

**A Short Introduction to the Controversy
Between Calvinism and Arminianism**

INTRODUCTION

This particular study seeks to answer the question: *is God's provision of salvation best explained in Calvinistic or Arminian terms?* Perhaps a good starting point would be to clarify some titles.

The term Calvinism refers to the doctrines set forth by the Reformer John Calvin, and developed by his successors in the Protestant church world-wide. This has come to be called Reformed Theology. The distinctives of Calvinism center on five key points that explain the doctrinal basis of the Gospel. Although nicknamed Calvinism by opponents, most the Reformers held these five points.

Historic Christianity has mainly been Reformed in its theology since the mid 1500's. Certainly all its key confessions were Calvinistic, whether they were Anglican, Presbyterian, Baptist or Congregational. Even the early Brethren movement was largely Calvinistic in Gospel truths. *Calvinism expresses the faith of the martyrs, confessors and reformers, the faith in which the majority of Christ's true people have lived and died ... it is the truth of God.* (John L. Girardeau, *Calvinism and Evangelical Arminianism*, Sprinkle Pub. P. vii)

Arminianism stems from the teachings of Jacob Arminius [1560-1609] that diverged from the Reformed view of predestination. His followers (the *Remonstrants*) took these views even further and solidified their position in five points in the early 1600's that led to their denunciation by the Synod of Dort in 1619. It was here that the Calvinistic five points were clearly spelled out in distinction to the Arminian theology:

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

Methodism is the main Arminian representative in history (although even portions of that were Reformed like the Calvinistic Methodists of Wales). From it stems the Holiness movement and the Revivalist movements, which were strongly Arminian, or even Pelagian in the case of Charles Finney and his successors, and from this comes the modern crusade evangelistic movements and Pentecostalism. Roman Catholicism is also a works based religion and history shows that Jesuits have encouraged Arminianism to undermine Protestantism at various times.

The influence of Arminianism in modern times is enormous, mainly due to the influence of various evangelistic organizations and the effects of popular books. The average evangelical Christian is probably Arminian in his understanding of the Gospel. It must also be said that our time is seeing a dearth of

theological awareness, many being blown about by every wind of doctrine, a dangerous over-dependence upon experiences, reliance upon 'professional' ministers or leaders, and a concomitant fall out of casualties on all sides.

Salvation

Today there are many forms of salvation being offered just as there are many available gods. We have seen a return of civilization to a pagan culture where idols and false religions abound upon every corner. Even man himself is said to be god by some. This particular idea of man being god is popularly taught by New Age cults. It is the original Satanic lie.

We need not study the variety of salvations being presented since we are looking at Christian doctrines. This means we can ignore

- Universalism, which states that everyone will be saved, and also
- Pelagianism (see *History*) which denies the Fall of man and believes that man can save himself.

Universalism	False Religion	New Age	Pelagianism
Everyone is saved	A variety of salvations (Buddha, Hinduism Islam etc.)	A variety of ways to salvation Most based on releasing the god in you (Mysticism)	Man saves himself

A study of the Bible gives us only two possible options concerning the Gospel:

- Salvation is something that God provides, initiates, and controls totally.
- God only potentially provides salvation; man must initiate his personal conversion and co-operate with God to complete it.

There are no other options. These in turn lead to two different pictures of God:

- The first picture is that of an all powerful, completely sovereign God in total control of everything, past, present and future, who loves man so much that he actually saves those He has chosen and brings them through to the end.

Or...

- The second picture is that of a God who loves indiscriminately (i.e. everyone), but not enough to guarantee the salvation of anyone; who has left the initiation of salvation to mere man; who hopes that people will respond to his gracious offer and who cannot control the destiny of those that do respond to his Gospel so that they could still be lost.

This is not an unfair caricature, though perhaps the comparison is not usually presented in this way. The first presentation is Calvinistic, the second is the Arminian nature of things.

The History of the Controversy

Throughout the ages a key struggle in theology has been between those that stressed the sovereignty of God in salvation (*monergism*) and those that elevated man (synergism). The Bible shows us a balance between the provision of God and the responsibility of man in many areas, but in salvation, even man's responsibility is activated by God. Man must respond to the Gospel, but God in his grace enables man to respond by changing his heart (more of this later).

In history, movements began which elevated man, even to the position of being able to provide his own salvation (e.g. Pelagianism). True Bible believers could not accept this course, but some of these weakened the Gospel by saying that man initiates or contributes to his salvation, apart from God (i.e. Semi-Pelagianism).

