Going to Extremes

It appears that most evangelical Christians fall somewhere between five-point Calvinism and Arminianism in their theology. But is it possible to go beyond these two theological bookends into extreme forms of belief and practice? Yes, and both extremes are fraught with doctrinal danger. In this study we will look at two extremes – hyper-Calvinism and open theism – and see why they drift into perilous theological waters.

Hyper-Calvinism

Simply stated, hyper-Calvinism is a doctrine that emphasizes divine sovereignty to the exclusion of human responsibility, according to Phillip R. Johnson, executive director of *Grace to You*, a Christian radio and tape ministry featuring the preaching of Reformed pastor and teacher John MacArthur. "To call it 'hyper-*Calvinism'* is something of a misnomer," says Johnston. "It is actually a rejection of *historic* Calvinism. Hyper-Calvinism entails a denial of what is taught in both Scripture and the major Calvinistic creeds, substituting instead an imbalanced and unbiblical notion of divine sovereignty."

The *New Dictionary of Theology* says hyper-Calvinism "so stresses the sovereignty of God by over-emphasizing the secret over the revealed will of God and eternity over time, that it minimizes the responsibility of sinners, notably with respect to the denial of the use of the word 'offer' in relation to the preaching of the gospel; thus it undermines the universal duty of sinners to believe savingly in the Lord Jesus with the assurance that Christ actually died for them; and it encourages introspection in the search to know whether or not one is elect."

Some key points:

- Hyper-Calvinists tend to stress the secret (or decretive) will of God over His revealed (or perceptive) will.
- They deny that the gospel message includes any sincere proposal of divine mercy to sinners in general.
- They emphasize the elusiveness of knowing whether one is truly elect. "Therefore," says Johnson, "hyper-Calvinism soon degenerates into a cold, lifeless dogma. Hyper-Calvinist churches and denominations tend to become either barren and inert, or militant and elitist" ("A Primer on Hyper-Calvinism," www.spurgeon.org).

Some hyper-Calvinists oppose all forms of evangelism because they believe God will save whomever He will apart from human means. Others are fatalistic in their approach to God's work of salvation, depersonalizing God and ascribing to Him a mechanistic determinism. Finally, some promote the doctrine of double-predestination, the belief that God chooses the non-elect for hell and may even hate them and delight in their damnation because it demonstrates His justice and wrath.

Grace to You's Johnson, a five-point Calvinist and a critic of hyper-Calvinism, says a hyper-Calvinist is one who either:

- Denies that the gospel call applies to all who hear; or
- Denies that faith is the duty of every sinner; or
- Denies that the gospel makes any "offer" of Christ, salvation, or mercy to the non-elect (or denies that the offer of divine mercy is free and universal); or
- Denies that there is such a thing as "common grace;" or
- Denies that God has any sort of love for the non-elect.

"All five varieties of hyper-Calvinism undermine evangelism or twist the gospel message," writes Johnson. "In practical terms, the hyper-Calvinist 'gospel' often reduces to the message that God simply and single-mindedly hates those whom He has chosen to damn, and there is nothing whatsoever they can do about it."

In short, hyper-Calvinism is a dangerous doctrine because it:

- Deviates from sound Biblical interpretation;
- Suggests a capricious God who favors some people over others for no apparent good reason – a God who hates the non-elect and glories in their damnation;
- Refutes the Great Commission and undermines evangelistic efforts; and
- Promotes fatalistic thinking and belief in an impersonal, mechanistic God.

Hyper-Calvinist groups today include English hyper-Calvinists (most happen to be Baptists), American "Gospel Standard" hypers, Primitive Baptists, and Protestant Reformed Churches.

Open Theism

Open theism, also known as "free will theism," the "openness of God view," and "neotheism," is the teaching that God has granted people free will to such an extent that He does not know their future free choices. Open theists believe that God could have known every future event had He decided to create a fully determined universe. However, God decided instead to create a world in which the future is not entirely knowable, even to God. Open theists make a case for a personal God who may be influenced through prayer, decisions and human action. While God is able to anticipate the future, he remains fluid to respond to decisions and actions made contrary to or consistent with His plan.

