

Monergism versus synergism

Introduction

I have written on this topic a number of times in the last thirty years, mostly in connection with papers on the Doctrines of Grace or Calvinism. However, a fresh summary of the subject is required as the topic is being discussed in various circles, often by critics of Calvinism like Mike Winger. The level of discussion is frequently superficial and sometimes downright facile. It is expressed very badly in terms of theological maturity; hence the need to talk about it now.

What do these terms mean?

We can keep this simple. There is no need to wax lyrical about this.

Monergism

'Mon-' is from 'mono' meaning 'single', 'alone' or 'one'; '- ergism' stems from the Greek word *ergon*, meaning work. In short: a single work; a work done alone.

Synergism

This derives from the Greek *sunergos* 'working together', from *sun-* 'together' or 'with' + *ergon* 'work'. In short: co-operation in something; a joint effort.

In theological terms, monergism is the teaching that regeneration is the work of God without the assistance of human effort or co-operation. Synergism claims that man co-operates with God in salvation, particularly in initiating regeneration.

What is their place in theology?

These theological terms relate to the doctrine of salvation and in particular who is responsible for it.

In short, they are answers to the question: is salvation a sovereign work of God alone or is salvation a co-operation between God and man?

In terms of theological positions, the chief debate is between Calvinists, who support monergism – salvation is a work of God alone – against Arminians – salvation is a co-operation between God and man.

The essential positions on salvation

All salvation systems are either monergistic or synergistic. Amyraldism tries to join the two but unsuccessfully, which is why it is called Hypothetical Universalism – it hypothesises an impossibility.

Pelagianism	Semi-Pelagianism	Calvinism	Amyraldism	Universalism
Man saves himself by his own will and effort.	Man co-operates with God in salvation. In effect, man initiates salvation by his own will.	Man is dead in sins and unable to do good. God is sovereign in salvation.	An attempt to blend Semi-Pelagianism and Calvinism.	Everybody is saved automatically. There is no hell.
A type of monergism.	Synergism.	Monergistic.	An impossible attempt to join synergism with monergism.	A type of monergism.
Denies Total Depravity.	Denies Total Depravity.	Upholds Total Depravity.	Claims to uphold Total Depravity.	Denies Total Depravity.
Denies unconditional election.	Denies unconditional election.	Upholds unconditional election.	Denies or at least corrupts unconditional election.	Denies unconditional election.
Denies Limited Atonement.	Denies Limited Atonement.	Upholds Limited Atonement.	Denies Limited Atonement.	Denies Limited Atonement.
Denies irresistible grace (effectual calling).	Denies irresistible grace (effectual calling).	Upholds irresistible grace (effectual calling).	Distorts and corrupts calling.	Denies irresistible grace (effectual calling).
Finneyism comes very close to this. Many cults. Humanism. New Ageism.	Examples: Arminianism, Socinianism and Roman Catholicism.	Examples: historic Presbyterians, original Congregationalism, original Anglicanism (39 Articles) and some Baptists (Particular, Strict, Gospel Standard, Southern).	Many superficial Calvinists (4-point Calvinists). Historic Amyraldians (Saumur School).	Unitarians. Modern Anglicans. Modern Quakers.

All synergistic systems and some monergistic systems contradict the Doctrines of Grace (TULIP: Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace, Preservation of the saints). The Doctrines of Grace are the bedrock of Biblical teaching on salvation.

Perhaps the key issue is Total Depravity. Salvation systems which centre on man as able to play a part in saving himself all deny Total Depravity. The question is: does the Bible teach Total Depravity? The answer is clearly 'Yes'.

Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man *was* great in the earth, and *that* every intent of the thoughts of his heart *was* only evil continually. Gen 6:5

The imagination of man's heart *is* evil from his youth. Gen 8:21

Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, And in sin my mother conceived me. Ps 51:5

The wicked are estranged from the womb; they go astray as soon as they are born, speaking lies. Ps 58:3

Do not enter into judgment with Your servant, for in Your sight no one living is righteous. Ps 143:2

This *is* an evil in all that is done under the sun: that one thing *happens* to all. Truly the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil; madness *is* in their hearts while they live, and after that *they go* to the dead. Eccles 9:3

But we are all like an unclean *thing*, and all our righteousnesses *are* like filthy rags; we all fade as a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away. Isa 64:6

The heart *is* deceitful above all *things*, and desperately wicked; who can know it? Jer 17:9

