

# Is Calvinism Biblical? Douglas Wilson and Steve Gregg Debate

CALVINISM	ARMINIANISM
T Total Depravity	Total Depravity
U Unconditional Election	Prevenient Grace
L Limited Atonement	Atonement for all
I Irresistible Grace	Resistible Grace
P Perseverance of the Saints	Security in Christ

I have heard about Calvinism from time to time after I became a Christian, but I don't think I truly understood what it's all about as well as I do now thanks to the debate between Douglas Wilson and Steve Gregg that I just heard today. It was very interesting for me to hear both sides of either for or against the doctrines that John Calvin taught.

I think it all comes down to how one defines the keywords of the subject at hand. When I lived in Japan, I had an experience of a misunderstanding with a Japanese brother who defined an English word in a completely different way than I understood what that word meant. The result? Confusion and miscommunication!

This is my view. You could say I am not a Calvinist.



But I don't call myself an Arminian because I don't read or follow what Jacobus Arminius taught. I want to get my doctrines from the Word of God, the Bible, and not filtered through the mind of some theologian.

People with doctorates in theology don't impress me. I talked to one recently, a professor of theology from Indonesia. He did not wholly agree with me or the Protestant view of the Man of Sin of 2 Thessalonians chapter 2 being the popes of Rome. I would rather trust the views of the Protestants of the 16th through 18th centuries than what *most* 20th or 21st century Bible teachers teach. It was in the 19th century when the Jesuit-based false doctrine of an End-time 7-year Antichrist first infiltrated the Church.

Arminianism acknowledges God created man with free will, the majesty of choice. Calvinism teaches the opposite. Douglas Wilson elaborates greatly on that point.

In the debate, there is talk about the September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Center. The debate sounds as if it happened fairly recently after that.

## **Partial transcript of the debate**

### **Douglas Wilson's opening statement:**

Thank you. It is good to be here. I'd like to thank Matt Gray and CRF for sponsoring this and doing the legwork. Thank Steve Gregg for coming up from

Grangeville.

So, but overarching all things, I'd like to thank God who governs all things and in whom we live and move and have our being. And of course, we're talking about what exactly that means, what is involved in that when we say we live and move and have our being in him. This first debate is on the sovereignty of God.

And of course, every Christian says, well, how can Christians debate the sovereignty of God? Well, what we're debating is the definition of the word sovereignty, not the reality of sovereignty. Both I and my opponent would agree that God is sovereign over all things. But where we differ is what is entailed in that sovereignty.

In order to make clear what I'm arguing for, I want to maintain what I call the exhaustive sovereignty of God. That is, God is sovereign at the macro level, God is sovereign at the micro level. Nothing happens outside of his all-determining decree.

And this decree does not create a fatalistic machine that grinds us up like so much hamburger. This decree creates freedom for us. The more Shakespeare writes, the more sovereign he is and the freer Hamlet gets. Hamlet has freedom because Shakespeare writes. Hamlet's freedom is not displaced by Shakespeare's freedom. It is created by Shakespeare's freedom.

So I want to argue for the exhaustive sovereignty of God. And of course, in the mind of an Augustinian or a Calvinist, if you want to use the contemporary nickname, in the mind of a Calvinist, to say exhaustive sovereignty is like saying sovereign sovereignty. We're just saying, well, sovereignty involves sovereignty in the details, sovereignty in the great things and sovereignty in the lesser things.

So what I'm arguing for is exhaustive sovereignty. And I will let my opponent define his position, but his position is other than that. He does not want to say that God is sovereign in every detail.

He's sovereign overall, but he's not sovereign necessarily the way I am defining it in all, through all, throughout everything. When we first set this debate up, we had no idea that all of us here would still be reeling from the horrible events in New York and Washington, D.C. And we had no idea that we would have such a stark reminder of our own mortality and such a stark reminder of how great God is and how tiny we are in reference to his purposes and plans. But this is a wonderful exhibition of the sovereignty that we all affirm at some level.

These are not mere academic issues. These issues touch each of us every day at some level with every step we take, with every head check in the car, every plane we get on, get off of. We can see how a number of these people, the death toll is over 6,000 now in New York.

Every person who died in that tower made a series of trivial choices throughout the earlier part of that day. And all those trivial choices, no, I

think I'll go here first and then go to the sandwich shop. I think I'll do this and not that.

All of those trivial choices were eternal choices, everlasting choices. There's no such thing, I think we can see, as a small decision by a human being. There's no such thing as a trivial move.

These are not academic issues. These are not arcane theological debates best tucked away in some book of theology in the times of the Reformation. This affects everyone.

