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Is Calvinism Biblical? (Part 5)



Is Calvinism Biblical? (Debate) - Steve Gregg

Steve Gregg and Douglas Wilson debate the concept of perseverance of the saints in Calvinism. The two present different interpretations of biblical passages and debate the nuances of individual choice and God's election.

Transcript

This final debate is on perseverance of the saints. The format will be the same except that both of them have agreed at the end of the session that we will try to limit the length of response to the question and then allow the other gentlemen to provide a reaction to the session. I learned over and over in the course of my life that perseverance of the saints is the only truth.

Paul refers to the whole counsel of God. God is self-consistent in what he reveals. It is not possible to make one truth which you can't take the atonement or evangelism or the sovereignty of God or any of these things as a stand-alone truth.

In the last debate, I hope you saw the importance of eschatology and the atonement. The atonement says Jesus died for the elect only and he also believed in a universe and an iso-Jesus. This only makes sense of the Bible's teaching of universal atonement.

Well, it's the same sort of thing with every other aspect of Calvinism. And I want to do full justice to the obvious set of texts. And so that's one obvious group of texts.

And Calvinists who talk about the perseverance of the saints, sometimes I think also talk about this. Those are the texts we naturally go to. But there's another set of texts that we also have to appeal to and must affirm that all texts belong to them.

It's not as though Calvinists have some texts and Arminians have other texts. What we should do is affirm everything the Bible affirms and let God sort it out in our lives over time. And perhaps he won't sort it out until we're in glory.

But we need to take all the texts as they present themselves. The Bible tells us in countless places, and it does, and it tells us to choose, and it does, that I can conclude

from this. If the Bible says to suffer for Christ, that's what I mean.

And I don't have to reconcile with those and show you the mechanics. This is the issue. The person does not stand above the truth.

This by itself is no justice. They talk about apostasy as a very real sin. Calvinists explain away some of the warning passages as hypothetical warnings.

In other words, God gives us hypothetical warnings, warnings of falling from grace. They talk about perseverance. The true child of God can never be lost.

Well, I want to harmonize these of sovereignty and election, and number two, the objectivity. What's at stake here? A man can still be unregenerate. The Bible teaches that a man can still be unregenerate.

The Bible teaches equally clearly who will lay a charge against God's election. It is God who justifies. So, when Paul thunders all the way through the last part of chapter, Romans chapter 8, he is glorying and exulting in how God's sovereign election means that someone who is in that number among the elect cannot be touched by tribulation, peril, nakedness, or... It is God who justifies.

Well, the Bible uses those two definitions are in play in Romans chapter 8 and Romans chapter 9. In Romans chapter 8, Paul is exulting in the fact that the elect, as he's using the term, and he is sort of doing a little party dance over the fact that the perseverance of the saints... You see, all the way through Romans, Paul teaches something, and then all the way through, he is having... The question is, Paul, and you're saying, tribulations are part of this tribulation. He says, not as though the word of God has taken... Don't conclude that God has a people, and this people are objectively part of him. Christ is the root, and the church is the almond tree.

Christ is divine, and it's very clear that there are branches that are cut out of Christ, taken away to the congregation. I conclude from... Unbelieving Jews were cut out. Our problem is... The damaging notion was... The people were cut out... So, not every covenant member is elect, but every unregenerate covenant member who falls... Is falling from grace, and they are being removed from Christ.

They are trampling underfoot the blood of the covenant, which sanctified them. That sanctified them positionally. Well, the cup of blessing... The cup of blessing was... Alright, so, the efficacy... Chapter 8, he's talking about individual... That I will not turn away from doing them good.

But I will put my fear in their hearts, so that they will not depart from me. There is a class of people in the world, in such a way, that... Of not departing... In John 5, 24, it says... So God says, when you're saved... He is... When he saves the elect... And, I've made a pronouncement... So... He who hears my word and believes... So, if I'm a number