For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a man. Mk 7:21-23

Jesus answered, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, "You must be born again".' Jn 3:5-7

You are of *your* father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and *does not* stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own *resources*, for he is a liar and the father of it. Jn 8:44

What then? Are we better *than they*? Not at all. For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin. As it is written: 'There is none righteous, no, not one; There is none who understands; There is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside; They have together become unprofitable; There is none who does good, no, not one.' Rm 3:9-12

Because the carnal mind *is* enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God. Rm 8:7-8

And you *He made alive*, who were dead in trespasses and sins. Eph 2:1

And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses. Col 2:13

To the pure all things are pure, but to those who are defiled and unbelieving nothing is pure; but even their mind and conscience are defiled. They profess to know God, but in works they deny Him, being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work. Titus 1:15-16

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us. 1 Jn 1:8-10

In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor *is* he who does not love his brother. 1 Jn 3:10

The meaning of grace

Pelagianism does not rely upon grace in real terms; it proposes that man can keep the law of God. The argument is that if God gave the law to man, then man must be able to keep it; responsibility implies ability. However, the clear testimony of Scripture is that man, on his own, cannot keep the law, 'there is none righteous, no, not one'. No man can keep the law and be holy and righteous. The purpose of the law was to reveal man's sin and his need of a Saviour. The law identifies the need for grace; it does not overturn it.

Synergistic systems, such as Arminianism, rely upon the giving of grace in some universal manner to all people to trigger man being able to do good works, such as believe and repent. However, some Semi-Pelagians (e.g. Roman Catholics) teach that man's will comes first and triggers a general available grace. This is sometimes called Common Grace (a grace common to all men). This idea arose with Abraham Kuyper in the 19th century for

political reasons. It is entirely unbiblical. Grace is not given to all but only to the elect. Grace comes from the cross (Jn 1:17) and is only for those chosen to be under the cross.

There is also prevenient grace, which originally developed in Roman Catholic dogma but was also adopted by John Wesley to support his version of Arminianism. This is a grace that 'comes before'. In Catholicism this grace is mediated by the church, in Wesley it is universal for those who choose to use it.

Synergists claim to assent to Total Depravity (though some deny it outright) and also claim that some form of Common Grace enables them to make the first move in salvation by an act of will. So Wesleyan prevenient grace is available for all. Those who grasp it are then able to believe the Gospel. This enables them to say that they believe in Depravity, but in reality they do not.

The Bible teaching on Depravity makes it clear that man can do nothing to initiate or merit salvation in any way at all. Neither is there some general grace available to every person on earth. There is no Common Grace and man cannot initiate salvation.

God's grace is only for those chosen by God and comes from the merits of Christ on the cross. Those whom Christ died for are those chosen in eternity by God and only these are given grace; grace is a gift to the chosen alone. Grace is God's favour, unmerited kindness and power. It is this that enables salvation.

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; *it is* the gift of God.
Eph 2:8

Since grace is a gift from God, it cannot be chosen to be used by man and there is no reservoir of grace for everyone on Earth.

Without grace, there can be no faith and repentance; Esau is a harrowing example of this.¹ When God gives grace to regenerate a person, he also gives faith and repentance. The work of salvation in a person is all of God – it is monergistic. Faith² and repentance³ are gifts given to those with grace – the elect.

Scriptures declare that Salvation is monergistic

This is a select list only.

Salvation *belongs* to the LORD. Ps 3:8

The LORD *is* my light and my salvation. Ps 27:1

But the salvation of the righteous *is* from the LORD. Ps 37:39

O Lord, my salvation! Ps 38:22

Truly my soul silently *waits* for God; from Him *comes* my salvation. Ps 62:1

The God of our salvation! Ps 68:19

¹ Heb 12:16-17, 'lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright. For you know that afterward, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought it diligently with tears.'

² Gift of Faith: Jn 6:29; Acts 14:27, 18:27; Eph 2:8-9; Phil 1:29; Heb 12:2.

³ Gift of Repentance: Acts 5:31, 11:18; Rm 2:4; Tim 2:25-26; Heb 12:17; Rm 2:4.

