

Countering Calvinism

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Sermon Synopsis

This episode of World Impact takes viewers to Geneva, Switzerland, the historic center of John Calvin's ministry and a city that became a hub of the Protestant Reformation. Filmed inside St. Pierre's Cathedral—where Calvin preached thousands of sermons—Dr. Billy Wilson, joined by scholar Bedros Nassanian, explores the origins of Calvinism, its central doctrines, and its enduring impact on Christianity and society. Geneva is presented not only as a birthplace of theological reform but also as a setting where biblical principles were applied to education, governance, and family life, shaping the cultural and moral fabric of Europe.

Dr. Wilson explains the well-known TULIP framework of Calvinist theology—Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, and the Perseverance of the saints. While recognizing Calvin's strong emphasis on God's sovereignty and grace, he also raises important biblical concerns. He examines how doctrines such as predestination to damnation, a restricted atonement, or the denial of free will can limit evangelistic passion and create a passive view of Christian life. Instead, Dr. Wilson emphasizes Scripture's witness that God's offer of salvation is for all, that grace can be resisted, and that human choice plays a vital role in responding to God's covenant. He draws on passages from Genesis, Psalms, John, 2 Peter, and Revelation to affirm that God's justice and love are best understood in the light of both divine sovereignty and genuine human responsibility.

The program also broadens the lens to consider Geneva's wider legacy, from Enlightenment thought and revival movements to humanitarian efforts such as the founding of the Red Cross. Through this historical and theological reflection, viewers are invited to consider both the strengths and limitations of Calvinism and to measure all teaching against the gospel's invitation to every person. Dr. Wilson closes by encouraging believers to embrace their freedom in Christ, live with evangelistic zeal, and trust in God's goodness and grace.

Sermon Highlights

- Calvinism is summarized in five central points known as TULIP: Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, and Perseverance of the saints. These teachings have strongly influenced the Reformed Christian movement globally for nearly 500 years.
- God is sovereign and in control of all things; however, foreknowledge does not mean predestination. The Bible reveals human free will through repeated conditional statements ("if"), demonstrating that God's blessings depend on man's response.
- God's grace is for all people and can be resisted. Jesus Christ died for everyone, not just a chosen elect, affirming John 3:16 and 2 Peter 3:9 where God desires all to come to repentance and receive salvation.
- Calvinism undermines evangelistic fervor by suggesting limited atonement and predestination, which diminishes the motivation to preach the gospel universally and discounts human free will in responding to God's grace.
- Obedience and free will are vital for glorifying God; humans are not robots. God's love and grace enable us to choose Him, making salvation accessible and free to all who accept Christ, reinforcing that God is good all the time.

Scripture Verses

Psalm 47:7-8

For God is the King of all the earth; sing to him a psalm of praise. God reigns over the nations; God is seated on his holy throne.

Genesis 4:7

If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door and desires to have you, but you must rule over it.

2 Chronicles 7:14

If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.

Revelation 3:20

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.

Ephesians 2:8-9

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.

Titus 2:11

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all people.

John 3:16

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

2 Peter 3:9

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

Revelation 22:17

The Spirit and the bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life.

Quotes

- "Calvinism negates human free will and damages God's reputation as a good God." - Dr. Billy Wilson
- "God is sovereign, but foreknowledge is not pre-determinism; Scripture is filled with 'If' — showing our response matters." - Dr. Billy Wilson
- "Grace lifts us out of death in sin, it redeems and changes us, but grace can be resisted and it is given to all." - Dr. Billy Wilson
- "Jesus died for everyone, not just for a select few, and anyone who receives Him has eternal life." - Dr. Billy Wilson
- "We are not robots; God gave us free will to glorify Him by choosing Him over sin and Satan." - Dr. Billy Wilson

Bible Study

Objectives

- Understand the historical context of John Calvin and the Reformation in Geneva.
- Explore the core doctrines of Calvinism summarized as 'TULIP'.
- Critically examine and counter the theological claims of Calvinism using Scripture.
- Affirm the sovereignty and goodness of God alongside human free will.
- Encourage believers to embrace evangelistic zeal centered on Christ's universal atonement.
- Develop a balanced understanding of grace — powerful yet resistible.
- Reflect on the importance of human choice in glorifying God.

Reading and Reflections

- Psalm 47:7-8 — Recognize God's sovereign reign over all nations.
- Genesis 4:7 — God's call to Cain showing contingent blessing upon obedience.
- 2 Chronicles 7:14 — 'If my people... will humble themselves...' emphasizes human response.
- Revelation 3:20 — Jesus stands and knocks, offering fellowship to whoever opens the door.
- Ephesians 2:8-9 — Salvation is by grace through faith, a gift from God, not works.
- Titus 2:11 — God's saving grace appears to all people without partiality.
- John 3:16 — God's love for the whole world and open invitation to believe.
- 2 Peter 3:9 — God's patience desiring all to come to repentance.
- Revelation 22:17 — The Spirit and the bride invite all who thirst to freely take the water of life.

