

Calvinism vs. Arminianism

A Short Summary with Texts

Throughout church history, especially after the Reformation, virtually all sound Christian theologians were Calvinists (a nickname for those who uphold God's sovereignty in the Gospel, named after the Reformer John Calvin). Today, most of the evangelical church is Arminian, named after the opponent of Calvinism Jacob Arminius [1560-1609]; this is how badly we have drifted.

The dispute is over the doctrines of grace, sometimes called the 'five points of Calvinism'. A theological professor, named Arminius, began teaching unorthodox doctrines in Holland and gained a following after being influenced by Roman Catholic ideas. After he died, his supporters (mainly students who were called the Remonstrants because they remonstrated against Calvinism) drew up his essential teaching into five controversial points. So much trouble was caused to the reformed churches that an international synod was convened at Dordrecht (or Dort / Dordt for short) in 1619 to settle the matter. The Remonstrants behaved badly and were eventually dismissed; but finally, the synod drew up five points to summarise the Bible's teaching which corrected the five heretical points of the Arminians (Remonstrants).

These points are sometimes known under the mnemonic *'TULIP'*:

Total Depravity
Unconditional Election
Limited Atonement
Irresistible Grace
Perseverance of the Saints

Total Depravity

- As a child of Adam man is born in sin and is full of corruption, even infants are sinful (*'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.'* Ps 58:3).
- Since the root is sinful, the tree is sinful and death resulted from the fall of Adam (Rm 5:14).
- A man may not express all of that corruption, but the seed of it is in his heart (Gen 6:5. *'The heart is deceitful above all things, And desperately wicked;'* Jer 17:9).
- Since men are dead they can contribute nothing to their salvation; even their best works are sinful in God's eyes (*'all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags.'* Isa 64:6).
- This sinful, Adamic, nature puts all men under God's wrath and means that they are spiritually dead (*'And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins.'* Eph 2:1).
- Man is not just a slave to sin (*'You were slaves of sin.'* Rm 6:20) but are dead in sins (*'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).

Unconditional Election

- Election means choice or selection and refers to the fact that God chose those who would be saved (*'Blessed is the man You choose, and cause to approach You, that he may dwell in Your courts.'* Ps 65:4).

- This selection was decreed from eternity, before the world was made (*'God from the beginning chose you for salvation.'* 2 Thess 2:13).
- Christians were loved by God, in Christ, before time began. (*'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).
- Those whom God chooses, he saves, justifies and glorifies (Rm 8:30).
- We were chosen to express the good works God predetermined we should perform. (*'For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.'* Eph 2:10).
- The cause of this choosing is nothing good in the believer. God did not look into the future to see who would believe the Gospel; no, the choice is based simply on God's good pleasure (*'...having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will.'* Eph 1:5).
- When scripture mentions the elect being 'foreknown' (Rm 8:29), it means that they were loved in eternity, not that God knew what they would believe and so chose them. God predestines all men's gifts anyway, people only believe when God grants faith to them. (Read Ps 139; Eph 2:8-9).
- If God elects some and some only, it follows that others are not chosen. These 'reprobates' (non-elect) will face judgment without a saviour, but they are only being judged for sins they chose to commit. (*'The LORD has made all for Himself, yes, even the wicked for the day of doom.'* Prov 16:4). Predestination does not mean that God makes people sin; people want to sin because they are totally depraved. The wonder is not that some are chosen to be saved, but that any are chosen at all. God could justly condemn all mankind to hell for rebellion.
- It is a terrifying but true fact that God chooses some from eternity to manifest his divine wrath and just condemnation against sin in hell (*'What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much long-suffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory.'* Rm 9:22-23).
- These vessels of wrath cannot be loved by God, neither do they love God, have any desire to serve him and do not seek righteousness or heaven.

