

Calvinism and Arminianism, Lesson 1: Introduction

Introduction

As our opening exercise demonstrated, misunderstandings and misrepresentations on both sides abound when it comes to the topic of Calvinism and Arminianism. Our church stands in a Calvinist tradition; therefore, it is easy to misrepresent the other side. For example, some Calvinists will say that Arminianism is Pelagianism or Semi-Pelagian. (If you don't understand these words, that's fine for now.) Arminianism is neither Pelagianism or Semi-Pelagianism. On the other side, some Arminians will say that the God of Calvinism is a monster—electing and damning whom he will, haphazardly. This is a caricature; a misrepresentation that is not true.

So, I want to do this series to help clear up any misunderstandings and misrepresentations that you currently have. Furthermore, I hope even by the way I approach this series, it will help you as you move forward to not only identify misunderstandings and misrepresentations but also not to articulate any yourselves.

The question is: How do we remove the misunderstandings and misrepresentations? History.

The Importance of History

Going back to history is massively important and helpful for removing misunderstandings and misrepresentations. In fact, we cannot talk about these topics of Calvinism and Arminianism without talking about history. But many Christians do this very thing. To use an analogy, if a couple came to our church one morning that I had never met before, and they asked me to do marriage counseling with them, and I agreed, and thereupon immediately proceed to offer advice, that would be crazy, because I have no idea of their history in order to offer help. In a similar way, many people talk about Calvinism and Arminianism without giving any thought or study to the history of these ideas. In fact, I once heard a pastor speaking about Calvinism and Arminianism say the following: "I don't care what Calvin says; I don't care what Arminius says; I only care what the Bible says." Now, this sounds good, but it is deceptively wrong. Here's why. I do not doubt the intention of this pastor was to have his church members base their understandings of topics like predestination on the word of God alone. We should base our theology on the Bible alone (*sola Scriptura*). But what this pastor was really saying is this: "Don't investigate and believe what Calvin wrote about the Bible; don't investigate and believe what Arminius wrote about the Bible; only believe what I say about the Bible." You see, this pastor was being a-historical. He was distancing himself from history. And, in the process, claiming himself to have the biblical answers to these topics on Calvinism and Arminianism. But Christianity does not allow for this pastor's approach. We have two thousand years of history that cannot be ignored! We inherently must deal with the past, not because that's "just what we do," but because Christianity is a historical faith, and the Spirit has been speaking to men and women in the church for the last 2,000 years. This is why

Spurgeon said: “I find it strange that so many men talk about what the Holy Spirit reveals to themselves with little respect or thought for what the Holy Spirit reveals to others.”¹

And so, when a pastor says unhelpful things like: “I don’t care what Calvin or Arminius says,” it translates into people saying—a common objection—which I hear often: “I’m not a Calvinist or an Arminian; I just believe the Bible.” But, again, this statement, while intentions are noble, is unhelpful and even detrimental. Why? (1) Both Calvinists and Arminians only care what the Bible says. That’s what a Protestant does—care only what the Bible says. (2) “I just believe the Bible” doesn’t tell anyone what you believe about the Bible. It’s like churches that say: “No creed but Christ.” O.K., what does the Bible say about Christ? And as soon as someone says something to the effect: “I believe that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man in one person forever,” you will know that they embrace Chalcedonian Christology. Labels like Chalcedonian Christology, and Calvinism and Arminianism, mean something in their historical context. (3) “I just believe the Bible” is problematic because it is divorced from 2,000 years of historical articulation on the interpretation on what the Bible teaches.

My contention, therefore, is, you must take a position on the issues surrounding Calvinism and Arminianism; in fact, you *do* take a position. I know you do. If I were to ask you: do you believe in election? You would undoubtedly say: “Yes.” If I were to ask you further: “What is the basis of election.” You would say: God’s choice or something else. But you would take a position and defend it (or attempt to) from Scripture.

