

THE FOUR-DOOR LABYRINTH

Part 2 of 4

by Steve Hays

IV. Door 2

Does man have freewill?¹

I. Yes! Pelagianism, &c.

II. No! Calvinism.

A. Open systems of action

1. Libertarianism

Where you emerge from Door #1 affects where you end up here, or vice versa. If you answer “yes” to freewill, then you must answer “no” to *sola Scriptura*; for if everyone has a chance to be saved, then common grace and general revelation must supply the sufficient conditions, in which event, man is justified by the law, not the Gospel.

You see, there is an internal relation between *sola Scriptura*, *sola fide* and *solus Christus*. For if faith alone in Christ alone is a necessary and sufficient condition of our justification before God, then that, in turn, assumes *sola Scriptura* inasmuch as the Bible supplies us with the object of faith through the saving revelation of Christ in the scriptures.

Conversely, if everyone has a chance at salvation, then that must be apart from the Gospels inasmuch as everyone has not heard the Gospel. So even before you come to the freewill/determinism debate, your prior position on *sola Scriptura* may have already co-opted your position on the freewill/determinism debate.

However, it is also worthwhile to weigh each alternative on its own merits or demerits. Let us work through some of the consequences of freewill before

¹ Some definitions are in order. Arminian theology defines and affirms freewill as an inalienable power to do otherwise, whereas Reformed theology defines and affirms freewill as a voluntary or uncoerced decision. On the latter definition, freedom and determinism are consistent (compatibilism). Reformed theology denies freewill in the Arminian sense. There are several specific respects in which Reformed theology denies freewill. It denies that (i) an agent is free to thwart the divine decree; that (ii) the unregenerate are free to believe the Gospel; that (iii) the regenerate are free to commit apostasy, or that (iv) the glorified are free to sin. The Arminian version attacks the Reformed version on ethical grounds whereas the Reformed version attacks the Arminian version on exegetical and philosophical grounds.

returning to the subject of determinism. For freewill, although it negates determinism, does not thereby nominate for or else eliminate any particular alternative to determinism. So it doesn't simplify the selection process. Quite the contrary, if you answer in the affirmative to freewill, then that, in principle, opens the door very widely indeed, for the degree to which, on that assumption, a man may contribute to his own salvation (or damnation) ranges along an infinitely divisible continuum of possible options.

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If, on the other hand, you answer in the affirmative to freewill, then that, in principle, opens the door very widely indeed, for the degree to which, on that assumption, a man may contribute to his own salvation (or damnation) ranges along an infinitely divisible continuum of possible options. To name just a few of the signs you see strolling down the ever-receding corridor, there's Deism, Sufism, Socinianism, asceticism, Arminianism, Amyraldianism, Baalism, Bogomilism, Cabalism, cannibalism, Catharism, Confucianism, Gnosticism, Taoism, Molinism, Mormonism, Manichaeism, phallicism, Pharisaeism, Neoplatonism, Zoroastrianism, Swedenborgianism, Yoga, open theism, Ophism, Orphism, condign merit (Pelagianism), congruent merit (Roman Catholicism), alchemy, necromancy, naval-gazing, Islam, idolatry, ufology, Mariolatry, Free Masonry, ancestor worship, emperor worship, ufology, process theology, Totemism, Tai Chi, witchcraft, priestcraft, child sacrifice, headhunting, intoning "OM," smoking dope (peyote, Soma), breathing exercises, devotion to the Sacred Heart of Mary, apocatastasis, theosis (Greek Orthodoxy), metempsychosis, &c.

2. Conditional Immortality

If you answer "yes," then that affects your eschatology. If even common grace and general revelation are not enough to level the playing field, then conditional immortality and postmortem evangelism take up the rear. For the notion of a second chance is predicated on freewill (although postmortem evangelism could be made accessory to universalism). But if you answer "no," then that slams the door shut on such rearguard actions.

Of course, conditional immortality is open to other objections. It restores a Sadducean eschatology,² in open defiance of Scripture (Mt 22:23; Acts 23:8).

