

Why Would a Deterministic Calvinist Become an Atheist?

By Bob Nyberg

Why would someone who once professed faith in Jesus Christ become an atheist?

From a human standpoint, there could be a myriad of answers to that question. But if you pose that question to theologians discussing issues related to *sovereignty* and *free will*, two possible answers rise to the surface of that debate.

- Option #1: God decreed and causally determined it to be so.
- Option #2: God did not decree and causally determine it to be so.

According to “Deterministic Calvinism,” the reason individuals are “reprobate” and wind up in hell is because God decreed and causally determined it to be so. Now some Calvinists will attempt to soften their view of determinism, by appealing to arguments such as compatibilism or secondary causes. But the bottom line for “Deterministic Calvinism” is that God decrees and determines everything.

John Piper reflects typical Deterministic Calvinism: “Nothing that exists or occurs falls outside God’s ordaining will. Nothing, including no evil person or thing or event or deed. God’s foreordination is the ultimate reason why everything comes about, including the existence of all evil persons and things and the occurrence of any evil acts or events. And so it is not inappropriate to take God to be the creator, the sender, the permitter, and sometimes even the instigator of evil... Nothing — no evil thing or person or event or deed — falls outside God’s ordaining will. Nothing arises, exists, or endures independently of God’s will. So when even the worst of evils befall us, they do not ultimately come from anywhere other than God’s hand.”¹

As we explore this question as it relates to Deterministic Calvinism, let’s consider the case of Derek Webb. Derek was a former lead vocalist with the Calvinistic group Caedmon’s Call. Derek became a self-described atheist sometime around 2017. In an interview with Matthew Cook, Derek talks about his departure from his Calvinistic brand of Christianity into atheism.

Derek Webb: “Like, I don’t know why you’re trying to persuade me, because your own Bible says that it’s a gift. It’s a work of the Spirit from start to finish. It’s a removing of a heart of stone and replacing with a heart of flesh. That is not something that you can do for me. So, if it’s true, we’re both depending on the Spirit to show up. I’m literally in the grave next to Lazarus waiting to hear my name. And I’m going to lay in there dead until He shows up.”

Matthew Cook: “Somebody asked me, ‘What would it take for you to believe in God?’ That’s easy. God would have to give me faith, because I can’t reach out and grab it.”

Derek Webb: “Yeah. What it would take is a miracle. Like, what does it take for a dead man to come six feet out of the ground? It takes someone to dig him out, to open the box and revive him. And the Bible makes it clear that there is nothing less than that going on in salvation. New life—from death to life. And that’s what would be required. And I’m open to it. I’m literally in the grave waiting to hear my name. And I won’t be able to resist it. And I can’t call out for it. I cannot coax Him over. Either my name is written in the book of life or it’s not. So if were really going to get into the hard language of the Bible, provocative as it may be... I don’t like binary ideas or statements, but there’s a few that emotionally feel like they are, although maybe they’re not. There’s a point where I

said, ‘You know what? Maybe God made me and fashioned me for destruction.’ Cause He says He does that. There’s nothing I’m going to be able to do to change His mind about it. So, maybe it’s all real and I’m just not chosen. And that’s just a thing that I’m going to have to reckon with. And that’s not a thing that I can really do anything about. So, I’m going to try to make the best of this. And I’m listening ... in as far as Lazarus was listening the moment before he heard his name out of Jesus’ mouth, which a dead man cannot. So, he wasn’t listening. He wasn’t paying attention. He wasn’t flagging someone down. He wasn’t wishing or hoping for it. He wasn’t seeking it. He was just suddenly called out—came alive and came out. And that was the only response that he could have had. Cause he had no choice. I mean, it’s a hard and Biblical word. It’s so funny. All my friends call me like a Reformed Atheist.... I go immediately into that Reformed view only because it’s just the one that seemed to make the most logical sense to me.... So what’s hysterical is that I will find myself in theological debates with friends arguing a Biblical position, arguing from a Bible that I have no belief in. I’ll argue all the tenets of Reformed Theology with them and sometimes win. And then at the end of it, will just have to say, ‘And by the way, that was weird, because I for sure don’t believe any of what either of us have just been talking about.’”

Source: <https://youtu.be/ORYcoIpIQSw>

Why did Derek Webb become an atheist?

If Deterministic Calvinism is true, then God decreed Derek to become an atheist. Assuming that is the case, then Derek really has no culpability for his actions. After all, God decreed him to become an atheist and causally determined that it would be so. So, who are we to question God?

On the other hand, if Deterministic Calvinism is not true, then God did not decree Derek to become an atheist. If so, then Derek is culpable for his own actions and decisions.

People will say that the debates between Calvinists and non-Calvinists are simply matters of splitting theological hairs. Such debates really do not make much of a difference. It’s like arguing about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. But the fact is that doctrine does matter. What a person thinks about God actually has consequences in real life.

A. W. Tozer wrote:

“What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”

“The history of mankind will probably show that no people has ever risen above its religion, and man’s spiritual history will positively demonstrate that no religion has ever been greater than its idea of God. Worship is pure or base as the worshiper entertains high or low thoughts of God.”

“For this reason the gravest question before the Church is always God Himself, and the most portentous fact about any man is not what he at a given time may say or do, but what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like.”

“We tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God. This is true not only of the individual Christian, but of the company of Christians that composes the Church. Always the most revealing thing about the Church is her idea of God.”²

Derek Webb has an image of God that was shaped by Deterministic Calvinism. He concluded that either, the Deterministic God of Calvinism had not chosen him as one of the elect or that there really is no God. Two paths lay before Derek. One path led him to a horrific image of a capricious God who decreed that the vast majority of mankind spend eternity in torment for no other reason than it pleased Him to see multitudes being tortured forever. For Derek, the second path was more palatable to his own conscience. For Derek, to become an atheist was a better alternative than to live with the image of the Deterministic God of Calvinism.

