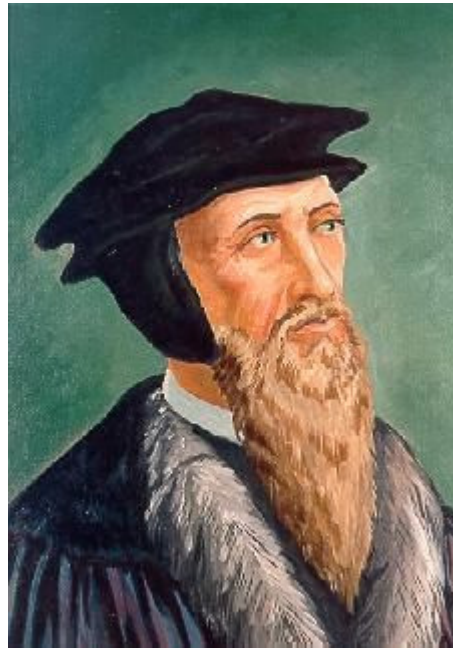


Calvinism, Arminianism and Universalism in the Theology of Tom Smail

Authorship Unknown

There's an awfully long discussion going on over at the Thinkings Weblog over the issue of God's sovereignty, although as with so many debates of this nature it eventually comes down to a confrontation between Calvinists and Arminians over the issues of God's sovereignty, human free will and predestination and election. Of course Christianity had been around for 1500 years before Calvin and then Arminius came along, so it's hardly as though those are the only two options one may take and still call oneself a Christian. Of course both claim to be 'biblical' (Lately I'm so sick of that adjective being used as a *carte blanche* for people to believe whatever they want as long as there's a Bible verse that seems to say what they're thinking) but then every theology claims to be 'biblical' so I'm a little wary of embracing a theological standpoint simply because its proponents claim that it is the 'biblical' way to believe.



Calvin thinking: "Now where did I put my razor?"

Personally I've still to be convinced that Calvinism (or Arminianism) are the biblically and theologically sound doctrines that their adherents claim, but by way of investigation I've started to do a bit of digging. I'm kind of short on books whilst I'm away from home but I've still managed to gather some thoughts on the subject and to give my beliefs some thought. Yesterday I re-read Tom Smail's book '[Once and For All: A Confession of the Cross](#)' and he discusses some of the major objections to both Calvinism and Arminianism, in particular the doctrines of limited atonement and double predestination

(in Calvinism) and the semi-pelagianism and human sovereignty of Arminianism. What follows is a summary of his position.

Did Jesus really die for everyone?

Smail affirms that Christ's death was for all humanity and not just for the elect. He cites New Testament scholars Jeremias and Cranfield in support of his argument and notes that Christ's work is spoken of as having universal significance. Jesus carries the sin of the world (John 1:29), he is sent to save the world (John 3:17) and in his death he will draw *all men* to himself (John 16:31-32). Likewise in Paul the scriptures say that God reconciled *the world* to himself in Christ (2 Cor 5:19), which is our basis for summoning the entire world to Christ. Paul also notes that just as God has given all men over to disobedience, he will have mercy on them all (Romans 11:32). The cross is not only for humanity, but also to redeem the whole of creation from sin and death, and God one day will bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, Jesus Christ (Eph 1:17-20). The church then is not the gathering of God's private elect, but:

“The present experience of God's redeeming grace in the Church gives insight into and confidence about God's ultimate purpose for the whole universe. What he has already done for us and has begun to work out in us, he has also done for the whole created universe and the day will come when he will fulfil that purpose on that cosmic scale.”

What God has done in Christ will extend beyond humanity to the whole of creation. All things were made by Christ and for Christ, and all things will be redeemed through him. This is the hope of Romans 8:19-21, that once humanity has been renewed, so all of creation will be. In the light of Christ's all-encompassing salvific work which encompasses both humanity and creation, there can be no room to cling to the belief that God had in mind only to die for a small number of elect, or to only redeem part of what he has made whilst wilfully condemning the rest.

However it is clear that not all of humanity has responded to the Gospel as it has been preached throughout the centuries. Most people have never heard it, and of those that have, many still reject it. The atoning act is done for many; it is received by few. So how are we to relate our belief that Christ died to draw all people to himself yet that he appears to have drawn only some people to himself?

