

Calvinism and Arminianism

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Introduction

Due to an aggressive revival of Calvinism in the 20th century, many Christians in the United States are learning the word “Calvinism” for the first time. They are vaguely aware that there is a theological battle between Calvinism and Arminianism today.

It is obvious that the battle is going to heat up as Calvinism is gaining strength among serious minded Christians who desire to be exegetical in their approach to Scripture and are tired of the shallow sermons of the typical Arminian evangelical pastor.

There is also a revival of interest in the Reformation and its theology because this is where the protestant Church began. Such modern leaders as Francis Schaeffer, J. I. Packer, Jay Adams, Gordon Clark, R.C. Sproul, James Boice and James Kennedy are openly Calvinistic in their theology. A new day seems to be dawning for the Reformed Faith as people are discovering that their roots lie in the theology of the Reformation.

It is important for the modern Christian to understand that the present battle between Calvinism and Arminianism is not a new or recent development. The issues that are being fought over have been points of controversy for two thousand years. It is thus essential to place the present controversy in the context of two thousand years of Christian research and conclusions.

Part One

I. “Calvinism” is a label that was placed on those who basically agreed with the theology of John Calvin (1509-1564). Calvin was the greatest theologian of the Reformation in that he was the one who first developed a systematic Protestant theology. What he taught concerning the nature of salvation

and the nature of man was in union with what the other Reformers taught. Even his doctrine of predestination and his denial of the Catholic teaching of “free will” were the accepted Protestant position. For example, see Luther’s book *The Bondage of the Will*, where Luther gave his full weight to what was appropriately called “the doctrines of grace.”

Calvin’s position on salvation was officially accepted by representatives of all Protestant Churches at the Synod of Dort in 1619. Let there be no mistake on this point. The Protestant theology of the Reformation was what we now call Calvinism.

II. Arminianism is a label that was put on those who followed the theology of James Hermann (1560-1609), whose Latin name was Jacob Arminius. Although he was raised in the Reformed Church of Holland, through reading the works of the Socinian cult, whose most famous member was Servetus, came to embrace their brand of Pelagianism.

His followers waged a battle to change the creeds of the Church to reflect their views instead of keeping the theology of the Reformation as the official position of the Church. This controversy reached its climax at the Synod of Dort, where the issues were debated by representatives from all of Protestantism

The views of Arminius were condemned as heresy and as a veiled attempt to return to Roman Catholicism. It was also pointed out that Arminius was only reviving the doctrine of semi-Pelagianism that had already been condemned as heresy by the Council of Orange in A.D. 529.

The issues that Arminius was now raising were the same issues that were involved in the controversy between Augustine and Pelagius in the early church.

III. Augustinianism is a label placed on those who follow the theology of St. Augustine (A.D. 354.. 430), who was the greatest theologian of the Early Fathers. His position on the nature of salvation and the nature of man reflected, for the most

part, the views of the orthodox Fathers before him.

He was the one who was called upon to refute the teachings of the monk Pelagius. Augustine believed that salvation was all of grace and that man does not contribute anything toward his own salvation. He taught that man is totally unable to seek after God or do any good works that could merit salvation.

All men are born with the guilt and depravity of Adam upon them and, by nature, we are spiritually dead and incapable of saving ourselves. Thus God must initiate salvation, faith and repentance, which are the good gifts of God. His views were accepted as the official position of the Christian Church and ratified as such by various councils.

After several centuries, the Roman Church embraced a semi-Pelagian view that promoted good works for salvation and the necessity of earning merit for salvation.

At the time of the Reformation, the Reformers were simply reviving Augustinianism. They proclaimed that salvation was all of grace. Justification was by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. The Roman Church officially condemned the "doctrines of grace" at the Council of Trent. The Roman Church today shows itself to be heretical by teaching that which was condemned by the councils of the early church.

IV. Pelagianism is a label placed on those who follow the teachings of the Monk Pelagius (A.D. 411-431). Following the teachings of the heretical Origen, who attempted to combine Christianity and Greek philosophy, Pelagius came to believe that each human soul was placed in the infant by a creative act of God. Each soul was therefore perfect and sinless at birth in the same way that Adam and Eve were at the original creation. Thus the fall of Adam and Eve did not in any way affect their children. We have perfect free wills and can be sinless if we so decide. Salvation is not all of grace because we are perfectly able to be saved by an act of our own free wills. Faith and repentance are not the gifts of God. Man can initiate his own salvation. We are free to be sinless or sinful. We are not

helpless. We do not need God to intervene for salvation.