among the elect, I'm saved in turn... In Romans 8, which we've already considered, I'd like to point to certain phrases in... There's Christ who died... And furthermore, he was also risen... He shall separate us from the love of Christ... Now, it's important... At the end... Not when he says nothing, he shall separate us from the love of God... Which is in Christ Jesus our Lord... The love of Christ... The love of God, from which we cannot be separated... Is the love of God, which is in Christ... It's not outside of Christ... It's not indiscriminate... It's the love of God, in Christ Jesus... So, if this is a rhetorical question... Who shall separate us from the love of God? The answer is in other words... The stress, the persecution, the famine, the slaughter... Yet, in all things, we are more than conquerors... Through him, who loved us... Now, notice that my perseverance is based on his love for me... It's not based upon my love for him... I am persuaded that neither death nor life... Nor angels nor princes nor goblins nor power... I cannot separate myself from the love of God... Which is in Christ Jesus our Lord... It's not a creative thing... Even though it proceeds from a creative thing... To fall entirely and completely flat... Who shall separate us from the love of God? Distress, maybe... Persecution, probably... Famine, well... A lot of people would wait... Through him, who loved us... I think that there are three things... One, eight through nine... It says this... Who will also confirm you to the end... That you may be faithful... God is faithful... Like you were called in the fellowship of the Son of Jesus Christ our Lord... Perseverance and protection depends upon... So, I have confidence... Because I believe that God is going to be faithful... As soon as I start saying... Well, God's promises are indiscriminate... And God's promises are just sort of there... And he puts it all out... And then says, come and get it... Then, some people come and get it... And some people don't... And that puts the burden on me... To respond properly... Now, I do believe I must respond properly... But I believe that I do in fact respond properly... Because God has shown his love to me... And he is the one that gives all the glory... And all the credit... So then, what... How can we sum this up? Perseverance is the same... Does not mean that every baptized... Will fall away... The baptism... Are there being... Unregenerate people... Who do not receive the warnings... Those who believe in Christ in truth... They have the consolation... Well, of course... The proposition we're debating is... What the Calvinistic view... I don't know that Douglass' view he's expressed is... Strictly speaking, the Calvinistic view... Obviously, he is a Calvinist... But it's his view... There are apparently different views... So I have the task of responding not only to Calvinism... But also to Douglass' own views on this... Which I don't mind doing... I would point out that... It's not unprecedented that... Someone who would hold the first four points of Calvinism... Like most Calvinists... And yet have a different view of perseverance... Augustine, for example... Differs from Calvin on this one point only... Augustine believed... And not elect... I would quote from him... And also Calvin scholars who admitted this... There's a principal difference between Augustine's theology... And Calvin's... Calvin believed that if you are regenerate... You are elect... And Douglass believed that too... But... Of course, this raises serious questions... About the strength of salvation... Since the fact... The evidence of regeneration... Gives us a strength of salvation... Again, Augustine felt like God doesn't give perseverance... To all

who are regenerate... Calvin and Augustine didn't agree... And I don't think that Douglass agrees... Douglass does believe that we can be... Joined to Christ... Be a member of Christ... And yet not even be regenerated... Now, as I understand it... With the depth... In sin... That I had before... This communication of life... Comes to me through union with Christ... If I'm united with Christ... Then the life will press me... That's what the vine pictures... Every branch in me... Jesus said... Because every branch that's united with him... Shares the life of the vine... And that's why it produces fruit... Because the life of the vine is in all the branches... That are attached... That are continuous... To suggest that... Everyone who's baptized has been joined to Christ... Since we know very well... Our people who've been baptized... Have not been regenerated... I believe that regeneration is an act of God... Physical baptism is an act of man... Jesus can baptize with the Holy Spirit... But man can baptize with water... He can baptize whole nations... If they want to... Without saying anything... Or without joining anything to Christ... Obviously God is distinct in terms of... Being joined to theology... I believe that being joined to Christ... Is indeed being joined to the true church... But the institutional church... Catholic church for example... But by the working of the Holy Spirit... Which is not a ritual... But a spiritual reality... And I believe... That he is quite right... That there can be those who are joined to Christ... And who fall away... That's unfortunate for Jesus of Romans 8... Because what we can't be separated from... Is the love of God... Is in Christ... Now those who are in Christ... Have the love of God... Those who are not in Christ... Those who are cut off from Christ... Because that love of God is in Christ... We are accepted in the beloved... Outside the beloved we are not accepted... And for that reason Romans 8... That indeed you can be cut off from Christ... And no longer be in the body... Then there is some factor... That can cause us to be separated from the love of God... Now I understand things a little differently... Of course about this... I might suggest that the election of the Bible... Is a corporate thing... Almost entirely... I'm not aware of any scripture... That is an exception to this... Certainly there is a general teaching of scripture... That God's election is corporate... That he chooses categories... For example Israel... It says in Romans chapter 9... Jacob I have loved... Esau I have hated... This is a statement about the nation of Israel... And the nation of Esau... There is no statement in this passage... About the individual salvation... At least Paul doesn't indicate there is... And he tells us what he is talking about... When he quotes the Old Testament... He says as it is written... The older shall serve the younger... He is quoting from Genesis 25... Where it says to Rebecca... There are two nations in your Roman... Two peoples shall be separated from between your feet... And the older shall serve the younger... That is the older nation... Will serve the younger nation... This is not about the individual salvation of these two men... There is no reference to salvation in that statement... It can't be individual either... Because Esau never did serve... If God was saying that Esau the man would serve... Two nations, two peoples... The prophecy is not about individual salvation at all... It is talking about which nation God chose... To specially associate himself with... Even when he quotes Malachi... Individuals could be in Israel or not... That is a category... Individual sons of Israel... And Eli is a Terrarian so they are out... Disqualified

