

If I Were a Calvinist or an Atheist

MAY 25, 2022 BY ROGER E. OLSON • 109 COMMENTS

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But this blog post is not about gun reform; I’m a theologian so I will focus, at least now, here, on theology in the face of such evil as this.

I began this blog as a place to respond to the growing influence of hard-core, aggressive Calvinism in America (now elsewhere as well). The so-called “Young, Restless, Reformed Movement” (YRRM) was sweeping through college and university campuses under the influence of people like John Piper and Wayne Grudem. I was at the starting place when that movement began. I was teaching Christian theology as a non-Calvinist at Bethel College and Seminary in Minnesota. Piper and Grudem had been there not long before me, also teaching biblical studies and theology, but left before I came on faculty.

Many of my students were quoting Piper and Grudem in class as if what they wrote and taught was God's Word. Of course, neither of them ever said that about what they taught and wrote, but many young (mostly male) Christians latched onto their teachings about God's sovereignty as if it is the only orthodox, biblical interpretation.

Over the years I have said here many times that IF I were a Calvinist I would have to look at a horror such as unfolded yesterday in Uvalde, Texas and praise God for it. Let me be clear: I do NOT praise God for it! But IF I were a Calvinist I would have to if I wanted to be logically consistent. I realize that very few, if any Calvinists do that, but my argument is they are being inconsistent when they don't.

Let us be clear here. This kind of Calvinism which goes back to John Calvin himself, if not further back, teaches that everything that happens, without exception, is planned, ordained and rendered certain by God FOR HIS GLORY. Thus, whatever happens, however horrific to us, causes God to smile. Remember the Calvinist hymn "God Moves in a Mysterious Way" — "behind a frowning providence God hides a smiling face."

According to Piper, events such as the killing of children is truly evil but only because God has forbidden it. But also, God plans, ordains and renders it certain. According to Piper, evil events such as this sadden God—because they are necessary. But they are necessary for the greater glory of God (as is hell)!

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Quick side note: Piper uses the phrase that God "plans, ordains, and governs" all things including what we call evil. A close look at what he means by "governs" reveals, at least to me, that he includes there what earlier Calvinist theologian Charles Hodge and more recent Calvinist theologian Millard Erickson refer to as "renders certain."

If you doubt me, read my book Against Calvinism (Zondervan). There I quote extensively from Piper and other Calvinists about this matter.

In case you think I don't know or understand Piper and his theology, you are wrong. I spent two hours in intense one-on-one conversation with Piper about all of this and about his attempt to get my colleague Greg Boyd fired from Bethel because of his open theism. He told me he would also get me fired for defending Greg, for not opposing him and for saying I am "open to open theism." I have also read several of his main books about God's sovereignty and I have watched and listened to lectures and interviews he has delivered and given on Youtube. I have studied Piper's theology extensively.

IF I were a Calvinist I could not sacrifice my intellect by calling mass shootings of innocent people, especially children, evil. I would have to look above the “secondary causes” and look at God’s ultimate responsibility for them and praise God for rendering certain another event that I would have to believe is ultimately part of God’s plan to glorify himself.

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Fortunately, for me, I am not and never have been a Calvinist and so I can look at such horrific events and call them what they are: pure evil. Who is really behind them? Not God but Satan. They are not part of God’s plan and they do not glorify God. To think otherwise is abhorrent to me. I simply cannot understand people who think they are really good on some higher level of God’s secret purpose for planning, ordaining and rendering them certain.

I have here before responded to Calvinists’ accusations that my view, that God permits but does not plan or ordain or render certain such horrible crimes, is no better than theirs. That is simply a dodge on Calvinists’ part. There could be many reasons why God reluctantly permits evil to occur and God’s character is not besmirched by saying “God sadly permits some things to happen that he does not want to happen in any sense.”

If you are a Calvinist and plan to respond here, I will ask you to respond to one question only: Why do you NOT praise God when you hear about a mass shooting including of children—assuming you do not. If you do, then all I can say is you may be consistent but you probably worship a different God than I worship.