Our God *is* the God of salvation; and to GOD the Lord *belongs* escapes from death. Ps 68:20

Show us Your mercy, LORD, and grant us Your salvation. Ps 85:7

Let Your mercies come also to me, O LORD -- your salvation according to Your word. Ps 119:41

Behold, God *is* my salvation, I will trust and not be afraid; 'for YAH, the LORD, *is* my strength and song; he also has become my salvation.' Isa 12:2

The LORD our God *is* the salvation of Israel. Jer 3:23

Salvation *is* of the LORD. Jonah 2:9

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation. Rm 1:16

... and not in any way terrified by your adversaries, which is to them a proof of perdition, but to you of salvation, and that from God. Phil 1:28

God from the beginning chose you for salvation. 2 Thess 2:13

Salvation *belongs* to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb! Rev 7:10

Alleluia! Salvation and glory and honour and power *belong* to the Lord our God! Rev 19:1

If salvation is of the Lord, then it cannot be of man in any shape or form. Man cannot merit salvation but neither can he initiate salvation.

So, the Bible teaches that salvation is only of the Lord; it is a sovereign divine work. It also teaches that man is unable to contribute to salvation in any way due to Total Depravity. Man is dead in sins; a dead man cannot do a spiritual work.

Regeneration is a divine work

Jesus answered and said to him, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.' Nicodemus said to Him, 'How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?' Jesus answered, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, "You must be born again." The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.' Jn 3:3-8

All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out. Jn 6:37

No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day. Jn 6:44

No one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father. Jn 6:65

You do not believe, because you are not of My sheep, as I said to you. My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. Jn 10:26-27

You did not choose Me, but I chose you. Jn 15:16

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; *it is* the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. Eph 2:8-9

Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of *our* faith. Heb 12:2

The clear teaching of Scripture is that God provides salvation for the elect alone, chosen in eternity. He then initiates that salvation in effectual calling; he draws people to Christ. These are then regenerated by the work of the Holy Spirit. Following this power in the inner man the regenerated person is then immediately able to believe in Christ and repent.

Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit. 1 Pt 1:2

Is this not fatalistic and a hindrance? How can anyone be saved?

Nothing is stopping any person coming to God and crying for mercy, calling on God for salvation – except their own sinfulness which stops them doing this. Men don't want to be saved; they enjoy sinning.⁴

When a person shows signs of thirsting for truth about God, this may be a sign that the Spirit is beginning a work in that person. All can come freely (Rev 22:17) but only those called want to. A person who is unsaved but asking questions and thirsting for truth about God should be encouraged to keep thirsting for the word. If this thirst continues, he will find salvation. If it fails, the search was merely intellectual curiosity.

No one knows if they are elect or not until they are actually converted. Neither does anyone else. So no one should be discouraged from seeking the truth and knocking on the door.

Seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. Matt 7:7-8

LORD, You have heard the desire of the humble; You will prepare their heart; You will cause Your ear to hear. Ps 10:17

Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me. Ps 50:15

You, Lord, *are* good, and ready to forgive, and abundant in mercy to all those who call upon You. Ps 86:5

Salvation is not a heavenly package but a Person

Synergistic folk, such as Arminians, treat salvation as if it was merely some gift package kept in heaven waiting for a person to claim it by willpower (albeit aided by common grace). This is rubbish.

Salvation is centred in Christ. Salvation involves being united in Christ and made into a new creation (2 Cor 5:17). Christ is thus the Head of the church, which is his body.

Salvation is not just justification, sanctification and adoption, it is being united with Christ. The righteousness in which saints stand that enables them to be justified before God is the righteousness of Christ. Their union with Christ secures his righteousness which becomes our new nature.

He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love. Eph 1:4

⁴ Election is not unmerciful. All men deserve judgment for rebelling against God and sinning. God could justifiably damn everyone to hell. Instead God offers mercy to all who come to Christ, but man's sin is such that he won't come. So God, in an act of undeserved mercy, chooses a portion of the human race that will be saved and calls them in time. These are the elect. God's mercy is seen in the elect.

We sit in heaven because we sit with Christ.

When we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised *us* up together, and made *us* sit together in the heavenly *places* in Christ Jesus.
Eph 2:5-6

We are given every spiritual blessing – IN CHRIST.

Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly *places* in Christ. Eph 1:3

Salvation is not some mere package available for anyone to grab, but is centred in Christ. We are saved by a relationship not a change of status. Those who are in Christ are those chosen from the foundation of the world (2 Thess 2:13-14).

Arminian salvation

It is a cause of great sadness that most people in churches who identify as Christian today are Semi-Pelagian (e.g. Roman Catholics) and Arminian.⁵ This situation developed after the crusade evangelism of DL Moody, at the turn of the 20th century, whereby Arminianism swept through Britain.⁶ However, the historic root of most denominations is actually Calvinistic.