It affects how we live our lives. It affects how we trust God. It affects how we pray. It affects how we respond to hard mercies. I first started grappling with these truths on a personal level. I've engaged with them on an intellectual level or a theological level in other settings.

But I first started grappling with these issues, or it might be better to say they started grappling with me, as a result of an automobile accident. It didn't involve me or my family, but it almost involved me and my family. We were traveling on the East Coast and we decided to drive from Annapolis, Maryland into D.C. to go to the Smithsonian.

We borrowed a little crumpled car, the kind that wouldn't take much, and we were driving into D.C. on Highway 50, and it started to rain and it got really nasty, and then suddenly this big car came across the middle strip from the other side of the highway. She had come on the on-ramp and lost control. I swerved and missed her by inches, a foot maybe, but just barely missed her, and she swerved around in the car behind us, T-boned her car, and she was killed.

I started thinking about how many life-and-death choices I had been making in the ten minutes prior to that. We have a tendency to say, well, you should really, really pray if you're going to ask a girl to marry you, or you should really pray and get God's guidance if you're going to move to another state and change jobs and so forth, and it's true, we should pray, because those are big decisions. But those are big decisions from our vantage point.

But it was born in on me with startling clarity that I hadn't made a small decision that entire day. Moreover, I hadn't made a small decision in my life. Every time I tapped on the brakes, every time I flipped the turn signal, every time I did a head check, every time I did these things, it was affecting what was going to happen down the road.

If I'd been five seconds faster, we may have heard sirens. If I'd been ten seconds slower, we would have been in a traffic jam, and if I'd been one second slower, we'd have all been dead. Not only would we have all been dead, but my grandchildren wouldn't have been here, and their children wouldn't be here, and their children wouldn't be here, and all the tens of thousands of descendants that I hope God gives me over the next millennium or so, none of them would be here.

In other words, and all of it was riding on my lane change, and I didn't have

time to seek the will of God before I changed lanes, or moved here, or moved there. Well, the scripture says in Proverbs 16.33, the lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord. In Proverbs 16.1, it says the preparations of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the Lord.

The Bible tells us that every step, what's more random than the casting of lots? What's more random than throwing a dice? What's more random than just walking aimlessly down a sidewalk, or driving aimlessly down the road? Well, every bit of that is in the hand of God. I also have to confess, connected to this, that, and I'm not speaking for others, I'm not speaking here for every Arminian in the world, but I have to confess that before I came to grasp these truths, before I embraced them, I have to confess that I was deeply prejudiced against them. I also remember standing at one point in my living room and surrendering to God on the point.

The opening prayer I thought was appropriate and one that we should all affirm, and I think we do all affirm in principle, but I can assure you that there was a point in my life where I didn't affirm it. I would affirm it on paper, but I didn't want these truths to be true. I was not willing for them to be true, and I remember having to surrender to God on the point.

I did not become a Calvinist at that point. When I surrendered, I didn't become a Calvinist, but I became willing to become one, and prior to that time, I was not willing at all. And this is the demeanor that we should all have here tonight and in the debates tomorrow.

Each of us, and I would include myself here, each of us should be willing to change, abandon the position that we believe to be the truth of God when someone shows us from the word of God that it's not the case, that you've misread the scripture, thinking you understood it but you did not. All of us need to be prepared to submit to whatever the scriptures teach. So what is at stake in this debate? God is God over all things, through all things, and in all things.

He is God over how many hairs came out of my head this morning in my brush. And when Jesus says that the hairs of your head are all numbered, don't be afraid. When Jesus says in the same breath that a sparrow can't fall to the ground apart from the will of the Father, you can look out in the neighbor's yard and you can see a cat stalking a bird.

You don't have to say, you know, if that's a sparrow, that's in the Father, but if it's a robin, he better watch out for himself because Jesus is using a figure of speech that invites us to spread the truth into the corners. He is not saying the hairs of your head are numbered, but the hairs on your chin aren't, or the hairs of your head are numbered, but the hairs on your arm are. Gosh, I don't know how many there are.

When Jesus uses that expression, he is inviting us to say the hairs of your head are numbered, the hairs on your arm are numbered. God knows how many little bits of gravel are in your driveway. He knows the number of hairs on the last yellow dog in the history of the world.

He knows everything, and moreover, he knows it with these details being dependent upon antecedent events that are also within his sovereignty. So when we say, when we as Calvinists maintain that God is sovereign over all things, it's because, it's not that we believe that God is a sovereign control freak and God cannot afford to let anybody else do anything or know anything, it's that we believe that his relationship to us is like Shakespeare's relationship to the characters in his play. His relationship to us is not like one of the characters in relation to the other character, and this is where we stumble.