Pelagius' teachings were first discovered through his disciple Coelestius, who preached this boldly in Carthage. After much debate, Pelagius' doctrines were condemned as heresy by the Church of Carthage in A.D. 412. Later, more churches got involved in condemning Pelagianism at the Synod of Mileum in A.D. 416. It reached its climax in A.D. 431, when the Ecumenical Council of Ephesus condemned Pelagianism as heresy. There were seven such Ecumenical Councils where representatives of all the churches of Christianity met to decide such issues.

With the triumph of Augustinianism at the Council of Ephesus, the followers of Pelagius modified their views at certain points and put forth what was called semi-Pelagianism. This was condemned by the Council of Orange in A.D. 529. Twenty-five articles were developed against semi-Pelagianism. Some of these articles are as follows:

- 1 We condemn those who maintain that the sin of Adam has affected only the body of man by rendering it mortal and has not affected the soul also.
- 2 We condemn those who maintain that the sin of Adam injured only himself or that the death of the body is the only effect of his transgression which has descended to his posterity
- 3 We condemn those who teach that grace is given in answer to the prayer of man and who deny that it is through grace that he is brought to pray at all.
- 4 We condemn those who teach that God waits for our wish before purifying us from sin and that he does not by His Spirit give us the wish to be purified.
- 5 We condemn those who maintain that the act of faith, by which we believe in Him who justifieth, is not the work of grace but that we are capable of doing so of ourselves.
- 6 We condemn those who maintain that man can think or do anything good, as far as his salvation is concerned, without grace.

Part Two

The Present Situation

Pelagianism appeals to unregenerate man because it exalts man and downgrades the need for divine grace. It eventually supplanted Augustinianism in the Roman Church by the time of the Reformation. The Protestant churches revived Augustinianism and proclaimed the doctrines of grace. Arminius was the first to officially desire a return to the semi-Pelagianism of the Roman Church. It was hoped that the Synod of Dort would be able to stop the spread of this ancient heresy but within two centuries, Arminianism supplanted Calvinism in the mainline churches.

It has come full circle once again. There are those who exalt man and his supposed free will and who maintain that man has all he needs in his own powers to acquire salvation. No divine grace is needed to repent or believe. They speak of children as “innocent” and have invented the unscriptural concept of an “age of accountability” Any attempt to view man as a helpless sinner is resisted. God is viewed as responding to what we do. He chooses us if we choose him. Man is the ultimate arbitrator of his salvation. The needs of man and not the glory of God is the goal of salvation.

Today, there is a revival of what is called Calvinism, Protestant Theology, Reformed Theology or Augustinianism. There is a New Reformation beginning in which the old doctrines of grace are being boldly proclaimed for the first time in a long time. People sense that the time has come to exalt God as the Lord of all of life and to dash to the ground the pretended autonomy of men who see themselves as the center of the universe.

The churches need to be reformed according to the Word of God. For too long God has been pictured as a helpless old man or as a puppet whose strings man controls. God is treated like a servant who waits on man’s commands.

Serious Christians can no longer abide the downgrading of God and the exalting of man. God is sovereign and His

salvation is all of grace from beginning to end. We are helpless sinners who are in need of God to intervene in our lives to bring us to Himself. This is the only answer to the teachings of secular and religious humanism. The reason that the Fundamentalists cannot answer humanism is that their Arminianism is itself a form of humanism. This is why they must depend on Calvinists such as Francis Schaeffer.

Just as humanism finds its logical climax in atheism, even so theism finds its logical climax in Calvinism. It alone gives to God all the glory and calls sinners to fall down and serve Him who is their Creator and Redeemer.

Part Three

25 Crucial Questions

- 1 What was the original spiritual condition of man at his creation? Did he have a free will? In what sense?
- 2 What happened to Adam and Eve when they sinned against God? What effect did their sin have on their mind, emotions and will?
- 3 Did the sin of Adam affect his posterity? In what way?
- 4 When and how do people receive their soul?
- 5 What is the spiritual condition and standing of man at conception? Did Adam pass on his guilt and depravity to all of his posterity?
- 6 Is human nature perfectible by its own abilities? Is it possible to be sinless in this life?
- 7 Are we capable of pleasing God by our own actions, words or deeds?
- 8 Do we have the ability to produce good works and our own righteousness before God that merits our salvation?
- 9 Does man need God to intervene in grace to save him or does man just need another chance?
- 10 What is grace and why does the Bible refer to it so much?
- 11 Was Christ's life and death necessary for our salvation or was there an infinite number of ways that salvation could be given?
- 12 Is the work of the Holy Spirit necessary for salvation? Does He interfere with the heart and will of sinners to

