

Free Will or Calvinism: Which Should You Choose? With Dr. Leighton Flowers

(April 4, 2023)

Frank:

Ladies and gentlemen, the topic we are going to discuss today, we'll get more hate mail than virtually any other topic we discuss. And it's not even an essential of the faith. And it's not even about whether or not Christianity is true. The topic is God's sovereignty versus human responsibility, Calvinism or not. And so, we're going to talk about this with my friend Leighton Flowers. Leighton, you have an entire ministry related to this topic. You have Soteriology 101, which is a great YouTube channel where you cover all these issues. Give our viewers and our listeners a little background. How did you even get into this?

Leighton:

Yeah, I was a Calvinist for ten years and slowly came out of Calvinism through study. I ended up writing my dissertation when I was doing my doctoral work at New Orleans on this topic. I was teaching on it at Dallas Baptist and a lot of the students just lit up when I started talking about this. Just fireworks, like you said. A lot of hate mail, a lot of interest in this topic. And so, one of the students suggested that we do a podcast on it, or that I start a podcast. I said Well, what's that? How do you do that?

Back in the day I didn't know how to do that. So, I began to YouTube how to do podcasts, and just one thing led to another. That's why it's called Soteriology 101, because it was birthed out of a 101 course. One thing led to another, and it ended up being very popular. A lot of people think that's all I do. It's really not. It's only since 2014, that I've been doing this.

Frank:

That's what they see though.

Leighton:

Right, that's what they see. So, I'm the Director of Evangelism and Apologetics for Texas Baptist. So, most of my work is in winning the lost and on the essentials of the faith, apologetics. Hiring people like you to come to our conferences in the state of Texas and other places to train people for doing good apologetics and evangelizing the world.

Frank:

What is your doctorate in?



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Leighton:

My focus was on this topic. Because it was such a hot button topic for me, I went through a church split over the issue. I mean, it was pretty passionate for me. And that's why I think was driven to kind of go deeper into the topic and to the issue. I agree with you. It's a secondary matter. I have Calvinists who are friends of mine. Who are brothers, who I love dearly, sisters that I love dearly, family members that I love dearly that lean that direction. I think they're wrong. But that's okay. We can still love each other. There's people who are wrong about politics too. But you can love them, and deal with them, and work with them.

Frank:

No, not really. What, are you crazy? Come on. [laughter]

Leighton:

I started the podcast because I just really saw a vacuum on the internet. Especially, of non-Calvinistic scholars and resources because the Calvinists are, let's just face it. They're a lot better at telling people what they believe, and why they believe what they believe, than non-Calvinists have been over the last 20-30 years, since the inception of the internet. So, I really thought there needed to be more information out there online helping people who struggle with this issue.

Frank:

What were some of the reasons? Originally you thought Calvinism was true.

Leighton:

Of course. Well, I grew up in a kind of a whosoever will, kind of Baptist Church. It was a typical Baptist Church that really didn't teach a doctrine of predestination or election at all. It just didn't talk about that topic. And so, I came out of really ignorance of the topic. Just always believing the basics of you know, God loves everybody. Anybody can be saved if you believe in and follow Jesus' kind of a theology. And when I was 19, in college, I was introduced to John MacArthur. I was given a book by him by a mentor friend, who's still a very good friend of mine, who's still a Calvinist. And he gave me a book by MacArthur.

I read the entire thing while I was on a mission trip in Belarus and slowly began to just understand what Calvinism was. And so, I was introduced to how you interpret Ephesians 1, for example. Or Romans 9, which are hot button passages in this debate. I learned for the very first time how to interpret them from a Calvinist. And so, that just seemed like that must be the only real interpretive option. That's what was introduced to me first. And so, I pretty much just adopted the entire worldview, because that was the worldview that was first introduced to me. And I became very insistent upon trying to convert others because there was a part of me that was like, why haven't I been taught this all my life? Why isn't the church talking about this?

And so, I began even as a young college student, talking to a lot of my friends and converting a lot of my friends into Calvinism. And from what I've seen looking back over my lifetime, that was

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happening in a lot of places. The resurging of Calvinism was really taking place in the mid 90s, early 2000s. And we see a lot of the influence. I went to school with Matt Chandler, for example. I helped to convince him of the "L" because that's the one he was hung up on. In the student center, we were debating with a few other guys, Calvinist guys. And so, it's just one of those things, this generation has experienced a real growth and resurging of Calvinism. And having come back out of it after coming into it, I just felt like it needed to be addressed. And at least help people to understand both sides of the issue.

Frank:

For our viewers who may not be completely familiar. I mean, they know basically what Calvinism is. But if you had to put a definition on it, how would you describe it? Are you going through T.U.L.I.P.?

Leighton:

Yeah, even when John Piper and Matt Chandler had that interview online on YouTube, it's still there. He asked Matt Chandler, what is Calvinism? What is that? He says, it's T.U.L.I.P. I mean, that's just the acrostic, or the way in which we remember it.

Frank:

Go through it quickly.

Leighton:

T stands for total depravity. Which is basically that you're born separated due to your sin. But it's a little more than that on the Calvinists side, because we can all agree that we're separated due to our sin, that we're sinners, we're fallen. But the Calvinist goes a step further and to say what RC Sproul says. We're totally morally unable to respond positively to even the Gospel. We can't respond positively to the work of God unless we've been unconditionally elected, which is the U. And that means that you were chosen unilaterally, before you were ever born. Calvinists don't know why one person was chosen over another. They admit that it's just a mystery, that God unilaterally picks some people and not others. It seems arbitrary. Some Calvinists will push back on that word, because of its negative connotation. But even Jonathan Edwards, Calvin himself used the word arbitrary, because it is the will of the arbiter. And He unilaterally makes this choice before you're ever born. And in fact, you could even argue that He created you for that end. He created you to be a believer, or He created you to be a reprobate on Calvinism.

The L stands for limited atonement, which means that Christ didn't come to die for the sins of the world. He came to die for the sins of His elect, those He's unconditionally chosen. The I stands for irresistible grace. That if He's chosen you, that He's going to change your very ontological nature to make you want Him. So, you're born, according to the T, unable to want Him, because your desires would never want Him, unless He's picked you and irresistibly graces you. Which is what some refer to as regeneration. That He makes you alive in order that you can see the truth of His beauty and that you will certainly come to Him.