Double predestination and limited atonement?

Smail then outlines the ideas of limited atonement and double predestination found in historical Calvinism, which deal with the double outcome of the Gospel by accepting that the situation as it now stands is as things will finally be, and so the biblical passages about Jesus' universal atoning work are restricted and conditioned. The Calvinist side have tended to attribute this to a decision of the divine will, while the Arminian side has attributed the situation to human will.

Hyper-Calvinism plants this double-outcome firmly at the heart of God's eternal purpose for humankind. From eternity God has chosen some people to be saved from their sins by his gracious love and the death of his Son. The flipside of this is of course that those who have not been chosen are left to face the consequences of God's justice by being damned for all eternity. Smail summarises this viewpoint thusly:

“Christ died therefore, not for all people, but only for those whom God has chosen and who therefore by the Holy Spirit would be brought to justifying and sanctifying faith when they heard the Gospel.”

This is clearly against the evidence of the universal atonement texts discussed above. Of course the normal Calvinist response to this argument is to argue that “all people” really means “all sorts of people”, rather than “everyone”, so essentially Jesus is promising to draw not all people to himself, but all *categories* of people to himself, which of course means that there are some people that he is pushing away.

Aside from the exegetical problems of making such texts appear to say the opposite of what they appear to say, such a reading of the universal atonement texts is also rejected by Calvin himself in his discussion on what Jesus means by the ‘many’ that his blood is poured out for in Mark 14:24:

“By the word many, he means not a part of the world only, but the whole human race.”

Calvinism has often (dishonestly in my view) tried to read the terms ‘many’ and ‘all’ as being opposites, and that behind them is still the doctrine of double predestination. In Greek of course ‘many’ means only part of the ‘all’, but in Hebrew and Aramaic there is no word for ‘all’, so ‘many’ is substituted instead. In any case, Calvin seems to state in his own commentary on the passage that Christ intended to communicate that his blood was to be shed for the ‘whole human race’, not a select part of it.

Biblical problems aside, there are also severe pastoral and preaching problems with holding to a doctrine of double predestination and limited atonement. How are we able to reconcile preaching messages where we call everyone to follow Jesus when at the same time we sincerely believe that the

“very decree of God himself has prevented people from responding to that call [of the Gospel]? It can easily seem that God is offering Christ with his open hand and simultaneously taking him away with his closed predestination hand, and that is not an attitude consonant with the revealed character of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

What sort of picture of God does double predestination and limited atonement present? Does it correlate with God as we see him revealed in Jesus Christ? This is questionable. Against proponents of this view such as John Owen and Jonathan Edwards, Scottish theologian John Mcleod Campbell made clear his reasons for rejecting the traditional Calvinist stance:

“While they set forth justice as a necessary attribute of the divine nature, so that God must deal with *all* men according to its requirements, they represent mercy and love as not necessary, but arbitrary, and what therefore may find their expression only in the history of *only some* men. For according to their system justice alone is expressed in the history of the non-elect, in their endurance of punishment; in the history of the elect, in Christ’s enduring it for them. Mercy and love are expressed in the history of the elect alone.”

In the system of limited atonement, God’s justice is meted out to all, either directly to the non-elect in the form of wrath and hell, or it is meted out to Christ instead of the elect. God’s justice is universal, but his mercy and love are expressed *only* to the elect. God is fundamentally “a God of justice who gives to sinners what they deserve and his love and mercy are restricted to those he has, for inscrutable reasons of his own, decided to redeem.”

There are of course pastoral problems with such an approach. How are people to trust in God’s love for them when there is no way of knowing until judgement day whether he has in fact chosen you or not? How can we preach that God loves the world when in fact he has decreed to reject and cast away huge parts of it? Does this correspond with the accepting love and open invite that Jesus offers to sinners? Hardly. Jesus says that he will draw all men to himself, and that he will not drive away anyone who comes to him. How can it be said then, that Jesus is revealing a Father who has already chosen to damn some people for all eternity whilst saving others? Even for Christians, there can be no real assurance as to whether or not God has chosen you until all is revealed in the last judgement.