Trust me, there are many people today articulating beliefs about salvation, predestination, sin, conversion, and related doctrines that are the heart of Calvinism and Arminianism. But the question is: are they historical informed or not? Many are not. For example, one Calvinist author, Edwin Palmer, says that the “Arminian believes that man is sick in sins and trespasses; the Calvinists believes he is dead in sins and trespasses.”² Yet, Arminius himself said: “[M]an is not capable, of and by himself, either to think, to will, or to do that which is really good; but it is necessary for him to be regenerated and renewed in his intellect, affections or will, and in all his powers, by God in Christ through the Holy Spirit.”³ Sure sounds to me like Arminius believed “man is dead in sins.” At best, then, Palmers sacrifices historical accuracy for contemporary brevity. Similarly, Arminian Roger Olsen argues that the Calvinist view of God makes God the author of sin.⁴ Yet no Calvinist makes this assertion, for the Canons of Dort explicitly say that “the cause or blame for unbelief, as well as for all other sins, is not at all in God, but in man” (I.5).

¹ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Commenting on Commentaries* (London, Passmore & Alabaster, 1876), 1.

² Edwin H. Palmer, “The Significance of the Canons for Pastoral Work,” in *Crisis in the Reformed Churches: Essays in Commemoration of the Great Synod of Dort, 1618-1619*, ed. Peter Y. De Jong (Grandville, MI: Reformed Fellowship, 1968, 2008), 173.

³ James Arminius, “A Declaration of the Sentiments,” in *The Works of James Arminius*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classic Ethereal Library, n.d.), 174.

⁴ Roger E. Olsen, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 243.

Conclusion

So, having said this, here is where we are going with this series.

First, next time I'm going to give you a historical sketch of the issues surrounding Calvinism and Arminianism. Far from being unimportant or uninteresting, I find the history utterly fascinating. But not only that, utterly needful for understanding these issues.

Second, after we set the historical stage, we're going to walk through the issues, but from a historical standpoint. So, again, we're never going to divorce this topic from history. But, at the same time, I hope to make this relevant to where you sit and from your vantage point.

So, we will walk through the issues one by one. My goal is that you would have understanding and comprehension of the issues and be able to articulate each side fairly and know what you believe and why you believe it. In addition, I hope to model to you how to be fair and accurate, using history as a guide.

Main idea: History is important and necessary for the contemporary discussion of Calvinism and Arminianism.

Calvinism and Arminianism, Lesson 2: History

Introduction

Last week two great questions were asked: (1) What is Arminianism? (2) Are there only two options—Calvinism and Arminianism? Today we are going to start to answer these questions as we look at the history surrounding Calvinism and Arminianism.

History, as we said last week, is important and necessary for contemporary discussion of Calvinism and Arminianism. For instance, when confronted with biblical issues such as: does God elect people, and if so, upon what basis, we cannot say: “I just believe what the Bible says” for this doesn’t tell us what you believe the Bible *says*. Rather, you must say something like: “I believe God elects us based on our faith in Christ” or “I believe God elects us based on his grace and mercy alone.” These are interpretations of the Bible. And, it is helpful to see the historical understanding of your position on the Bible—where did it come from? Who else taught it? If you come up with a new interpretation that has never been articulated before, you are most likely incorrect.

The issues surrounding Calvinism and Arminianism are now new; they have been around for a long time. So, what I want to do today is to give you a very high-level overview of the Calvinist and Arminian controversy.

Augustine and Pelagius

When we come to issues of Calvinism and Arminianism, we must realize that these issues were discussed way before the early 17th century. The issues go all the way back to, at least in church history, to the time of Augustine.

Augustine (354-430) was a pastor in North Africa. During his day he wrote many works to defend the true Christian faith. One of the works he wrote defended biblical Christianity from Pelagianism. Pelagius (390-418) taught that we do not inherit a sinful nature from Adam. Adam only set a bad example. Thus, we are born neutral and merely follow his bad example—we are sinners by choice only. Augustine, on the hand, taught that Adam’s guilt and corruption was passed on to us—we are sinners by nature.