We stumble because we assume that God's will toward us is the same as my will toward another. If I push someone or if I offend someone or if I take someone's life or sin against them in some way, as was just recently done on this grand scale, the exercise of will on the part of the terrorists displaced other wills. In other words, creaturely wills, created wills are like billiard balls.

One displaces another. If one billiard ball comes and occupies this place, then the other one has to move. And so when we act on one another, we act on one another by displacing one another's wills.

When we act on one another the way we would describe it as coercively, when we do that, we move someone else's will out of the way. But God's will is not like that. It doesn't make sense to say, now in this scene in Hamlet, how much of this is Shakespeare and how much of this is Hamlet? That's a nonsensical question.

If two men are carrying a log, it makes sense to say, well, how much of the weight was borne by this guy and how much of the weight was borne by that guy? That's a physics problem. But when we're talking about the relationship of God to man, it doesn't make sense to say, well, Shakespeare did 70% of that and Hamlet did 30%. It doesn't make sense to go with the hyper-Calvinist and say Shakespeare wrote it all and Hamlet's a bunch of nothing.

It doesn't make sense to adopt the Pelagian view that says Hamlet, or the atheistic materialist view that Hamlet created himself. Hamlet writes his own play. That doesn't make sense either.

I believe that we ought to maintain that Shakespeare does 100% and Hamlet does 100%. The more Shakespeare does, the more Hamlet does. The more God writes my life for me, the more life I have to make choices in to serve him and respond to him and love him.

We are saying that God is God over all things, including the hairs of our head, including the pebbles in our driveway, including the grains of sand on the seashore, and so forth. Our lives are lived along a razor edge. Our lives are lived along a razor edge because God has put eternity in our hearts.

Every decision we make, scratching your head, stopping for a drink at the drinking fountain, everything that you do has to be governed by God. We walk along a razor's edge and there's eternity on this side and there's eternity on that side and we need the everlasting arms underneath and God's protective

hands around us in every detail because there's no such thing as a trivial decision. There's no such thing as a trivial act.

We're created in the image of God and so consequently everything we do is filled with moment. Everything we do is filled with importance. Now I've said a lot by way of autobiographical information and definition.

I want to say a few things about what the scripture actually says. In Isaiah 46 verses 9 and 10, it says, remember the former things of old, for I am God and there is no other. I am God and there's none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things that are not yet done, saying my counsel shall stand and I will do all my pleasure.

So of course we would both agree that God will do all that he wants to do, but I believe that it's saying more than this. Not only will God do all that he wants to do, but he declares the end from the beginning. So when God creates the world, knowing the end from the beginning and declaring that he's going to accomplish all his good purpose in it, then we know that when God creates the world, the world that comes into being is the world that God wanted to be here.

And this means that fundamentally I want to argue that every, you know, lots of folks won't appreciate this, but I believe that every Christian who affirms creation from nothing, I want to, in overflow of benevolence, declare them all honorary Calvinists. Every Christian who believes that God created from nothing believes that the world is here because God put it here and he put it here because he wants it here and he wants it here this way. We can debate what his reasons are for wanting it here, but he put it here because he wanted it here and he put it here knowing what would come if he did it.

He knows the end from the beginning. In Psalm 139, verse 16, we don't have to rest on speculation from a text like Psalm 139, verse 16, says, your eyes saw my substance being yet unformed. And in your book, they all were written. The days fashioned for me when as yet there were none of them. God wrote my biography before I was born in God's book.

They were all written. The days fashioned for me. Well, the days fashioned for me were not fashioned by me. The days fashioned for me were fashioned by God and written in his book. Isaiah 45, 7, I form the light and create darkness. I make peace and create calamity.

I the Lord do all these things. Now, this is where we start to stick a little bit because we really want God to be, as scripture describes him, kind and benevolent and so forth, and he is, but he's not benevolent the same way that we are. Because his action does not displace my responsibility the way my action on someone else would do.

So God can create evil, create evil in the sense of calamity. God can create evil, the evil day, and scripture says that he does. He creates darkness.

He creates light. He makes peace and he creates calamity. Amos 3, 6 says this, and it shows the sovereignty of God, not just the sovereignty of God

over nice things, not just the sovereignty of God over sweet things.

Many Christians love to give glory to God when, if it involves baskets of kittens or pussy willows or nice things, but we have trouble with earthquakes and we have trouble with disasters or this enormous calamity in New York City. We say, what's God doing? And we struggle with that because we don't know. We don't affirm with the scriptures that God has authority over this.

