

**God's Sovereignty in Human Salvation:
A Response to Why I Am Not A Calvinist by Jerry Walls and Joe Dongell**

by Alex Chediak

Executive Summary

Walls and Dongell believe that Calvinism portrays a tyrannical God who arbitrarily selects some for salvation and others for damnation, even though the latter are powerless to repent and believe in Christ. They maintain that the biblical passages expressing God's general love for all mankind (John 3:16) and His desire that all be saved (I Tim. 2:4) suggest the Calvinist exegesis regarding effectual grace (for some) and definite atonement (for some) is severely misguided. In response, I argue that God's electing love is a biblical concept, and does not negate God's love for the non-elect, nor His genuine desire that all be saved. God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezek. 33:11), but He deems it best that not all receive saving mercy. His higher goal is the manifestation of the full range of His glory in both mercy and just wrath, to the everlasting enjoyment of His saints.

Practical Theology

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“For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.’” – I Cor. 1:26-31

“What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory—even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?” – Rom. 9:22-24

The Central Message of *Why I Am Not A Calvinist*¹

Jerry Walls (a philosopher) and Joe Dongell (a biblical scholar) of Asbury Seminary have teamed up to write a provocative book entitled Why I Am Not a Calvinist. The following is a summary of their central message, followed by four key aspects of this message:

The character of the Calvinistic God is severely maligned by the fact that His need to glorify Himself comes at the expense of the damnation of a significant percentage of His sinful human population throughout history, whom He could save (with their compatibilist² freedom intact) with the same relative ease that He exercises in the saving of other sinners, from whom they differ in no significant way. Such a God, who arbitrarily subjects endless misery on creatures for failing to love Him when they could not possibly do otherwise, cannot be worthy of our reverence, awe, and adoration.

1. Compatibilism makes the general offer of salvation insincere, since (a) the non-elect are unable to affirmatively respond; (b) it cannot genuinely be said that Christ died for everyone; and (c) God is unwilling to save all. Given these difficulties, Calvinists are (unconsciously) inconsistent in their message, suggesting that the gospel offer can be responded to by all (when it cannot), and that God truly wants everyone to be saved (which apparently He does not). The pervasive acceptance of such inconsistencies makes Calvinism's credibility unwarranted.
2. Calvinism argues that God must display wrath in order to show forth the full spectrum of His attributes, and so God, though able to save all, has ordained some to experience wrath (Rom. 9:20-24). But this makes God (ironically) dependent upon man; He *needs* evil creatures to be the just recipients of wrath in order to glorify His Name. By implication, God cannot be said to love the non-elect in any meaningful way. The Arminian God truly does not want to display wrath on any of His creatures; He is doing everything He can to see them repent and be saved (short of coercing their will, which would render a genuine relationship impossible).

¹ Dr. Walls was gracious enough to review and approve this summary.

² Compatibilism is the view that God's sovereignty and man's free agency are not contradictory, but compatible. God's sovereign will is accomplished by the means of humans acting according to their desires. Effectual grace

3. Accountability and responsibility only extend as far as human ability. Since God is love, He is obligated (not by man's merit, but by His own internal nature) to try to do all He can to help humans flourish. If hell is a consequence of rejecting God, then He must enable man to at least have the ability to accept Him. But Calvinism's view that electing grace is withheld from the non-elect makes God cruel and arbitrary when He later condemns them.

4. Scriptural passages that assert the universal saving will of God (I Tim. 2:4, II Pet. 3:9, Ezek. 18:23) and the general love of God (John 3:16, I John 2:2, Luke 15:1-7) imply that God must be making genuine efforts to save *everyone* from everlasting wrath (rather than helping just a select few with electing grace, and leaving the rest to persist in their sins).