There is of course election in the history of God’s dealings with humanity. God chooses Jacob over Esau and **Israel** over the other nations as the bearers of the divine purpose. However, these double outcomes are never ultimate, and God does not elect people simply for them to enjoy the privilege of salvation instead of others. To be chosen as God’s people is a calling to the *responsibility* of mediating and proclaiming God’s salvation *to the whole world*.

What about Arminianism?

Calvinism is not the only answer to the double response to the preaching of the Gospel. Contrary to Calvinism, the ultimate deciding factor in who is saved and who isn’t is not rooted in an eternal divine decree, but in human free will. Modern evangelistic techniques encourage people to make ‘decisions for Christ’, which will lead to their salvation. The ultimate deciding factor in whether or not one is saved is whether or not we have rejected or accepted Christ.

In this system, God respects our free will and doesn’t interfere with our free choices. Such a few is of course flattering to our ego, but it is also a fearful situation to be in because ultimately our eternal destinies are in our own hands and not in the hands of

God. Heaven and hell are simply the ultimate endorsements of human choice, and God's function as judge is simply to be the executor of our free wills, and so ultimately he will be dispensable.

Does the New Testament really paint such a picture though? Smail muses:

“Do we not flatter ourselves more than a little when we see ourselves as independent free agents competent to stand in our freedom over against the Gospel and reach our own independent decisions about it? Is our human condition not more realistically described by Paul when he says that, left to ourselves, we are ‘slaves to sin’ with sinful minds that are hostile to God (Romans 8:5) so that our alienation from God prevents us from knowing him and from being able to respond positively to him? Our freedom to be in right relationship with God is the very thing we have lost and that needs to be restored to us before we are in any position to decide anything.”

We do not choose God, he chooses us, and our ability to respond to Christ does not have its source in ourselves, but is itself his gift to us. Faith is something we are given by grace, not something we summon up for ourselves (Eph 2:8-9). Both the grace and faith that enable us to respond to God appropriately originate entirely with him.

There is also little room for the Holy Spirit in the Arminian model where individuals decide to accept or reject God of their own accord. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of responsiveness who first comes from the Father to the Son to enable his responsiveness and who is then given by the Son to enable our responsiveness to him and his atoning and renewing work. Such responses generate the faith and repentance which are essential to our incorporation into Christ, and a strength of the Arminian position is that it emphasises the need for personal human responsibility before God. The responsiveness of course does not have its origin in us, but in God and his grace.

To confess Jesus as Lord cannot be done without the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:3), and we can only relate to God as Father by the Holy Spirit (Gal 4:6). We can only pray because the Holy Spirit is given to us (Rom 8:26), our conformity to Christ happens by the Spirit (2 Cor 3:18), and it is the Spirit which enables us to respond to God, though it is always God who chooses us first, and only then can we choose him (John 15:16).

Neither the double predestination and limited atonement of Calvinism or the human free-will decision of Arminianism seem to adequately resolve the tensions between an atonement for all of humanity (and indeed all of creation), the election of God, and the need for human responsiveness to God enabled graciously by the Holy Spirit. Smail similarly finds both schools of thought problematic and proposes another way forward.

A universal hope?

Both Calvinism and Arminianism are the result of the double outcome of the preaching of the Gospel, and as the Gospels and Church history show, both the Son of God and the Spirit can be rejected. The Holy Spirit, sent by God to draw men to Christ, can be

rejected (Ephesians 4:30), and Christ himself was despised and rejected by humankind. “The Gospel is answered with the No of alienation rather than with the Yes of liberation,” and the world which crucified Jesus still rejects the overtones of his Holy Spirit today.

The world’s rejection of Christ led to Calvary, but just as death and evil did not finally triumph over Christ, so evil and rejection cannot be the final outcome of the Spirit’s encounter with the human heart. The New Testament looks ahead beyond the rejection of the Messiah (and his people) to a day when “at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Philippians 2:10-11) Likewise Saul of Tarsus, the persecutor of the church and of Christ, becomes an apostle for Jesus Christ after encountering him on the Damascus Road.

