



CALVINISM & ARMINIANISM

GIL RUGH

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E-Mail: ihcc@ihcc.org

FAX: (402) 483-6716

Phone: (402) 483-4541

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To many people the subject of Calvinism conjures images of dusty theologians bickering over points that do not make a lot of sense. It is not seen as an issue of much importance in the average person's daily life.

Believe it or not, the issues surrounding Calvinism lie at the heart of the Christian life. Your convictions on this point determine much of how you face each day as a child of God. It affects your response and reaction to the situations you find yourself in and how you view your responsibility before God.

A Brief Comparison

Today the Church as a whole is basically Arminian. That does not mean that most church's *doctrinal* statements are Arminian, but most believers function as Arminians in the way they live. This creates all kinds of difficulties for the Church.

Arminianism has given us the idea that man has some ability to deal with his own sin—some ability to respond and accept God's salvation on his own. This view of man ultimately weakens our perspective on sin. After all, if I have some ability to deal with sin through my own power, then my focus is going to be on myself rather than on God.

Arminian theology turns our attention to man rather than God. Man is not viewed as totally depraved, totally helpless, worthless and unable to do anything pleasing to God. Rather, he is seen as cooperating with God in bringing about salvation. Compare this to Calvinism which teaches that only through God's power—sovereignly and supernaturally—can we be enabled to live a godly life.

But I Would Rather Do It Myself

The Church today emphasizes a salvation that depends upon man and his response. Evangelists often implore people to “make a decision for Christ,” as if it were entirely up to them. This leads some unbelievers to arrogantly say, “Well, maybe I will decide for Christ—but *maybe I will not*. I will have to think about it.”

This view blurs the true picture, for the decision concerning who will be saved is ultimately in God’s hands. It is not man who accomplishes salvation at all but God who saves. It is not man who chooses God, but rather God who chooses man. All man can do is cast himself on the mercy of God and trust in the salvation that He has provided. Even the ability to trust and believe is a work of God in the heart of the elect. No one will come to salvation who does not come as a result of the sovereign work of God in eternity past in choosing that person and drawing him to salvation.

A Brief Background

The names *Calvinism* and *Arminianism* are derived from the names of men whose teachings have come to be associated with theological systems. *Calvinism* comes from John Calvin, a French theologian and Reformer who lived in the first half of the 1500s. Calvin very ably defended the doctrines that came to be known as Calvinism, but they did not originate with him. Some 1100 years before John Calvin, Augustine presented the facts of Calvinistic theology very clearly, and *he* had ably defended them against Pelagius and others who held an “Arminian” view.

Arminianism gets its name from James Arminius. We are not as familiar with Arminius as we are with Calvin, but we do know that he lived a little later than Calvin—from 1560 to 1609—so he was four years old when John Calvin died.

As with the tenets of Calvinism, the doctrines of Arminianism did not begin with James Arminius. They go back to the third or fourth century. But they have been associated with his name because his followers, after his death, presented them in a systemized fashion.

Arminius taught that although God’s grace provides salvation, the ultimate choice regarding salvation is man’s. To a large extent

then, salvation is a result of man's work not God's work, because salvation hinges on man's response. There would be no salvation without the act of man in response to God. Arminians would firmly agree, as would all Evangelicals, that salvation is provided by God alone. But in the Arminian system salvation is *accomplished* by an act of man.

The Anti-Points of Arminius

Calvinism is traditionally summarized in five points. But it is interesting to note that Calvin's "five points" find their origin not in Calvin, but in the "five points" of Arminius! Arminius' followers presented to a church council five points upon which they disagreed with Calvinistic theology. The council, in responding to those five points, presented the "five points" of Calvinistic doctrine. Thus the Calvinistic doctrine became identified with five distinct tenets.

We remember the five points of Calvinism by the acrostic, "TULIP": *Total depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace and Perseverance of the saints.*

"T" is for Total Depravity

This is the first point, and in many ways it is the most important. If you are clear on the total depravity of man, everything else begins to fall into place.

When God presents His Gospel in the Book of Romans, He begins with a presentation of man's total depravity and condemnation as a result of sin. From Romans 1:18 through 3:20, man is seen as sinful and depraved because that is the first thing you have to understand to receive the Gospel.

Total depravity means that man is corrupted and depraved in every part of his being. He is saturated by his sinfulness. Sin has so corrupted man that he is unable to function in a way that is pleasing to God. He can do nothing acceptable to God. Man is controlled and dominated by his sin to the extent that he cannot respond positively in faith to an offer of salvation.

This sin is ours by virtue of our relationship to Adam, and it characterizes us from birth: "Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned" (Romans 5:12).

