

# **ARMINIANISM & CALVINISM**

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

1. The most hated Christian doctrine is the doctrine of hell – Christians believe that God has created a place of conscious eternal torment, and that those without Christ go there. This is a subject with which we must deal in our conversations with unbelievers. They want to know how a loving God could send people to hell. Depending on your interpretation of Scripture, a Christian might answer in one of two ways. First, people go to hell because God does not offer them salvation; He does not give them the option or possibility of salvation; He does not attempt to save them. Second, people go to hell because God offers them salvation through Christ, but they reject it. The first answer is that it is God’s fault that people go to hell; the second answer is that it is people’s fault that they go to hell. These two answers represent a key difference between Calvinism and Arminianism, and provide us with a good place to begin in a discussion of their differences.
2. Arminianism and Calvinism are two perspectives on soteriology – the study of salvation.
3. The debate often comes up as you are studying the Bible. For example, our church is currently working our way through the book of Romans, and it has come up a number of times. Just off the top of my head I can remember that the issue came up in Romans 1, and Romans 8, and then again in Romans 9. In fact, the issue comes up in just about every book of the New Testament at least once, if not multiple times.
4. However, I realize that there are some of you, if not most of you, who are confused by the issue. You don’t know the difference between Arminianism and Calvinism, or why it matters. When I say, “Arminians interpret this passage this way, and Calvinists that way,” you immediately tune out because you have no idea what I’m talking about. Therefore,

this morning I want to give you a brief overview of Arminianism and Calvinism so that you can understand the issue when it comes up in our study of the Bible together.

5. This morning I want to accomplish four things:
  - i. First, I want to explain how Arminians and Calvinists can get along in same church.
  - ii. Second, I want to give you a brief history of the origins of the two schools of thought.
  - iii. Third, I want to teach you the five points of Calvinism, and the five points of Arminianism.
  - iv. Fourth, I want to explain where I stand on the issue and why.

## **II. CAN ARMINIANS AND CALVINISTS ATTEND THE SAME CHURCH?**

1. Yes they can. How can people who believe different things get along? The key to unity is to learn how to disagree without dividing. How do you do that? You must understand that not every doctrine is equally important. There are first, second, and third-order doctrines.
  - i. A first-order doctrine must be affirmed to be a Christian; it must be affirmed to be saved. Most theologians point to the Nicene Creed to identify first-order doctrines.
  - ii. A second-order doctrine must be affirmed to be a member of the church. Every church has a doctrinal statement that you must agree with to join the church. For example, our doctrinal – the Baptist Faith and Message 2000 -- says that the Bible is inerrant – truth without any mixture of error. If you don't believe that, if you believe that the Bible is filled with errors and contradictions, then you can't be a member of our church. You can attend, but you can't be a member, or a teacher, or a leader. When it comes to second order doctrines, we agree to agree. If you don't agree with our doctrinal statement, that doesn't necessarily mean you aren't a Christian, just that you can't be a member of our church.

- iii. A third-order doctrine is a doctrine that is not in the church's doctrinal statement. This doesn't mean that it is unimportant; it is just not an issue that our church takes a stance on. Our church's doctrinal statement doesn't take a stance on a host of issues. One example is Bible-version. Some prefer the KJV, some like the CSB, the ESV, the NIV – our church doesn't take a side. Another example is eschatology (the study of the end times). Some are premil, some amil, some postmil – our church doesn't take a side. Another example is Arminianism vs. Calvinism – our church doesn't take a side.
2. The key to unity is to agree to disagree about third-order doctrines. If the church's doctrinal statement doesn't take a side, then it is fair game; you are free to disagree. But you are not free to condemn, criticize, or be condescending or degrading or disrespectful to people who disagree with you.
3. There are many things that can disrupt the unity of the church, but one of the most common is the person who treats every one of his theological beliefs like a first-order doctrine. Theologian Roger Olson says this is the definition of a religious fundamentalist – they treat every doctrine as fundamental. I've seen people like this bounce from church to church until they eventually drop out of church because they can never find a church that agrees with them on every point. They don't know the difference between first, second, and third-order doctrines.
4. To protect the unity of the church, we must agree to disagree on third-order doctrines. That means you can disagree, but don't condemn or be condescending toward those who disagree with you. Don't misrepresent the other view.
5. For example, don't say things like,
  - i. "Calvinists don't know their Bible," or "Arminians ignore parts of the Bible." Neither of those is true or fair.