² Cf. Josephus, BJ 2:165; Ant. 18:16.

Sure, you can draw some hairsplitting distinctions between the Sadducees and their modern counterparts, but the respective views have the same cash value.

As with most compromise positions, it is heir to the same basic criticisms leveled against the opposing extremes without being able to capitalize on the distinctive appeal of either. It isn't strictly retributive (hell) or remedial (universalism). Conditional immortality is the *Goldilocks* porridge of the afterlife—not too hot and not too cool! It really represents a transitional phase on the downward slide into secular materialism, which ends in universal annihilationism—what with its denial of the soul and survival beyond the grave.

3. *Reincarnation*

But once you cut free of *sola Scriptura*, you don't have to stop with half-measures like conditional immortality. At this point, pagan options are now in play, like transmigration. Again, if you deny freewill, then this door is bolted shut—for its autosoteric morality spins on the wheel of a fateful freewill.

Of course, reincarnation is vulnerable to various other objections. For if the purpose of reincarnation is to work off bad Karma, it does seem a little odd that the metempsychotic machinery would reincarnate a guilty soul as a Chinese soldier under orders to gun down Tibetan monks. And if guilt-free souls have been trickling into Nirvana for unnumbered centuries, how do we account for the population explosion—especially in Asian nations where the Oriental pieties and austerities are so assiduously observed? One must also wonder who is manning the vast metempsychotic machinery, especially as Hinduism and Buddhist are either atheistic or pantheistic.³

B. Closed systems of action

1. *Calvinism*

But if you answer in the negative, then this greatly simplifies the matter, for it leaves you with very few options. You can choose between the “infra” door or the “supra” door, but that's about it.⁴

For if man does not have freewill, then the salvation (or damnation) of man depends entirely on God. And that being the so, a “no” answer commits you in advance to a lengthy and logical set of doctrines, viz., divine omnipotence and omniscience, predestination, unconditional election/reprobation; general/special providence, federal theology, the bondage of the will, special redemption, penal

³ A further problem distinctive to Buddhist ontology is how to square reincarnation with its no-soul doctrine.

⁴ The supra view maintains that God foreordained the fall as a means of manifesting his mercy and justice to the elect by visiting his grace upon the elect and judgment on the reprobate. The infra view admits that God foreordained the Fall, but is wary of deriving a theodicy from this arrangement.

substitution, irresistible grace, sola fide; the assurance of salvation, and perseverance.

How it all hangs together goes something like this. If fallen man lacks freewill, then he is entirely at the mercy of God for his redemption. And only a God with sovereign attributes, such as omniscience and omnipotence, can act in a sovereign fashion.

If fallen man lacks freewill, then salvation doesn't depend on individual action, but on one party acting on behalf of and in the place of another or many others.

If fallen man lacks freewill, then whoever is saved is saved on account of God's sole and sufficient grace. God predestines, elects, creates, redeems, renews, justifies, preserves, and glorifies. By the same token, whoever is lost is not lost on account of God's efficient and final agency. God predestines, reprobates, creates, judges, hardens, and damns.

If fallen man lacks freewill, then whoever is saved is saved from eternity and saved for time and eternity—for his salvation was rendered certain by the sovereign grace of God. And thus he may be assured of the gracious state wherein he finds himself.

None of this should be taken to mean that the object of grace is passive from start to finish—God revives our heart and restores our sight. He works in us to will and to do his good will (Phil 1:6).

Reformed theology is popularly defined in terms of the five-points of Calvinist (TULIP). This is a rather negative definition inasmuch as it merely serves to distinguish Calvinism from the alternatives, but there is more to Calvinism than what makes it to differ from something else. And Calvinism can be viewed from varied perspectives:

(i) *Trinitarian*: Those the Father chose, the Son redeemed and the Spirit renews

(ii) *Redemptive-Historical*: Throughout history, God is adopting, redeeming, calling, justifying and gathering a chosen people to be his people and be their God

(iii) *Supralapsarian*: God foreordained the Fall to manifest his mercy in election and his justice in reprobation.