As the federal head of the human race, Adam acted on our behalf. When he acted in sin, *his* sin became *our* sin. And since we are all descendants of Adam, sin is ours by virtue of our relationship to him. If you have any doubts about our relationship to Adam or of our having sinned with him, just look around you and see. All human beings are dying, and death is the penalty for sin . . . “death spread to all men, because all sinned” (Romans 5:12).

In Psalm 51:5, David writes, “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me.” David is not saying that conception is sinful but that at conception he became a sinner, because as soon as conception occurred, he was identified with Adam. So sin does not begin when we commit rebellious acts. Sin begins when we are conceived in the womb. That further supports the fact that our sin centers in Adam’s act.

We see the same point in Psalm 58:3: “The wicked are estranged from the womb; these who speak lies go astray from birth.” From *birth* the wicked are separated from God. And who are the wicked? We all are! Isaiah writes: “All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way” (Isaiah 53:6). We are all sinners in our very being—in what we are from the point of conception.

As sinful beings, we are incapable of doing anything that is pleasing to God. Romans 3:12 says, “All have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one.” Romans 8:7,8 adds, “The mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, *for it is not even able to do so*; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God” (emphasis added).

These passages clearly illustrate the futility of fallen beings in attempting to do anything acceptable or pleasing to God. Their submitting to God is a total impossibility.

Total depravity does *not* mean, however, that sinners always act as wickedly as they could. There are restraints on our sin—thank God! But men are as totally corrupt as they can be, even though the expression of that corruption is somewhat restrained and limited—at least in ways that we can see.

This is the Calvinist view of sin—total depravity.

Arminians, however, believe that while all men are sinners, God has given “common grace” to all men. This “common grace” enables men to decide for God—to make certain decisions that are pleasing to God—to become a partner, if you will, in dealing with sin. God cannot deal with sin in the life of an individual until that individual decides to cooperate. So salvation becomes a joint venture from the Arminian viewpoint.

“U” is for Unconditional Election

This second point in Calvinistic doctrine simply states that at some time before Creation (usually called “eternity past”) God sovereignly selected from among sinful humanity those who would be the recipients of His salvation (see Ephesians 1:4,5). This “election,” (the word simply means “choice,”) was unconditional in that it was not based on anything that man would do or be. God decided simply on the basis of His own character—sovereignly. It was His arbitrary decision, if you can accept this word without its negative connotations. Ephesians 1 puts it: “According to His good pleasure” (v. 5, lit.).

Teaching on the sovereignty of God often causes people to react negatively. We do not like to hear about it because naturally we prefer man-centered theology. Man likes to be at the center of his world.

Remember the Garden of Eden? With what words did Satan tempt Eve? “You will be like God” (Gen. 3:5). We still have that desire today. We may *share* our world with God, but we do not want to be humbled to the point of being nobodies—helpless and hopeless. And yet, that is where the biblical emphasis lies.

In 2 Timothy 1:9 we read that God has “called us with a holy calling *not according to our works*, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity” (emphasis added). God’s call, which involves our being drawn to salvation as a result of our election, was not according to our works but according to His grace. Before the creation God sovereignly called us. On what basis? According to His own purpose and grace. The basis for election rests in the very character of God, and that is as far back as we can take it.

Some Calvinists believe that God not only elected some for

salvation but that He also elected some to spend eternity in hell. This is known as “double predestination.” I do not believe the Bible supports this idea. The Bible clearly teaches that God sovereignly chooses some for salvation. It does *not* state, however, that He chooses or predestines anyone to hell. People go to hell because they are sinners. God did not have to *do* anything to send sinners to hell, but He did intervene that some might be saved. I do not believe that you can find biblical support for double predestination.

Arminians will teach election also, of course. They have to because the Bible clearly talks about election! But they teach that God elected some to salvation based upon His foreknowledge—that He looked ahead in time and saw that some would choose to believe in Christ when given the opportunity. On the basis of this foreknowledge, God chose those whom He knew would believe. But again you see that the Arminian view of salvation centers on man and his choice. God is reduced to an observer, but man has the *power*.

An Arminian will say, “No, man does not have the power. God provides all men with just enough power to believe. That is what we call ‘common grace.’ ” But common grace does not resolve the question, because when some men and women are confronted with the Gospel, they don’t believe! If all men are given enough grace to respond of their own will, then why do some respond while others do not? The only conclusion, from an Arminian point of view, is that somehow, some people are more worthy. The focus again returns to man.

Ultimately, Arminians see election as based upon the actions of man. Calvinists see election as based on the sovereign choice of God.

“L” is for *Limited Atonement*

This third point of Calvinism which is often referred to as “particular redemption,” teaches that Christ died only for the elect. Since God only intended to save the elect, He made provision only for those He intended to save. Therefore, Christ’s atonement is restricted in that it only provides for those whom God has chosen.

