

# CALVIN VS WESLEY

BRINGING BELIEF IN LINE WITH PRACTICE

D O N T H O R S E N

Abingdon Press  
Nashville  
2013

C h a p t e r 1



# GOD: MORE LOVE THAN SOVEREIGNTY

*Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. (1 John 4:7-8)*

When I was in seminary, a roommate of mine signed up for CPE—Clinical Pastoral Education. His particular supervised ministry was to serve as a chaplain in a state university hospital. On the first day, his supervisor sent the student chaplains out onto their hospital floors without much instruction. Upon return, the student chaplains lamented that they were unsure about how to minister to patients. Should they pray for the patients? If they prayed, then how should they pray? For physical healing? For spiritual healing? For encouragement to persevere? For quality care from their physicians? Or, should they not pray but minister to patients more with the gifts of presence, conversation, or advocacy on behalf of their particular needs?

The supervisor responded to the student chaplains by asking the question, What is your view of God? If you believe that all things happen according to the will of God, then you will pray that God's will be done. If you believe in a God who heals, then you will pray for healing. If you believe in a God who helps people help themselves, then you will pray for spiritual, physical, and emotional strength for the patients. If you do not believe in a God who answers prayers, then you will concentrate more on being present with patients, conversing with them, and advocating for them.

This story profoundly influenced me as a seminarian because it made me realize how important my view of God is. How do you view God? As

Christians, how we view God affects all aspects of our lives. For example, it affects how much or how little we think that God is actively involved in our salvation. Just as important, it affects how much or how little we think that God is actively involved in our day-to-day lives. Is God very much or a little involved? How is God involved? What priorities does God have, and what ends is God trying to achieve? Is God's will primarily for our individual benefit, or for the benefit of the church? Or, are there grander plans involved, which may or may not directly affect us as individuals? Do God's plans include society, all countries, and the environment?

These questions and others like them profoundly affect our lives as well as our understanding of Christianity. They influence what we think about God, just as our basic beliefs about God influence us daily—who we are as well as what we think, say, and do. We ought not to minimize our views of God, even if we are not always knowingly aware of them. Beliefs about God, whether we are consciously or unconsciously aware of them, powerfully affect us. They influence who we are and how we relate with others in the world and with ourselves and not just how we relate with God. Thus, in comparing Wesley and Calvin, it is important to begin with how they each viewed God.

## Calvin's View of God

Calvin believed in the absolute sovereignty of God. From his perspective, Christians ought to do all they can to acknowledge God's almighty power, to celebrate the glory of God, and to give praise and thanks for how God directs all that occurs. In the opening passage of the *Institutes*, Calvin says:

*Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But, while joined by many bonds, which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern. In the first place, no one can look upon himself without immediately turning his thoughts to the contemplation of God, in whom he "lives and moves" [Acts 17:28]. For, quite clearly, the mighty gifts with which we are endowed are hardly from ourselves; indeed, our very being is nothing but subsistence in the one God.<sup>1</sup>*

Calvin did all he could to honor God's majesty, and it influenced every dimension of his beliefs, values, and practices.

This sovereign view of God makes complete sense to Christians. How often have you heard people say that they "give all the glory to God?" They do not want to take credit for any good thing that happens; instead, they give praise and thanks to God for who God is and for all that God has done for them: creating them, providentially caring for them, and redeeming them.

Why would people ever want to take anything away from the sovereignty, majesty, glory, and power of God?

From Calvin's perspective, these affirmations about God are firmly taught in the Bible, or as he usually referred to it, Scripture. Verse after verse can be found that talks about the supremacy of God: God's power; God's knowledge; God's presence. Calvin especially spoke of God's power, which he referred to as "God's omnipotence." Calvin said:

For he is deemed omnipotent, not because he can indeed act, yet sometimes ceases and sits in idleness, or continues by a general impulse that order of nature which he previously appointed; but because, governing heaven and earth by his providence, he so regulates all things that nothing takes place without his deliberation. For when, in The Psalms, it is said that "he does whatever he wills" [Ps. 115:3; cf. Ps. 113: 3, Vg.], a certain and deliberate will is meant.<sup>2</sup>

Calvin's doctrine of providence reflects his high regard for the sovereignty of God. Providence has to do with God's ongoing care for creation. So great is God's care for the world and for people God created that nothing takes place without divine oversight. Calvin said: "At the outset, then, let my readers grasp that providence means not that by which God idly observes from heaven what takes place on earth, but that by which, as keeper of the keys, he governs all events."<sup>3</sup> He continued: "To sum up, since God's will is said to be the cause of all things, I have made his providence the determinative principle for all human plans and works, not only in order to display its force in the elect, who are ruled by the Holy Spirit, but also to compel the reprobate to obedience."<sup>4</sup> Thus, Calvin thought that the sovereignty of God is a blessing, a comfort, and encouragement to people, especially to Christians, because they are not alone. They are not without an omnipotent God who oversees and purposefully works in their lives. Indeed, God's sovereignty and providence represent Calvin's "determinative principle."