The great Gospel champion, Augustine of Hippo, contended against Pelagius in the 5th century, and re-emphasized the New Testament teaching that salvation is all of God. God predestines those who are to be saved and ensures that they are saved. Although the Gospel is declared to all, i.e. the command to repent is open, only those who God has chosen will respond. (Similar controversies took place in the 3rd and 4th centuries).

The Reformers, starting with Martin Luther, rediscovered what Augustine taught and went to the Bible to search out the truth for themselves. This current controversy is not modern, but ancient. Throughout history, God has taught men to proclaim the truth (*monergism*) in the face of opposition. That truth was then established, underlined and initiated periods of consolidation in the church. This happened, for instance, in the times of the Puritans in England, Knox in Scotland or Spurgeon in Victorian London.

The Heart of the Question

We have seen, then, the central issue: *Is salvation all of God; or is salvation partly of God and partly of man?*

GOD SAVES TOTALLY	GOD SAVES IN PRINCIPLE ONLY
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Man is powerless • Grace can't be resisted • Those who are truly converted will persevere to the end in God's grace • Man is depraved and unable • God elects those to be saved in eternity in his good pleasure • Christ's death is for the elect (chosen) only 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Man co-operates • Man can resist God and reject the Gospel • Salvation can be lost • Man is not totally depraved and unable • God only chooses those whom he sees in the future will respond to the Gospel • Christ's death is for all without exception

Arminianism is, therefore, a sort of Semi-Pelagianism, which emphasizes man's free will and ability to choose, to make a decision to be saved. The question is: *does the Bible show that man can accept and reject the Gospel, or is even his*

coming to Christ controlled by God? Does man choose or is he drawn? Is God in control of everything, or are some things beyond his power? Is God truly God?

Man

The essence of Man's problem is selfishness. The Bible implies that the fall of Satan was due to pride (Isa 14:12-15), and his original temptation to Adam and Eve was towards self-determination; to controlling their own destiny, to be like God (Gen 3:5). Man always wants a finger in the pie. He cannot stand being uninvolved. If he is not able to control a thing, then he must have a measure of autonomy to satisfy his pride.

In understanding the processes of salvation, this desire for inclusion arises. In Pelagianism, man wants to control his salvation totally; he feels that he is not that bad and certainly not totally depraved. He can, therefore, determine his own future. This is so clearly unbiblical that Christians can see through it. However, it is harder to spot the watered down version since a few texts seem to support it.

In reality, this is man trying to determine his future again. Salvation is provided by God, say the Arminians, but it must be appropriated by each person for themselves. It must also be continued by their own strength or they will lose it.

Any mention of God's foreknowledge must, therefore, mean that God looks down the window of time and searches for those who will have faith.

Such a view brings presuppositions to the Biblical text before it is interpreted. It is so hard for man to lay down his life in the things of God. Jesus said that you must lose your life to save it (Matt. 10:38). The Arminian seems to be saying that you must use your life to save it. The Christian, by definition, is a follower of Christ. As such we should come to his word in submission, not presupposition.

It is hard for us to accept that we cannot contribute anything to a salvation which is all of God. It goes against the grain of our rebellious independence to accept that the only thing I bring to God in salvation is my utter need for mercy. The Bible does not say that my salvation is dependent upon my decision, my accepting Christ, my opening the door of my heart, my praying a certain type of prayer or anything else that arises from my life. In fact, what the Gospel does demand, faith and repentance, are specifically said to be given to us by God as a result of a heart regenerated by God (Eph 2:8; 2 Tim 2:25).

Dead in Sin

Without referring to many scriptural arguments to prove the issue, we will simply look at one; the argument of Paul in Ephesians 2, since this alone clears up the confusion.

And you he made alive, when you were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience... But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead ... made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved) ... for by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God-not because of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them. (Eph 2:1-10)

Could anything be clearer than this? Let us list its component items. How can we study such a passage carefully and come to the conclusion that we contribute towards our salvation?