Response to *Why I Am Not A Calvinist*

Walls and Dongell make three unwarranted assumptions: (1) that God cannot love people whom He allows to remain in sin; (2) that God cannot have two levels of "wishing," whereby He simultaneously desires that all be saved (I Tim. 2:4), but decrees that not all receive electing love (Rom. 9:20-24); and (3) that God is obligated by His character to show saving mercy to everyone. They distort the Scriptures by reading these philosophical commitments into the biblical texts. In short, they reject Calvinism because they cannot understand why, given compatibilism and electing love, God would not save everyone. But our discomfort ought not to be mistaken for inconsistency within Calvinism. On the contrary, the doctrine of election, properly understood, is a comfort to Christians (Rom. 8:28-30), a reason to praise God (Eph. 1:5-6), and a motivation for evangelism (since God guarantees some will be saved, II Tim. 2:10). It is by God's wisdom that the elect do not differ from the non-elect, except that He chooses them (Deut. 7:7). God is glorified by our total dependence upon Him for salvation (I Cor. 1:21-31).

means that God woos sinners to Himself in such a way that they freely come. God does not reject people who come to Him (John 6:37). Nor does He drag people into heaven against their will.

The elect receive mercy, and the non-elect receive justice. None receive injustice. Biblically, it is incorrect to conclude that God is obligated by His character to show saving mercy to all (Ezek 36:22-32). As sinners we are not in a position to presume upon grace.

Electing grace is explicitly taught in the Bible (Acts 13:48; 16:14; Eph. 1:12; I Thes. 1:4-5; II Thes. 2:13; II Tim. 1:9; I Pet. 2:9; Rev. 13:7-8). Predestination is *in love* toward the elect (Eph. 1:3-12). John 6:37 speaks both of our coming to Christ, *and of our being given to Christ by the Father* (cf. John 17:2, 6, 9, 24). This is *compatibilism*, just like the account of Joseph, whom God “sent” to Egypt (Ps. 105:17) by the means of his wicked brothers, who meant evil *in the same act* in which God intended good (Gen. 50:19-20). On the one hand, humans act freely (i.e., according to their desires). On the other hand, God sovereignly accomplishes His objectives through these very same acts (cf. Acts 2:23). In salvation, God causes us to be born again (I Pet. 1:3), so that we are made alive spiritually (Eph. 2:1-4), and therefore freely choose to embrace Christ as our indescribably beautiful Savior, Lord, and Treasure (Mat. 13:44).³

Indeed, nothing *ultimately* stops God from saving everyone, except for His divine prerogative, by which not all are the recipients of His electing love. But God nevertheless loves the non-elect, for God *is* love (I John 4:8). This does not mean that love is God or that God is nothing but love, but rather that love is central to God’s being and therefore present in all His attributes and dealings with man, including His anger toward sin *and sinners* (Ps. 7:11; 11:5; 78:62). Christ’s death on the cross flowed from a salvific, loving posture toward a wicked world in full, open rebellion against Him. Out of this love, God showers undeserved blessings upon everyone—blessings which are meant to encourage repentance (Matt. 5:44-45; Acts 14:17; Rom. 2:4). And out of this love, God has chosen an innumerable array of people from every nation and

tribe to be adopted into His family (Rev. 5:9). In terms of God's intention, Christ died effectively for the elect—in the same way the Bible consistently speaks of God's saving love for the elect only (Deut. 7:7-8; 10:14-15; Mal. 1:2-3; Eph. 5:25).

It is not contradictory for the world to be under both God's condemnation and love. For example, Moab is so wicked that God says: "Make her drunk, for she has defied the Lord. Let Moab wallow in her vomit..." (Jer. 48:26), but for this same Moab God also "wails" and "cries out" and "moans like a flute" (Jer. 48:31-36).⁴ In His sovereign will, He approves of her judgment; as a loving Creator, He grieves that it must be so.