- ii. Don't say things like, "Calvinism leads to a loss of evangelistic zeal." That's not fair. Some of the most passionate and effective evangelists are Calvinists.
  - iii. Don't say things like, "Arminianism leads to theological liberalism." Again, that's not fair. There are many Calvinist denominations that have gone liberal, and many of the most conservative denominations are Arminian. The conservative resurgence in the SBC in the 1980s was led by Arminians (they would call themselves non-Calvinists).
  - iv. Don't say, "Calvinists don't believe that God loves everyone, only the elect." That's not true; they do believe that God loves everyone.
  - v. Don't say, "Arminians don't believe that salvation is by grace alone." That's not true; they do believe that.
  - vi. In fact, Arminians and Calvinists both believe that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, to the glory of God alone. Those are the majors, and because we agree on the majors, we can disagree on the minors.
6. So, the debate between Arminianism and Calvinism is a third-order doctrine. You are welcome to agree or disagree with me, but don't be disagreeable. Don't allow Satan to use this issue to divide us.
7. With that said, as a passionate Arminian, I'm going to try to convince you to be like me.

### **III. WHO WERE JOHN CALVIN AND JACOB ARMINIUS?**

1. Calvinism and Arminianism take their names from two theologians.
2. To provide some context, we need to start with Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation. Martin Luther was a German monk who initiated the Protestant Reformation in 1517. He and other theologians were hoping to reform the Roman Catholic Church because they believed that it had departed from Scripture in many ways, but when they couldn't reform it they left it.

3. The leading reformer in France was John Calvin (1509-1564). Calvin agreed with Luther on many things, but he also differed from Luther on many things, and he crafted what has come to be known as Reformed theology, which spread to many parts of Europe, including the Netherlands. Calvin's greatest written work is called *Institutes of Christian Religion*.
4. Toward the end of Calvin's life there was a theologian in the Netherlands named Jacob Arminius who agreed with Calvin on many things, but he disagreed with Calvin on some points, especially Calvin's doctrine of predestination. When Arminius died, his followers took up his cause. They were called the Remonstrants, which means "the protesters." The Remonstrants wrote a document called "The Remonstrance," which argued against Calvin's theology on five points. The Dutch Reformed Church called an official assembly – called a synod – in the city of Dort in 1618-1619. It is known as the Synod of Dort. Unfortunately, Jacob Arminius wasn't there because he passed away, and none of his followers were invited. The Synod condemned Arminianism and began a system of persecution against Arminians. They also wrote their own document called the Canons of Dort which became the foundation for the five points of Calvinism. Ever since then Christians have been debating the issue.
5. So, what did John Calvin and Jacob Arminius disagree about?

#### **IV. THE TULIP OF CALVINISM**

1. The teachings of Calvinism can be summarized with the acronym TULIP. These are often called the five points of Calvinism, or the doctrines of grace. Incidentally, no one knows who came up with the TULIP acronym, but it was not John Calvin.
  - i. **Total Depravity:**
    1. Definition: People are so affected by sin that they cannot and will not respond positively to the gospel without God's help.

2. Sometimes this is called “total inability,” because people lack the ability to respond to accept Christ.
3. The only way that people can repent and believe in Christ is if God enables them to do so.
4. **The Westminster Confession of Faith (9.3)** “Man, by his fall into a state of sin, hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation ;a so as a natural man, being altogether averse from that good, and dead in sin, is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto.”
5. Arminians and Calvinists agree on this point.