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And so, the Calvinists are not saying that He's dragging people kicking and screaming into heaven. They're saying, no, no, He changes your very desires, where you want to come willingly. And then perseverance, the P, is the concept and idea that if He changes you, if He's truly elected you and changed you, then you'll stay changed. You won't renege. You won't go back on what He's done for you, because you would never leave something if He's the one who's ultimately, effectually caused you to come to it. And so, you will absolutely persevere if you're truly elect.

Frank:

Now, in your view, are any of these attributes or descriptions of Calvinism, the T, the U, the L, the I, and the P, are they correct as defined by Calvinists? Or do all of them need some modification?

Leighton:

All of them need modification. That's why you'll hear some modified Calvinists say, I'm a two pointer, I'm a three pointer. And I said, well, technically, if you're defining those points the way the Calvinist does, they kind of hang or fall together. And you'd have to alter some aspect of the definition. The P, for example, would be the closest one that I would hold to because most of us as Southern Baptists would believe in once saved, always saved or the eternal security concept. I have some issues with some of the vernacular there. And we talk about that on the podcast regularly. And there are people who side with me on almost every area except that one, because it sounds too Calvinistic for some. And I understand that. And I understand some of their arguments for it. But that would be the closest one of all the five, that I would hold to as a Southern Baptist.

Frank:

It's a big topic. We obviously can't cover all of this here in this one podcast. But let's just talk a little bit about the Scriptures. Which do appear to talk about God, making choices almost for us, seemingly arbitrary choices. Let's just go to Romans 9 for just a second. We can talk about Romans 9. And again, we can't read the whole passage. But we're in Romans 9. There's the passage, "Jacob I loved. Esau, I hated. What should we say? Is God unjust? Not at all. For He says to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I have mercy. And I'll have compassion on whom I have compassion. It does not therefore depend on human desire or effort but on God's mercy..." How would you respond? It seems kind of fatalistic.

Leighton:

Right. And to be frank, when I was being introduced to Calvinism for the first time and explained Calvinism, and then taken to Romans 9, I was like, who can argue with that? I mean, it was just obvious. And so, it starts with presuppositions. What presuppositions are you holding when you walk into the verse. And so, once you address those presuppositions, like take off the lenses, so to speak. And you step away, and you address what we believe Paul is actually addressing in his context, then it makes sense from both sides. And that's the hard thing. It's very difficult to see something from a different angle.

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I use the illustration of the duck and the rabbit. It's both a duck and a rabbit when you look at it. It's not really until you can see both pictures, that you can argue which of these two pictures is Paul really attempting to explain here? And if you've only seen the duck all your life, and somebody else is coming along and says, no, it's really a rabbit. Then they sound like a heretic. And they say you're just not honest with the text. That's what the text says. That's obvious. Are you blind?

Well, no, I'm coming from a different presupposition than you are. And so, what I believe Paul is addressing is the Nation of Israel and their hardening. The Nation of Israel has become hardened. Israel is reflected by Jacob. Jacob's name was changed to Israel. Esau is representing the Edomites. That verse is quoted from Malachi, not Genesis. And actually, he starts in Genesis, in the verse right before. And then he goes to Malachi. It's almost a before and after picture. And two nations are in your womb is from the first quote in Genesis. And then he's going on, fast forwarding 1500 years, long after Jacob and Esau have died. And saying, this is the nation I chose, Israel. Jacob is the one I chose, not Edom, not the Edomites.

And this is in reflection, right after Edomites had attacked the Israelites. And so, it's not just arbitrarily, I love one kid before he's born and not the other kid. It's in the context of these two nations, and what God is accomplishing through them. So, I've chosen Israel to be the seed through which the promise would come. So, it's not talking about I've chosen this child to be effectually saved, and this child to be effectually damned. Which is the way some, not all Calvinists read it that way, by the way. It's very interesting. I've come across many who still are within the reformed tradition who interpret these texts exactly the way I do. And it's really interesting, you read through some of their commentaries and I'm going, that's exactly right. And then at the very bottom, they'll say, but that doesn't change the fact that God's sovereignty and election is true, and His choice of individuals.

It's almost like they're beholden to their system and way of thinking that they'll interpret it exactly the way I do, but then come to a different conclusion. And so, I just want people to back up, and to look at this with fresh eyes. Take away the concept of God reprobating people before they're ever born. Just remove that from your mindset and look at this with fresh eyes to understand that Paul is addressing. He's quoting Old Testament texts throughout this chapter. Quite a few, in fact. Look at what the text meant then, when he's quoting from it. I will have mercy on whom, I will have mercy, for example. He's speaking from Exodus, when he's talking about how the Israelites had built the golden calf.

And he's talking about Moses in this whole situation there. And he's saying, don't kill them. And Moses is stepping in, almost like Paul is in the first five verses saying, take me instead. It's almost the Christ like figure there. I'll stand in the gap for them. And that the response of that is I will have mercy on whom I have mercy and meaning, I'll have mercy on Israel when it serves my purpose to have mercy on them. And I'll harden them when it serves my purpose to harden. Who are you to question me how I use this hardened lump of clay, namely Israel? Which is

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reflection perfectly on Jeremiah 18, where he tells him the same thing. In the potter's house, there's this potter, and if you go this way, then I'll use you for this purpose. And if you go this way, I'll use you for this purpose.

Which Paul, by the way, uses the exact same analogy to Timothy, when he talks about in the large house, there are many earthen vessels, clay pots. If you cleanse yourself, you will be used for the honorable purpose instead of the ignoble purpose. Same exact illustration he uses in Romans 9. But he still says the pot has some responsibility, to cleanse yourself. Meaning repent, and you will be used for noble purposes. Well, the same is true of Israel. When they grow hardened and callous by their own free choice, not some sovereign decree that they couldn't help, but when they grow hardened and callous, and God judicially, as an act of a judge, hardens them or blinds them in their rebellion so as to accomplish a good purpose through them, namely Passover. Which, by the way, is exactly what he does with Pharaoh. He hardens Pharaoh to accomplish the first Passover. In the same way, he hardens Israel to accomplish the second Passover.