Some chief characteristics of neotheism are:

- A libertarian view of free will (which entails the power of contrary choice);
- A partially open (non-determined) future, namely, one where free acts are involved;
- The belief that God's nature can change;
- The belief that God is temporal;
- The implication that God is not simple (indivisible) in His essence (Norman L. Geisler, "Neotheism: Orthodox or Unorthodox? A Theological Response to Greg Boyd," www.ses.edu).

In open theism, God either knows or does not know the future. For open theists who hold that God knows the future, they maintain that God voluntarily limits His foreknowledge of free choices so that they can remain truly free. Other open theists say that the future, being non existent, is not knowable, even by God. Gregory Boyd, a well-known advocate of open theism, says, "Much of it [the future], open theists will concede, is settled ahead of time, either by God's predestining will or by existing earthly causes, but it is not exhaustively settled ahead of time. To whatever degree the future is yet open to be decided by free agents, it is unsettled (*God of the Possible*, p. 15).

In open theism God can make mistakes because He does not know the future. God also takes risks and adapts to the free choices of people. Open theists claim biblical support for their position by citing scripture where God changes His mind (Ex. 32:14), is surprised (Isa. 5:3-7), and tests people to see what they will do (Gen. 22:12). Finally, open theism tends to portray the God of orthodox theism as distant, controlling, and unyielding, while the God of openness is involved, adapting, loving, interacting, and caring for humanity.

Neotheists list five characteristics of their position:

- God not only created this world *ex nihilo* [out of nothing] but can (and at times does) intervene unilaterally in earthly affairs.
- God chose to create us with incompatibilistic (libertarian) freedom – freedom over which He cannot exercise total control.
- God so values freedom – the moral integrity of free creatures and a world in which such integrity is possible – that He does not normally override such freedom, even if He sees that it is producing undesirable results.
- God always desires our highest good, both individually and corporately, and thus is affected by what happens in our lives.
- God does not possess exhaustive knowledge of exactly how we will utilize our freedom, although He may very well at times be able to predict with great accuracy the choices we will freely make (Clark Pinnock, *Openness of God*, p. 156).

Norman Geisler responds:

> [T]he traditional Christian view of God held by the early church fathers, expressed in the great confessions and creeds of the Christian church and embraced by the Reformers … firmly upheld the traditional attributes of God. Among other things, these included that God is transcendent (beyond the universe), immanent (within the universe), Creator *ex nihilo* (out of nothing), and can cause supernatural events (miracles). In addition, these attributes include that God knows all things (has omniscience), God is before all things (has eternality), God never changes (has immutability), and God is in complete control of all things (has sovereignty). But it is precisely these attributes of traditional Christian theology (including Calvinist and Arminian) that are denied by those extreme Arminians who embrace Neothism (*Chosen But Free: A Balanced View of Divine Election*, p. 107).

The primary dangers of open theism are that it:

- Denies the infallible foreknowledge of God.
- Rejects the biblical doctrine of God's immutability (unchangeability).
- Denies God's eternality; while acknowledging that God has no beginning, open theists deny that he is beyond time or nontemporal.
- Denies the sovereignty of God.
- May lead to a wrong view that people in some way control God through their decisions and actions.

Conclusion

As we have learned over the past several months, there is at least some common ground between Calvinists and Arminians on each of the five points identified by the acrostic TULIP. Calvinists and Arminians may consider each other brothers and sisters in Christ, share the same convictions about many doctrines of the faith, and cooperate in carrying out the Great Commission. At the same time, there is danger at the extreme ends of the Calvinist-Arminian spectrum, where God is seen either as mechanical or wishy washy, and man appears to be either a puppet or a self-determining puppet master. Believers do not have to agree on every detail of biblical interpretation, but we would be well advised to take to heart Paul's challenge to Timothy: "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who doesn't need to be ashamed, correctly teaching the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15).

Next week: Final Exam and Wrap Up

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