There is a prevenient or common grace available to all.

UNBIBLICAL. No such thing is ever mentioned in Scripture. The term, ‘Common Grace’, meaning the doctrine of a favour from God to all people outside of salvation, only appeared in the late 19th century.

Prevenient grace is a Roman Catholic idea. It teaches that prevenient grace is necessary to receive the benefit of grace conveyed by the church in the sacraments. There is an ubiquitous grace available to get you to church to receive its infused grace.

John Wesley used this idea to suggest that a prevenient grace is necessary to be able to choose to believe so that he could claim to believe in Total Depravity. Continental Arminians just concluded that man can choose to believe unaided and fully denied Total Depravity.

The carnal mind *is* enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God. Rm 8:7-8

The atonement is for everyone.

UNBIBLICAL. Redemption is particular – for the elect alone. Christ’s blood is not wasted. God has mercy on those he chooses (Rm 9:15).

God loves everyone and wants everyone to be saved.

UNBIBLICAL. Many times God is said to hate sinners (e.g. Ps 5:5-6, 11:5).

⁵ Most ‘Christian’ denominations are Arminian. This includes: most Baptists, United Reformed, most Anglicans, most independents, virtually all Methodists, virtually all Pentecostals, most Charismatics and most of what is left of the UK Brethren. A very few Calvinists (Reformed theology) may abide in these denominations uncomfortably. However, many that claim to be Calvinists are really Amyraldian.

⁶ Along with ‘easy believism’, altar calls, raised hands to identify conversion, crowd conversions, reciting a dictated prayer, downplaying of conviction of sin, emotionalism, mysticism etc.

Sinful man is able to do good works and please God, such as believing and repenting.

UNBIBLICAL. Sinful man cannot please God in anything; neither daily work (Prov 21:4) or religious work (Prov 15:8).

Man initiates salvation by an act of free will. Man chooses salvation.

UNBIBLICAL. God chooses the elect. Man can only choose sin (Gen 6:5).

Regeneration is the result of faith.

UNBIBLICAL. See earlier. Regeneration is plainly stated in Scripture to precede faith.

Man is thus able to believe and repent by free will.

UNBIBLICAL. These are gifts from God to the elect alone. Scripture specifically states that salvation is not of man's will (Rm 9:16).

Clearly Arminianism is completely unbiblical. This is a Semi-Pelagian, synergistic system.

The other chief synergistic system is Roman Catholicism, and this is doctrinally even worse.

Both these systems rely upon meritorious works to gain salvation – good works of sinful man. It is man that initiates salvation by his free will choice. To claim that this is not meritorious because it is relying on a prevenient grace is false because there is no such thing. Semi-Pelagianism is synergistic and it is a meritorious work.⁷

There is no place for synergism in the doctrine of salvation.

Conclusion

Though the terms monergism and synergism are not commonly spoken in churches, they are fundamental in theology. They aptly explain the difference between two streams of doctrine of salvation: 1) those that believe God is sovereign in salvation, that grace is sovereign, that man is dead in sin; 2) and those that teach that man co-operates with God in salvation.

Semi-Pelagianism is not as pernicious as Pelagianism, but it is still completely unorthodox and ruins any attempt to understand Scripture. Neither does it secure a foundation for genuine salvation. Genuine Christians may exist in Arminian settings, but they have to have moved past Arminian teachings to believe the true Gospel at some point.⁸ However, the majority of people in Arminian churches are unlikely to be saved because they have relied upon human effort to believe.

The poor fruit observed in these churches confirms that there can be few genuine Christians present, if any. The 17th century original continental Arminians fell into deeper and deeper apostasy, as I have demonstrated in previous papers. They ended up as Socinians, Pelagians, universalists, and worse.

⁷ Or 'auto-soterism' (self-salvation). Meritorious works are those human works that deserve praise, reward or have value. In the matter of theology, they are works that contribute to salvation.

⁸ For example, I have met genuine Christians that were saved at a Billy Graham rally in the 50s. The Arminian Gospel he preached was false but God used the setting to save people through the reading of the words of the New Testament. God overrode the faulty preaching and used the words of Scripture to convict people.

God is the origin of salvation; Jesus is the author of our faith. Salvation is of the Lord; it is monergistic.

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