It has nothing to do with individuals being reprobated from before they're ever born, where they're born ultimately blameless because they didn't have anything to do with it. And they're going to hell and suffering in hell for something they have absolutely nothing to do with. Intuitively, I think we all know. Even Calvinists deep down they go, that's not right. There's something wrong with that. And there is something wrong with it. The first 400 years of the Christian church didn't interpret it that way. Eastern Orthodoxy has never interpreted it that way. And this is a unique way of understanding that's following from Augustine, who was a former Manichaean Gnostic. He was the first to introduce this kind of way of thinking into the Church in the fifth century. So, it's questionable, and people should be willing to step out of their echo chambers and study this fresh and anew.

Frank:

I think the bottom line is, as you pointed out, that election here is not the election of individuals to salvation. It's the election of the nation of Israel, to be the conduit through which the Messiah will come. And when you look at the structure of the book of Romans, he couldn't be more clear. Because the first eight chapters are dealing with condemnation, then justification, then sanctification, then glorification. And then Paul stops. Right after that soaring passage at the end Romans eight, "who will separate us from the Love of God?" You would think it would have been a perfect time to then go right to chapter 12 where he says, "Therefore, present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God." He doesn't do that. He says, I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, what about Israel? If Christianity is true, what about my brethren who don't believe it? And so, he goes on a three chapter sort of detour to talk about Israel. And chapter nine is Israel's past, chapter 10 is Israel's present, and chapter 11 is Israel's future. So, the whole context of Romans has nothing to do with the election of individuals to salvation by the time you get to Romans nine.

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Leighton:

Especially when you consider the fact that the same ones who are hardened in Romans 9, are the same ones that Paul says, haven't stumbled beyond recovery, in chapter 11, verse 11. And that could be grafted back in if they leave their unbelief. How is that a reprobate? These are people he's holding out hope for. He's saying, yes, the rest were hardened. But they've not stumbled beyond recovery. They might leave their unbelief and be saved. That's his hope that his ministry to the Gentiles will provoke them to envy, so that they'll desire to come back. And so, how is that possibly the reprobate within the Calvinistic worldview? It just doesn't fit the interpretation.

Frank:

And in the passage, I think in Romans 11, that I think, really drives this point home. He says in Romans 11, speaking of the Nation of Israel, the so called elect. It says, "As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies for your sake. But as far as the election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs." Notice, if he was talking about election to individual salvation, how could they be enemies of the Gospel? No, they couldn't be, because the Gospel is what saves. So, he's bifurcating the Gospel and election here. Which if it's election, individual salvation, you can't separate those two things. That's what it's all about. What he's saying here is that the Jews as of right now are enemies of the Gospel. So, they're not elect to salvation, but they are elect because of the patriarchs. They are elect because they were the nation through whom the Gospel came.

Leighton:

Exactly, yep.

Frank:

And so, when you look at the whole context, Romans nine is not talking about individual's elected salvation. But it appears Ephesians one is. So how do you deal with that?

Leighton:

Some may think so. And often they begin at verse three or four. It gets into the word predestination. But I always back them up and say, let's go to verse one and two first. Look at the audience first.

Frank:

Okay, Paul, this is Ephesians one. "Paul, an Apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God. To God's holy people in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus, grace..."

Leighton:

Stop right there. The faithful in Christ Jesus. The in him, the in Christ, is used over and over and over again. So, who are the in Christ he's talking to? The faithful in Christ. These are people with faith in Christ. That's the us in Him that you're going to see throughout the rest of this. So

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just keep the faithful in Christ in mind. And every time we see us in Him later, let's plug that in and remember he's talking about those who have faith in Christ.

Frank:

So, he goes on to say, "Grace and peace to you. To God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. And then what is the longest sentence in the Bible? He goes on with saying... [laughter]"

Leighton:

He doesn't like punctuation, apparently.

Frank:

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ." Here's the sentence. "For He chose us in Him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight. In love He predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ in accordance with the pleasure of His will, to the praise of His glorious grace which He has freely given us in the one He loves." And he goes on to talk about we have redemption in all this. Comment on that.

Leighton:

So yeah, the us in Him that it's referring to, the faithful in Christ. So, He has predestined, that the faithful in Christ will be made holy and blameless. Sounds kind of like becoming conformed into the image of His Son. Which is the other place where Paul uses the word predestination, is in Romans eight. That He has predestined, for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose, to be conformed to the image of Jesus. In the same way, He has predestined the faithful in Christ, to what? To be holy and blameless. And this is a choice that He made from the foundation the world. In other words, it's not a new plan of God to engraft the Gentiles, and to conform them into the image of His Son. This has been a part of his plan from the very beginning, that those who are in Christ Jesus...

And remember Paul, an apostle to the Gentiles, as a predominantly Gentile audience, when he's writing his letters to these different churches. And so, when he's reminding them that you're chosen, that this is a plan from the beginning, as Ephesians three goes on to describe, that this mystery that's just now being revealed, is the engrafting of the Gentiles. It's always been from the very beginning God's plan, to make them holy and blameless. And so, what He's saying is, He has chosen from the beginning, that those who have faith in Christ, will be made holy and blameless. They have been predestined for adoption.

Go back to Romans eight and you'll see that adoption is something we await for. We eagerly await our adoption, the redemption of our bodies, he says in verse 23 of chapter eight. What does that say? I'm still hoping for my adoption to be completed. In other words, I'm waiting for the redemption of my body, when I take up residence with the one who has adopted me. And so, in Paul's mind, adoption is something we're eagerly awaiting for, even as Christians. How do I know that's going to happen? Because God has predestined that to happen. And so, when we

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understand predestination, again it's the duck and rabbit thing. You're shifting your mindset. Because most people in our culture today at least, when they hear the word predestination, they think of it Calvinistically. God has predestined certain individuals to believe so as to be saved. The Bible never says that as far as I can tell. It talks about what God has predestined for those who are in Christ. We come to be in Christ through faith.

