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Calvinism and Arminianism: Myths and Realities



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“Oh my, don't tell me you're attending *that* church?”, says your friend.

“Yes, I am...Why? What's wrong?”, you ask, a little shaken.

“Why, don't you know that they're *Michaelists*??”

Michaelists?, you say to yourself. *What is Michaelism? Why have I never heard of this? Why is my friend so concerned? What have I got myself into?*

“Uh, no, I didn't. What have you heard?”

“Well, Michaelists don't believe God loves people. And they believe He wants everyone in Hell. So they don't evangelise. And they don't pray for sinners, or send missionaries.”

You swallow hard, and wonder if you've really been so blind. Could it be that your church holds those extreme views?

This conversation probably happens in various forms hundreds of times a week, around the world. Except the term is not Michaelism, but either **Calvinism**, or **Arminianism**. It's really amazing that the Bible warns Christians against slander (Eph 4:31, Jas 4:11, 1 Pet 2:1) and yet so many Christians commit that sin against one another regularly when throwing these terms around. How? By misrepresenting the views of other Christians, and putting a dark stain over their beliefs and

practices, Christians commit slander. Perhaps no debate within evangelical Christianity contains as much slander, misrepresentation, and misunderstanding as the debate between Calvinists and Arminians.

If you are new to the debate, Calvinism and Arminianism represent different views of how the grace of salvation works in man. Calvinism is named after **John Calvin** (1509-1564), and Arminianism is named after **Jacob Arminius** (1560-1609), even though both of those men are not entirely responsible for the views that are now associated with their their names. John Calvin had never heard of the acronym TULIP now connected with Calvinism (**T**otal Depravity, **U**nconditional Election, **L**imited Atonement, **I**rresistible Grace, **P**erseverance of the Saints); it was developed centuries after his death. Jacob Arminius was a faithful pastor and professor within the Dutch Reformed Church, and would have been surprised to see his spiritual descendants' hostility to the word "Reformed". Nevertheless, we are stuck with the terms, and the terms do describe different approaches to understanding the doctrines of grace. Both systems seek to explain the biblical data on how God chooses people, how people are drawn to salvation, what role the human will plays, how sin has affected the ability to believe, whether a regenerate soul can fall back into destruction.

A Spectrum of Positions

What is often misunderstood is that Calvinism and

Arminianism do not represent two opposing positions, as if they are the only choices on the table. Instead, in the debate over how saving grace works, there is a spectrum of orthodox positions, from strict to moderate Arminianism, to moderate to strict Calvinism.¹ Churches and individuals may be anywhere on that spectrum, and it is only fair to understand another's position so as to not slander or misrepresent one another.

Hyper- Strict Moderate | Moderate Strict Hyper-
Arminianism Arminianism Arminianism | Calvinism Calvinism Calvinism

The Dividing Line

The hinge on which the debate swings, and the real dividing line between the two positions, is the question of God's **foreknowledge** in election (1 Pet 1:2, Rom 8:29). Calvinists believe God's foreknowledge is a choice, or even an act of love. They believe God's foreknowledge is causative – He is not passively seeing the future, but causing it to be. Necessarily then, for a Calvinist, election is a choice God makes for reasons of His own. No condition that man meets is the cause of God's election (including foreseen faith). Election is **unconditional**, though of course, not arbitrary – God has His perfect reasons for His choice.

In Arminianism, God's foreknowledge is His foresight. God sees who will believe on Christ, and chooses them

1. I am indebted to Dr. Kevin T. Bauder for this approach. See <http://www.centalseminary.edu/resources/nick-of-time/220-the-electrum>.

retrospectively. Foreknowledge is essentially reactive, responding to man's choices and ratifying them with His own. Election is then **conditional**, based upon man meeting the condition of belief. (Calvinists agree that justification is conditional upon faith, but they maintain election is unconditional).

Once election is either conditional or unconditional, the rest of the positions naturally follow. For Calvinists, if election is a selective, unconditional choice on God's part, then it is certain that the elect will come to God. Therefore, the call of God will always be **effectual** in them (John 6:37, Rom 8:29-30). No one is able or willing to come (John 6:44, Rom 3:10-12), but the drawing of the Spirit infallibly persuades the elect who willingly and voluntarily come to God.

For Arminians, if election is a conditional response of God to foreseen faith, then the call of God can be resisted (Acts 8:51). Instead, God supplies **prevenient grace** to all men, drawing all men (John 12:32) enabling all to respond to Him if they wish to. Those that come, by choosing to respond positively to the drawing of God, turn out to be the elect.