from the category... Likewise the sons of David... Were chosen to be the kings of Judah... And individuals choose to be in or out of that category... In the New Testament the category is Christ... Jesus of Nazareth is the head... There are members of his body... These make up the true church... Those who are in Christ... Are elected in him according to Ephesians... See God doesn't admit that some people used to be in Christ... But are not anymore... They were joined in Christ... They were branches in the vine... But they seem to be branches... But they are not in him anymore... Well, in Christ we are... Outside Christ we are not elected... We decide which... It says that the election in chapter 8... Of Romans is individual... To contend that he is half right... The election in chapter 9, 10, 11... But I would argue that there is no cross... Those... I was asked once by a man... But I believe by evidence... The basic statement... In 1 John chapter 5... This is the testimony that God has given us... Eternal life... And this life is where? In his son... So if you are in the vine... In his son... You have eternal life... What kind of life? Eternal life... He that has not his son, God has not life... Now Douglass admitted... He admits... By definition they have eternal life... And then they cease to be in Christ... By definition they don't have eternal life... So they have eternal life... I agree with this... I participate in that life... If I abide in Christ... I cease to participate in that life... If I don't abide in Christ... Now is my abiding in Christ conditional? Absolutely... Absolutely... The bible always states the conditions... Or it doesn't always state them... John says... Therefore let that abide in you... This is what I am supposed to do... Let it abide in me... Which I heard from the beginning... If what you heard from the beginning abides in you... Which I am supposed to let it do... Then you also will abide... Ok, how do I know if I am going to abide in Christ? Well, if I let that which I heard from the beginning... Abide in this world... What if I don't let this abiding in me? Obviously the commandment is just... It is very clear even by the use of... It is to all the tree that is alive... All the branches in the off-tree that participate... Behold the goodness and the severity of God... On those who fell, severity... But on you, goodness... If you continue in his goodness... Otherwise you also will become unholy... So Paul makes it very clear... And you continue to be good to us... If we continue in his goodness... If we don't, we will become unholy... Abide in me... But the apostasy text... To realize that God doesn't put a... Tells us to beware... Lest there be an enemy of evil... They depart less heavily... So Paul said, I could become reprobate... Even though I preach to others... Even though I persevere this long... He said, I buffet my body, I keep it under... I discipline myself... And I keep it... It is possible to fall away... The question I guess is... Whether those who fall away... Were ever regenerated or not... Douglas and I disagree on this point... Because I believe they might have been regenerated... He believes they were not regenerated... But the strange thing about this theology... The life of Christ is flowing through them... That they have found again... These are passages... Whoever believes right now... Will not come into condemnation... Hear my voice... And they will never perish... Douglas says this proves... No, that's not what it means... The same sentence structure is also found... And he that believes not... Shall not see life... Future... Shall not see life... That's the same as saying... The person who does believe... Shall not see death... But what we have here is the assumption... If

in the nature of the pastor. It's rather foolish for him to do so.

In reality, he could have been able to do so. In taking this as an individual thing, because I would like to think that you and other scholars are suggesting this about election as individuals, that is a product, very largely, although Calvin did this before, that we know very well our attitude of individualism, that all the problems in the book are mine, and when I said this about them, in the passage, Paul makes it very clear, that being called and justified, these are all formally called the love of Christ, or the love of God, for that matter. But he says, in the very last sentence, that the love of God is in Christ.

So, Christ is in the corporate entity that these things are true of. The question of whether we abide in Christ or not is still an individual matter, but the passages are talking about the category. In Christ, those who are justified progress through the different stages of glorification.

If they don't remain in Christ, they get off at one of those stages of Christ, and they don't get there. And so, if there's really nothing, except for our recent positions, which come from our tendency toward individuals, I'm sure, to see individuals in different ways, likewise, those who we pour into us, those are people. Yes, they are people.