And so, here's an illustration. If you've got a field, and there's a big fortress that God puts right in the middle of that field. And He says, before anything happens, he says to all the people in the land, if you get into the fortress, you will surely live when the storm comes because the storm is coming. If you stay outside the fortress, you will surely die. The storm comes, everybody who stays outside the fortress, they all perish. Everyone who goes into the fortress, they all live. Could you rightly say that all those who died outside the fortress were predestined to die? Yes. You could also say, all of those inside the fortress were predestined to live. It says nothing about God predestining who will and won't get into the fortress. It's simply God's destiny beforehand. Here's your destiny beforehand. If you're in the fortress, the destiny is that you will live. If you stay outside the fortress, your destiny is to perish. But you're responsible as to whether you get into the fortress or not.

Well, the fortress is Christ. If you come into Christ, God has destined beforehand that you will be saved. Here are the spiritual blessings. As a matter of fact, there are seven spiritual lessons listed in that sentence. These are the spiritual blessings God has destined beforehand, for those who are in Christ Jesus through faith. If you read verse 13, it goes on to tell you how you come to be in Christ. When we heard the message, when we believed, we were marked in Him. So, you're not marked in Him arbitrarily before you're ever born. You're marked in Him when you hear the truth, and you believe. So, you're marked in Him through faith. And so, you're not born already in Him. Even some Calvinists waver on which view they take with regard to when one comes to be in Him, temporarily or eternally? Just depending on the Calvinist on how they word that. And so, I'm not trying to lump all Calvinists as monolithic in this perspective. A lot of them have various views on these different subjects. But the important thing is, to understand that he's speaking about the faithful in Christ, and what spiritual blessings they have been predestined to.

Frank:

So, isn't it true, however, that when God elects to create a universe, and He did elect to create this universe, quite obviously. He's electing the outcome, because He knows what we're going to do. But it's not against our freewill, it's in accord with our freewill. Doesn't Peter talk about, in accordance with the foreknowledge of God? Now, technically, God doesn't have foreknowledge. It's written from our perspective. He has knowledge. Isn't it inevitable, Leighton, or unavoidable, maybe is the better word. It's unavoidable, since God knows all things. He knows who's going to believe and who isn't, right? So, any universe He elects to create is going to turn out in a way in which he knows it's going to turn out. But that doesn't mean He's taken away our freewill, does it?

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Leighton:

No. And then this stuff, kind of away from the theological, the biblical, into the philosophical. There's nothing wrong with that. But I think it has to be noted, that there are some things that philosophies, or philosophical speculations are attempting to answer that the Bible doesn't necessarily give a specific answer for. And that's where you get into molinism. That's when you get into the eternal now view of God that's [unintelligible] by Boethius, and later Aquinas, and C.S. Lewis. And it's this God outside of time kind of perspective. You get into determinism. I mean, determinism is a philosophical perspective most held by Calvinists. Which is ultimately that God knows it, because He's determined it. In other words, God's in a sense, scripted by divine decree, everything that's going to happen. And it's going to happen because He decided it would happen.

Versus the way the other indeterminist perspectives would hold to. It's to say, the reason God knows it, is because you chose it. And if you chose differently, He would have known differently. But you're still libertarianly free? You still have the capacity to say yes or no, to the grace of God. And so, that's the distinction between those two perspectives. But then there's tons of ink, obviously, that's been spilled on that particular topic in that discussion.

And I'm not a philosopher by training. That's why I'll appeal to you know, William Lane Craig, and other philosophers, yourself, and others who are better at making a case for the philosophical side for libertarian freedom versus determinism. You know, I'm more of a Bible guy to say, what is the Scripture actually talking about? What is Paul describing here? Like we just went through with Romans 9 or Ephesians 1. I don't need those philosophical answers to get to that interpretation. But it's fun to speculate.

Frank:

Let's go back to Ephesians 1. Just to reiterate, you're saying that when he says the term predestined in here, he's not saying I'm predestinating you in particular to salvation. What Paul seems to be saying is that if you are in Christ, you are predestined to be conformed to the image of His son, to be adopted.

Leighton:

Exactly. So, anyone who is in the fortress is predestined to be saved from this coming storm. Well, the ark, or the blood post on the door. Anyone who's under the blood on the doorpost, it's been destined beforehand that the death angel will pass over. And so, this view, in my perspective at least, gives mankind all the blame. In other words, they're blameworthy show their rejection of the Gospel. Whereas on Calvinism, I can't see, and I know Calvinists wouldn't say this. But I can't see how God's not to blame. And how man is held blameworthy in any kind of rationally, just or righteous way.

Frank:

God makes all the choices and then blames us for choices we couldn't have made anyway. How is that a moral way of dealing with the issue?

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Leighton:

If He's predestining, in other words, He's causally determining who gets into the fortress and who doesn't. How can you call that just are right? And that's when Calvinists will often quote from Romans 9 out of context, and say who are you, oh man, to question God? Because if God wants to determine whether you choose Him or not, then who are you to question a God who does that? And if Paul was saying that, then I would say, yeah, you got me. You won. But Paul's not talking about that.

Frank:

Yeah, I know Calvinists recoil at this comparison. But basically, as I understand it, the hard Five-Point Calvinist God is Allah, because Allah is arbitrary. Whatever Allah decides, is good. Allah isn't essentially good. I mean, this is according to Muslim scholars.

Leighton:

And even among Muslims, it's interesting. There's a split between the Muslims on the freewill versus determinism. And the ones who are flying their planes into the building are the determinists. But these are the hardcore guys, and the determinists are a fraction of them. But yeah, and obviously Calvinists will recoil it quite a bit, because Calvinists would never want to be compared to the god of Muslims. And there are a lot of distinctions and differences. But what you're saying is philosophically, is that the determinism, the position of Islam, is similar to the hardcore Five-Point Calvinist.

Frank:

Yeah, because it makes God, to use the theological language, God is a voluntarist God. Meaning he doesn't have an essence that is good. Whatever he decides to do is good. He's arbitrary. The Christian God, that I think is the true view of God, is He's essentially good. He is the standard of good. There's not a standard beyond Him. This gets into the Euthyphro Dilemma and all that. He is the standard. And it seems to me, if the hard Five-Point Calvinist view is correct, then God is more like Allah than he is, the God of the Bible, or the God that was the God of the first 15 centuries of the Church.