Deterministic Calvinism absolves Derek Webb of his own culpability. Of course the Calvinist will not admit that. They claim that Derek is culpable for his own actions and decisions even though those very acts and decisions were causally determined by God.

The fact is that Derek had a choice to make and that choice was not causally determined by God. Therefore, Derek is culpable for his own decision. But not only is Derek Webb culpable for his own decision, those who led him astray through the erroneous doctrines of Deterministic Calvinism also have culpability for his departure from the faith into atheism.

According to Derek's own testimony, the reason that he is an atheist is because God has not regenerated him and given him the faith to believe. Where did he get that teaching? Are not those who taught him that erroneous doctrine partly responsible for his atheism?

Jesus said, "Woe to the world because of offenses! For offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes (Mt. 18:7)!"

Here is a question for those who embrace Deterministic Calvinism. Why would God pronounce a woe upon those causing offenses, when supposedly He not only decreed the offense, He also decreed the instrument by which the offense would come?

Some Calvinists would attempt to deflect the moral implications of this question by appealing to a view called "compatibilism." They claim that an individual has a "free will"—as they define it. And yet this "free will" is somehow compatible with divine determinism. How can this be? They say that men are free in the sense that they "do what they desire." It is just that fallen man desires only to do evil because of the "total depravity" inherited from the sin of Adam.

However, there are major flaws in this logic.

According to the Westminster Confession of Faith (the Holy Grail of Calvinism), "God has decreed whatsoever comes to pass." That means that even the desires and thoughts of men are decreed by God. God causally determines not only the actions of men, but also their very thoughts and desires. So in what sense can anyone have a "free will" if God has already determined those thoughts and desires?

Even if we were to buy into the twisted logic of Calvinism's *Total Depravity*, how are we to explain the fall of Adam in the first place? Where did Adam inherit his sin nature from?

Calvinist theologian R.C. Sproul admits: "But Adam and Eve were not created fallen. They had no sin nature. They were good creatures with a free will. Yet they chose to sin. Why? I don't know. Nor have I found anyone yet who does know."³

Likewise, John Calvin himself wrote:

"But now, removing from God all proximate causation of the act, I at the same time remove from Him all guilt and leave man alone liable. It is therefore wicked and

calumnious to say that I make the fall of man one of the works of God. But how it was ordained by the foreknowledge and decree of God what man's future was without God being implicated as associate in the fault as the author or approver of transgression, is clearly a secret so much excelling the insight of the human mind, that I am not ashamed to confess ignorance."⁴

"The first man fell because the Lord deemed it meet that he should: why he deemed it meet, we know not... Man therefore falls, divine providence so ordaining but he falls by his own fault."⁵

When backed into a corner on inexplicable points such as this, the Calvinist will eventually punt to "mystery." Calvin appealed to "mystery" when pressed on trying to explain the unexplainable. It is as if, passing the magic wand of "mystery" over passages of scripture that the Calvinist cannot explain makes the blatant contradictions disappear.

According to compatibilism, the choices of lost mankind are determined by their depraved desires. Yet Adam and Eve did not have a sinful nature prior to their fall. They had no inherent desire to sin before that fateful day that they chose to disobey God. So why did they make that horrible choice? Well, God decreed it to be so. He causally determined them to choose to sin. But Calvinism is quick to add that He did so, yet without being the author of sin? "How can this be," we ask. Before the problematic inquiry escapes our lips, the Calvinists waves his magic wand of "mystery" and all the logical inconsistencies disappear in a theological cloud of "pixie dust."

While Derek Webb is culpable for his own actions and decisions, he is not the only one who will be held accountable. Those who planted the seeds of Deterministic Calvinism in the mind of Derek Webb must surely bear part of the responsibility for his defection from the faith into atheism.

James 3:1 says: "My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment."

No doubt the Calvinist will attempt to find solace in the tenets of TULIP in order to assuage his guilty conscience. He may reason: "The Derek Webbs of this world have left the faith because that is what God decreed. God causally determined Derek Webb to abandon the faith and to become an atheist. So, why should I be found culpable?"

However, the Calvinist's magic wand of "mystery" will by no means absolve him from his own guilt. According to both James and our Lord Jesus, those who foist erroneous doctrines that cause harm to His flock of sheep will face the woe of stricter judgment.

D.L. Moody once told a story about a blind man sitting at a street corner with a lantern beside him. Someone asked him why he had the lantern. Since he was blind, the light was the same as darkness to him. The blind man simply replied, "So that no one may stumble over me."

Would that theologians think about the consequences of presenting a distorted image of God before the eyes of their followers!

Tozer was right. What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.

Offenses will most certainly come. But woe to those by whom the offense comes. I certainly would not want to be found culpable for sending the Derek Webbs of this world down a path that leads to atheism.

¹ Mark R. Talbot, "All the Good That Is Ours in Christ", in *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God*, ed. John Piper and Justin Taylor, (Crossway, 2006): 43-44

² A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: HarperCollins, 1978): 1

³ R.C. Sproul, *Chosen By God* (Tyndale, September 21, 1994): 31

⁴ John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God* (Westminster John Knox Press, March 1, 1997): 123-124

⁵ John Calvin, *Inst. III.xiii.8*. See A.N.S. Lane, "Did Calvin Believe in Freewill?" *Vox Evangelica* 12 (1981): 73