And so, when the Synod of Dort met in 1618, they recognized the history from which they came. Yet, at the end of the day, they based their conclusions and positions on the Bible alone. This is the actual wording from the call for the Synod of Dort: “I will use no human writings, but the Word of God alone as the sure and undoubted rule of faith.”⁵ As such, the Canons are chalked full of Scripture. So, the Synod set a great example for us. These brothers

⁵ Fred H. Klooster, “The Doctrinal Deliverances of Dort,” in *Crisis in the Reformed Churches: Essays in Commemoration of the Great Synod of Dort, 1618-1619*, ed. Peter Y. De Jong (Grandville, MI: Reformed Fellowship, 1968, 2008), 79.

sought, with the word of God in hand, to understand what it said about salvation, yet with an eye to the past. It is a great model for us.

Jacob Arminius

Many, many more years after Augustine, along comes a man by the name of Jacob (or James) Arminius (1560-1609). While his name may sound like a four-letter word to many Calvinists, Jacob Arminius was attempting to follow what he believed the Bible to say. He was not some sort of fringe lunatic, trying to pervert the Christian faith. In fact, Jacob Arminius was brought up in the Reformed tradition and studied under one of the great Reformed theologians, Theodore Beza (1519-1605), who was himself a student of John Calvin (1509-1564).

As mentioned, Arminius studied under Beza, but he rejected Beza's position on God's order of decrees. God's order of decrees is this: in the mind of God, what was the logical (not chronological) order of how things played out in God's mind? What is the proper order of these events in the mind of God?

- The decree to create the world.
- The decree to permit the fall into sin.
- The decree to elect a certain people.
- The decree to send Christ as a payment for sin.

What order you put these things in matters. And the order of these decrees gets to the heart of the Calvinism and Arminian controversy, so we'll explore this in more detail in the coming weeks. For now, just know that Arminius disagreed with Beza on the proper logical order of these events in the mind of God.

In the 1590s Arminius became a pastor, and in 1603 he became a professor of theology at Leiden University. During this time in church history, you didn't have seminaries as they exist today. If you wanted to study theology and become a pastor, you would attend a University. And each University had a theology department.

At Leiden University, Arminius disagreed with a colleague Franciscus Gomarus (1563-1641) on the order of decrees. So, in 1608, Arminius wrote *Declaration of Sentiments* in which he set forth his views on predestination and associated doctrines.

Arminius dies an untimely death in 1609, but by this time he had accumulated a large following of people who agreed with his views.

1610 Remonstrance

In 1610 a group of Arminius' followers met at Gouda, a city in modern day Netherlands. Arminius' followers produced "Five Articles," which they believed to be a summary of Arminius' teaching. The articles were called the Remonstrance, and the people who produced them became known as the Remonstrants.

Now, from a historical point of view, some Remonstrants, over time, diverged from Arminius' views, but for the sake of our lectures, the Remonstrants and Arminians are synonyms—they refer to the same people. These Five Articles is what the Synod of Dordt responds to. So, the so called Five Points of Calvinism are really a response to the Five Points of Arminianism.

1611 Hauge Conference

Because of building tension and disagreement in the Low Countries (essentially today what we would think of as the Netherlands and Belgium), the States of Holland convened a conference of the two sides to resolve the issue. It was a group of 6 Remonstrants (the Arminians) and 6 Contra-Remonstrants (the Reformed). The Reformed produced the Counter-Remonstrance, a statement of reaction to the five points of the Arminians. However, ultimately, this effort at reconciliation was a failure.

The ensuing years brought more and more conflict. From 1610-1618 there were pamphlet wars (the 17th century version of a twitter or Facebook fight); the teachings spread from the University to the churches and society; local church schisms began—those in favor of the Arminian teaching and those not in favor; and all this intermingled with the politics of the day—especially in a day when the church and state were intertwined.

The Synod of Dordt

Finally, in 1617, the States General, essentially the government of the Low Countries, called to convene a Synod to resolve the Arminian issue, as well as other issues. The Reformed churches, of which the Low Countries were Reformed countries, hadn't convened a national conference for many years. The last national synod was in 1586—almost 30 years prior. The churches had intentions to meet regularly, but it never happened.

