

Dear Luke,

Concerning <http://benwitherington.blogspot.com/2008/11/john-piper-explains-why-calvinists-are.html>.

The blog is clearly an attack on Calvinism. It relies mainly on unfair, negative rhetoric about Calvinists, and irrelevant points about theology and doing theology (most of which Calvin and Calvinists agree with.) (You can continue by reading the right hand column - I put his article on the left for reference only.)

<p>Here is a very interesting and indeed revealing brief interview with John Piper about why Calvinists not infrequently come across in such a negative and arrogant way. I find his explanation in some ways convincing. BW3</p>	<p>The author begins by noting that Calvinists "not infrequently come across in a negative and arrogant way." What he doesn't do is ask why. Is it because Calvinists are actually negative and arrogant? Or is it because hearers don't enjoy being told they are wrong, and / or they have a great dislike for the God of Calvinism? My experience is along the second line.</p>
<p>What he does not add, that could have been added, is that, for whatever reason, Calvinism seems to feed a deep seated need in many persons for a kind of intellectual certainty about why the world is as it is, and what God is exactly like, and how his will is worked out in the world, and most particularly how salvation works and whether or not one is a saved person.</p>	<p>The author continues, "Calvinism seems to feed a deep seated need in many persons for a kind of intellectual certainty about why the world is as it is, what God is exactly like ... and whether or not one is a saved person". If he had written "Calvinists desire to know what God is like, and to know whether or not they are saved", this would be fair and true. But his rhetoric is negative and unfair. Calvinists do not believe that they can know "exactly" what God is like. And "a deep seated need ..." leaves the reader with a sense of psychological imbalance.</p>
<p>And all too often, the apparent intellectual coherency of a theological system is taken as absolute and compelling proof that this view of God, salvation, the world must be true and all others be heresy, to one degree or another. But it is perfectly possible to argue logically and coherency in a hermeneutical or theological circle with all parts connected, and unfortunately be dead wrong-- because one drew the circle much too small and left out all the inconvenient contrary evidence.</p>	<p>The author continues "all too often, the apparent intellectual coherency ... is taken as absolute and compelling proof ... ". Notice how different this would read if he had written, "Calvinists take the coherency of the system (together with the fact that the bible affirms each part of it) as strong evidence for its truth. This would be fair, and worth discussing. But our author writes, "absolute and compelling proof", which is unfair. It is also interesting to note the word "apparent" in "apparent intellectual consistency". Apparently, if he had not used the word "apparent", it might appear that maybe the Calvinist is right: coherency is some evidence of truth.</p>

<p>This sort of fault is inevitable with theological systems constructed by finite human beings.</p>	
<p>A minute's reflection will show that intellectual coherency, as judged by finite fallen or even redeemed minds, is not a very good guide to what is true. The truth of God and even of the Bible is much larger than anyone's ability (or any collection of human being's abilities) to get their mental calipers so firmly around it that one could form it into a 'coherent theological system' without flaws, gaps, or lacunae. That includes Calvin's very fine mind as reflected in his Theological Institutes. The real paradox about the God of Calvin is while Calvin does all in his power to stress the enormity and consequent sovereignty of a great God over all things, sadly but inevitably even his God is too small to encompass everything that is said about God in the Scriptures, even just everything that is said about soteriology in the Scriptures.</p>	<p>To assure his readers (a very crucial rhetorical tactic), he notes that it only takes a "minute's reflection" to see that Calvinists are wrong. He then provides a sad argument against intellectual coherency as evidence. The argument assumes that a coherent system has no "gaps or lacunae". But, no Calvinist affirms this. Also, he affirms that the greatness of God implies that we are able to construct a theological system without "flaws". Given this, it follows that Calvinism is flawed (as well as Arminianism, and every other theology); but this affirmation is not a matter of a "minute's reflection". It would put an end to all theology. In a second line of argument, he asserts that Calvin's "God is too small to encompass everything that is said about God in the Scriptures". But Calvin never did say that his writings or his system of thought "encompass everything that is said about God in the Scriptures". The question is whether the Scriptures teach the doctrines of grace.</p>
<p>While I certainly believe that God's <i>own</i> worldview is coherent, and that <i>some</i> of it is revealed in the Bible, the facts are that the Bible does not reveal everything we always wanted to know about God so we could be certain God exists and form that body of knowledge into a self-sustaining fully coherent theological system with one idea leading to another idea, and so on (and now we can all sing a chorus of 'Will the Circle be Unbroken').</p>	<p>Concerning coherency, he allows that "God's own worldview is coherent, and that <i>some</i> of it is revealed in the Bible." I would have expected him to continue by asserting that from a human point of view, biblical teachings are not coherent. I suspect that this is the author's view. Rather, he continues by noting that "the facts are that the Bible does not reveal everything we always wanted to know ...". This is disappointing. Calvin stresses that the Bible does not reveal everything we might want to know. But the topic is coherency, not totality of knowledge.</p>
<p>A strong sense of assurance provided by the</p>	<p>This point is important. Throughout the article the author notes that</p>

<p>living presence of God in the person of the Holy Spirit in our lives is not the same as intellectual certainty. Nor does God reveal so much about the eternal mysteries that a finite human mind could form it into an airtight theological system of any kind. Indeed, the Bible is pretty clear that God quite deliberately did not 'tell all' either in general revelation in creation or in the Scriptures(read Job), not least because God wants us to trust him and to build a trust relationship with him. What God has done is that God has revealed <i>enough</i> so that we may be redeemed but not so much that we do not have to trust God about the future.</p>	<p>we don't know everything about God, that we don't have an "airtight theological system", that "God quite deliberately did not 'tell all'", etc. This is all true and every Calvinist would affirm it. However, the author appears to draw the conclusion that the Bible does not have a coherent soteriology (such as the five points of Calvinism). This is a ridiculous <i>non-sequitor</i>.</p> <p>When the author continues, "A strong sense of assurance provided by the living presence of God in the person of the Holy Spirit in our lives is not the same as intellectual certainty", I begin to question if he has ever read Calvin. One of Calvin's most famous doctrines is the doctrine of the "internal testimony of the Holy Spirit". Calvin does refer to assurance as a "sure and certain <i>knowledge</i> of the benevolence of God". But he does not equate assurance with intellectual certainty.</p>
<p>I must confess that as a NT scholar I am inherently suspicious about theological systems like Calvinism or Dispensationalism or even Arminianism and the like which seem to foster certain kinds of feelings of intellectual certainty and even smugness about things that are in fact profound mysteries.</p>	<p>Near the end of the article, the author confesses that "as a NT scholar I am inherently suspicious about theological systems ... that foster certain kinds of feelings of intellectual certainty and even smugness about things that are in fact profound mysteries". I suppose everyone should be suspicious about such systems. Smugness is not a positive. And how can we have a system of thought about a profound mystery? But, according to the Calvinist, the five points are not a mystery - they are revealed in the Bible.</p>
<p>When someone brings up a topic like "why is their evil in the world, and why do even God's people suffer so much" rather than give a pat answer ...</p>	<p>The article closes with trite discussions of the problem of evil, how little we know about God, about "placing our faith in God, not in a particular system", a lecture on humility, and some other irrelevant material. Each is filled with negative, unfair suggestions about Calvinistse. But none of them give us any reason to believe that the Bible does not teach the five points of Calvinism. In fact, it does.</p> <p>Andy McCafferty November 24, 2008.</p>