Limited Atonement (or Deliberate Atonement or Particular Redemption)

- Since God only chose some, God only loves some and Christ only dies for some, not everyone. Those who benefit from Christ's death are variously called: his sheep (Jn 10:15), his people (Matt 1:21), the many (not all Matt 20:28, 26:28), the flock (Acts 20:28) and the called (Rm 1:6).
- The Bible never states that God died for everyone. Some verses (e.g. Jn 3:16, 1 Tim 2:4) have been interpreted this way but this is not a good exposition of these texts (we cannot go into this in detail here).
- The Bible never states that God loves everyone. In Jn 3:16 the 'world' here is the world of the elect, those who are rescued from this world to be God's people called to populate a purified new world, otherwise v17 would support Universalism (i.e. the unbiblical idea that everyone is saved, and that there is no hell).
- The Bible frequently states that he hates certain people (Mal 1:3; Rm 9:13) and sinners generally (Ps 5:5; 11:5).
- God never does anything imperfectly, he only does things fully and forever (Eccles 3:14). If he loves someone, he loves them to the end. He cannot love someone whom he later condemns to hell.
- Neither is there any waste in God. The blood of Jesus is the most precious substance in the universe; God will not waste that on people he has already decided will not be saved.

- The death of Jesus is of infinite value and would be sufficient for everyone, but it is never applied to everyone. It is only applied to those whom God has chosen.
- Since grace comes from the cross, it is wrong to say that there is a 'common grace' available to all men. Grace is only given to the elect as a result of the cross. The cross is never applied to the reprobate (non-elect). Neither is 'common grace' a Biblical term. God gives sun and rain to all men in his bountiful providence. He grants that people have what they need to survive, but this is not grace, it is providence overruling circumstances. This goodness affects the just and the unjust, but the prime cause is to see the elect come to repentance. When the last elect person is saved, God will wind this world up (*'the long-suffering of our Lord is salvation.'* 2 Pt 3:15).
- All God's love and goodness is directed to the elect, the church. God is sovereign over all things for the church (Eph 1:22-23) because Christ's death was only granted to be effective for them alone.

Irresistible Grace (or Effectual Call)

Since God chooses only some, and since Christ only dies for some, this means that only some are effectively called and empowered to believe by the Gospel.

- The outward call is the Gospel preaching to all but within this is an inward calling which changes only some people's hearts. (*'Many are called but few are chosen'*. Matt 20:16, 22:14)
- In the Gospel message, the Holy Spirit especially touches the hearts of some people and changes them. People do not open their own hearts to the Gospel. (*'The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul.'* Acts 16:14)
- This is why people are born again by God, not because they make a decision. (*'...who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.'* Jn 1:13)
- In fact, no one can come to Christ unless God the Father draws them to him (*'No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day. ... Therefore I have said to you that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father.'* Jn 6:44, 65)
- Conversion, therefore, is not decided by man. We cannot choose to be saved by our free will, God calls us and saves us. Our free will cannot choose spiritual good because we are dead in sin and slaves to Satan's kingdom in the flesh. (*'...the Son gives life to whom He will.'* Jn 5:21. *'God, who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began.'* 2 Tim 1:9)
- Only those who are called receive God's inheritance (*'...those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance.'* Heb 9:15).
- We cannot accept or reject Christ by choice. By nature everyone would reject God's offer of life and choose to sin. Only those God calls can receive the gift of grace. (*'A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven.'* Jn 3:27)
- Repentance and faith (conversion is repentance and faith) are both gifts from God. This is why salvation is of grace (undeserved kindness and heavenly provision), (Jn 6:29; Acts 11:18, 14:27; 18:27. *'For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God;'* Eph 2:8-9. *'For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but ...'* Phil 1:29. *'God has exalted to His right hand to be Prince and Saviour, to give repentance.'* Acts 5:31. *'God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth.'* 2 Tim 2:25)
- Repentance cannot always be gained even if sought diligently and with tears (Heb 12:17).