**ii. Unconditional Election:**

1. Definition: Before creation, God chose some people for salvation and the rest for damnation, His choice not being influenced by any distinctions in the elect.
2. Sometimes this is called predestination.
3. The key word is “unconditional.” It means that God’s choice was unconditional; it was not based on anything in the individual. There was nothing about this person, such as faith, that caused God to choose them for salvation and pass over someone else.
4. Why then did God choose this person and not that person? Calvinists would answer that the Bible doesn’t say. It is a mystery.
5. **R.C. Sproul** “It [the Calvinist doctrine of unconditional election] teaches that from all eternity God has chosen to intervene in the lives of some people and bring them to saving faith and has chosen not to do that for other people. From all eternity, without any prior view of our human behavior, God has chosen some unto election and some unto reprobation.... The basis for God’s choice does not rest in man but solely in the good pleasure of the divine will.”<sup>i</sup>

**iii. Limited Atonement:**

1. Definition: Christ only died for the sins of the elect, not the whole world.
2. In other words, if you are not one of the elect – one of those chosen for salvation – then Christ did not die for your sins.
3. There is a great deal of speculation on whether Calvin believed in limited atonement. David Allen is probably the leading expert in the world and he argues forcefully that Calvin believed in unlimited atonement.
4. **Edwin Palmer** “The Calvinist... says that Christ died only for the believer, the elect, only for those who will actually be saved and go to heaven. According to the Calvinist, Christ intended or purposed that His atonement should pay for the sins of only those the Father had given Him.”<sup>ii</sup>

**iv. Irresistible Grace:**

1. Definition: God effectually draws the elect to Christ so that they will respond positively to the gospel.
2. Because of total depravity, people are unable and unwilling to turn to Christ in faith with God’s help. This is where irresistible grace comes in. Before salvation, God enables the elect to turn to Christ.
3. It is called irresistible because it cannot fail.
4. **Edwin Palmer** “It [irresistible grace] means that the Holy Spirit will certainly –without any and’s, if’s, and but’s – cause everyone whom God has chosen for eternity and for whom Christ died to believe on Jesus.”<sup>iii</sup>
5. Connected to the doctrine of irresistible grace is the idea of pre-faith regeneration. Calvinists believe that regeneration occurs before you put your faith in Christ. This regeneration, or new birth, or new life, enables not only enables you to believe but always results in faith in Christ.

6. Also connected to the doctrine of irresistible grace is the Calvinist idea of the effectual call. In fact, sometimes they call irresistible grace the effectual call. Calvinists believe that God makes two different gospel invitations – the general call and the effectual call. The general call/invitation goes out to everyone, but it does not include God’s enabling grace to believe. The effectual call/invitation only goes out to the elect and includes regeneration and always results in conversion.

**v. Perseverance of the Saints:**

1. Definition: God enables those who are saved to persevere in the faith to the end.
  2. **Edwin Palmer** “The term perseverance of the saints emphasizes that Christians... will persevere in trusting in Christ as their Savior. They will not turn on and then turn off, but they will continue believing forever. Thus they will always be saved.”<sup>iv</sup>
  3. This is sometimes called eternal security, or once-saved-always saved.
  4. Many Arminians, such as me, agree with Calvinism on this point.
2. Why do Calvinists believe these things? If you have not been taught Calvinism, then these ideas may puzzle you. You might wonder why a Calvinist would believe such things? I can assure you that they have verses that support each of their positions. The difference between Calvinists and Arminians is not that one side believes the Bible and the other doesn’t, or that one side knows the Bible better than the others. Both sides believe the Bible; both sides know the Bible; but they disagree about how to interpret the Bible.

**V. THE FACTS OF ARMINIANISM**

1. The teachings of Arminianism can be summed up with the acronym FACTS. This acronym was coined by a theologian named Brian

Abasciano. Note that the FACTS of Arminianism counter the five points of Calvinism, but not in the same order.