- cause them to turn to God?
- 13 Are faith and repentance the gifts of God to helpless sinners or the gifts of man to God?
 - 14 Can we say that men have free wills? In what sense?
 - 15 Who initiates salvation? God or man?
 - 16 Is the goal of the plan of salvation the glory of God or the needs of man?
 - 17 Who completes the salvation process? God or man?
 - 18 Is salvation a 50/50 deal between God and man with each doing their parts, or is salvation wholly of God's grace or man's work?
 - 19 What is the basis of justification?
 - 20 Was Christ's active obedience in life vicarious in nature, that is, in our place?
 - 21 Is divine election and predestination based on anything we will do or have done? Does God choose us because we chose Him or do we choose Him because He first chose us?
 - 22 Did Christ come to make salvation merely possible or did He come to secure the actual salvation of sinners? Was the atonement only hypothetical or was it actually vicarious in nature? Did Christ die in the place of only the elect, securing their eternal salvation? Or, was His death a hypothetical situation in which He did not actually die for anyone at all? Thus did He actually die in the place of all men or of the elect? Did He make salvation possible only if men will use their free will to seek it?
 - 23 Does regeneration (i.e., the new birth) precede or follow the act of faith?
 - 24 Is man totally passive in regeneration? Can man regenerate himself by an act of his own will?
 - 25 What is man's true spiritual condition and standing before God?

The above issues must be honestly dealt with because they involve the essence of the Gospel of the unmerited grace of God. The Christian Church was founded on the doctrines of grace and had her greatest growth in that period. She has always triumphed over paganism and humanism when these same doctrines are preached. These wonderful doctrines of

grace returned to Europe in the Reformation. They were revived in America by the Great Awakening under the great Calvinist Jonathan Edwards. They formed the basis of the Evangelical revivals under Whitefield and were the guiding force behind the great missionary efforts of Carey and Judson.

The Church has had her darkest hours when she turned to Pelagianism and its various formulations. The Church today is sunk in extreme ignorance and spiritual poverty. Man-centered preaching abounds on all hands. Secular humanism is triumphing in our culture because religious humanism has been the norm in our churches for generations. We are back to “square-one” with most “religious” people believing that they are going to Heaven on the basis of the good life they are trying to lead. It is as if the Reformation never happened!

Let us therefore understand the grace of God and the power that it has in saving helpless sinners. Let us cleanse ourselves from the errors of Pelagianism and Armimanism, its modern expression. And let us boldly proclaim that salvation is totally by the sovereign, unmerited grace of Almighty God (Eph. 2:8-10).

Part Four

The Foundation of Calvinism

The basis of Calvinism is its commitment to the absolute supremacy of Scripture above all other things. The Reformers rejected the humanism of the Renaissance that taught that man was the origin and basis of all things including religious truth. Humanism has always deified some aspect of human nature and turned it into the origin of truth, morals, justice and beauty. Three general philosophical views have developed from humanism’s commitment to the idea that “man is the measure of all things.”

1. The Rationalists claim that human reason is the basis and judge of truth.
2. The Empiricists point to human experience as the source of all knowledge.
3. The Mystics look within themselves and claim that their emotions can tell them right from wrong, truth from error.

The objections we hear today against the doctrines of God's sovereign grace usually arise from someone's commitment to Rationalism, Empiricism or Mysticism. The Doctrines of Grace are rejected before the Bible is even opened. The Calvinist is usually not given the benefit of the doubt nor allowed to present his case because of a prior commitment to humanistic thought.

The Rationalist: "It is unreasonable to believe in God's sovereignty. As I see it, Reason demands that man has a free will. As to limited atonement, it is unthinkable! Who can reconcile the free offer of the Gospel with election? If I cannot understand it, I reject it. Our beliefs should be justified before the bar of Reason. Why waste time looking in the Bible to see if such irrational ideas as Calvinism are true?"

The Calvinist: "I do not pretend to understand everything. I admit that I do not know how to reconcile God's sovereignty and human responsibility. But, that I cannot does not bother me in the least. The issue is, what does the Bible teach? I reject human reason as the final court of appeal. The Scriptures alone decide what I believe and how I live. I do not understand the Trinity, but I do not reject it because I do not understand it. Faith swims when reason can no longer touch the bottom."