I do not believe this idea is consistent with proper exegesis of the God’s Word. The concept of limited atonement seems to be based upon “logical reasoning” rather than explicit Scripture passages.

Those who believe in a limited atonement would say that it is theologically incorrect to tell someone that Christ died for his sin, because if he is not one of the elect, Christ did *not* die for his sins. Christ died only for the sin of the elect.

Of course, the strict, five-point Calvinists believe that you should still present the Gospel to the lost because you do not know who the elect are. But they do not believe that you should tell an unbeliever that Christ died for his sin and exhort him to believe, because if he *is* one of the elect, he will respond. And if he is *not* one of the elect, then there has been no provision for his sin.

I believe a denial of the universal provision necessitates an abnormal approach to interpreting a wide variety of passages of Scripture. The Bible clearly teaches that Christ died for the sins *of the world*.

Christ's death made provision for all of humanity even though that provision is applied only to the elect.

In John 6:51 Jesus said, "I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he shall live forever; and the bread also which I shall give for the life *of the world* is My flesh" (emphasis added).

In passages such as this, you see that in the death of Christ a universal provision was made. An unlimited atonement was provided for every person who would be born into the human race. But that provision will only be applied and become effective for those who are the elect of God.

Those who believe in a limited atonement redefine *world* in such passages to be the world *of the elect*. But I do not believe that you can demonstrate anywhere in Scripture where the word *world* refers only to the elect. If you take your concordance and look up the word *world* in the writings of John, you will see how subjective it is to arbitrarily pull out some references to *world* and say, "Well, that must mean the world *of the elect*." There is no interpretive reason to do that, unless you have come to the Scriptures with a preconceived idea.

Support for an Unlimited Atonement

In 2 Corinthians 5:19 we are told that Christ's death was a reconciliation to the world: "Namely, that God was in Christ reconciling

the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation." This does not mean that everyone in the world is going to be reconciled in the sense of salvation, but nonetheless, Christ's ministry is one of reconciliation of the world.

In 1 Timothy 2:6 we are told that Christ gave Himself as a ransom *for all*. It would seem rather arbitrary to interpret this verse as *Christ gave Himself as a ransom for all (the elect)*, when in practically the same breath, Paul says, "God desires all men to be saved, and to come to the knowledge of the truth." Who are the "all" in verse four? Why would the "all" in verse four refer to everyone, while the "all" in verse six be interpreted to mean only the elect?

First Timothy 4:10 presents a real problem for five-point Calvinists: "It is for this we labor and strive, because we have fixed our hope on the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of believers." That interpretation would not make sense at all! (See also Titus 2:11; Hebrews 2:9; 1 John 2:2; 4:14 for more passages that disprove the *world equals the elect* theory.)

Hebrews 10:29 is very clear:

How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant *by which he was sanctified*, and has insulted the Spirit of grace? (emphasis added).

So there is a sense in which unbelievers have been impacted by the blood of Christ. Provision was made for them, but they have trampled it underfoot.

One well-known evangelical writer, speaking in defense of limited atonement, says that 2 Peter 2:1 is the most difficult verse to explain:

But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, *even denying the Master who bought them*, bringing swift destruction upon themselves (emphasis added).

Here, Peter is clearly talking about unbelievers. And yet, they deny the Master *who bought them*. There was a universal provision made for them, which they have not personally accepted by faith.

These are just a sample of the many passages that support unlimited atonement—that Christ made provision for the world. Since He died for all, it is definitely theologically correct to tell an unbeliever, “Christ died for you!” But the application of that provision extends only to the elect.

“I” is for Irresistible Grace

Also known as the “efficacious call,” this tenet of Calvinism refers to the work of the Holy Spirit in drawing the elect to salvation. The grace of God in drawing the elect to believe in Christ is irresistible; the elect *will* come to believe. When God chose them in eternity past for salvation, He also ordained the means by which they would come to believe in Christ. And when the Holy Spirit does His work of drawing them to faith, His work of drawing is irresistible.

In the epistles the idea of irresistible grace is described as the “call of God.” Romans 1:6,7 says: “Among whom you also are the called of Jesus Christ; to all who are beloved of God in Rome, called as saints.” In the Gospels the word *call* is used differently. For example, Matthew 22:14 says: “For many are called, but few are chosen.” When you come to the epistles, however, Paul talks about “the called” only in the context of the elect.

Romans 8:30 reads: “And whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.” Note here that the *called are justified*. He is speaking of an effective call. Those who are called *are* justified; those who *are* justified are glorified.

The word *called* is used a number of times in 1 Corinthians.