The Synod of Dordt lasted from November 13, 1618 to May 29, 1619. We just had 400 years since the Synod concluded, which is why there has been many writings and conferences on the Synod of Dordt in the last several years.

One of things that I think would be helpful to convey to you is the breadth of this Synod. Yes, this was a national synod, but it had international representation. There has never been a Reformed synod of such breadth since then. There were eight delegations from foreign lands. Foreign theologians had full voting rights as the Dutch theologians. At the same time, the outcomes of the Synod were only official for the Dutch churches and University. England—who came to the Synod—had its own Reformed statement of faith: The *Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion*. Interestingly, the French were invited to attend, but King Louis XIII did not allow them to attend. In addition to Reformed theologians and pastors from various countries, the Remonstrants were invited to attend, to have their views examined and judged. The Remonstrants put up a stink with the procedures of the Synod, causing much delay. They were eventually dismissed so the Synod could continue. In addition to theologians from both sides, Dutch politicians were invited for administrative purposes. Again, we think this strange today.

When the elders of this church have meetings, we do not invite the mayor of Lakeville to join us! They lived in a different time.

As I mentioned, many other things were discussed at the Synod of Dordt in addition to the Arminian controversy. The Synod discussed the following: a new Dutch Bible translation, catechizing in church services and the manner of catechizing, training for the ministry, church order, and other issues. But the Canons of Dordt were the heart of the Synod.

The Canons of Dordt

The drafting of the Canons was a lengthy process over the course of many weeks. The intention of the Canons was to give the Synod's "judgment" on the Five Articles of the Remonstrants. The Canons were not intended to be another confessional standard of the Reformed churches. However, they came to be that over time. Why weren't the Canons intended to be a confessional standard? The answer is that they were limited. They were a response to the Five Articles of the Remonstrants, which doesn't contain all there is to know about the Faith.

The Canons contain five sections or heads, but the third and fourth sections were so intimately connected, that they are put together.

I: Divine Election and Reprobation

II: Christ's Death and Human Redemption Through It

III/IV: Human Corruption, Conversion to God, and the Way It Occurs

V: The Perseverance of the Saints

Now, again, remember, this was a response to the Arminians, and in the same order. So, the Arminians (or Remonstrants) started with election. We often think that when you talk about salvation, you start with man as a sinner. But that's not where the Arminians started.

Even though you might not think so, the Canons were written with a pastoral and church perspective. This is because the delegates wanted Canons to impact not just the academy but the church. After all, the Arminian issue had affected the whole church and even state. In fact, the Low Countries were close to a civil war on these issues. The fact that the Canons were written with a pastoral tone is seen in the following:

- Recognizes the need to repent and believe (I.2, 3; III/IV.12, 13)
- Assurance of election/salvation (I.12, 13)
- Sensitive to varying levels of assurance (I.12; V.9)
- Recognizes doubts (V.11)
- Challenges false security (I.13; III/IV.15)
- Addresses fear of reprobation (I.16)
- Encourages humility (I.13)
- Challenges laxity, indifference (V.13)