Necessarily, if God unconditionally elects and efficaciously calls the elect, then He will preserve them and keep them for himself (Rom 8:29-30, Phil 1:6). Not one will be lost, but they will certainly **persevere** in their faith and are **eternally secure** in Christ. Calvinists hold to eternal security and perseverance of the saints.

For Arminians, the question of eternal security is an open one. Since the drawing grace of the Spirit can be resisted, some Arminians believe one can fail to hold to the keeping grace that will result in eternal life. Therefore, Christians have a **conditional security**, that may be forfeited.

Related, but not integral to this debate, is the negative side of the atonement. For some Calvinists, God's foreknowledge, unconditional election, and effectual call means that not only did Christ die to bring many sons to glory, but He did not provide atonement for the non-elect. Some Calvinists affirm this, and some do not.

Four Positions, Not Two

Once we understand what the dividing line is between these positions (foreknowledge and election), we soon see that there are not two positions, but at least four: **strict Arminians**, **moderate Arminians**, **moderate Calvinists** and **strict Calvinists**.

Moderate Calvinists hold to unconditional election, and the effectual call, though they emphasise that the effectual call refers to the *result*, not the *means* of conversion. God will infallibly save His elect, but moderate Calvinists do not believe the call is synonymous with the act of regeneration. Other works, such as the sanctification of the Spirit (1 Pet 1:2, 2 Thes 2:13) can account for this. For this reason, not all moderate

Calvinists require that regeneration logically precede faith. Some see it as simultaneous, and some see faith (though given as a gift of God by the drawing of the Spirit) as preceding regeneration (John 1:12). Further, most moderate Calvinists are unpersuaded by the negative side of particular redemption: that Christ did not die in any sense for the non-elect. They believe there is some sense in which Christ's death was sufficiently meritorious for the whole world (1 John 2:2, 1 Tim 4:10), or that a provision was made for the non-elect which would not be applied to them, further indicting them for their rejection (John 3:18). Well-known moderate Calvinists include Warren Wiersbe, Millard Erickson, Bruce Demarest, A.H. Strong, Charles Ryrie. Many Baptists and independent evangelicals are moderate Calvinists.

Strict Calvinists hold to unconditional election and the effectual call, though many regard regeneration as virtually synonymous with the effectual call. Most will then see faith as logically proceeding from regeneration. Strict Calvinists believe Christ died to provide not a hypothetical but a definite atonement for the elect, and therefore by implication, He did not do so for the non-elect. Well-known strict Calvinists include men such as R.C. Sproul, John Piper, Paul Washer, and most Reformed Denominations and Reformed Baptists.

Returning back to the dividing line, and working the other direction, **moderate Arminians** hold to a conditional election. They will see regeneration and faith as logically simultaneous, or as regeneration following faith. They believe God's drawing

grace is necessary to be saved, but that this prevenient grace is equally given to all men and can be resisted. They believe Christ has provided redemption for all. Many moderate Arminians would hold to eternal security, and believe that once a true believer is saved, he is always saved. Well known moderate Arminians would include men such as A.W. Tozer, Norm Geisler, Paige Patterson, Roger Olson. Many Baptists, evangelicals, charismatics, and Pentecostals are moderate Arminians.

Strict Arminians likewise hold to conditional election, prevenient grace, and universal provision of atonement, but most would hold that a believer's salvation is conditional and can be lost. Well-known strict Arminians include Michael Brown, Jerry Walls, and David Pawson. Many Wesleyans, Pentecostals, Holiness, Church of God, and other such denominations are strict Arminians.

Now while it is clear that the differences are sharp, particularly when relating strict Arminians to strict Calvinists, all four positions, and everything in between, fall within the scope of orthodox, evangelical Christianity. Neither strict Arminianism nor strict Calvinism deny any of the tenets of the Gospel. All affirm the Tri-Unity of God, the full deity and humanity of Christ, the virgin birth, the atoning work of Christ, the inability of man to save himself, salvation by grace through faith, the return of Christ, the future of eternal life or eternal punishment. It is true that a particular adherent of one of these positions could articulate the system so as to endanger

the Gospel. It is also true that synergistic accounts of salvation may create a trajectory that endangers the truths of grace alone, by faith alone. But in principle, none of these positions is a denial of justification by faith, or of grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

The Real Heresies

The true denials of the Gospel are what are termed **hyper-Calvinism**, and its corresponding opposite, **hyper-Arminianism**. Hyper-Calvinism is not five-point Calvinism – that's simply strict Calvinism. Hyper-Calvinism involves at least the following: a denial that we should make a free offer of the Gospel to all, a belief in double-predestination (that God actively elects men to eternal destruction, rather than passively passing them over, as in Calvinism), a denial that common grace exists and placing election at the head of all God's decrees (known in theology as supralapsarianism). Some extreme forms hold that the elect are actually justified before they are born. To the extent that a person holds these beliefs, that person is going beyond traditional Calvinism as defined at Dort (in response to Arminianism), and that is what makes the position hyper-Calvinistic.