In talking about the providence of God, Calvin raised the issue of the reprobate—that is, one who will suffer eternal damnation. If God controls all that occurs, then why is it that some are reprobate? Clearly Calvin believes that the future of all, including the reprobate, occurs by the will or decrees of God, which occurred before the world was created. He said, "God once established by his eternal and unchangeable plan those whom he long before determined once for all to receive into salvation, and those whom, on the other hand, he would devote to destruction."<sup>5</sup> Calvin continued, "Therefore, those whom God passes over, he condemns; and this he does for no other reason than that he wills to exclude them from the inheritance which he predestines for his own children."<sup>6</sup> He was aware of the logical implications

of these affirmations, and actually admitted, "The decree is dreadful indeed, I confess."<sup>7</sup> However, he considered the affirmation of God's sovereignty and the omnipotent purposes of God to transcend those of finite human minds and that people ought to approach all the works of God with humble submission, intellectually as well as volitionally.

Rather than being a liability to faith, Calvin considered the omnipotent providence of God to be an enormous benefit, an encouragement to those who believe, because ultimately God is in control of all that occurs. Because of human finitude and sin, it is a relief to know that God saves people, rather than people having to rely upon any human potentiality for securing salvation. Praise and thanks be to God, who redeems us when we do not have the wherewithal to redeem ourselves!

Calvin saw no contradiction between saying that God determines all that happens and saying that sinners—that means everyone—are accountable for sin. It is finally they who succumb to temptation, and not God; people commit the sinful acts. No doubt mystery surrounds this affirmation, but the clear teachings of the Bible deny that God is the cause of sin. Certainly, Christian faith demands that people affirm the teachings of the Bible, rather than try in their human, finite, sin-tainted ways to resolve questions of ultimate responsibility for sin. Rather than God, it is Satan and demons who are the immediate instigators of sin and evil, so they as well as people are without excuse. All the same, people are still culpable for sin, since they are the ones who transgress against God. With regard to how this culpability occurs, Calvin advised that "it is better not to say anything, or at least to touch upon it lightly":

But although these things are briefly and not very clearly stated, they are more than enough to clear God's majesty of all slander. And what concern is it to us to know anything more about devils or to know it for another purpose? Some persons grumble that Scripture does not in numerous passages set forth systematically and clearly that fall of the devils, its cause, manner, time, and character. But because this has nothing to do with us, it was better not to say anything, or at least to touch upon it lightly, because it did not befit the Holy Spirit to feed our curiosity with empty histories to no effect. And we see that the Lord's purpose was to teach nothing in his sacred oracles except what we should learn to our edification. Therefore, lest we ourselves linger over superfluous matters, let us be content with this brief summary of the nature of devils: they were when first created angels of God, but by degeneration they ruined themselves, and became the instruments of ruin for others.<sup>8</sup>

God is not thought to be directly involved with causing sin, either among demons or people, and thus Calvin thought it wrong to believe that God is

in any way imaginable responsible for sin and evil. Such knowledge is not for "our edification"; if it was otherwise, then we must be content to know that God would have informed us.

From the outset of the *Institutes*, Calvin warns readers that God has not fully revealed all matters to humanity. Some truths are too great for people to understand because God and the ways of God are ineffable—that is, beyond human comprehension. He said: "Indeed, his essence is incomprehensible; hence, his divineness far escapes all human perception. But upon his individual works he has engraved unmistakable marks of his glory, so clear and so prominent that even unlettered and stupid folk cannot plead the excuse of ignorance."<sup>9</sup> The ways of God are hidden, and people ought not to be curious about questions asked that are not explicitly answered in the Bible. But sufficient knowledge of what people need to know is available, and most clearly available in the Bible. It is best to trust in what the Bible says, believing it reveals all that we need to know about God, and be content with the blessings it conveys. Calvin warned people against being too theologically curious. He said:

First, then, let them remember that when they inquire into predestination they are penetrating the sacred precincts of divine wisdom. If anyone with carefree assurance breaks into this place, he will not succeed in satisfying his curiosity and he will enter a labyrinth from which he can find no exit. For it is not right for man unrestrainedly to search out things that the Lord has willed to be hid in himself, and to unfold from eternity itself the sublimest wisdom, which he would have us revere but not understand that through this also he should fill us with wonder. He has set forth by his Word the secrets of his will that he has decided to reveal to us. These he decided to reveal in so far as he foresaw that they would concern us and benefit us.<sup>10</sup>

More will be said about Calvin's doctrine of predestination later, but Calvin made it clear that people should restrain their curiosity. Suffice it to say that God is in control and we should free ourselves of every care since "the secrets of his will" transcend our human understanding. If people insist on questioning the goodness or works of God, then they will become lost as if in a labyrinth or maze from which there is "no exit." One ought to accept what Calvin believed were the clear teachings of the Bible about God's sovereign power to affect all the blessings promised and disregard questions and concerns about the logistics of such beliefs.