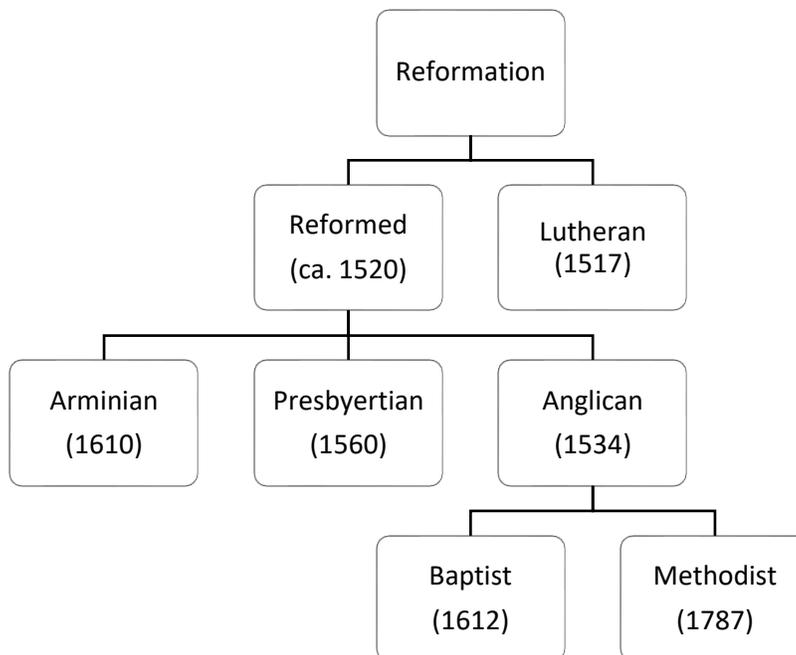
- Addresses grievous sins of believers (V.4)
- Incentive to godliness (V.12)
- Encourages Bible reading/mediation (V.14)
- Offers comfort (I.14; V.15)
- Hope for family members who have given up on the faith (V.6)

The Canons contain two parts: positive and negative. The first part affirms what the churches believe by way of positive proclamation. The second part denies what the churches do not believe by way of negative proclamation. These two parts on each point of doctrine are meant to be read together. So, it is not enough to see what the Canons believe about election, for example; it is also helpful to see what they are rejecting. Both parts are necessary.

Putting the History into the Big Picture

Taking all this history, I want to remind you of the big picture. During the Reformation, two branches of Protestantism formed: Lutheran and Reformed. During the late 16th century is when Arminius and his followers started to form views that were divergent from the Reformed position. Arminius, as I stated, came out of the Reformed branch, but came to articulate views that become something else.

So, when the question is asked whether there are other options besides Calvinism and Arminianism, I want to respond by asking: sure, there are other positions, historically speaking. Within Protestantism, you only have really two traditions: Reformed or Lutheran. Over time, Arminianism diverged from the Reformed. Arminianism was answered with the Synod of Dordt in 1618-19. Yet, Arminianism did change over the years. We must be careful, therefore, when we use terms like Calvinism and Arminianism. When people ask me if I am a Calvinist, I never answer their question with a yes. I always answer with: “What do you mean by a Calvinist?” Only then can I affirm or deny what they are saying about Calvinism. So, for this series, when I talk about Calvinism and Arminianism, I am going to the source documents—the Canons of Dordt and the Five Articles of the Remonstrants.



Another question was asked last time about what is Arminianism? My answer to this question is that we're going to uncover what an Arminian is—using the source documents—over the next few weeks; as well as what a Calvinist is—at least what one is as the Canons articulate it.

Conclusion

It really is remarkable to look back on history and to see how God has preserved his church from error.

You might be wondering, what does GCBC believe about the Canons? In the whole, we agree. There are a paragraphs that speak of Covenant Theology and infant baptism, which we wouldn't agree with, but in the whole, the Canons are what we embrace *because* we believe them to be an accurate summary of what the Bible teaches about key points of the doctrine of salvation.

Main idea: Canons of Dordt were the Calvinist (or Reformed) response to the Five Articles of the Remonstrants.

Calvinism and Arminianism, Lesson 3: Election

Introduction

By way of review from the prior two weeks, we have learned that history is important and necessary for a contemporary discussion of Calvinism and Arminianism. And that the history, in a nutshell, is that the Canons of Dordt were a response to the Five Articles of the Remonstrance to settle the Calvinist-Arminian controversy. Today we begin to unpack the content of what the response entailed.

God's Decrees

As I mentioned last time, Jacob Arminius, from where we get the term Arminian, differed from his mentor, Theodore Beza, and later his colleague, Franciscus Gomarus, on the order of decrees. Remember, the order of decrees is attempting to understand what took place in God's mind before creation. This is not a chronological order but a logical order.