Hyper-Arminianism on the other hand, goes beyond classic Arminianism. Classic Arminianism has always affirmed that grace is needed to restore the moral ability to believe. In hyper-Arminianism, every human being has complete freedom of will in every sense and can choose God at any time. Of

course, this is a denial of the inability of man to save himself, and so it is at least implicitly a denial of salvation by grace alone.

Beyond the heresies of hyper-Calvinism and hyper-Arminianism are two more extreme heresies. On the Arminian side, the desire to preserve absolute freedom of choice to humans leads some to deny that God could know the future (for then the choices would be certain, and determined). To preserve their logic of libertarian freedom, the future is completely indeterminate and thus unknowable, even by God. This is the heresy of **Open Theism** or **Free Will Theism**.

On the Calvinist side, the desire to preserve absolute sovereignty on God's part leads some hyper-Calvinists to affirm that God is the direct author and cause of sin itself. Here, both heresies have reached absurdities and horrific implications.

Oddly enough, if you go far enough in either direction, you end up in the same place. Push far enough into determinism, and it becomes fatalism, such as that found in hard materialism or Darwinism. Choice is merely an illusion, and an inexorable chain of material causes is what leads one event to another. But push far enough in the other direction, and freedom becomes so open as to be almost random: a matter of chance or luck. But the fatalism of a Darwinist, and the luck of a quantum indeterminist are really different names for the same thing. Extremes circle round and land us in the same

place.

Dispelling Myths

When we understand this spectrum of beliefs, we can quickly dismiss eleven myths. These myths are precisely the kind of slander that we mentioned earlier.

Myth # 1: Calvinists don't believe God loves the world.

No, most Calvinists believe that God loves the works of his hands, including all men. They are happy to affirm that John 3:16 refers to God's universal love for all men. Some Calvinists believe that 2 Peter 3:9 or John 3:16 refer to the 'world of the elect' or the 'all' of the elect, while others believe that God desires the salvation of all. God's prescriptive and permissive will differ (God may desire certain things, but will to bring something else into being because of an ultimate plan). Nevertheless, nothing in the system of Calvinism prevents someone from believing that God can and does love all men. What Calvinists do believe is that the Bible teaches that God loves the elect in a particular way (1 Timothy 4:10). In fact, it is His special love that constitutes His election of them.

Myth #2: Arminianism is the belief that you can lose your salvation.

As we have seen, many Arminians believe in eternal security. Some Arminians hold that one's security is conditional, and

some do not. Arminianism is defined by conditional *election*, not conditional *security*.

Myth #3: Calvinists believe God predestinated people to go to Hell.

Hyper-Calvinists believe in double-predestination. Calvinists believe God chose who would be saved, and as a reflexive action, passed over the non-elect. While Arminians are bothered by the idea of God passing people over, in reality, the Arminian view of foreknowledge and election is not that different in its implication. If God's foreknowledge is simply His foresight of who would believe, then it follows that God foresaw who would not believe, but *chose to create them anyway*. In other words, if God foresaw that someone's own choice would condemn him to Hell, God still had a choice to bring that person into existence or not. And if He did, the end result is not that different to choosing some to life, and allowing others to choose their own destruction.

Myth #4: Arminians believe we can come to God without grace.

Classical Arminianism does not believe man can come to God on his own. In fact, Article Three of the original Arminian Articles states "That man has not saving grace of himself, nor of the energy of his free will, inasmuch as he, in the state of apostasy and sin, can of and by himself neither think, will, nor do any thing that is truly good (such as saving Faith eminently

is); but that it is needful that he be born again of God in Christ, through his Holy Spirit, and renewed in understanding, inclination, or will, and all his powers, in order that he may rightly understand, think, will, and effect what is truly good, according to the Word of Christ, John 15:5, "Without me ye can do nothing." Only hyper-Arminians and Pelagians believe we can come to God without grace.

Myth # 5: Calvinists don't love evangelism and missions.