“God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. . . . we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. . . . For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble” (1 Cor. 1:9,23,24,26).

The irresistible grace of God guarantees that the elect will believe in Christ and experience God’s salvation. Without irresistible

grace, there would be no effective election. This is where we would disagree with the Arminians. The Arminians believe that by common grace all men have the same opportunity. The call of the Spirit of God goes out to all, and some resist the grace of God and are lost. They do not believe in irresistible grace.

We should keep this in mind as we present the Gospel. Paul says, “For this reason I endure all things for the sake of those who are chosen, that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus and with it eternal glory” (2 Tim. 2:10). Our job is not to cajole or manipulate people with sad stories or high pressure the lost into believing in the Savior. We present the almighty, all-powerful Word of God so that the Spirit of God might impress it upon the heart of unbelievers and draw the elect to salvation, which is in Christ Jesus.

It is *God’s* work, and *only* God’s work, which brings about salvation. We need to be very careful. I believe many people respond in evangelistic meetings because of the emotion of the moment—not that the Spirit of God cannot use emotion. And there is a certain pressure in the Word of God: “Now is the *acceptable time*, behold, now is the *day of salvation*” (2 Cor. 6:2, emphasis added). But we are not trying to talk people into salvation. We are not trying to pressure them into making a decision for Christ. We are presenting the Word of God as clearly as we can in the Spirit so that the Spirit can convict hearts and draw men and women to salvation in Christ.

“P” is for Perseverance of the Saints

The final point of Calvinistic theology is commonly known as the security of the believer. I think *perseverance* is the more accurate expression. *Security* conveys a passive attitude—I just sit back and let God carry me to glory. But correct Calvinistic theology talks about perseverance of the saints. The saints *will* persevere; they *will* be faithful. Through trials, through difficulty, through hardship, they will endure. There is no sitting back and floating to heaven. It is an active perseverance through which the true saints will emerge victorious.

First John 2:19 tells us, “They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, in order that it might be shown that they all are not of us.” In other words, those who do not persevere

demonstrate their unbelief. True believers do not stop persevering.

Romans 8:1 says: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." This is our established condition: no condemnation. In that sense we are secure.

A passage we have already discussed, Romans 8:29,30, describes the entire process: "For whom He foreknew, He also predestined . . . and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified." It is a package deal, if you will, beginning with God's sovereign work in eternity past, and carrying us to eternity future, when we will be glorified in His presence.

Calvinists assert that salvation is totally the work of God. If, as the Arminians believe, salvation is the work of man *in response* to the work of God, then there can be no security. For how does one get saved? By making a decision. It follows then that if salvation is a choice *I* make, then I can also choose at some future point to change my mind. I can lose that salvation by making a decision to reject it.

Not every Arminian denies eternal security, of course. Keep in mind that this is just a general summary. But to make the distinction between Calvinism and Arminianism clear on this point, we must bring it to its logical conclusion. If salvation depends upon me in its initiation, then why does it not depend on me for its continuation?

On the other hand, if salvation is the work of God from beginning to end, then none of it depends on me. So we are left with Philippians 1:6: "For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus." God, who began the work of salvation, will continue that work of perfecting and completing us until the day of Jesus Christ.

Focus on Man or Focus on God

The two theologies of Calvinism and Arminianism conceive the plan of salvation in quite different terms. One makes salvation depend on the work of God, the other on a work of man. One regards faith as part of God's gift of salvation, the other as man's own contribution to salvation. One gives all the glory of saving believers to God; the other divides the praise between God (who "built the machinery" of salvation) and man (who, by believing, operates it).

Plainly, these differences are important.

Over the years the Church has distanced itself from Calvinistic theology. Most people who talk about Calvinism have a vague notion that it has something to do with election and that God has made some arbitrary choices in sending some people to hell who never had a chance and so on. This leads to emotional responses, and we end up deciding our theology by our emotions rather than on a clear understanding of Scripture.

The end result has been disastrous. Today we have believers and professing believers trying to deal with the issue of sin, and they look to *man* for solutions! Why? *Because they do not see God as completely sovereign and in control.* Therefore, it is up to us! And we begin looking to other men who may have come up with better solutions. As a result we become absorbed with man, rather than God.

Whether we realize it or not, our theology pervades the way we live our lives. Even if we do not know what our theology is, we all have a theology that we live by. When disaster strikes, we react according to the way we view God. We either recognize Him as in control and rely on His sufficiency or we run around saying, "What will I do?"

What we should do is come back and search the Scriptures. We need to make sure that our theology is a *biblical* theology, so that the Spirit of God can work His purposes and plans, which are always in accord with the Word of God, in developing the people of God into a body that brings glory to God.

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