The Empiricist: "I think that Arminianism is true because it works. Look at all the money they have! Look at their big churches! Hey, you cannot argue with success. If it works, do not knock it. I do not need to look in the Bible when I see the answer in front of me."

The Calvinist: "Human experience should not be viewed as the origin of truth and morals. We must interpret our experience according to Scripture and not the other way around. The Scriptures clearly teach that just because something works, this does not mean that it is true. The end does not justify the means. I do not care what success some evangelist or pastor has had. The only question I am interested in is whether his message and his methods are Scriptural."

The Mystic: “I do not like that awful doctrine of election. It makes me so mad! It is unkind and not loving at all! I prayed about it and the Lord told me in my heart it cannot be true. I know what he told me because I feel it deep inside me. Well, anyway, my feelings tell me that election is not true. That is how I feel about it. You can show me all the verses in the Bible until you are blue in the face, but I know how I feel.”

The Calvinist: “Our emotions should not be put in the place of God’s Word. Instead of looking within yourself to your feelings, you should be looking away from yourself to the Scriptures. Feelings do not and cannot determine Truth. Scripture alone is the origin and judge of truth.”

Nearly every objection to Calvinism that we have ever read or heard comes down to three basic arguments:

Rationalism: “It is not reasonable.”

Empiricism: “It will not work.”

Mysticism: “My feelings reject it.”

The Calvinist knows from Scripture that he cannot trust in human reason, experience or feelings (Prov. 3:5-7). What then does he trust? He trusts in the Infinite Mind of God as revealed in Scripture. The Calvinist is willing to bow in humility before the infinite wisdom of God which transcends man’s finite and sinful mind (Rom. 11:33-36; Eph. 3:9, 19; Phil. 4:7). He knows that he is not under any biblical constraint to justify Revealed Truth before man’s reason, experience or feelings. To do so would be sinful.

The Calvinist stands on the shore of God’s infinite wisdom and knows that he will never plumb its depths, scale its heights or search out all its riches. He is content to believe in Revealed Truths even if they seem to be contradictory. While his reason cannot understand it, he knows that there is no conflict in the mind of God over such things (Isaiah 55:8, 9).

Experience or feelings do not fluster the Calvinist. Scripture must interpret them. What if some sinner does not like God's sovereignty? What if he objects to God's decrees? Both the O.T. and the N.T. rebuke such attitudes and objections as rebellion against God (Psa. 2; Rom. 9:10-23; Ezek. 18:25, 29).

What if all men were to raise up and condemn a certain teaching of Scripture as "wicked," "irrational," "unreasonable," "useless," "unloving" or "unkind?" The Calvinist would answer in the words of the Apostle Paul: "Let God be true and every man a liar" (Rom. 3:4).

What man thinks or feels about Revealed Truth has no bearing whatsoever on the Truth. We must humbly bow before the Infinite Mind of God and accept whatever He has revealed and leave the secret counsels of God alone (1 Cor. 4:6; Isa. 8:20; Deut. 29:29).

Any religion that is completely understood by man is of human origin and not the true religion. The religion that comes from the Infinite Mind who created the universe will surpass the feeble mind of man. Its mysteries prove its divine origin.

Since Scripture reveals the Infinite Mind of God, the Calvinist expects to find ideas in it that surpass all understanding. Thus he does not get "shook up" when he runs across things he cannot understand. His beliefs do not rest on his ability to understand but on God's faithfulness to reveal. As Augustine said: "I do not understand to believe. I believe to understand."

Once someone decides that the Bible is really trustworthy and that he will believe whatever it teaches regardless of the fact that he cannot understand it or reconcile it or that his feelings rebel against it, he will become a Calvinist in the end. Thus, the number of Calvinists in any generation is directly related to the number of those who really accept the Bible as the final authority in all matters of doctrine and life.

Conclusion

Calvinism was the religion of our Puritan and Pilgrim fathers who started this country. They were committed to the absolute authority of Scripture over all of life. When liberalism arose in New England, the authority of the Bible was rejected and Calvinism fell on hard times. During the last fifty years, two things have happened. The full authority of Scripture has been revived and Calvinism has begun to flourish once again. The two are interrelated and stand or fall together. You cannot have a Bible fully inspired and free from error unless God is sovereign over all things, including the will of man.

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