From Calvin's perspective, people should rest in their understanding of God's sovereignty, power, and majesty. Life is difficult to understand, much less live. Yet God has revealed to us in the Bible that God is in absolute control. We do not need to worry about that over which, ultimately speaking,

we have no control. There is one who is in control, and we may rest in peace, knowing that God will care for us since we are unable to care for ourselves. Again, praise and thanks be to God who compensates for the apparent neediness people endure spiritually, intellectually, emotionally, relationally, and socially!

It was obvious to Calvin that people's knowledge is finite, and their utter sinfulness seemed equally obvious to him. By themselves, people possess neither the cognitive nor spiritual power to answer the questions and concerns they have, much less questions and concerns about eternal life. If anyone has sufficient power to meet all of people's questions and concerns, then it is God. In contemplating the overwhelming greatness (and direness) of people's life situation, what alternative do people have other than to submit humbly and obediently to God, the only one who conceivably has sufficient power to help finite, sinful people?

Because of the teachings of the Bible, Calvin deduced that mere human deliberation could not penetrate God's sovereignty. People ought to submit to the authority of the Bible and its clear, propositional statements about the sovereignty, majesty, and glory of God. What the Bible does not clearly state propositionally ought not to be questioned—that is, at least not at length. God has not seen fit to answer all questions and concerns that people have; yet, knowing that God, ultimately speaking, controls all there is may encourage them. We need not be concerned about trying to fathom all mysteries that exist. Instead we should trust that God, like a loving parent, knows that knowledge of all things is not good for us; and again, like a loving parent, God cares for those needs for which we cannot care for ourselves.

Christians in particular ought to affirm what the Bible says about God's sovereignty, majesty, and glory, and be overjoyed that God has elected them to salvation. Their faith is a gift, which they have not earned, since faith that people have comes from God and not from themselves. Christians would not have faith if they were not among the elect—those whom God has to receive eternal life. Thus they should give praise and thanks to God for the immeasurable blessing of eternal life, wrought through the atonement of Jesus Christ.

## Wesley's View of God

Like Calvin, Wesley believed in the sovereignty of God. In "Thoughts upon God's Sovereignty," he said: "As a Creator, he has acted, in all things, according to his own sovereign will. . . . Here, therefore, he may, in the most absolute sense, do what he will with his own. Accordingly, he created the heavens and the earth, and all things that are therein, in every conceivable

respect, 'according to his own good pleasure.'"<sup>11</sup> Wesley also believed in the omnipotent power of God. He said:

And he is omnipotent, as well as omnipresent; there can be no more bounds to his power, than to his presence. He "hath a mighty arm; strong is his hand, and high is his right hand." He doeth whatsoever pleaseth him, in the heavens, the earth, the sea, and in all deep places. With men we know many things are impossible, but not with God: With him "all things are possible." Whosoever he willeth, to do is present with him.<sup>12</sup>

So Wesley aligned with both the Bible and historic Christianity in affirming the sovereign, almighty power of God. From Wesley's perspective, there was no question about God's ability to accomplish all that God intends to do in creation and among people.

But Wesley did not think about the sovereignty of God, except in relationship to the holiness of God. He considered holiness to be fundamental for a biblical understanding of God, and holiness involves more than power. The holiness of God distinguishes God above everyone and everything else in the world. It includes truth and justice as well as love and mercy. So people ought not to think of God primarily in terms of power because it can cause them to lose sight of God's concern to be in relationship with the people who God created. Being in relationship includes relational attributes of love, grace, patience, goodness, and forgiveness of those from whom God expects accountability. With regard to God's holiness, Wesley said:

Holiness is another of the attributes of the almighty, all-wise God. He is infinitely distant from every touch of evil. He "is light; and in him is no darkness at all." He is a God of unblemished justice and truth; but above all is his mercy. This we may easily learn from that beautiful passage in the thirty-third and fourth chapters of Exodus: "And Moses said, I beseech thee, show me thy glory. And the Lord descended in the cloud, and proclaimed the name of the Lord,—The Lord, The Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, and forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin."<sup>13</sup>

God's holiness, of course, is not merely a matter of God's essence or being; it is an attribute for which Christians should be concerned. Nor is God's sovereignty more important than other attributes of God, including God's love and relations with people. To be sure, the attributes of God should be understood to include the love of God and the ways in which people may grow in loving relationship with God and others.