**i. Freed to Believe:**

1. Definition: God enables all people to believe the gospel and be saved, but His prevenient grace can be rejected.
2. Notice the term “prevenient grace.” The word “prevenient” means “before”, so prevenient grace is grace that goes before salvation.
3. **Roger Olson** “Prevenient grace is simply the convicting, calling, enlightening and enabling grace of God that goes before conversion and makes repentance and faith possible.”<sup>v</sup>
4. Arminians agree with the Calvinists in total depravity – that people are dead in their sins and cannot believe in Christ without His enabling grace. But remember that Calvinists believe that enabling grace is irresistible. Arminians disagree with irresistible grace in three ways:
5. First, prevenient grace is given to everyone, not just the elect.
  - a. **John 12:32** As for me, if I am lifted up from the earth I will draw all people to myself.
6. Second, prevenient grace is resistible.
  - a. **Luke 13:34** “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her. How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!
7. Third, prevenient grace is not the same as regeneration. Arminians believe that regeneration, or the impartation of spiritual life, or the new birth, occurs after faith.

- a. **John 20:31** But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

ii. **Atonement for All:**

1. Definition: Christ died for the sins of every single person, but only believers benefit from His death.
2. Most Calvinists believe that Christ only died for the elect, but Arminians believe that Christ died for everyone, but only those who believe get the benefit of Christ's death.
3. **1 Timothy 2:5-6** 5 For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, 6 who gave himself as a ransom for all, a testimony at the proper time.
4. **1 John 2:2** He himself is the atoning sacrifice, for our sins, and not only for ours, but also for those of the whole world.
5. **1 Timothy 4:10** For this reason we labor and strive, because we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe.
  - a. Notice that Christ is the Savior of all people – He was punished for the sins of the whole world. But only those who believe get the benefits of His atonement.

iii. **Conditional Election:**

1. Definition: Before creation God chose believers for salvation and unbelievers for condemnation.
2. Arminians believe in election and predestination, but we define them differently.
3. First, we believe that election is conditional – based on faith.
  - a. **2 Thessalonians 2:13** from the beginning God has chosen you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth.

- i. Notice that election is conditioned upon faith. God chooses to save those who believe.
  - b. **Ephesians 1:4-5** For he chose us in him, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and blameless in love before him. He predestined us to be adopted as sons through Jesus Christ for himself, according to the good pleasure of his will.
    - i. This passage mentions election (“chose”) and predestination. Notice that it says that God chose us “in him.” God chose us because of our relationship with Christ. How did we come to be in a right relationship with Christ? By faith (Gal 3:26).
      - 1. **Galatians 3:26** for through faith you are all sons of God in Christ Jesus.
- 4. Second, we believe that election is according to God’s foreknowledge.
  - a. The Bible states that God chose to save us before creation (Eph 1:3). How? Because His election is based on His foreknowledge of who would believe.
  - b. **Romans 8:29** For those he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, so that he would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.
    - i. Notice that predestination (another word for election) is based on foreknowledge.
  - c. **1 Peter 1:1-2** Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ: To those chosen, living as exiles dispersed abroad in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, chosen 2 according to the foreknowledge of God the Father.

- i. Here it explicitly says that election is according to God's foreknowledge.
- ii. Before God created the world, He knew the future. He knew those who would believe in Christ and those who would reject Jesus. Those who would believe were elected for salvation, and those who would reject Christ were elected for condemnation.

5. **Jack Cottrell** "The reason God predestines some to go to heaven is that from the vantage point of eternity past God knew in advance who would meet the conditions and who would not. In other words, predestination to eternal life is based on God's foreknowledge of who would and who would not meet the conditions that constitute a proper response to his grace."<sup>vi</sup>

6. The Bible makes it very clear that salvation is conditional upon faith – that if you want to be saved you must believe. It only makes sense that election would also be based on faith. To put it another way, the Bible says that the reason that some people aren't saved is because they don't believe, not because they weren't elected. The Bible puts the blame on the individual, not God. Thus it follows that election is conditional upon faith.

**iv. Total Depravity:**

1. Definition: People are so affected by sin that they cannot and will not respond positively to the gospel without God's help.
2. You may be surprised to find that Arminians agree completely with Calvinists on this point. While there are some non-Calvinists who don't affirm total depravity, Jacob Arminius and classical Arminians do.