Leighton:

C.S. Lewis actually addressed that when he talks about, you know, if his black is our white. His good is our evil, then we can only say we worship, we know not what. We might as well be worshipping an all-powerful demon. Now I'm paraphrasing, but basically what he's saying, is that we have to have some essence of what's good. How do we measure what is good, what is right, what is righteous? And when you kind of throw out that concept and just say, well, it must be good because he did it, versus understanding that God's given us a conscience...

He's told us in His Word what is right and what is good. And when we judge goodness by that standard, and we understand goodness by that standard, then anybody who comes along and says God does this thing that's evil, that's demonstrably evil, or demonstrably wrong...maybe that's the wrong interpretation. You know, maybe that's not the interpretation we should go with.

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Especially when there's another viable interpretation that's been held to by a majority of scholars and Christians throughout Christian history. Why not at least consider it?

Frank:

You and I have spoken about that before. That you could, I think, improperly but it's plausible, you could interpret the Scriptures, the way the Five-Point Calvinists do. I think you have to ignore some context, as we mentioned. But you can easily interpret the Scriptures as you have been doing here. And if you had those two choices, why would you choose the one that basically makes God the author of evil, and arbitrary? When you could say, no, I think in context, this is what Paul means here. And it doesn't run into those problems of making God evil or arbitrary. Why would you choose this one? That's what I'm trying to figure out.

Leighton:

Yeah, and each individual is going to be different. What motivates them to choose one thing or another? And I think they're probably convinced that that's the correct exegetical methodology that led them to that conclusion. And they think, therefore, it must be the right interpretation. At least that's why I chose it when I did. I thought that's what the Bible said, and I want to be biblical. I don't want to just reject it out of emotional reasons. You know, I didn't want to just say, well, it's just too difficult for me to swallow. It's too hard for me. I want to be able to say, I want to be biblical, even if it's difficult. And so, I adopted that interpretation because I really felt that's what Paul was saying in those passages.

It wasn't until I was introduced to the other side and begin to understand it. And I could see both the duck and the rabbit, like I was saying earlier. I could see them both side by side and now I was able to be I think, objective. To be able to look at them both and go, okay, which one did Paul probably really mean here, given all the other contextual issues that I've been discovering, as I read through this. All the verses that he's quoting from...is Paul eisegeting the Old Testament in order to introduce this newfound soteriological perspective?

And the history of it helped to convince me of it too. Realizing that Augustine, even by reformed scholar's own estimation, was the first to really introduce this way of thinking or this way of teaching through the Scriptures, theologically and philosophically from determinism. And so, once I began to weigh all those things, and to see them, I began to be more and more convinced that the Calvinistic way of interpretation was just falling short. It was not true to the whole counsel of God's word, or even to the historical development of these doctrines.

Frank:

Well, let's go to one of the other key components of Five-Point Calvinism. The T in T.U.L.I.P., total depravity. The Five-Point Calvinist will say, we're completely dead in our trespasses and sins. Meaning we can't even seek God or accept His free gift of salvation. God has to regenerate us first, before we can even possibly accept him. How do you respond to that?

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Leighton:

Well, in a lot of ways, I try to concede as much as I can, to what I agree with, with the Calvinists. And so okay, but let's just say that's true. We are dead in our sins. We need God to do something, don't we? So, He needs to initiate something. I think He did. I think that's what incarnation is all about. He sent Jesus. He sent the Gospel to be inspired through holy apostles who were inspired to write these words down. That's an intervention of God. In other words, if left to ourselves, everything you just said is absolutely true. But God hasn't left us to ourselves. He has engaged us. He has confronted us. He has brought life giving truth to dead men. We were cast out of the garden. That means we're separated from fellowship with Him. He could have just left us cast out of the garden and not done anything, but He didn't. He comes to us. He condescends to us. That's what incarnation is all about.

And He brings truth. Truth is powerful, it's the Word. And we're responsible, meaning able to respond to that life giving truth. And so, when the Scripture talks about, for example, Jesus saying, in John 5:40, "You refuse to come to me, so that you may have life." Well, notice what He's saying there. He didn't say, I refuse to give you life, regeneration, so that you would certainly come to me. In the mind of Jesus, it seems that you must come to me in order to have life. So, He's saying they're dead. But if you come to me, you'll have life.

In John chapter 20:31, it says, "These things have been written," speaking of the Gospel. "These things have been written so that you may believe, and that by believing, you may have life." So once again, yes, we're dead. Calvinists, I agree with you. But what's the solution to that? The gospel, the life giving truth. Believe so that you may have life. In the Calvinist Ordo Salutis, the order of salvation, in my estimation is backwards. Because they'll ultimately say that you must be regenerated, which means to be given life. Reborn in order to believe, so as to get eternal life, is the way they'll interpret those verses. And I don't see that convincingly taught in that passage or any other. It doesn't seem to me that God is just arbitrarily or unilaterally giving people new life, causing them to believe, leaving the rest born in this incapacitated state where they're ultimately if not blameworthy.

Frank:

If He wants all to be saved, why are some not saved if He's doing everything?

Leighton:

Exactly. And the reason they're not saved on Calvinism, is because God didn't really want them. God didn't really send Jesus to die for them. And ultimately, they can end up in hell and say, I mean, legitimately...and I'm not saying they would say this...Calvinists always say, well, they wouldn't say that. They can't even talk back to God. I'm saying, legitimately, they could have the excuse, I was born unloved by my maker. I was born without the capacity to believe His truth, even when it was made plain to me. I was born without the ability to desire that. I couldn't want Him because of the nature He created within me from birth. I have no control over that. That is the best excuse, Frank, I can possibly think of for being an unbeliever. God's chosen me for this. He created me for this end.

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And there are actually some former Calvinists like Derrick Webb, who was the former lead singer for Caedmon's Call, who I grew up listening to, because he would write songs on Calvinism. And he has some famous songs that support Calvinistic doctrine. He's become an atheist now, and he actually cites this. He actually says, I don't know why people are trying to convince me to become a Christian again, because it's all up to God. I'm like Lazarus in the grave. If He's chosen me...