God created people to be in relationship with God as well as others. God's sovereignty does not preclude a genuine ability (or power) on the part of people

to decide whether and how to relate to God. Of course, that power is no longer natural to them because of the effects of sin. But God provides grace that enables people a sufficient amount of volitional power to respond to God's gracious overtures for salvation as well as for growth in relationship. After all, the Bible describes salvation as reconciliation—the reconciling of relationship between two (or more) persons. Salvation involves more than a change in juridical relationship; it involves a quality of mutuality, which God enables by grace. By permitting people a measure of volition, God does not become less sovereign. Indeed, Wesley thought that sovereignty implies a greater achievement, namely provision for people to choose freely to respond to God in love as well as faith and hope. To be sure, volitional power on the part of people occurs by God's grace, permitting people to choose genuinely and not determinatively.

Affirmation of the sovereignty of God does not preclude God from voluntarily restricting divine power, so to speak, so that people may exercise genuine freedom of choice, which is crucial for their relationship with God. Of course, Wesley did not think about people's free will as an innate human ability, without the aid of God's gracious providence. On the contrary, Wesley agreed with Calvin's rejection of Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism, which placed the initiation of salvation upon people, rather than upon God. Indeed, Christian debate over the relationship between divine predestination and human freedom long predated both Calvin and Wesley. But the debate heated up with Luther and Calvin's reintroduction of Augustine's condemnation of all forms of Pelagianism as salvation by works righteousness, which the Bible clearly rejects, especially in the writings of the Apostle Paul. Unfortunately, Calvin—like Augustine—tended to put the debate in either-or terms: either salvation is earned by human merit (Pelagianism) or unmerited by divine grace (Augustinianism). However, the debate is far more complex, and more than two views arose in church history. Just as Augustine argued against Semi-Pelagianism, which does not argue as exactly for works righteousness as Pelagianism, there arose what could—at least—be called a Semi-Augustinian view. The Semi-Augustinian view supplanted Augustinianism in church history and continues to be the dominant view among Christians today, despite the arguments of Luther and Calvin to the contrary.

Semi-Augustinianism may be used to describe Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican views of divine predestination and human freedom that developed in contradistinction to what was considered Augustine's authoritarian view of God's predestinarianism. Such Semi-Augustinian views may be found in historic Christian leaders such as Caesarius of Arles, Thomas Aquinas, and Desiderius Erasmus, as well as many others who lived prior to Calvin. Semi-Augustinianism affirms that God graciously initiates, sustains, and completes the salvation

of people, and thus people must choose to accept or reject their salvation and reconciliation with God. God voluntarily limits divine power over people so that their decisions are not effectually determined. At minimum, people must believe or resist God's overtures for salvation. Because God eternally knows the decisions of people, God responds to them accordingly, working through the Holy Spirit to redeem everyone. To people, such divine knowledge seems like foreknowledge, but that is because of their finite understanding of time. Thus, God graciously enables people so that they have sufficient power to choose freely to accept or reject God's gift of salvation through Jesus Christ.

Divine self-limitation is not thought to represent an actual limitation in the sovereignty, power, and majesty of God. If God voluntarily chooses to permit people some genuine measure of freedom, that permission does not represent a diminution of God. In the same way, God permits the whole of creation to function with some genuine measure of freedom. For that reason, it is possible to study scientifically the laws of nature, so to speak. As such, the laws of nature function with a degree of independence from God's direct causation, just as people function with a degree of independence from God's direct causation. To be sure, God continues to care providentially for creation and for people. But the various laws of nature and activities of people may be investigated inductively, deductively, and in other ways. Indeed, great amounts of knowledge and wisdom may be accumulated in order to aid people as well as the world through scientific, technological, medical, and other disciplines. Such investigations ought not to be seen as a limitation upon God, but rather as an outflowing of the sovereignty, power, and majesty of God, who makes such investigations possible.

Wesley considered himself a faithful follower of the Anglo-Catholic tradition of Christian theology that emphasized both divine sovereignty and human freedom. If he disagreed with Calvin, it had as much to do with his fidelity to the church tradition in which he had been raised, educated, and ordained, rather than as a polemic against Calvin. To be sure, Wesley had disagreements with followers of Calvin in his day, but he did so convinced that the Anglo-Catholic tradition of Christianity better represented the teachings of the Bible than the Augustinian-Calvinist tradition of Protestantism. God does indeed predestine people, according to Wesley, but it is conditioned on God's eternal knowledge (or foreknowledge) rather than on God's divine decrees (see Romans 8:29). Accordingly, with regard to Calvinist challenges that his theology reduced the sovereignty of God, Wesley said:

Natural free-will, in the present state of mankind, I do not understand: I only assert, that there is a measure of free-will supernaturally restored to

every man, together with that supernatural light which “enlightens every man that cometh into the world.” But indeed, whether this be natural or no, as to your objection it matters not. For that equally lies against both, against any free-will of any kind; your assertion being thus, “If man has any free-will, God cannot have the whole glory of his salvation;” or, “It is not so much for the glory of God, to save man as a free agent, put into a capacity of concurring with his grace on the one hand, and of resisting it on the other; as to save him in the way of a necessary agent, by a power which he cannot possibly resist.”<sup>14</sup>

From Wesley’s perspective, it was absurd to think that God’s sovereignty was in any way diminished by allowing people a measure of freedom and responsibility. On the contrary, he considered it far less convincing to believe in a God who ultimately precluded any human freedom, other than the freedom to do that which God had foreordained for people to think, say, and do.