He has sovereignty over this, over the free choices of men, as I've already described, and over the wicked free choices of men. In Amos 3, 6, it says, if a trumpet is blown in a city, will not the people be afraid? If there's calamity in a city, will not the Lord have done it? And this is something we need to just submit to. If there's calamity in a city, in this case New York City, will not the Lord have done it? This does not mean that the terrorists are not wicked men.

They are wicked men, and they're not puppets. But God is in all, over all, and through all, and there's not a hair on anyone's head in that tower that perished apart from the will of the Father. And this is a wonderful source of two C's, courage and comfort.

There's a purpose in everything. God has a divine purpose in all things, and we can take courage in that, and we can take comfort from that.

#### **Steve Gregg's opening statement:**

I want to begin by saying the admiration I have for Douglas Wilson and his wife, whom I only recently met, but I've read some of their writings over the years.

I especially like their writings about family life, and I was drawn to Douglas personally by reading his books. I knew we did not agree on this issue, but notwithstanding the difference we have on the matter of Calvinism, I was thinking of the many things that Douglas and I actually have had in common. We both were born the same year.

I realize he looks ten years younger than I do. I assume that's due to clean living. We were both raised in Baptist homes, and both of us began, well, we preached our first sermons when we were teenagers.

Both of us played in Christian bands and have written music about the same time in our lives, actually. We didn't know each other, of course. Eventually, we both went into full-time ministry, though neither of us chose to go the route of formal theological training.

Both of us were studious and studied on our own, and I know he got a formal education in philosophy, wasn't it? I did not. But we did depart from our Baptist roots theologically in some ways. Both of us actually went in the direction of Reformed theology with reference to our eschatology.

He became a post-millennialist. I became an amillennialist. Both are Reformed views.

But we went in different directions for some reason on the matter of soteriology, the doctrines of salvation, the doctrines of grace. That's something I have not understood very well, why people go that direction. But then some of the people here don't know why I didn't go that direction.

On my radio talk show, I had a Calvinist pastor call frequently and say, "Steve, you're an odd bird." He says, "You left dispensationalism to become Reformed in your eschatology, but why didn't you embrace Calvinism too?" My answer is because I left dispensationalism when I found out it was a man-made system. I did not wish to choose another man-made system.

And that is what I believe Calvinism is. That's why it took the church 400 years to come up with it. The Calvinistic doctrine of sovereignty is not the doctrine, my contention, is not the doctrine of sovereignty found in the Bible, and it is not the doctrine that anyone who is a Christian found in the Bible until Augustine, around the year 400 AD, Calvinist scholars admit this without any embarrassment.

They usually say, well, the church was persecuted during those early years, they didn't really have time to think through some of these theological issues until Augustine's time. Well, 400 years is a long time for the church to think through issues, it seems to me like during times of persecution are the times when the issues like sovereignty are particularly under scrutiny. I believe that's the case in the book of Revelation, written to churches that were under persecution a book that presents the sovereignty of God about as strongly as any book in the Bible.

I do believe that times of persecution are the times when sovereignty of God is the most important issue to Christians, and it's interesting that during the years that the church was persecuted, it never occurred to them that the Calvinistic or Augustinian view of sovereignty was found in the Bible. Augustine brought it in, as most are willing to admit, from his own mixture of his own philosophical background. He had been a Manichean (a follower of Manichaeism, a dualistic religious movement founded in Persia in the 3rd century ce by Mani, who was known as the "Apostle of Light" and supreme "Illuminator."), but most would not admit that he brought Manicheism into his theology, although it's interesting that the Calvinistic doctrine of sovereignty, or the Augustinian view, is agreeable with Manicheism, and although none of the church fathers before the year 400 ever heard of Augustine, well, maybe a little before 400 they did, they did recognize in the doctrine of total determinism Manicheism, or they often had a hard time finding the difference between that doctrine and the pagan view of fate.

In fact, I have quotes from about a dozen of the church fathers who talk about what we call Calvinistic view of sovereignty. They didn't call it that, of course, and they call it indistinguishable from the pagan view of fate. They call it indistinguishable from Manicheism.

Some of the better refutations of Augustine's doctrine came before Augustine was around by Christian fathers writing against Mani, the founder of Manicheism. I suspect, though I couldn't prove it, that Augustine probably had a tinge of his old Manicheism ideas about sovereignty that came with



him. Most of us bring some baggage into our Christian lives, and I suspect that that may have been the case because he introduced, for the first time, the view of sovereignty that God is all-determining.