Perseverance of the Saints (or Preservation of the Saints, or Eternal Security)

Since we are chosen by God, since Christ died for us alone, since God calls us through the Gospel, it follows that those who are chosen will be preserved unto the end; otherwise God would have failed to bring his elect people through (Matt 18:12).

- We must still lead responsible lives or God will chasten us as sons. (*For whom the LORD loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives.* Heb 12:6).
- Those who are truly saved will bear fruit and progress in faith; they will be and more conformed to Christ. (*For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.* Rm 8:29).
- Those who are truly saved have (not 'will have') eternal life. This is stated to be certain even now on earth. (*He who believes in the Son has everlasting life.* Jn 3:36. *Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life.* Jn 5:24).
- Once you are in the hands of Jesus, no one can snatch you away (*My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand.* Jn 10:27-29).
- Once we are in God's family, God is working for us and no one can overpower his decrees. (*For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.* Rm 5:10).
- Nothing can separate us from God if we truly believe in Christ (*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?* Rm 8:35. *... Our Lord Jesus Christ, who will also confirm you to the end, that you may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.* 1 Cor 1:7-8).
- However, only those who are called will be preserved (*To those who are called, sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in Jesus Christ.* Jude 1); professing Christians who did not really believe on Christ or submit to his lordship will not bear fruit and will not be saved.

The sovereignty of God

The key difference between Calvinism and Arminianism concerns the sovereignty of God. Arminians do not believe that God is sovereign in salvation, they believe that God has made salvation possible, that Christ died for everyone, that a generalised grace is available and that man must decide, believe and keep going by his own strength. At best they teach that man co-operates with God, it is a 50-50 approach. God is also supposed to be unable to change a man's heart if that man is set on rejecting the Gospel. This is not the God of the Bible for whom nothing is impossible (Lk 1:37).

Calvinists believe that *'salvation is of the Lord'* (Jonah 2:9; Ps 68:20; Ps 37:39). God initiates everything from the act of regeneration (new birth) onwards. He: gives grace, faith and repentance, he changes a man's heart, he calls and empowers, he justifies (pardons sin and makes righteous), he adopts us as sons, he brings us into the body of Christ after uniting us with his Son, he leads us forward, he fills us with His Spirit and sees us safely to our journey's end. The aforementioned scriptures make this plain to see.

Man is obviously responsible for his actions, but the initiative rests with God. Man does not believe from his own volition, God gives faith to his people. Man does not decide to repent, God grants repentance. The key is: *'work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.'* (Phil 2:12-13).

God works within us, giving us grace and strength, but we are responsible to work that out into the practicalities of life.

Calvinism can be clearly seen to be the essence of the Biblical message of salvation. It was preached by the apostle Paul and championed by the great church fathers like Augustine. After the world had been confused by the platitudes and errors of Romanism, God broke forth with the original Gospel message in the Reformation, beginning with Martin Luther in 1517. Luther spearheaded the breakaway movement from the Roman church but Calvin was the main exponent of Reformation Biblical theology up to the latter half of the 16th century. It is due to the greatness of Calvin's impact upon the Western world that the Biblical doctrines of God's grace, the emphasis upon God being God, being sovereign, is now widely known as Calvinism.

The fact that modern church people are unaware of them, and that most church leaders either ignore or spurn these teachings is a tremendous loss. The best times of church history were seen when men and women not only believed this Biblical Gospel but practised it with godliness and righteousness. Countries that originally encouraged Calvinism were blessed and became prosperous, like: America, Holland, Britain, Switzerland. Countries that persecuted the truth lost civil liberties and remained in darkness; some (like France) descended into bloody revolution after killing thousands of true Christians.

It is vital that believers understand these truths, and walk in them, in order for God to be glorified and for people to be soundly converted. The results of preaching a mutilated Gospel are plain to see around us in the multitude errors and aberrations in modern churches as well as the large numbers of confused believers with no assurance. May God's truth once more prevail in the church so that he is glorified.

Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version*
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