In talking about the sovereignty of God, Wesley distinguished between God’s work as creator of the world and as governor of the world. As creator, God acted in all things according to God’s sovereign will; as judge, God governs people who were created in the image of God, who have a measure of freedom like God has freedom, since they were created in the image of God. Of course, God’s freedom is infinite, while people’s freedom is finite, and there are many factors—spiritual, physical, emotional, and cultural—that diminish human free will. But it is genuine freedom nonetheless, and God governs the world filled with people who are expected to act responsibly. Wesley said, “Of his own good pleasure, he made such a creature as man, an embodied spirit, and, in consequence of his spiritual nature, endued with understanding, will, and liberty.”<sup>15</sup> God created people to exercise understanding, will, and liberty—that is, freedom—but God does not irresistibly determine such exercises. Instead, God graciously creates and sustains people with the potential to choose, including the potential to sin, but never leaves them without the option for redemption.

## Love of God

The more Wesley interacted with the followers of Calvin, the less patience he had with their beliefs, which he considered mistaken with regard both to how they viewed God and how they viewed the Christian life. For Wesley, it largely had to do with his understanding of God as loving. He was profoundly influenced by how God’s love must predominate how we view God and God’s relationship with us. For example, 1 John 4:7-12 says:

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know

God, for God is love. God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

Here the Bible says that “God is love,” and Wesley thought that the crucial message of the Bible has more to do with uplifting the love of God than the power of God—not that the power of God’s sovereignty is unimportant, but that power without love misses out on the full self-revelation of God to people in the Bible. In fact, in commentary on 1 John 4:8 above, Wesley described love as God’s “darling, his reigning attribute, the attribute that sheds an amiable glory on all his other perfections.”<sup>16</sup>

Of course, Calvin spoke about the love of God. For example, he said, “Indeed, no one gives himself freely and willingly to God’s service unless, having tasted his fatherly love, he is drawn to love and worship him in return.”<sup>17</sup> Calvin continued by saying that the work of the atonement derives from God’s love. He said:

For this reason, Paul says that the love with which God embraced us “before the creation of the world” was established and grounded in Christ [Eph. 1:4-5]. These things are plain and in agreement with Scripture, and beautifully harmonize those passages in which it is said that God declared his love toward us in giving his only-begotten Son to die [John 3:16]; and, conversely, that God was our enemy before he was again made favorable to us by Christ’s death [Rom. 5:10].<sup>18</sup>

So love definitely factors into Calvin’s theology, but it is not the primary focus. A brief perusal of book headings in the *Institutes* reveals a stronger emphasis on God as creator, on knowledge of God, on law and gospel, on the benefits and effects of grace, and on the church. Themes found in Calvin’s chapters include the Bible, the power of God, the secret working of the Spirit, faith, eternal election, and so on. But love does not explicitly appear in the content headings of the *Institutes*. Even in the substance of Calvin’s writings, love is not a prominent theme—at least not as prominent as Wesley wanted.

One of the reasons Wesley emphasized the dynamic nature of God’s love so much had to do with his relational view of the Trinity—of three persons in loving relationship within God. For the most part, he did not query much about the mysteries of the triune nature of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Still, Wesley envisioned the “new creation” to come as “a constant communion with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ, through the Spirit; a continual enjoyment of the Three-One God, and of all the creatures in

him.”<sup>19</sup> Although Wesley did not focus at length on the doctrine of the Trinity, he was appalled that Calvin promoted the execution of the Spaniard Servetus in part because of an unorthodox view of the Trinity. Wesley said: “I think them very good words [i.e., Trinity and Person]. But I should think it very hard to be burned alive for not using them; especially with a slow fire, made of moist, green wood!”<sup>20</sup>

According to Wesley, divine sovereignty and love are not contradictory; they are complementary. Of course, a similar argument could be made in description of Calvin, since he talked about God’s love as well as God’s sovereignty. Yet, Calvin emphasized sovereignty far more than he emphasized love. Wesley, however, said that it is because of God’s sovereign, holy love that God created people in God’s own image, providentially cares for them even when they do not return love to God, and provides for their redemption so that they willingly—and not by divine compulsion—love. Of God’s love, Wesley said:

If God *SO* loved us;—observe, the stress of the argument lies on this very point: *SO loved us*, as to deliver up his only Son to die a cursed death for our salvation. Beloved, what manner of love is this wherewith God hath loved us; so as to give his *only Son*, in glory equal with the Father, in Majesty co-eternal? What manner of love is this wherewith the only-begotten Son of God hath loved us so as to *empty himself*, as far as possible, of his eternal Godhead; as to divest himself of that glory which he had with the Father before the world began; as to take upon him the form of a servant.<sup>21</sup>

Reference to Jesus as having emptied himself of his divine prerogatives exemplifies the voluntary as well as loving nature of God’s relationship with people. Just as God voluntarily limited divine control over people in order that they might exercise freedom to choose and freedom to love, the Son of God, Jesus, voluntarily acted to redeem people from their abuses of freedom—that is, from their sin.

In contrast to Calvin and his followers, Wesley said that God’s loving-kindness must be maintained as primary in understanding all the other attributes of God. He said:

So ill do election and reprobation agree with the truth and sincerity of God! But do they not agree least of all with the scriptural account of his love and goodness? that attribute which God peculiarly claims, wherein he glories above all the rest. It is not written, “God is justice,” or “God is truth:” (Although he is just and true in all his ways:) But it is written, “God is love,” love in the abstract, without bounds; and “there is no end of his goodness.” His love extends even to those who neither love nor fear him. He is good, even to the evil and the unthankful; yea, without any exception or limita-

tion, to all the children of men. For “the Lord is loving” (or good) “to every man, and his mercy is over all his works.”<sup>22</sup>

Wesley was particularly concerned about how the followers of Calvin placed the sovereignty and power of God over the holiness and love of God. He asked:

But how is God good or loving to a reprobate, or one that is not elected? (You may choose either term: For if none but the unconditionally elect are saved, it comes precisely to the same thing.) You cannot say, he is an object of the love or goodness of God, with regard to his eternal state, whom he created, says Mr. Calvin plainly and fairly, *in vitae contumeliam et mortis exitium*, “to live a reproach, and die everlastingly.”<sup>23</sup>

In Wesley’s opinion, Calvin’s doctrine of God, especially as it pertains to God’s role in people’s election and reprobation, “is a doctrine of blasphemy”; it makes God “more cruel, more false, and unjust than the devil.”<sup>24</sup>

Perhaps Charles Wesley, John’s brother, provides the *pièce de résistance* with regard to the Wesleys’ disagreement with the theology of Calvin and his followers. Charles was a poet and hymnist for the Methodist movement, and he wrote *Hymns on God’s Everlasting Love*. In this collection he wrote hymnody contrasting Calvin’s “horrible decree” with the Wesleys’ “decree of love.” Consider the following hymn that Charles wrote on “free grace”:

We need no reprobates to prove  
That grace, free-grace is truly free,  
Who cannot see that God is love,  
Open your eyes, and look on me,

On us, whom Jesus hath call’d forth,  
T’ assert that all his grace may have,  
To vindicate his passion’s worth  
Enough ten thousand worlds to save.

He made it possible for all  
His gift of righteousness t’embrace,  
We all may answer to his call,

May all be freely sav’d by grace.  
He promis’d all mankind to draw;  
We feel him draw us from above;  
And preach with him the gracious law,  
And publish the DECREE OF LOVE.<sup>25</sup>



## Importance of Our Views of God

How we view God is inextricably bound up with how we, in turn, think about ourselves and the world in which we live—what we say and what we do. It affects our relationship with God as well as our understanding of God. Our view of God influences whether we are hopeful about the future or whether we are resigned to forces beyond our control. It influences how responsive or diffident we are to circumstances. Do we think of ourselves as active participants in the world, spiritually as well as physically? Although we must ultimately trust in God for how life unfolds, to what degree do we believe that God wants us to be active participants?

A Calvinist, of course, would disagree with Wesley's assessment of divine predestination and human freedom. Based upon God's sovereign control, Christians may be hopeful and responsive, not Stoic, which Calvin critiqued as a godless philosophy. Calvin would argue that any theologies that allow for human freedom, however they are conceived, run the risk of Pelagianism—that is, the usurpation of God's sovereignty for the imagined exercise of people's role in their eternal as well as earthly well-being. As we will see, Calvin allows for a type of human freedom compatible with divine sovereignty, but his view of freedom ultimately cannot resist God's grace. Thus, any theology that takes on responsibilities that God never intended for people to have, Calvin would argue, errs on the side of transgressing the first of the Ten Commandments, which dishonors God's glory and majesty.