Key Observations

- Geneva, under Calvin, became a pivotal center for the Reformation influencing global Christianity.
- 'TULIP' briefly outlines Calvinism's major theological points: total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, perseverance of the saints.
- Calvinism strongly emphasizes God's sovereignty but questions arise about human free will.
- Calvin's teaching that grace is irresistible and that Christ atoned only for the elect can diminish evangelism.
- Scripture consistently presents God's offer of salvation as conditional on the human response.
- The goodness of God is incompatible with predestination of some to eternal damnation without recourse.
- Grace is available to all and can be resisted or accepted by human free will.

- Evangelistic fervor and the integrity of Christ's atoning work depend on universal availability of salvation.
- God desires all people to be saved, which counteracts the exclusivism embedded in unconditional election.

Personal Reflections

- Reflect on how understanding God's sovereign yet loving control brings comfort rather than despair.
- Consider how believing in free will empowers living a life of spiritual passion and responsibility.
- Recall people known or self-experienced struggles from accepting deterministic theology versus embracing grace.
- Ponder the balance between God's initiative in salvation and our willing response.
- Re-evaluate the motivation to evangelize when salvation is truly open to all.
- Appreciate God's consistent invitation for relationship, not mere predestination.
- Recognize the tragedy in seeing life or suffering as 'predestined' to despair, rather than trusting God's good plan.
- Encourage a mindset that glorifies God by making choices for Him, not viewing ourselves as robots.

Lessons for Daily Life

- God's sovereignty provides the foundation for trust even amid suffering and uncertainty.
- Our choices matter deeply — we are responsible before God for faith and obedience.
- Salvation is a free gift available to anyone who chooses to believe and repent.
- Evangelism is a joyful duty because Jesus died for all mankind, not a select few.
- Grace is powerful but can be rejected—let us hold fast to it and not take it for granted.
- Avoid fatalism; instead, embrace a hopeful life filled with purpose and spiritual zeal.
- Encourage others toward Christ, knowing their response is truly open.
- Pray for discernment to understand Scripture, especially teachings that challenge our beliefs.

Practical Applications

- Begin each day with prayer asking God for wisdom to recognize and resist false teachings.
- Engage in personal Bible study focusing on God's invitations and conditional promises (e.g., 'If you...') to cultivate free-will faith.
- Share the gospel actively with friends and family, emphasizing God's love for all and universal availability of salvation.
- Encourage a church or small group Bible study centered on exploring Calvinism and its biblical counterpoints.

- Write down personal testimonies of moments when you experienced God's grace and choice in salvation.
- Serve others in community with a joyous heart, knowing that godly choice glorifies God.
- Reject any theology or mindset that promotes despair or spiritual passivity.
- Memorize one or more key verses from the readings to reaffirm God's goodness and the open offer of salvation.

Challenges for the Week

- Monitor your thoughts and correct any belief that God predestines evil or suffering to occur without a redemptive purpose.
- Practice sharing the gospel with at least one person, emphasizing Christ's atonement for everyone.
- Confess any tendency toward spiritual complacency caused by misinterpretations of grace and election.
- Study the use of conditional 'if' statements in the Bible and how they relate to human responsibility.
- Encourage someone who struggles with feelings of predestination despair, reminding them of God's loving plan.
- Reflect daily on how your free will choices glorify God and deepen your faith journey.
- Pray for pastors, theologians, and believers worldwide grappling with Calvinism to receive biblical clarity and revival.
- Journal your own beliefs about salvation and how they influence your devotion and evangelism.

Further Study

- Explore further Scriptures on free will and human responsibility: Joshua 24:15; Deuteronomy 30:19; Romans 10:9-13.
- Study the book 'Chosen But Free' by Norman Geisler and Ron Brooks for balanced views on predestination and free will.
- Examine the full 'TULIP' doctrines in historical Reformed confessions like the Westminster Confession and compare with Scripture.
- Review biographies of John Calvin and critiques from other Reformers like Martin Luther and John Wesley.
- Investigate the history and impact of the Protestant Reformation through trustworthy Christian history sources.
- Look into revival movements that followed Calvin's Geneva, such as the 19th century Geneva Revival and the global missionary imperative.
- Meditate on God's patience and desire for repentance in 2 Peter 3 and related texts.
- Study doctrinal distinctions regarding grace: prevenient grace, saving grace, and resistible grace.

Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father, we come before You in awe of Your sovereignty and grace. Thank You for the gift of free will that You have graciously given us — the ability to respond to Your love and salvation. Help us to understand Your Word clearly, to reject doctrines that diminish the fullness of Your grace and the power of the cross. Strengthen our faith and ignite within us a passion to share the gospel boldly, knowing that Jesus died for all people. Protect us from fatalism or despair, and remind us that life with You is full of hope and eternal purpose. May our lives glorify You through choices that honor and worship You. We pray for unity among believers and courage to walk in Your truth. In Jesus' mighty name, Amen.

Daily Devotionals

Day 1

Scripture Verse

Psalm 47:7-8 (NIV): "For God is the King of all the earth; sing to him a psalm of praise. God reigns over the nations; God is seated on his holy throne."

Reflection

As we begin this series of devotionals reflecting on the message from Geneva, the birthplace of Calvinism, let us first focus on the unshakeable sovereignty of God. Psalm 47:7-8 reminds us that God is King over all the earth—He reigns over every nation and sits on His holy throne with authority. This truth is foundational, especially given the controversial teachings of Calvinism about predestination and God's control. Dr. Billy Wilson highlighted that while Calvin rightly taught about God's providence and sovereignty, his doctrine wrestled with the tension of how God's control and man's free will interact. There is a danger in turning man into a mere robot, devoid of choice, by overemphasizing predestination. Think of George, a man who once felt trapped by the idea that his life's outcome was sealed, no matter what he did. Once he embraced Psalm 47's truth—that God reigns but also invites us to glorify Him through our choices—George found freedom and purpose. The sovereignty of God never negates our volition but invites our responsible participation. The very fact that God reigns disposes us to trust that His plans for us are good. We serve a God who governs nations but also cares for each individual life intricately. As we move forward this week, hold fast this truth: God's control is not cold determinism, but a loving reign that calls us to glorify Him by living faithfully and freely. Let this be a time of contemplating how God's kingdom reigns in your life amid circumstances that may seem uncontrollable. Are you resting confidently in His sovereignty or wrestling alone with fears of fate? God reigns! This is your sure foundation.

Prayer

King of all the earth, help me to surrender my fear of helplessness into trust in Your holy reign. Guide me to glorify You freely and joyfully in every choice I make today. Amen.

Day 2

Scripture Verse

Revelation 3:20 (NIV): "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me."

Reflection

Yesterday, we embraced God's sovereignty. Today, we delve into a powerful invitation found in Revelation 3:20. Jesus stands at the door of the heart and knocks—not forcing entrance, but waiting patiently for us to open and invite Him in. This verse beautifully counters the rigid Calvinist belief that grace is irresistible and predetermined for some but not for others. God's grace is real and powerful, yes—but it respects our free will. Grace knocks, but it never coerces. Imagine a young woman named Sarah who wrestled with guilt and shame over choices she believed sealed her fate. Her Calvinist upbringing ingrained the idea: "If you are elect, you will be saved; if not, no action on your part can change that." Sarah felt abandoned until she encountered Jesus' voice at her heart's door. When Sarah opened that door, she experienced the joy of fellowship with Christ, who dines with her heart. This fellowship is not robotic submission but a vibrant relationship born out of a free choice to say "yes." Our faith is deeply personal. God's waiting provides space for us to decide, to respond, to glorify. It's a relationship where our consent matters, where His grace is offered to everyone, inviting us all freely. Where do you sense Jesus knocking in your life today? Will you welcome Him? Embrace the mystery that divine grace honors your choice and calls you intimately into life.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, I hear Your knocking at my heart's door. Help me to open it wide and welcome You in. May I walk each day in the joy of Your fellowship. Amen.

Day 3

Scripture Verse

John 3:16 (NIV): "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

Reflection

Today we confront one of the most tender yet challenging doctrines that Calvinism struggles with—the scope of Christ's atonement. According to John 3:16, God's love embraces the entire world. Jesus died for "whoever believes," not some predetermined group. This universality reflects the heart of our good God. Dr. Wilson reminded us that limited atonement narrows the generous scope of the cross, and this threatens the explosive urgency of evangelism. Consider Maria, a missionary whose father's family came from a strict Calvinist background. For years, her zeal for sharing the gospel fizzled, thinking "only the elect will be saved anyway." But when she embraced that "whoever believes" means every person, every nation, every tribe, her passion exploded. She saw every face as precious and receptive to grace's call. Jesus did not die to cherry-pick a few; He bore the sins of all humanity. His cross shouts the truth that heaven's gates are open to all who believe. Our evangelism is fueled by this expansive hope—God calls and invites every person to salvation. Reflect on how this impacts your heart and your witness. Are you holding to a narrow gospel or embracing the full breadth of God's love that loves all and calls all? Let your life be a trumpet sounding this joyous gospel to the ends of the earth.

Prayer

Father God, thank You for loving the world so much that You gave Your Son for all. Empower me to share this love boldly, knowing that Your grace is for every person I meet. Amen.

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