- In ourselves, **we are dead**. Not sick, mortally wounded, terminally ill - but dead. As far as God, or spiritual life, is concerned man is dead. He died with Adam in the Garden of Eden (Rom 5:12,15). Can a dead man do anything, let alone raise himself to life? Can a dead sinner contribute and help a Holy God in the act of salvation?
- Even if we were alive, we are said to be **following, not only the world, but Satan** too. Will he help us aid God? Can we resist him without God's assistance? The world doesn't know God and is antagonistic to God, can its followers suddenly change and co-operate with God (1 John 3:1, 2:16)?
- In addition, we were **following sensual desires** of body and mind, lusts. Does the sinful nature know how to follow God? Would it want to if it did know? Of course not (John 3:19; Rom 8:6-8).

- We were described as **sons of disobedience**. Will the disobedient suddenly obey God? Obviously not; that is why we were said to be **children of wrath** by nature (Rom 8:7-8). God was angry with us (Psalm 5:5). God's judgment and wrath is hovering over every unjustified man like a sword of Damocles (John 3:36)

This picture is of a man that can do nothing to assist in his salvation. To emphasize this, the apostle then explains God's part. First he has to **make us alive** before anything can occur (John 3:3).

Regeneration, a sovereign act of God, is the initial point in the process of salvation (not necessarily a process in terms of time but of consecutive acts of God).

- This **salvation is of grace**, it is something given to a poor man. It is kindness which is unmerited. It is love given which is undeserved. Paul highlights this by mentioning it twice, three times if you include v7.
- It is an act of **mercy**. There is nothing in the object of salvation requiring that God should act this way. He does it in mercy. It is not a response in God to a decision, a prayer or an attitude. It is something God originates (Jonah 2:9).
- It involves God **raising us up with Christ** and seating us with him in heaven. How can we contribute to this?
- It is a **gift of God**. Does a person contribute to his or her own gifts? It is something offered freely by God.
- It is **through faith**, which itself is said to be **the gift of God**. It specifically states that this is not of our own doing. It is not a work of man in any way. The workmanship is of God and it began in eternity.

Many passages could be added to show that this is the teaching of the whole Bible. God is totally sovereign in salvation, but this passage alone makes the point crystal clear.

God's Love

Everything God does involves total commitment and a finality of expression. God is God, he doesn't act like man. What he starts, he finishes (Eccles 3:14). When he loves, he loves fully, finally and forever. If God just loved in a vague sort of way, he would not be God. If he put his love on some, and then they fell away, he could not be God.

God only does what will end in a full expression of his glory. His love is totally focused upon his Son. In this universe, it is only the Son that is the object of God's love, and that is poured upon Jesus in fullness. Everything else is tainted by sin and is corrupted. God will not tolerate impurity or mixture, and all is consigned to wrath and judgment. Only that which is in Christ will not only survive, but know the expression of God's love. Therefore, those loved by God are the elect in Christ, loved from eternity (Eph 1:4-5), chosen in the beloved.

God does not put his love upon an object destined to wrath. The sinner is said to be hated by God (Ps 11:5-7, 5:5; Prov 3:33) and predestined to judgment (Rm 9:22, called the *reprobate* by theologians.)

This selection of some to life and the passing by of others is called election. It is the eternal starting point of salvation. Our salvation began when Jesus agreed to die in our place as a lamb slain from the foundation of the world, and God chose a bride to give to his son (John 17:2,6,9). The church is that bride (Eph 5:23-33).

This leads the believer to overflowing worship that God should choose us in his mercy. Yet many Christians abhor this doctrine and demand 'fair play'. If we were to demand that God only acted in justice, we would all be damned. God had no obligation to choose to save any of the race that rebelled against him and joined forces with his enemy. God decreed to reveal his love as well as his justice by choosing a portion (the majority?) of the human race to be saved in his son. These were loved from eternity and are seen as perfect and complete in Jesus by the God who is not limited by time (Rom 8:30; 1 Cor 1:30).

Just as we cannot import our feelings into the Biblical concept of salvation, neither can we insist that God loves like us. He does not. We love in fits and starts, and even cease loving when injured. We only treat love glibly and superficially at best. God loves for eternity. This means that his love is not on the reprobate or his love would be in hell - the place of his wrath, the expression of his justice in the universe. Such an idea also ruins the Gospel. Why should anyone repent or seek God after being told that God already loves them?

The Call of the Gospel

At this point we should consider the actual proclamation of the Good News of salvation. If there is a limit to those who are saved, i.e. the elect, then how should we preach?