Just as Calvin would have thought that Wesley was wrong, Wesley considered Calvin to be wrong. From Wesley's perspective, God needs to be viewed with more love than power; more relationally than regally; more self-giving (and self-limiting) than authoritarian. To be sure, there are verses in the Bible that seem to affirm Calvin's view of God, and such verses ought not to be dismissed. Neither should other verses, which Wesley pointed out, be dismissed that establish love as decisive in best conceptualizing the person and works of God. Although biblical passages affirm the sovereign power of God, those passages do not suggest an authoritarianism that precludes freely chosen relationships and love on the part of people, especially in their relations with God.

Philip Schaff may best sum up Wesley's critique of Calvin with regard to his understanding of God. Schaff was from the German Reformed tradition, and became an internationally known church historian at the turn of the twentieth century. Of Calvin and those who followed him, Schaff said:

The Calvinistic system is popularly (though not quite correctly) identified with the Augustinian system, and shares its merit . . . but also its fundamen-

tal defect of confining the saving grace of God and the atoning work of Christ to a small circle of the elect, and ignoring the general love of God to all mankind (John 3:16). It is a theology of Divine sovereignty rather than Divine love.<sup>26</sup>

## Final Thoughts

Both Wesley and Calvin believed in the sovereignty, power, and majesty of God. Calvin thought that such beliefs resulted in divine control of all that happens, and that people ought to praise and give thanks to God for all that happens. Wesley thought that such beliefs resulted in divine control, which God limited for the sake of people who might exercise freedom—by the grace of God—to accept God's salvation and to love God in return. Wesley thought that Calvin was mistaken to believe that God's sovereignty so overwhelms the freedom of people as to make it negligible or nonexistent.

Most Christians believe that God is sovereign and that they have a significant amount of freedom, both with regard to repenting and believing in God for their salvation, and for day-to-day decisions they make. Their sense of freedom to make significant decisions for this life and for their eternal life is not illusory. Although their decision making is made possible by God's grace, they too give praise and thanks to God's Spirit for aiding them in all that happens. Because of this grace-enabled liberty, Christians may also love as they are loved by God. In the words of John, "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

## Discussion Questions

1. In what ways would you say that Wesley and Calvin most agree and disagree about how they view God?
2. What is important about the sovereignty of God—of God's almighty power?
3. Given the sovereignty of God, to what degree do you think that people are free to decide about their salvation or about other aspects of their lives?
4. What is important about the love of God—of God's goodness and grace toward people?
5. What are other important attributes of God?
6. Why is it important for Christians to think about their view of God and about how it affects their lives?

3. With which theology do you agree the most: Arminianism or Calvinism? Why?
4. How has misunderstanding of the five points been damaging to Arminianism? Has it also been damaging to Calvinism?
5. Is the acrostic ACURA helpful in comparing Wesley and Calvin? What are its benefits, and what are its liabilities?
6. Does the discussion of the five points help you to bring your beliefs more in line with your practice?

## NOTES



### Preface

1. E. Glenn Hinson, "A Contemplative Response," in *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification*, ed. Donald L. Alexander (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1988), 129.

### Introduction: Christians Live More Like Wesley Than Calvin

1. John Wesley, *Works* 21, *Journal* 14th May 1765, Letter to John Newton. (Note: A period that does not appear in the original letter has been added after the word *Mr.*) Although Wesley agreed with much of what Calvin believed, Wesley also disagreed with much of it.

2. Be aware that more Catholic traditions exist than only the Roman Catholic Church. But in most cases I use the word *Catholic* to refer to the beliefs, values, and practices of the Roman Catholic Church.

3. John Wesley, "Thoughts on Salvation by Faith," §5, *Works* (Jackson), XI:493–94.

4. Wesley, "Preface," §6, *Sermons, Works*, 1.103–4.

5. William J. Abraham, *The Coming Great Revival: Recovering the Full Evangelical Tradition* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 67.

6. Wesley, "Preface," §2, in *Sermons, Works* (1.103–4).

7. Some scholars describe Wesley's references to a right heart (*orthokardia*) as right affections or tempers (*orthoaffectus*) or right passions (*orthopathia*).

8. I first suggested this acrostic in a book I wrote with Steve Wilkens entitled *Everything You Know about Evangelicals Is Wrong (Well, Almost Everything): An Insider's Look at Myths and Realities* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 212, n. 12.

### Chapter 1. God: More Love Than Sovereignty

1. Calvin, *Institutes*, I.i.1 (1.35).

2. *Ibid.*, I.xvi.3 (1.200).

3. *Ibid.*, I.xvi.4 (1.201–2).

4. *Ibid.*, I.xviii.2 (1.232).

5. *Ibid.*, III.xxi.7 (2.931).