It's a plurality of people. The category is made up of people. And we can talk about any category of people as them.

We can mean either them as a category, or them as so many individuals in the category at this moment. But the distinction will be probably based on our theology, more than on the lexical meaning of these things, I would imagine. When he talks about those who are called according to purpose, Calvinists always assume that Paul is saying that people are called unilaterally, unconditionally, because God purposed for them to be called unilaterally and unconditionally.

Paul never says anything about unilateral or unconditional calling. That happens whether the person wants to come or not. Many are called, but not all come, and therefore not all will want to be elected.

So, few, actually, are really called, as Jesus said. So, I personally believe that we have here a category of people that are the ones that we foreknew. The ones we foreknew is not a reference to the individual names, but to the category of them.

Them we foreknew, them we call the church. Them who are in Christ, the corporate press. Those who are in Him, these things apply to.

And I believe that that makes the teaching of relationship consistent throughout the Bible, whether it's decided based on hunches or instincts, whether it's individual in this case or corporate in this case. I believe from beginning to end, election is corporate. Now, on the matter of the olive tree, it's interesting.

You're saying that Christ was in Christ at one time, in the olive tree. I don't believe Paul would say that Christ was ever in Christ. I believe that Christ is no doubt the root of the tree.

But it's also possible that in Paul's analogy, he's talking about Israel, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob could be the root of this whole thing. And those who are in the tree are holy. I'm not sure whether he intends Christ to be the root or the patriarch.

I'm willing to go either way on this. But it seems to me that when he talks about Jews that were part of the tree and then were cut off, he's talking about Jews that never had to go to Christ, but they were on the tree because the tree represents those who were elect. Not necessarily by salvation, but those that were in covenantal relationship with God.

All Jews were, by virtue of their natural birth. They were born in covenant. That includes Caiaphas and Judas and many others.

That doesn't mean they were in Christ. I believe that with the coming of Christ, those that were faithful to God at that time, they were God and he gave them to Christ. And so the tree is now defined, not by whether we belong to the national history, but now defined by whether we have faith in Christ.

And so those Jews that were in national history who don't have faith in Christ no longer belong to the elect. They're not part of that tree anymore. But those who do believe are, whether Jew or Gentile.

And those who disbelieve or stop believing will not be. So it's a different understanding of the tree, I'm sure. Now, I want to talk about those who drank from the rock and those who ate the bread.

Paul talks about that in 1 Corinthians 10 as an analogy to Christian life. He is not, I believe, telling us that the Jews literally drank from Jesus or that they literally ate Jesus. I don't think he's saying the man was literally Jesus or the rock was literally Jesus.

I believe that in the analogy of their deliverance from Egypt, they came through the water. That's an analogy of that water baptism. They were baptized into Moses in the sea and in the cloud.

And they ate bread from heaven, which is an analogy of us eating Christ. And they drank water from the rock, which is an analogy of us drinking the living water from Christ. I think he's making an analogy from them.

He's saying, listen, all these people were delivered from Egypt, which is an analogy of actually being saved. I don't know. Coming out of Egypt, being delivered to, you know, giving a new life, coming out of bondage to someone.

That's the church he's talking about. Truly, he's talking about a group of unregenerate Israelites. But their experiences are presented to us as a type and an imagery of those of us who are truly Christians, who have been delivered from the bondage of sin, who have been baptized into not only the water, but also the cloud, into the Spirit, and who have indeed partaken of Christ, which they do not literally do, but their experiences are a type.

Now, I realize Paul said that rock was Christ. But then Jesus said, this bread is my body, too. And because Roman Catholics express that further than we do, we have to point out, well, to say this bread is my body doesn't necessarily mean it becomes body of Christ, literally.

What we mean is, well, if I look at a road map and show you a line on the road saying this is interstate 5, I'm not saying that that line on that key table really is interstate 5. I'm saying in the context of representations of that, this line is this highway. In the representations of the imagery of the ritual, this bread is my body. This cup is my blood.

In the context of the representation of Israel as a type of Christ, or a type of the church, the rock is Christ. The water they drink is like the living water. So, I personally just take that whole thing differently than you do.

That he is speaking of those who really are saved. He's not just talking about, he's not saying all of Israel really was saved or really participated in Christ. It's providing a warning to all of us.

So, I do consider it to be a good passage about a son, but I don't believe it's necessarily true.