Now, Christians all believe, as Douglas correctly said, in the sovereignty of God. I would even say that all Christians believe in the exhaustive sovereignty of God. But the definition of the word sovereignty is where we do not agree.

I have a quote from R.C. Sproul. In his book, *Chosen by God*, he defines sovereignty this way. He said, when we speak of divine sovereignty, we are speaking about God's authority and about God's power.

Well, if that's really what Calvinists mean by sovereignty, then all Arminians would agree with them, and all Christians who ever lived would agree with them. If someone said, does God have all sovereignty, and what we mean is all authority and all power, those are the two things Sproul said actually constitute the doctrine of sovereignty. I've never met a Christian in my life who doesn't believe that God has all authority or who doesn't believe that God has all power.

Those are basic doctrines that Arminians can embrace, too. There's another element, though, and this is what not all Christians will embrace, and it is what Augustine introduced. And that is in the same statement R.C. Sproul continues, and he says that God, in some sense, foreordains whatever comes to pass is a necessary result of His sovereignty.

That God somehow foreordains everything that comes to pass is a necessary element of His sovereignty. Why should we believe this? Because Mr. Sproul says so? Because Augustine says so? It certainly doesn't agree with the dictionary definition of the word sovereignty. I encourage you to look it up.

If you look in the dictionary, you'll find the word sovereign means a king or a monarch. It means one who has the highest rank and authority. It refers to a person who makes his decisions without being answerable to any other person.

That's what the word sovereignty means. None of those things speak of absolute divine determinism, because kings are sovereigns but they don't determine everything that goes on in their realm, do they? I've never known of a king that did. Now, some might say, well, kings don't have omniscience and omnipotence like God does, and that's why God's sovereignty extends further.

I'm not so sure that that's a good answer. That suggests that the only reason that all monarchs are not tyrants is because they have human limitations. And were they given the power to be tyrants, that's what they would do.

They would determine every thought, word, and deed of all their subjects. And since God has that power, that's what he does. But you see, when we talk about divine determinism, which is what Calvinism really means by sovereignty, we're really not talking about what the word sovereignty means

at all.

Because a father is sovereign in his home, a husband over his wife, a lord over his servants, a king over his subjects, these are all sovereign positions. But none of them determine every thought, word, or deed of those who are subject to them. There is no support from the dictionary, and there can't be from the Bible, since the Bible doesn't even use the word sovereign.

But when we say the sovereignty of God, if we use the word in its ordinary meaning, we mean that God has all authority, he can act unilaterally anytime he wishes to, he answers to none, and he has enough power to retain his rights and to defend his rights. But that word sovereignty does not tell us whether he determines everything or not, because that's not part of the word sovereignty, and it's not part of the teaching of Scripture about God. There is no place in the Bible that substitutes the concept of divine determinism for the concept of God's sovereignty as a king.

In fact, since the word sovereignty doesn't appear in the Bible, we have to derive it from the Bible from the ways that the Bible describes God as a sovereign. God is called a king. God is called a lord.

God is called a husband. He is called a father. All of these are terms that convey the idea of sovereignty, but none of them convey the idea of total determinism, because that's not part of what sovereignty means.

That is the problem with Calvinism. They think, in many cases, that they are the ones who have the exhaustive view of sovereignty, where everybody who believes that God has total authority over all things believes in exhaustive sovereignty, and I believe that. What non-Calvinists do not believe is that the Bible teaches that God determines everything that happens.

Now, non-Calvinists do not put God outside his universe. To suggest that God determines how many of my hairs fall out today, or how many sparrows fall to the ground, is not a problem to the Arminian. And I use the word Arminian only as a catchword for non-Calvinists.

I don't know if I'm an Arminian, because I've never read Arminius. But I would say this, I'm not a Calvinist, and that makes me an Arminian in the eyes of all Calvinists. So, an Arminian has no difficulty at all with the view that God knows the number of hairs on our head, that God orders many things in history to bring about results that he wants.

Virtually every affirmative statement that a Calvinist can say about God's sovereignty, an Arminian would say without any hesitation, except that the Arminian does not extend the concept of sovereignty to total determinism. There's no need to do that. No scripture teaches it.

The question we're discussing is, is the Calvinist view of sovereignty biblical?

(End of partial transcript.)

What do you think? I agree with Steve Gregg's view. It sounds a lot more

solid biblically to me.

### **Audio of the debate**

**Note:** If you wish to listen to the debate but it says, "Video unavailable" below on your phone, [please click here](#).