There is an extreme form of Calvinism (called Hyper-Calvinism) which does not preach the Gospel to all indiscriminately. It falsely concludes that: if only the elect will be saved, then we should not preach good news to reprobates. Only when you see signs of God working in a person can you then share the Gospel with them. This is wrong. It is a false rational conclusion that flies in the face of Biblical commands. We are to: '*Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to the whole creation*'. (Mark 16:15 see also Matt 28:19; Luke 24:47).

The opposite error is to tell everyone that God loves them and will give salvation to all. You only have to pray and exercise your natural faith to receive it. This is Arminianism, and it is also false. There is no Biblical precedent to preach this way. The examples given to us in Acts never once use the term *the love of God*; in fact the word 'love' does not appear in Acts at all. What, then, is the Biblical way forward?

First, we must obey the clear word of scripture that tells us to preach God's word to everyone. We cannot segregate people into elect and non-elect because we do not know who they are! But what is it that we preach?

We must explain that God is the creator who has claims upon all people. We belong to him and cannot live to please ourselves (Acts 17:23-27). We then explain the demands of God's law, the means he has given man to live in this world, and that everyone has fallen short of these demands (Acts 17:30-31; Gal 3:24). As a result, all men are enemies of God (Rom 5:10) and will face his judgment on sin. However, Jesus has been sent to rescue those that come to him for salvation. Everyone that repents of his wrong way of life and believes in Jesus Christ as Saviour, whose heart is changed and who confesses in his life that Jesus is Lord, will surely be saved from the wrath that is to come. Those that come to confess this can be encouraged to expect mercy and counseled to receive Christ as Lord (John 1:12) and be baptized (Acts 2:38).

So we explain that God commands repentance (Acts 17:30) and faith (Acts 16:31). Those who obey are those whom God has enabled to do so by his grace. We cannot broadcast a global love of God or state that Jesus died for everyone in that room at that time. How can we do such a thing if many in that room will die in their sins? We can encourage all those that respond that they have been drawn by God (John 6:44).

Jesus said that many are called (to repentance i.e. God's prescriptive will, what God commands man to do), but only few are chosen (God's decretive will, what God effectually plans, those that God elects in this case), Matt 22:14. There is

a difference between the calling and the choosing of God. The Gospel call is a general command to repentance and faith, but it must not give indiscriminate assurance of life.

GENERAL CALL	EFFECTUAL CALL
•	Contained within the general call
• To everyone	To the elect
• Is external	Is inward
• Applies law	Applies grace
• Command to believe & repent	Ability to believe & repent
• Results in obligation to the reprobate	Results in life to the elect
• Can be rejected	Cannot be resisted

Conclusion

We have seen that Calvinism exalts God and Arminianism exalts man. Calvinism honors the Bible, Arminianism fails to do justice to the tenor of scripture and a great many clear texts.

The proof of the pudding is in the eating. The result of many years of an Arminian emphasis in the preaching of the Gospel in the UK has led to *an 'easy believism'* where almost anyone can be accepted as converted despite no evidence of repentance or conviction of sin. The dreadful problems in our churches stem directly from this where dubious converts are being treated as Christians and

require all sorts of ministry and healing techniques to resolve deep issues in their lives. Often a fruitless exercise.

In days gone by, the Gospel comforts were only applied to those who clearly showed signs of God's working as revealed in: an awareness of sin, a seeking of the Saviour, a desire for forgiveness and a deadly earnest to find peace with God. Our Calvinistic forefathers loved God and people too much to dispense with the rigors of the law and the threat of hell before they applied the good news. They were doctors who sought to reveal the disease before they applied the medicine. Only the truth sets us free. Weakening and falsifying the Gospel by making it sound attractive but unbiblical has dealt a severe blow to this country. A revival of true Biblical preaching is urgently required.

Appendices

Universal Texts

There are a few texts that seem to support the Arminian position by suggesting that God's love is universalistic and not particular; i.e. God loves everyone equally. Other verses seem to imply that Jesus dies for everyone indiscriminately. There is not space here to deal with these in detail, my other studies on the Doctrines of Grace look at these more specifically. However, it is important to at least evaluate them.

First, sound rules of interpretation insist that we should judge the meaning of the few and unclear texts in the light of the whole teaching of the Bible, and texts which explain the position more fully. If we have judged the matter rightly, and the Bible's teaching is essentially Calvinistic, then these texts cannot contradict the weight of scripture, they must mean something else. We cannot construct a theology on a few obscure verses and overturn the bulk of the Bible's clear teaching. The analogy of faith must guide our interpretation.