And he even says, "If this is all real, I hope I'm chosen. I want to be chosen. I want him to convince me of it." Because what has he done? He's abrogated his responsibility over to God because he's convinced Calvinism is biblical. And he's ultimately saying, and one of the lyrics in the song tragically is, "Maybe this is all real, and I'm just not chosen." And so, what he's ultimately done is said, you know, I believe the Bible does teach Calvinism. And if it's true, maybe I'm just not elect. And that's devastating to me, because I think the Bible reveals that God has provided salvation for every man, woman, boy and girl. And that they're responsible for whether they choose to put faith and trust in Him, or walk away.

Frank:

Yeah, the atonement, the L in T.U.L.I.P., it's limited only in the sense that not everybody accepts it. But it's available to everyone.

Leighton:

Exactly.

Frank:

Yeah. So, because people reject God, that's in the sense that it's limited.

Leighton:

Jesus talked about the serpent lifted in the desert, in John 3, same thing. That you look to the provision, and you will be healed. If you don't look to the provision in faith, you're not going to be healed. But it's provided for everybody to look to. So, whose fault is it, if you don't look to the provision for healing? It's yours, but God's provided it for everyone. And so, when Christ was lifted up for the sins of the world, He was lifted up and provided atonement or healing for the world, for all people. If they refuse to look to Him in faith, that's their fault. Not a lacking of the provision. Not a lacking of grace, not a lacking of God's love. Which ultimately, and though Calvinists may not want to say it that way, because it's not as palatable and doesn't seem as biblical, that's just the natural, and I think logical implication of their worldview. It's that ultimately, God hasn't provided for those who end up in hell.

Frank:

When the Calvinist says that we're dead in our trespasses and sin, is he getting that more from Ephesians 2? Where Paul says, "But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy,

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made us alive with Christ. Even when we were dead in transgressions, it is by grace, you've been saved." Is that where that comes from?

Leighton:

Sure. And would say I agree with that. But does He make us alive? Well, Colossians 2:12. We're raised with Him through faith. So how does He make us alive? By grace, through faith.

Frank:

That's the next passage, the famous passage. You know, it is by grace you have been saved. That's what he gets into. "And God raised us up and has seated us with Him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages, we might show the incomparable riches of his grace expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace, you have been saved through faith. And it is not from yourselves. It is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast." Now they'll try and say that means that the faith is the gift, when it's the salvation that's the gift.

Leighton:

There's a quote from even Calvin's commentary where he actually says that. He actually says, it's actually salvation by grace through faith is the gift, not just faith.

Frank:

Because in Greek, the tenses don't match if you're trying to say faith is the gift.

Leighton:

Exactly. But yeah, and again, I try to concede as much as I can to Calvinists, just to help them along. I just say, it's not enough just to say faith is a gift, because we can say, yeah, faith comes by hearing and hearing comes from the Word of God. So, my next breath is a gift of God. But I'm still responsible for how I use that. My ability to reason, to think, to have faith, to have trust in something, or even Him, it is a gift from God. But that's not what your claim is. Your claim is that it's an effectual gift, given to some people and withheld from all others. And so, what in that verse says that? Even if I concede with you that faith is individually given, or that faith is a gift from God, how does that prove that's an effectual gift from God, given to some people and not everyone?

Versus, it's a gift like breath, like common grace, like the ability to reason to think. I can put my trust in Allah, and fly a plane into the building, hoping to get 72 virgins. That's a lot of trust. It's a lot of faith. You talk about the faith of an atheist. They're putting a lot of trust in the scientific concepts of evolution and everything else. They're putting a lot of faith in that. Their ability to do that, is a gift from God. But they're putting their faith in the wrong thing. They're not putting their faith in the person of Jesus Christ. And we believe they're going to be held responsible for that. Why? Because they were actually able to respond to the word, the truth, the incarnation, the light that comes from God.

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Frank:

Doesn't the word dead here in this context, Leighton, I think maybe the Calvinists may take it this way. Correct me if I'm wrong. That unless God regenerates us, we can't in any way except His free gift. That's what they think the word dead means here. Do you think the proper interpretation of dead means that we can't, in any way merit favor with God, and earn salvation through works? That's how we're dead, because we've already sinned. So, we've broken our relationship with God. That's the sense in which we're dead. It's not the sense that we can't perceive God, or we can't receive the gift that God is providing. We can do that. But since we're dead, we need that. But it's not that we can't perceive it or receive it. That's what they seem to be thinking.

Leighton:

The way I put it in my book was, we're dead, more like the prodigal was said to be dead. He was lost, now he's found. He was dead, now he's alive. Doesn't mean that he couldn't come to his senses and return home. So, the deadness is the idiomatic use of being separated in the far country due to rebellion. Much like the church in Sardis. He says, you have a reputation of being alive, but you're dead. Wake up and renew what remains. Even Calvinistic commentators don't interpret dead there, nekros, the same word, to mean that the church is unable to respond to his warning. They don't interpret it that way. Because they understand the idiomatic use of deadness there is to say, you're separated because of your rebellious behavior.

And the same is true of us. We're not born dead in the sense that we can't respond to his life giving truth. We're dead in the sense that we're outside the garden. We're separated due to our rebellion. We're in the far country. What do we need to do? We need to humble ourselves, as the Bible says, over and over and over again. Humble yourselves and draw near so as to be reconciled. The appeal of God to be reconciled is sent to all men. Even Calvinists believe that's indiscriminately sent to all men. The question is whether all men can respond positively to that appeal of reconciliation. We as provisionists or non-Calvinists, we say, absolutely. God's provided for all; anyone can come. If they choose not to, they're blameworthy for not choosing to come.

Frank:

And if God makes all the choices and they can't choose Him, how can they be blameworthy? It just doesn't seem to be just.

Leighton:

The answer is, who are you to talk back to God? Which you already demonstrated, that's not necessarily the context of Romans 9. Again, if you go back to the context of, who are you, oh, man to talk back to God? Is that an Israelite saying, because he's hardened and calloused in his rebellion, because he's grown self-righteous in rebellion, and that now God is blinding him from the truth of the Messiah, so that they cry out, Crucify Him, and brings about the Passover? That in my mind, is the guy He's saying to, who are you, oh, man to talk back to the Creator. Because you're a hardened Israelite that's being used to bring about the Passover.