Christians too know dark nights of the soul when we are in rebellion against God and can say with Paul that:

“When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:21-24)

But ultimately of course, Christ sets us free from our body of death and the power of sin and the law (Romans 8:2), and evil and rebellion do not finally triumph. The Spirit who is grieved and rejected shows himself again and again to be the Lord and the giver of life to the very people who have turned him away. We should not be surprised that the Spirit does for us what he intends to do for all creation, because the Spirit is mediating to us the work of Christ, whose dying and rising was for all of creation. Such a universal hope has good grounding in the scriptures. God does not reject anyone, and neither does he leave us helpless and ensnared in our own choices, and in his Son and in his Spirit he has a love that is mighty enough to bring us home to himself. Smail notes that such an argument sounds like a wholehearted universalism, but having a universal hope is not the same as saying dogmatically that everyone will definitely be saved and that no one will be lost. To avoid such a theological minefield, Smail sets out three criteria by which the path to a universal Christian hope may be negotiated.

i) A Christ-centred Universalism

This is to distinguish from a pluralistic universalism that states categorically that God loves everyone and they will all definitely be saved regardless. Such a position would render the atoning work of Christ completely unnecessary.

The only way for humanity to be saved and to be brought back to the Father is through his Son Jesus Christ (John 14:5) and by being incorporated into him and being ‘in Christ’. Universal salvation is only possible because it is by the Holy Spirit that Christ draws all men to himself, but a pluralistic universalism makes the cross unnecessary, and it makes

conversion unnecessary. Indeed universal reconciliation is only possible by universal conversion (*metanoia*) to Christ, but with the foundation of a universal atonement and the gracious saving activity of the Holy Spirit this is certainly possible, especially if God is indeed going to fill everything with his fullness (Eph 1:23), has reconciled everything with himself (Col 1:20) and is willing that all should be saved (1 Timothy 2:3-4).

ii) Universal hope – not dogma

We are not permitted to state dogmatically that everyone will be saved, though there is a well-grounded hope that they will be. The outcome of man's rejection of the Holy Spirit is not a closed situation, and the situation remains open. Man greets God sometimes with a big No, yet other times with a Yes – not only prior to conversion, but also during the Christian life.

The evangelistic battle is a tough one, yet God's announced strategy is to draw all men to Christ through the Holy Spirit, who may blow anywhere he pleases. When we seem to face opposition and tribulation from the world, we should take heart in the Lord who has already overcome the world and is now reaching out to it by his Spirit.

iii) The warnings of Jesus

It would of course be unwise to dismiss the warnings of Jesus. We are to enter the narrow way that leads to life, not the broad road that leads to destruction (Matt 7:13-14), and there of course many other such warnings. Both in Jesus' day and in our own there are those who walk paths of self-destruction that are taking them straight to hell – the final state of being separated from God's love forever.

A merely optimistic universalism that overlooks the seeds of self-destruction that are present in human sinfulness is nothing more than a facile daydream. The power of sin and death is so real that it took the death and resurrection of Christ to destroy its power. Yet it is *precisely because* of the Christ's death and resurrection that we can hope that the threat of sin, death, and destruction can be overturned. Furthermore, the Spirit that flows from the cross into the world is able to make effective to everything and everyone the reconciliation of all things on earth and in heaven which Christ has won by his blood.



Karl Barth: a very clever man who you ignore at your peril.

In closing, Smail quotes Karl Barth as saying: “I do not believe in universalism or any other –ism, but I do believe in Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world and of all men.” Barth himself would not affirm a dogmatic doctrine of universal salvation, but he does affirm a strong *hope* of universal salvation:

“If we are certainly forbidden to count on this [universal restoration] as though we had a claim to it, as though it were not supremely the work of God to which many can have no possible claim, we are surely commanded the more definitely to hope and pray for it...to hope and pray cautiously and yet distinctly that, in spite of everything which may seem quite conclusively to proclaim the opposite, his compassion should not fail, and that in accordance with his mercy which is ‘new every morning’ he ‘will not cast off for ever.’ (Lamentations 33:22, 31)

God is our saviour, and he wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. “For there is one God and one mediator between God and humankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men.” (1 Tim 2:3-6) This is a prayer that pleases God, and as it has already been made concrete by the mediation of Jesus Christ, it has every chance of being answered.

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