6. Ibid., III.xxviii.1 (2.947).
7. Ibid., III.xxviii.7 (2.955). The Latin phrase *decretum horribile*, which Calvin used, is sometimes translated as “horrible decree” or “awe-inspiring.” Calvin used it to describe the doctrine of reprobation, but others have used the phrase to describe his entire theology of divine predestination, election, and reprobation.
8. Ibid., I.xiv.16 (1.175).
9. Ibid., I.v.1 (1.52).
10. Ibid., III.xxi.1 (2.922–23).
11. Wesley, “Thoughts upon God’s Sovereignty,” *Works* (Jackson), 10.361.
12. Wesley, “The Unity of the Divine Being,” §5, *Works* (Jackson), VII.265.
13. Ibid., §7, 7.266.
14. Wesley, “Predestination Calmly Considered,” §45, *Works* (Jackson), (10.229–30).
15. Wesley, “Thoughts upon God’s Sovereignty,” *Works* (Jackson), 10.362.
16. Wesley, *NT Notes*, 1 John 4:8.
17. Calvin, *Institutes*, I.v.3 (1.55).
18. Ibid., II.xvi.4 (1.506).
19. Wesley, “New Creation,” §18, *Works*, 2:510.
20. Wesley, “Some Remarks on ‘A Defence of the Preface to the Edinburgh Edition of Aspasio Vindicated,’” §6, *Works* (Jackson), 10:351. Words in brackets are mine.
21. Wesley, “God’s Love to Fallen Man,” §5 sermon 59, *Works* (Jackson), (6.235).
22. Wesley, “Predestination Calmly Considered,” §42 *Works* (Jackson), 10.227.
23. Ibid.
24. Wesley, “Free Grace,” §§23, 25 *Works* (Jackson), 7.381, 383.
25. Charles Wesley, “Free Grace” (hymn XVI), in *Hymns on God’s Everlasting Love* (Bristol: Felix Farley and Sons, 1741); reprinted in *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley*, vol. 3, ed. G. Osborn (London: Wesleyan-Methodist Conference Office, 1869), 96.
26. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 8 vols. (1910 reprint; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 8.261.2

## Chapter 2. Bible: More Primary Than Sole Authority

1. Calvin, *Institutes*, I.vi.1 (1.70).
2. Ibid., I.vii.5 (1.80).

3. Ibid., I.viii.4 (1.78).
4. Ibid., I.viii.5 (1.85–86) and I.ix.1 (1.93).
5. Raymond A. Blacketer, “Commentaries and Prefaces,” in *The Calvin Handbook*, ed. Herman J. Selderhuis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 184.
6. Calvin, *Institutes*, I.ix.1 (1.94).
7. Martin Luther, quoted by Erwin Iserloh, Joseph Glazik, and Hubert Jedin, *Reformation and Counter Reformation*, trans. Anselm Biggs and Peter W. Becker, in *History of the Church*, vol. V, ed. Hubert Jedin and John Dolan (English translation 1980; reprint, New York: Crossroad, 1986), 79.
8. Ibid., n. 17.
9. Calvin, *Institutes*, I.vi.2 (1.72).
10. Ibid., IV.viii.8 (2.1155).
11. Wesley, “Preface,” §5, *Sermons, Works*, 1.105.
12. Wesley, “The Character of a Methodist,” §1, in *Works* (Jackson), 8:340.
13. Wesley, “To Thomas Whitehead,” 10 February 1748, *Letters* (Telford), 2.117.
14. Wesley, “A Clear and Concise Demonstration of the Divine Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures,” *Works* (Jackson), 11.484.
15. Wesley, “Minutes of Several Conversations,” Q.32, *Works* (Jackson), 8.315.
16. Henry R. McAdoo, *The Spirit of Anglicanism: A Survey of Anglican Theological Method in the Seventeenth Century* (New York: Scribner’s, 1965), 313.
17. Wesley, “Preface,” §6, *Works* (Jackson), 1.iv.
18. Wesley, “On Laying the Foundation of the New Chapel” (1777, sermon 112), II.3, *Works*, 3:586.
19. Wesley, “Address to the Clergy,” I.2, *Works* (Jackson), 10.483.
20. Wesley, “To Dr. Rutherford,” 28 March 1768, *Letters* (Telford), 5.364. Words in brackets are mine.
21. Wesley, “Preface,” §6, *Sermons, Works*, 1.106.
22. Wesley, “A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, Part I,” V.24, *Works*, 11.167. Words in brackets are mine.
23. Albert C. Outler, “The Wesleyan Quadrilateral in John Wesley,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 20, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 11.
24. For more information about the Wesleyan quadrilateral, see Don Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), and W. Stephen Gunter et al., *Wesley and the Quadrilateral* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997).
25. Thorsen, *Wesleyan Quadrilateral*, 248.

## Chapter 3. Humanity: More Freedom Than Predestination

1. Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xv.3 (1.186).
2. Wesley, “The New Birth,” I.1, *Works*, 2.188.