Many of the greatest missionaries have been Calvinists: Adoniram Judson, David Brainerd, William Carey, Henry Martyn, as have some of the greatest evangelists: George Whitfield, Charles Spurgeon, George Muller and D. James Kennedy. Calvinists and Arminians may have very different ideas regarding how God's grace works with the human will, but both can and should be obedient to the Great Commission. Their respective theologies give them different motivations for evangelism, but nothing in either system, rightly understood, need be deadening to evangelism.

Myth #6: Arminians believe Jesus has paid for everyone's sins, and Calvinists don't believe Jesus died for the world.

Arminians believe that God has provided atonement for all men (a belief shared by some Calvinists, in fact). They do not believe that this atonement has been applied to every man, else every man would be saved. They see a distinction between the provision of redemption, and the application of

redemption. This does not make them hypothetical universalists, anymore than believing in particular redemption means you must hold to eternal justification. Some hyper-Arminians believe that sinners in Hell “go to hell with their sins fully paid for on the Cross”, which is true double-jeopardy. Many Calvinists believe Jesus died to purchase only those who God had chosen. In that sense, they believe Christ did not die to provide atonement for the non-elect. Some Calvinists believe that Christ provided propitiation for the whole world, but it is only applied to the elect when they believe.

Myth #8: Calvinists believe God forces people to come to salvation: irresistible grace.

No, Calvinists believe that God's grace will not fail to persuade the elect to come to salvation. They come to this position by comparing the “no one” of John 6:44, with the “all” of John 6:37, which suggests without God's effectual call you cannot come, and under the power of the effectual call, you will certainly come. The effectual calls speaks to the result of the call, not the means. God does not force anyone to come. He does change what a person knows and loves, so that such a person will voluntarily choose God. When God persuades, He is able to persuade without failure. The term *irresistible grace* is meant to suggest positive force, not compulsion. We speak of an irresistible chocolate cake, and we mean it is attractive and desirous. When God's grace works on a heart, that heart finds the beauty and glory of God irresistibly lovely, and comes to it voluntarily.

Myth # 9: Calvinists don't believe in free will.

Calvinists believe that man is a free *agent*: he can voluntarily choose according to his own inclinations. He will freely choose in the direction of his desires, and if his desires are corrupt, he will not choose a good thing until his desires are changed. But he is completely free to choose what he wants. What he cannot do is choose something outside his range of choices, or choose contrary to his nature (Jer 13:23). He is free to choose what he is able to choose.

Calvinists also don't believe a human's will is completely indeterminate until the moment of the choice (libertarian free will). If God can see the future, then He can see every choice, and if that future is certain in God's mind, then from God's point of view, the human's choice is certain, and in that sense, determined. The only way to escape this reality of determined choices is to believe in the heresy of Open Theism, where God Himself does not know the future.

Myth #10: Arminians are Pelagians or semi-Pelagians.

Pelagianism was a the heresy of the monk Pelagius, which stated that men can come to God unaided by grace. Furthermore, Pelagianism denied the imputation of Adam's sin and guilt. Arminians hold to both the need for grace to restore the moral ability to come to God, and to the doctrine of imputed sin.

One can speak of the possibility of Arminianism veering into Pelagianism, just as one could speak of the possibility of

Calvinism veering into hyper-Calvinism. The danger on the extremes of Calvinism and Arminianism does not release us from the need to be circumspect in our speech. Perhaps some Arminians have gone in the direction of Pelagianism, but no one would say that of A.W. Tozer, or of Wesley's hymns, or of E.M. Bounds' emphasis on prayer. On the other hand, Charles Finney's theology revealed a genuine Pelagianism, and sadly, many in the revivalist tradition look up to Finney as a model.

Myth #10: A third position exists between Calvinism and Arminianism: Biblicism.

People who make this claim can be commended for their professed allegiance to Scripture, but not for their understanding of the debate or even their charity to others. For if “biblicism” is a third option, it implies that Calvinists and Arminians are not biblicists, hopelessly beholden to their “man-made theologies” (as some will put it), while the “Biblicist” somehow escapes having to systematise his theology, and extracts it directly from Scripture, without theologising. In reality, calling yourself a *biblicist* would be like saying, “When it comes to the debate over private property, I'm neither a capitalist nor a communist; I'm an *economist*.” You'll deserve the wrinkled-brow responses you get, since both communists and capitalists are economists of a sort, and both practice a form of economics. Similarly, both Calvinists and Arminians hold to biblicism (if that means believing in the final authority of Scripture); it's precisely *how* that interpretation of Scripture is done that constitutes the debate.

