do not. None will be saved except on the basis of the atonement Jesus has made. Salvation will be conclusively "to the praise of [God's] glory (Eph 1:6, 12, 14). The mere presence of each redeemed human will attest throughout eternity to the "immeasurable riches of his grace" (Eph 2:7). On the other hand, all who ultimately perish in hell will do so despite the fact that Jesus died for sinners and despite the fact that he receives everyone who truly wishes to come.

Couplet 5:

- Salvation occurred objectively two thousand years ago in Jesus' work.
- Salvation occurs subjectively as each person believes the gospel.

Jesus himself announced that he came "to save" the lost (Luke 19:10; John 12:47; 1 Tim 1:15). He accomplished his stated assignment and triumphantly proclaimed from the cross "It is finished" (John 19:30; Heb. 1:3). God scrutinized what Jesus had done and was satisfied (as foreshadowed in Isa. 53:11). Then, to confirm the mission accomplished, God raised Jesus from the dead (Rom 4:25). After he had made purification for sins, Jesus took his place at God's right hand (Heb 1:3; 10:11-14). If we preach that Jesus' death was the payment for our sins, we may also proclaim that his resurrection was God's paid-in-full receipt.

All this occurred in the historical experience of Jesus, our substitute and Savior. God reconciled the world to himself in Jesus' fleshly body (Col 1:19-22; 2 Cor 5:18-19). Salvation is not a theoretical possibility but a fait accompli. It is "the good news of [our] salvation" (Eph 1:13). We may speak of this finished aspect of Christ's work as "objective" salvation. It happened once for all, outside us but for us, in the personal life and death of Jesus of Nazareth almost two thousand years ago.

On the other hand, every person who enjoys salvation in this life does so by a response of faith to God's gracious call. Whatever the case in the age to come, no one can enjoy salvation now apart from hearing and believing the gospel. We may speak of this present participation in Christ's work as "subjective" salvation.

Just as President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation and, by the stroke of his executive pen, freed every slave in the Confederate States effective January 1, 1863, so Jesus, by his perfect act, effectively saved every human being who finally will enjoy eternal life. Yet just as no slave empirically enjoyed the benefits of Lincoln's act until she or he heard and believed the good news of emancipation, so no redeemed sinner experientially enjoys Christ's redemptive blessings now except through hearing and believing the gospel (1 Cor 1:18). Until women and men learn the good news of their salvation, they continue to live as if nothing has happened. They remain as they were -- without hope, not knowing God, unaware of his forgiveness and favor. The gospel ministry is for the sake of such individuals, that they may obtain salvation in every sense, subjectively as well as objectively (2 Tim. 2: 10). Like Paul at Corinth, we need to declare the good news fearlessly and without ceasing, so long as God's patience indicates that he still has others who do not know they have been reconciled in his Son (Acts 18:9-

10; 2 Cor. 5:18-19; 2 Pet. 3:9).

Couplet 6:

- Every person finally lost will have knowingly rejected God's goodness.
- Every person finally saved will have accepted God's goodness as it was known to him or her.

Scripture speaks of some who perish "for lack of knowledge" or "by believing a lie" (Hos 4:6; 2 Thess. 2:8-10) This "knowledge" is relational as well as cognitive; it is not only intellectual but also moral and spiritual. Whoever rejects this "knowledge" does so by conscious choice and inevitably courts condemnation (John 3:19). Yet, because God is so just, and because Jesus' saving work is so extensive and so powerful, the apostle Paul confidently affirms that only those who consciously reject God's light will finally be lost (Rom 5:13-14, 18-21).

Not all who are finally lost will have rejected the gospel, at least not in this life. But even those will have consciously rejected knowledge of God in some form, whether in nature (Acts 14:17; Rom 1:19-25), conscience (Rom 2:15-16), or divine revelation (John 5:45-47). God's judgment of condemnation will be manifestly just in every case (Rom. 2:5-12).

On the other hand, Scripture indicates that all those finally saved will have welcomed in a spirit of faith the light of God they had. "God is one," Paul writes, "and he will justify the circumcised on the ground of their faith and the uncircumcised because of their faith" (Rom 3:30). Abraham is the prime example of one who was justified by faith though neither Christian nor Jew, and with limited gospel understanding as well (Rom 4:9-22). Jesus had in mind those who hear when he said: "He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned" (Mark 16:15-16).

Couplet 7:

- No person is better for not hearing the gospel. - No person is injured by hearing the gospel.

Sometimes people mistakenly assume, upon learning that Jesus' work saved all who are finally saved whether they hear the gospel or not, that those who never hear are somehow better as a result. That inference is neither necessary nor proper.

The ultimate rejection of God is in the rejection of the light of the gospel. For that reason, whoever willfully rejects Jesus incurs the greatest guilt (Heb 10:26-31). It does not follow, however, that those who gladly receive God's dimmer rays before they learn of Jesus will reject the brightest light when it appears. Each heart remains the same regardless of the degree of light to which it is exposed (Luke 16:30-31; Rev 22:11). We may be sure that no person who rejects the gospel and is lost would have been saved if only that one had remained ignorant of Jesus. It is inconceivable that anyone who cries "yes" to God from the hopeless darkness will suddenly shout a defiant "no" when the bright light of the cross and the empty tomb burst finally into view.

Common ground

These seven couplets come short, of course, of providing a third alternative to Arminianism and Calvinism, although with cultivation by brighter minds they might furnish seeds for a biblical "via media". Even so, they can serve a useful purpose. For they stake off common ground -- to the surprise, at times, of participants all around -- marking a safe and neutral area large enough for both groups to stand while growing together in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. After 450 years of constant controversy, perhaps that is no small step.

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