It is not contradictory to speak of God *desiring* that all men repent and be saved, while only *willing* that this occur for the elect. Consider Pharaoh, whose heart was hardened by God, such that he disobeyed God's wish (expressed via Moses) that he let Israel go to worship.⁵ Or Eli's sons, who lay with the women serving at the entrance to the tent of meeting and when warned that their wickedness would have consequences, "would not listen to the voice of their father, *for it was the will of the Lord to put them to death* (I Sam. 2:22-25)." So while God surely did not condone their sexual immorality, it was (in another sense) His will that it persist. Moreover, the same Hebrew word for "willed" (*haphetz*) used in I Sam. 2:25 is used in Ezek. 18:23,32 and 33:11 where God asserts he has no "pleasure" in the death of the wicked. So while God may not desire (in one sense) that wicked people die, He may (justly) deem that it be so.⁶ The biblical witness is that it is sensible to speak of God having a sovereign will (which always comes to pass) and a moral will (which reflects those things which accord with His character).

³ God gets the glory when by His grace we obey Him; we bear the responsibility when we sinfully rebel. The asymmetry is due to our being born in *total depravity*, unable to submit to God (Rom. 8:7-8). The Fall (freely chosen by man) was ordained that God's grace be magnified in our total dependence upon Him for salvation.

⁴ We see the same kind of mixture of love and anger directed toward Israel in Hosea 11.

⁵ God hardened Pharaoh's heart by allowing him to proceed in his own heart's wickedness without restraint. God can restrain the sin of rulers (Gen. 20:6) or not (II Sam. 24:1). Cf. Prov. 21:1; I Chron. 5:25-26; Ezra 1:1-3.

By analogy, it is reasonable to make a genuine gospel offer to everyone. Not all will respond and be saved. The offer is legitimate in that all who respond affirmatively will be received. Statements such as, “Christ died so that everyone who trusts in Him will escape the wrath of God, have their sins forgiven, and enjoy everlasting life” are biblically accurate and not disingenuous: God generally longs for everyone to be saved (I Tim. 2:4, II Pet. 3:9, Ezek. 18:23). Further, these statements express not just what God has done, but what man must do to receive the benefits: man (not God) does the repenting and believing.⁷ God ordains not only the salvation of the elect, but that their saving faith be awakened by the means of faithful gospel proclamation to all (Acts 16:14; Rom. 10:14). Since only God knows who will be saved, we are prohibited from discriminating.

Finally, Walls’ and Dongell’s view leads to justifiable boasting, since the elect differs from the non-elect only due to the prudent choice of the former, God having provided them both with an identical measure of graceful wooing to Himself.⁸ This directly contradicts God’s plan to retain all the glory in salvation (I Cor. 1:28-31; Isa. 48:11; Eph. 2:8-9).

By either view, God allows many to suffer eternal torment. For Walls and Dongell, God’s will to save all is restrained by the higher good of relationships with God only possible via human self-determination. For Calvinists, the greater value is the manifestation of the full range of God’s glory in both mercy and wrath, so that the saints’ rejoicing is intensified by the exhibition of wrath that they, too, deserved (Rom. 9:22-24). The latter is both biblically defensible and not contrary to God’s genuine love and saving posture toward every person.

⁶ On a human level, we have the same tension. A Father who spans his child can sincerely remark, “I hate to do this.” Yet in another sense, he chooses—desires—to do it.

⁷ Man is responsible to repent, even if he is morally unable; we lost that ability when we sinned in Adam (see footnote 3).

⁸ Via e-mail, Walls gave the analogy of a “man who submits to heart surgery rather than refusing it.” But note that his submission is the *decisive factor* in his salvation—the only reason why he, and not the other man, lives.

Resources Consulted

1. D.A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*, Wheaton: Crossway, 2000.
2. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994.
3. Hywel R. Jones, "Is God Love?" *Banner of Truth Magazine* 412 (Jan 1998), 10-16.
4. John MacArthur, *The Love of God*, Dallas: Word, 1996.
5. John Piper, "Are There Two Wills in God?" Pages 107-131 in *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace*. Edited by Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware.
6. Jerry Walls and Joe Dongell, *Why I Am Not A Calvinist*, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004.