Calling yourself a biblicist does nothing to advance the conversation; it only muddies the waters. Rather than patronising others (or perhaps arrogating a superior position to ourselves), it would serve the church better to simply explain where we fall on the spectrum of Arminianism to Calvinism. Every Christian who expresses an opinion on these matters lands up somewhere on the spectrum.

Recommendations

What then should we do? This booklet has not been an attempt to minimise the importance of the debate. It's an attempt to encourage Christians to think carefully, instead of tribally. The debate is too often dominated by the very vocal crusading Calvinists and shrill Arminians. Instead of "choosing a side" and then casting calumnies on the other side, the essence of charity and civil discourse is understand your opponent's position before you address the differences. It is not fair or proper to critique Calvinism or Arminianism by pointing to its extreme expressions, and calling Calvinists by the term *hyper-Calvinists*, or to call Arminians *Pelagians*. Instead of perpetuating the eleven myths mentioned here, we should permanently set them aside.

Instead, serious Christians should set to work to answer a set of four questions, and understand how Calvinists and Arminians answer them differently, to arrive at different positions on the spectrum. These should be done with genuine curiosity. It's not wrong for a Calvinist to wonder how

an Arminian holds his system together with integrity, nor for the Arminian to ask the same of the Calvinist. But a genuine, curious and honest inquiry is to seek to understand how your opponent's system seems to be right, to him. Merely seeking to refute him leads to answering a matter before we have heard it (Prov 18:13). Articulate your opponent's position in terms he would agree with, and you have a genuine, fruitful debate.

Four Questions

The first question is, is the human will, in its natural state, partially or completely disabled from responding rightly to God? Biblical texts such as Romans 1-3 and Ephesians 2:1-10 must be studied to come to the right answer.

The second question flows from the first. Given the state of the human will, how does God help or enable people to respond rightly to Him? What does He do, and when does He do it? What are its effects? Again, a careful study of John 6 will shed much light on this, as will passages from Romans 8.

The third question emerges from the second. For whom does God do this work of restorative grace? Here we must not be dominated primarily by philosophical speculations about what God would or should or could do, but by what Scripture actually says He does. Both Calvinists and Arminians will agree that the group that responds positively to this restorative grace are termed 'the elect'. But upon what basis do they

become the elect? Does God choose people based upon what He sees they will do? Does God select Christ, or the church, and consider people elect once they are joined to Him? Does God elect according to the good pleasure of His will? Here a study of Ephesians 1, and Romans 8-9 will be necessary.

And this leads us to the final question, which is where we said the dividing line exists between positions: what is the nature of foreknowledge? Is it foresight? Is it forechoice? Forelove? Again Romans 8-9, Ephesians 1, 1 Peter 1:2, 20 and John 17 will be natural choices to study.

Were we to undertake this task with this kind of charity, civility and carefulness, it would not solve or end the debate, but it would prevent unnecessary fracturing of Christian fellowship, and deliver Christians from speaking evil of one another. It would further biblical understanding, and possibly see erroneous positions move to more biblical ones.

Charles Simeon's Example

We might all, Calvinist and Arminian, remember Calvinist Charles Simeon's approach to the elderly John Wesley.

“Sir, I understand that you are called an Arminian; and I have been sometimes called a Calvinist; and therefore I suppose we are to draw daggers. But before I consent to begin the combat, with your permission I will ask you a few questions. Pray, Sir, do you feel yourself a depraved creature, so

depraved that you would never have thought of turning to God, if God had not first put it into your heart?

Yes, I do indeed.

And do you utterly despair of recommending yourself to God by anything you can do; and look for salvation solely through the blood and righteousness of Christ?

Yes, solely through Christ.

But, Sir, supposing you were at first saved by Christ, are you not somehow or other to save yourself afterwards by your own works?

No, I must be saved by Christ from first to last.

Allowing, then, that you were first turned by the grace of God, are you not in some way or other to keep yourself by your own power?

No.

What then, are you to be upheld every hour and every moment by God, as much as an infant in its mother's arms?

Yes, altogether.

And is all your hope in the grace and mercy of God to preserve you unto His heavenly kingdom?

Yes, I have no hope but in Him.

Then, Sir, with your leave I will put up my dagger again; for this is all my Calvinism; this is my election, my justification by faith, my final perseverance: it is in substance all that I hold, and as I hold it; and therefore, if you please, instead of searching out terms and phrases to be a ground of contention between us, we will cordially unite in those things where in we agree.”