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And what the Calvinists says is, no, that's a reprobate. That's a free will Armenian who's crying out, who are you, God to reprobate, somebody? In other words, doom them from the womb. Who are you, oh, God to choose somebody for destruction, who you give no real responsibility to? And if Paul was actually answering that objection, again, like I said, we would have to become Calvinists. But you can't just assume that's the interlocutor in the mind of Paul. You've got to establish it using the whole of Scripture. Which I don't believe that they've significantly done.

Frank:

Last topic. I think we're predestined to do one more topic, Leighton. And that is sovereignty. That's such a big issue, it seems with Calvinists. And RC Sproul would say about God's sovereignty, that God is in control of everything. If there's one molecule out there that he doesn't have control over, then He's not sovereign. What is the proper definition of God's sovereignty? And is it somehow taking away from God's sovereignty to suggest that human beings have libertarian free will?

Leighton:

Yeah, I think Calvinists have wrongly interpreted the word sovereignty. Matter of fact, there's actually on my blogsite, I quoted from another reformed thinker who actually is correcting other reformed theologians for their misuse of the word sovereignty. He says, we actually should be talking about meticulous providence. When we talk about the determinism of how God works, not sovereignty. Because the word sovereignty is about His right to rule. His kingship, in other words. And so, when we talk about a king or a ruler has the right to rule his nation, however he wants to, if he wants to micromanage everybody, he has the right to do that. But the freedom of the sovereign, is he can give certain rights and abilities to his subjects as he chooses to. And so, he can be in control, without necessarily being controlling, because he's giving a level of control over to his subjects.

And so, in the in the same way, we can say that God sits in the heavens and does whatever he pleases, as Psalm 113 says. But it goes on to say that the heavenlies belong to the Lord, but he has given the earth over to man. Which is why we would say there are principalities and rulers in the darkness, who are either actually called authorities. And they're given reign to rule, until the judgment, until the final day when God makes all things right and we established the kingdom.

Which is why we pray, God let your will be done in heaven as it is on earth. Why would we even pray that if determinism is true, because everything is being done exactly the way God determined it to be in heaven and on earth, and in exactly the same way? So why would God instruct us in the Lord's Prayer to say, Lord, let your will be done here on earth as it is in heaven? Because we want God's will to be done, because some people aren't doing God's will.

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Frank:

He gives us the dignity of causality, that we can actually affect time and eternity.

Leighton:

So, it comes back to sovereignty, how you define sovereignty, what you understand of sovereignty. An illustration I've used in my book as well, just to help people to see this. And I know others have used this.

Frank:

What's the name of the book, by the way?

Leighton:

"The Potter's Promise", is the first book. And then "God's Provision for all is a Defense of His Goodness", is my second book. So, both of them touch on similar topics. But the issue of sovereignty...I really do believe that we have a higher view of sovereignty than our Calvinist friends do. And the way I illustrate that, is that, if you're walking on a boardwalk, and you come across a man playing chess. He's playing both sides of the chessboard, he's moving the white piece, then he goes over, and he moves the black piece. Sir, why are you playing both sides?

Frank:

The guy controlling the white is an idiot. [laughter]

Leighton:

Why are you playing both sides of the chessboard? And he says, it's the only way I know how to ensure my victory, if I play both sides. I have to control both the black and the white pieces in order to ensure that what I have destined will come to pass, that's the only way I can really do that. You go down the boardwalk a little ways, and you see another chess master, and he's sitting there playing the best chess masters in all the world, as far as the eye can see. And one after another, he's just beaten them, one right after the other. Which one are you going to go home and brag about? The second one. And you would say, why is he more sovereign? Because he's better at chess. He's better than all his opponents. He's not controlling the moves of his opponents. He's just better than they are.

And that's my view of sovereignty. God is taking on opponents that, yes, He created. But that's why he's so much better than they are. And they can't handle Him, because He's just so much better. So, our view of sovereignty is not in any way impugning the character or the goodness of God by suggesting that He's controlling evil, or that He's causing evil, or that He's the one who's moving the hand of Satan in these kinds of ways. But instead saying, no, He's able to counter, and redeem, and bring good out of those free moves of his opponents. To bring about His good purpose and His plan, which is exactly what I think Romans 8:28 and Ephesians 1:11 is talking about. That God's bringing about presently actively working good, redeeming good, despite the free evil choices of creation. And I think that is a much more beautiful view of sovereignty than the Calvinistic system.

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Frank:

It brings more glory to God in that way, doesn't it?

Leighton:

I would think so.

Frank:

He has that capacity. I like to say it this way, that I think God is so sovereign, that He can get His will done through our free will.

Leighton:

That's a great way to put it.

Frank:

Yeah, He can do it. He's that good. You could even use an illustration with a parent too, right? I mean, to a certain extent, you have authority over your children. And if you were to try and micromanage them forever, they would never make moral choices of their own. But you do have the capacity to back off and give them free will, so they can mature. And God does that for us as well.

Leighton:

When you do that, that doesn't make you less sovereign.

Frank:

No, you're still sovereign.

Leighton:

It won't make you less strong. Because you gave your four year old daughter, the choice whether she eats her vegetables or not, doesn't make all your muscles just shrink up. And that's sometimes the accusation, that if God does give freedom of choice, He's lost His sovereignty, or lost His power. No, God has the right to use his power however He chooses to use it. And if He chooses to allow you to have a free choice, that doesn't in any way lessen Him, or His power, or His goodness. And in helping people to see that, not the false dilemma, or the false dichotomy that sometimes is painted. Either God is controlling everything deterministically, or He's just this weak, namby pamby, wringing His hands kind of God, that just doesn't know what's going to happen. And He's just uncertain with everything, and anything can happen, and we just don't know. That's the way it's painted sometimes. If those are my two choices, I'm going to go with Calvinism, you know? Because I want this powerful God that's controlling everything. But those are not your two options. There's, I think, a better option, a biblical option, right in the middle there, where God in His sovereignty has given us the freedom of choice.