3. **Matthew Pinson** “Arminians also believe that humanity by nature is totally depraved and hence spiritually unable to desire the things of God without a supernatural, gracious intervention of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>vii</sup>
4. **Brian Abasciano** “We cannot even believe the gospel on our own. If anyone is to be saved, God must take the initiative.”<sup>viii</sup>
5. **Romans 3:10-11** as it is written: There is no one righteous, not even one. There is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God.

**v. Security in Christ:**

1. Definition: God enables those who are saved to persevere in the faith to the end.
2. **1 Corinthians 1:8** He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you will be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.
3. This is sometimes called eternal security, or once-saved-always saved.
4. Notice that this is the same definition as “Perseverance of the Saints.” That’s because on this point many Arminians agree with Calvinists. However, some Arminians believe that you can lose your salvation if you stop believing in Christ. Jacob Arminius and his earliest followers were undecided on this doctrine, and so it is possible to be an Arminian and go either way. But in our church eternal security (perseverance of the saints) is a second order doctrine that must be affirmed for membership.
5. This is a good place to point out that there are different kinds of Calvinists, and different kinds of Arminians. For example, many Calvinists do not believe in limited atonement; they agree with Arminians that Christ died for

the sins of every single human being. And many Arminians do not believe you can lose your salvation.

## **VI. WHY I AM AN ARMINIAN**

1. You might have noticed that I agree with two of the points of Calvinism – the T and P. I agree with total depravity and perseverance, but I reject the “ULI” in the middle. Why?
2. Obviously I believe that Arminianism is the more Biblical way of interpreting Scripture, but let me try to summarize my “why” like this: The “Alls” of Scripture make Calvinism impossible. What are the “Alls” of Scripture?
3. The “Alls” of Scripture:
  - i. God loves all people (Jn 3:16).
  - ii. God wants all people to be saved (1 Pt 2:4; 2 Pt 3:9).
  - iii. God sent His Son to die for all people (1 Jn 2:2).
  - iv. God offers salvation to all people (Acts 7:30).
  - v. God enables all people to believe (Jn 12:32).
  - vi. God saves all people who believe (Jn 3:16).
4. I believe these “Alls” are very clear in Scripture. Therefore, I can’t accept Calvinism.
5. I realize that there are some verses that seem to point to Calvinism. But because of the “Alls” of scripture, whatever those verses mean, they can’t mean Calvinism.
6. I like how theologian Roger Olson put it. Both Calvinism and Arminianism have their problems. The question is which problems can you live with? Because of the “Alls” of scripture, I can’t live with Calvinism.
7. Let me close by revisiting doctrine of hell. Unbelievers want to know why a loving God would send people to hell. As I said, Christians might answer in one of two ways: Calvinism says that people go to hell because God does not offer them salvation; if they are not elect, then God does give them the option or the possibility of salvation. Arminianism says that people go to hell because God offers them salvation but they reject

- it. In other words, Calvinism would that it's God fault that people go to hell, while Arminianism would place the blame on those people who rejected the free offer of salvation through Christ.
8. This is one of the main reasons I align with Arminianism. I don't believe that it's God's fault that people go to hell; I believe it's their fault. I believe that God loves everyone and desperately wants to save everyone and He makes it possible for all to be saved, and the only reason why some people aren't saved is that they reject God's free offer of salvation through Christ. I also believe that is a more satisfying answer to unbelievers.

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<sup>i</sup> R.C. Sproul, *Chosen by God*, 137.

<sup>ii</sup> Palmer, Edwin H., *The Five Points of Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 42.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>v</sup> Roger Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* (Intervarsity Press. Kindle Edition), 35.

<sup>vi</sup> Jack Cottrell, *The Faith Once For All: Bible Doctrine for Today* (Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing, 2009), 399.

<sup>vii</sup> J. Matthew Pinson, *40 Questions About Arminianism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2022), 36.

<sup>viii</sup> Brian Abasciano, "The FACTS of Salvation: A Summary of Arminian Theology/the Biblical Doctrines of Grace" (<https://evangelicalarminians.org/the-facts-of-salvation-a-summary-of-arminian-theologythe-biblical-doctrines-of-grace/>).