Secondly, some of these texts prove more than the Arminian would wish. If understood in the way suggested by Arminian apologists, they actually teach Universalism.

For instance, **1 Timothy 2:4**: states that God desires all men to be saved. Does this suggest that God has provided a global salvation which is left for man to grab hold of? No! If *all men* is interpreted as every man and woman, then it clearly teaches that God will save every single person. This is strengthened by verse 6, which states that Jesus gave himself as a ransom for *all*. We know that not everyone is saved, the Bible's doctrine of salvation is not universalistic. Jesus even specifically said some of his hearers would be damned. If only one person was in hell, then this makes God a liar.

So these verses cannot apply to everyone on earth! The usual interpretation of this passage is to identify the all men as *all types* of men. Paul has suggested that thanksgivings be made for all men in verse one. This must mean all types, since it would be impossible to pray for everyone in the world. This is made clear as he begins to identify different types beginning with kings and those in high places. In other words, pray for those in authority in society, for God desires all sorts of men to be saved, even these kings and princes who were oppressing the church at the time.

So all does not necessarily mean everyone who ever lived. A concordance will show that all can be very restricted in its meaning (e.g. Mk 11:32, 5:20; Lk 3:15; Jn 3:26 etc.). This also explains Titus 2:11.

A similar situation applies to the word *world*, particularly in **John 3:16**. John often uses this word in a restrictive sense (e.g. John 12:19). His use of it in 1:29 and 3:17 would again imply Universalism if he meant everyone on the earth. John records Jesus as specifically not praying for the world, but only a portion of it who would be saved (17:3-9). John also tells believers not to love the world in 1 John 2:15-17. How can we not love the world that God loves? We must obviously tread carefully here.

God so loves the world of men that he wants a world of people to be saved and love him. To this end he has decreed that a portion of the current world's population will be saved. In the end, God will have a world of people, a populated earth who are in Christ. It is not everyone or it would include those God has already damned, like the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah.

John, like other writers (especially Peter) uses universalistic terms to make the point to Jews that salvation is now being made available to Gentiles as well. Jews found this a difficult concept to grapple with. Salvation is now available to all the nations of the world.

2 Peter 3:9 and Ezek 33:11 are more difficult and have led to a variety of interpretations. The simplest (simplistic some would say) solution is to see these verses as applying only to the elect. This makes eminent sense and complies with the analogy of the Bible. Others have said that God's revealed will (better

prescriptive will, what we are commanded to do) is to call to repentance but his secret will (better-decretive will, God's effectual plan, decree) is that only some will actually repent. However, I don't feel that this fully solves the problem.

What do these verses actually say? God does not delight in anyone dying. He would prefer that all men would repent. That is not really a problem. Faced with the Fall of man and everyone rushing headlong to destruction, God was not willing for everyone to die and decreed to save some, the elect. It does not imply a universalistic love of God or salvation. The emphasis is on the need for repentance, not on the love of God.

In **Revelation 22:17** it says: *'he that will, let him take of the water of life freely'*. This is often confused with the hymn that says: *'whosoever will unto the Lord may come'*.

Is this a problem? Not at all. We have no objection to the teaching that whoever wants to come may come to Jesus. This is entirely Biblical. However, only those that are drawn by God will come. The sinner has no desire for Christ naturally. He wants to stay in enjoyment of his sins. All may come, indeed all are commanded to come; but only those that God empowers actually will come.

John 6 is a clear commentary on this. In verse 35 there is the promise of Jesus that all who come will never thirst. In v 36: he confirms that, however, people do not believe. Then Jesus explains that only those whom the Father gives

to Jesus will actually come (v37, 39). In verse 44 it is again forcefully stated that unless the Father draws a person, no one can come at all.

Finally, what about Jesus knocking at the door of our hearts? Is not this a picture of God needing our permission or decision to save us? The passage in question is in Revelation 3:20. This statement of the Lord is specifically aimed at Christians not unbelievers. It forms part of a letter addressed to the church at Laodicea. The Lord takes this church to task in the strongest terms but then offers comfort for those who repent. The invitation is directed to those believers who respond to their Lord's chastening. They are not words to be used in Gospel preaching.

Other seemingly universalistic passages are simply explained if read carefully, commentaries will help. They do not constitute any real difficulty.

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- Unconditional Election
- Limited Atonement
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