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Now, what about my “If I were an atheist?” Very simply put, if I were an atheist I would not believe that anything is truly evil. By “evil” I would simply mean, assuming I used the word at all, that I and perhaps most other people find, feel, the event abhorrent, but I would not know why—except social conditioning. I would drop “evil” from my vocabulary. I would express sorrow, sadness, at horrible events like mass shootings, but I would not call them evil because evil implies something more than individual or social abhorrence. If I were an atheist I would not believe in any objective standard of right and

wrong; I would not believe in any absolutes. Therefore I would not be able consistently to use the word evil except as an expression of a feeling, even if a feeling shared by many other people.

If you are an atheist and choose to respond here, stick to answering one question. What do you mean by “evil” when referring to any event?

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John Piper, God's Sovereignty, and Sin

AUGUST 28, 2012 BY ROGER E. OLSON ■ 129 COMMENTS



A friend forwarded this to me: <http://www.christianpost.com/news/john-piper-on-mans-sin-and-gods-sovereignty-80617/> (Sorry, patheos's format has changed again and I can't find the key to make this a live link. Do it yourself.)

John Piper has been at it again. But there's nothing new in the sermon reported on there. He has been saying this and writing it for decades. According to him, God foreordains sin. He "ordains and governs" it. He stops short of saying God causes it. But the effect is the same: sin is God's will, even if it grieves him. And he's talking about every specific sin, not just "sin in general."

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Most Calvinists blush at such statements. And there's the line for me between "acceptable" and "unacceptable" Calvinism. I cannot accept, even with chagrin, Calvinism that says God foreordains and renders certain specific sins. That inexorably, ineluctably, inescapably makes God the author of sin and evil. That sullies God's character OR makes sin not really sin. You have to choose. There's no way around it.

Arminius was absolutely right when he addressed this Calvinist idea (which he associated especially with supralapsarianism but which is not held only by supras). He said that in that view, then, sin is not sin, or God sins and is really the only sinner.

Again, as I have said so many times before, whatever Scripture passages used to support this view mean, they cannot mean that. (Wesley said that about the Calvinist interpretation of Romans 9.) Why? Because if that's what Scripture means, then the God of the Bible is not good in any meaningful sense. Then, if that's what the Bible means (which it cannot mean), then the God of Jesus Christ is the ultimate sinner or sin is not really sin. The logic is inescapable.

I will not say Piper is not a Christian; I will only say that his view is worse, far, far worse, than open theism. At least open theism preserves the character of God. And I will say I could not in good Christian conscience attend a church pastored by Piper or any of his disciples ("Piper cubs," we called them at Bethel).

I wish that more moderate Calvinists would take a stand against Piper when he says these things (and against his surrogates when they repeat them). That they don't really worry me. What are they thinking?

Most Calvinists I know (and I have known many over the years as friends and colleagues) will leave more in the realm of mystery.

I remember well when the leader of a Calvinist Baptist organization spoke to my class some years ago. He seemed to agree with Piper about God's sovereignty and sin and he promoted TULIP Calvinism if not supralapsarianism. My dear, late friend and colleague Chip Conyers, a Calvinist himself, cornered the speaker and berated him (I've never seen Chip that angry) about his presentation of Calvinism. His main point was that it robbed God's sovereignty of the element of mystery Calvin preserved. I stood off to the side watching and listening. The speaker had obviously expected ME to attack him (which I never do with my guest speakers); he was totally taken aback when Chip did it—not in my defense but because HE (Chip, the Calvinist) was offended and was defending God's transcendence and the mysteriousness of God's sovereignty.

In my opinion, Piper is just over the top with these statements. But thousands are following him into a total obliteration of the good character of God. I can only shake my head in amazement and sadness and wonder what they are thinking. Is an all-powerful, all-determining God who isn't good worshipful? I don't see how.