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Frank:

Yeah. And in another sense too, I know people think that since God is sovereign, in the Calvinistic way, that we couldn't have free choice. That would be a contradiction. But in reality, just because God knows what we're going to do, since He's outside of time (we're going more philosophy here now, rather than just the Scriptures) doesn't mean we don't have free choice. I mean, knowledge does not necessarily imply causation. We can know the sun's going to rise in the east tomorrow, but we're not causing the sun to come up in the east, right? Just because God knows how we're going to do or what we're going to do, doesn't mean he's causing us to do it directly. Doesn't mean he's taken away our freewill. And some people think that that's, I don't know, they seem to think that since God knows what we're going to do, we don't have free will, which does not follow.

Leighton:

It doesn't, yeah. And that's because of the philosophical difficulties with that. That's why so much ink has been spilled over the years with the omniscience of God. And one of the reasons that open theists exists. It's because the way they're trying to deal with that same problem is just saying, well, God, maybe He doesn't exhaustively know things in the way traditionally, we think He knows them. They're trying to deal with the problem that way. And Boetheists, and C.S. Lewis, and others outside of time, that God knows all things because He's God, not because He causes it. But because He's at all places, at all times. He exists in all places at all times.

I think the way C.S. Lewis talked about it, is if you thought about the timeline, you know, drawn on a page as a pencil, that God would be the paper. He's at all places, at all times. So, He knows all things because He is at all places at all times. He's omnipresent. And therefore, He's all-knowing because He knows it in the eternal now. Can I understand that? No, it's beyond my comprehension. But any philosophical worldview that comes along and ultimately has the implications that we've just got through discussing, with regard to God not really loving and providing for most of humanity. The reason people going to hell, because Jesus didn't really die for them. And they're not even really rejecting an atonement, because they never had the atonement.

Frank:

They never had the ability to reject it. They were pre-determined to reject it.

Leighton:

A philosophical worldview that leads to those kinds of implications and conclusions, is not a biblical philosophy. And it's not a philosophy that's supported within the pages of Scripture. And just like, I don't think open theism is either supported in the pages of Scripture. Because I do think there's too many passages of Scripture about God's knowledge of all things, that I would reject the interpretation of my open theist friends. And because I'm nice to my open theist friends, just like, I'm nice to my determinist friends, some people accuse me of being an open theist in this regard. No, you can be friendly to both sides. I have people on my broadcast that hold the differing philosophical perspectives.

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But that's why we have these discussions. That's why the EPS ETS meetings and things that we go to, you have different groups getting up and giving their philosophical explanation to this or this. And I love that. I love the ability to iron sharpening iron, to learn from these things. To grapple with these ideas, to hear much more intelligent people than I ever hope to be, kind of diving into these issues. But going back to always the authority of the Scripture. To say, this is my guide. This is what I want to go to as my authority. And to always say, I want to make sure I interpret Scripture, in a way that doesn't impugn the character of God or doesn't give anyone that excuse that they might be looking for to reject God. i.e., maybe God didn't really love me. Maybe God didn't choose me. I don't think anybody should have that excuse.

Frank:

Leighton, what's your website so people can learn more?

Leighton:

On this topic, Soteriology101.com. You can even just type in "Leighton Flowers" in any Google search. Because obviously, there's a lot of controversy about this particular topic. That's where you would find it. You can find that the blog site, like I said, I've got a couple of books, the Soteriology 101 podcast, and the YouTube broadcast is more popular than I ever thought it would be.

Frank:

How often do you post there or podcast there?

Leighton:

Probably about weekly. A weekly broadcast. Some of them are Shorts that we put out from clips from a broadcast. You were on the show not long ago and that was very helpful. Because what I'm trying to do is platform more scholars from other worldviews. I have Calvinists on too, but I want people to hear the differing perspectives, to help them to objectively view the Duck and the Rabbit, to make a good, intelligent, well informed decision.

Frank:

You know, it would be interesting, if we could arrange it maybe. Would be to have someone who's a friendly Calvinist, who wants to debate some of these issues. Maybe we debate Romans 9 and Ephesians 1.

Leighton:

Sure. You'd be my debate partner?

Frank:

No, I'll be the moderator.

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Leighton:

Oh, I was going to say, I was wanting to sit next to you. [laughter] We've done some of that. We debated Joel Webbon. We debated a couple of guys, I don't recommend to debate down in Houston, because these guys were really almost even hyper-Calvinists. Even according to a lot of my Calvinist friends, these guys were more extreme. And then James White, I've debated as well, years ago. That was my first debate. And so, polished a little bit better since then, but at the same time, even the content of that debate, I think, was at least demonstrating what Romans 9 was really talking about with regard to who the interlocutor is, what the lump of clay is representing, the nation, like we already talked about earlier.

But I think those debates can be helpful. I think, open discussions like you and I are having right now are even more beneficial. If you were a Calvinist, or a Calvinist was sitting right next to me like this, and we were having open discussion, maybe with a moderator, to make sure we were given fair opportunities. I think that can be a really beneficial thing, because it's not so stringent that you're not able to engage each other. When you said this, what did you mean by that exactly?

Frank:

Formal debates are not as helpful as an interactive debate where you can question one another and interact. The duel and speech debates, that's formal debate. There's value to it, but I think the interaction is really where people learn and can sharpen one another.

Leighton:

Yeah, and that's why I've always invited James White, or Joel Webbon, or other Calvinistic friends. Chris Dates has been on. I invite them on the program, because I just want to have that open dialogue. I think we can learn to disagree without being overly disagreeable. I think we can have cordial conversations with each other respectfully, walking away saying, we agree to disagree. Love you brother, but we see things differently. And that's a part of maturity in the body, is being able to disagree with people. You worship with them still, and you believe the essentials of the faith, but you spar with each other about the deeper doctrines of grace.

Frank:

All right, friends. It's been great having Leighton on here. Leighton Flowers, check him out online. Soteriology 101. If you Google his name, you'll find him. There's so much more that we could cover, but we want to keep this in a manageable time. Give me the name of the books again.

Leighton:

"Potter's Promise" and "God's Provision for All." Both can be found on Amazon.

Frank:

Perfect. All right, friends. We'll see you here next time. God bless.

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