The first perspective accentuates the economic Trinity, the second—covenant theology, and the third—theodicy and historiography. These three perspectives are supplementary and complementary.

2. *Universalism*

In principle, the denial of freewill is also consistent with universalism; for universalism, with its uniform outcome, is also deterministic.

The decision depends in part on how you answer all four questions. For the way you answer one of the four questions turns the key one way or another on the other questions as well. If you answer “no,” to freewill, but answer “yes,” to *sola Scriptura*, and if Scripture closes the door on universalism, then that door will remain shut even if you try the knob.

The strong point of universalism is also its weak point. For the strong point lies in its three-hanky storyline. But by that same token, it makes no effort to resist the temptation of wishful thinking.⁵

Reading universalist literature is like going to the movies to see Shirley Temple in *The Little Princess*. To be a little princess is the secret wish of every curly-haired girl. And universalism spins the ultimate rags-to-riches tale. But the willing suspension of belief does not survive the exit sign, for as soon as I leave the hearts-and-flowers decor of the movie theater for the mean streets outside, the real world looks ever so much more like the work of a Calvinist than a universalist—a world in which every poor orphan girl is not rescued by a rich uncle.

In this same connection, have you ever noticed the coincidental relation between reincarnation and universalism? Subjects of past-life regression therapy always remember being an Egyptian princess rather than an Egyptian slave, and having an affair with a dashing Egyptian prince rather than a sorry Egyptian beggar.⁶

I would add that the lump-throated appeal of universalism is far from universal. It is attractive to pampered liberals, but not to poor orphan girls who would wreak vengeance on those responsible for their miserable plight. Mercy for all is most unmerciful towards the victims of injustice.

It is also hard to see how a universalist can condemn hell without invoking the principle of retributive justice. Hell would only be wrong if it were unjust to the damned. But aside from the fact that I've never shared his confidence in quantifying the guilt of a child rapist, the universalist is poorly poised to invoke the principle of retributive justice, for universalism occasions a universal miscarriage of justice.

⁵ Cf. M. McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Cornell, 2000); T. Talbott, *The Inescapable Love of God* (Upublish.com, 1999). Talbott and Adams are the two leading "Evangelical" exponents of universalism. But both pen polemical tearjerkers in which serious exegesis takes a backseat to the sob story.

⁶ More seriously, Origen's doctrine of the Apocatastasis owes as much to reincarnation as it does to universalism.

Jerry Walls has made the provocative claim that Calvinism implies universalism, on the ground that if God can save anyone, he should save everyone, and that it is only owing internal tensions within Reformed theology that it resists this inference.⁷

In particular, Walls alleges that the distinction between the general call and special call is "hypocritical," and at variance with "the ordinary sense of the term."⁸ God seems to be "toying with the lost."⁹ Likewise, reprobation is deemed to be unfair because it does not apply a "common standard of judgment" and because the reprobate are unable to avoid their fate, contrary to "normal assumptions" of fair play.¹⁰

What all this comes down to, however, is not that Calvinism suffers from internal tensions, but rather that Calvinism is in tension with Arminian ethics. So his critique systematically begs the question.

Along the same lines, Wallis plugs his Wesleyan definitions into Calvinist usage, and then expresses puzzlement at the incoherence thus generated. He claims that the distinction between a general and special call has reference to different *degrees* of divine influence,¹¹ falsely assimilating the Reformed category of the general call to the Wesleyan category of sufficient grace

When the Westminster Confession submits two grounds for reprobation, he plays these off against each other, as if they were mutually exclusive.¹² Yet this is merely the difference between necessary and sufficient conditions. Mainstream Calvinism has never subscribed to medieval voluntarism, and there is no reason why it should. God's sovereign will is not a sheer will, but a will characterized by all his other attributes. His power is a just power; and his justice is a powerful justice.

⁷ Hell: The Logic of Damnation (Notre Dame, 1992).

⁸ Ibid., 60.

⁹ Ibid., 62.

¹⁰ Ibid., 69.

¹¹ Ibid., 59.

¹² Ibid., 68.