To make this as easy for you to understand as possible, these are essentially the two positions on the order of decrees:

Calvinist order:

- Decree to create
- Decree regarding the fall
- Decree to elect some and reprobate others
- Decree to provide salvation only for the elect

Arminian order:

- Decree to create
- Decree regarding the fall
- Decree to provide salvation for all
- Decree to elect and reprobate those who repent and believe

For our purposes for this lecture, the main difference between the Calvinist and Arminian order is where you put the decree of election and reprobation. The Calvinist would put the decree of election and reprobation after the fall, so some from fallen humanity are elected. The Arminian would put the decree of election and reprobation after the decree to provide salvation for all, so that God has provisionally saved all people, but God only elects those who repent and believe.⁶

⁶ Please note that these two options have been greatly simplified for pedagogical purposes. In reality, there are nuances in both the Calvinist and Arminian order of decrees.

The order of decrees necessarily entails a discussion of the specific decree of election. Recall that election was the starting point for the Arminians. As such, the watershed difference between a Calvinist and Arminian is ones view on election. What makes you a Calvinist or Arminian is not whether you believe in a limited or unlimited atonement, whether you believe God’s grace is resistible or irresistible, or whether you believe you can lose your salvation or cannot. What makes you a Calvinist or Arminian is your view on election. Thus, we want to look at what both sides say.

Two Views: Unconditional Election or Conditional Election⁷

Before we lay out each view, let me make two comments. First, I’m going to present the view of each side, which means we need to look at what each side said, which means we have to go back to the Five Articles of the Arminians and the Canons of Dordt, because these documents are definitional and foundational for what it means to be an Arminian or Calvinist. Second, much more could be said about election than what we say today. My attempt today is to get to the heart of what each side said.

Remonstrance Article 1:

That God, by an eternal, unchangeable purpose in Jesus Christ, his Son, before the foundation of the world, hath determined, out of the fallen, sinful race of men, to save in Christ, for Christ's sake, and through Christ, those who, through the grace of the Holy Ghost, shall believe on this his Son Jesus, and shall persevere in this faith and obedience of faith, through this grace, even to the end; and, on the other hand, to leave the incorrigible and unbelieving in sin and under wrath, and to condemn them as alienate from Christ, according to the word of the Gospel in John iii. 36: “He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life; and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him,” and according to other passages of Scripture also.

The key here that I want to point out that God saves (or elects) those who “shall believe on . . . his Son Jesus.”

Though there are several articles, the key statement on election in the Canons of Dordt comes in . . .

Canons of Dordt, I.7:

Election [or choosing] is God's unchangeable purpose by which he did the following: Before the foundation of the world, by sheer grace, according to the free good pleasure of his will, he chose in Christ to salvation a definite number of particular people out of the entire human race, which had fallen by its own fault from its original innocence into sin and ruin. Those

⁷ In theory, universal election is another option. However, this view must be rejected because it promotes universalism—the doctrine that every human being will ultimately be redeemed because every human being without exception is elect. Also, some advance a position of “corporate election”—where God doesn’t elect an individual but a group of people. However, in a corporate election view, the *basis* of election still must be determined.

chosen were neither better nor more deserving than the others, but lay with them in the common misery. He did this in Christ, whom he also appointed from eternity to be the mediator, the head of all those chosen, and the foundation of their salvation. And so he decided to give the chosen ones to Christ to be saved, and to call and draw them effectively into Christ's fellowship through his Word and Spirit. In other words, he decided to grant them true faith in Christ, to justify them, to sanctify them, and finally, after powerfully preserving them in the fellowship of his Son, to glorify them.

God did all this in order to demonstrate his mercy, to the praise of the riches of his glorious grace.

As Scripture says, God chose us in Christ, before the foundation of the world, so that we should be holy and blameless before him with love; he predestined us whom he adopted as his children through Jesus Christ, in himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, by which he freely made us pleasing to himself in his beloved (Eph. 1:4-6). And elsewhere, Those whom he predestined, he also called; and those whom he called, he also justified; and those whom he justified, he also glorified (Rom. 8:30).

The key is that election is based on God's "sheer grace," based on nothing we do or don't do.

So, if you read each of these definitions closely, you will see that at the end of the day, they have a different understanding of election. Arminians in a nutshell believe that election is *conditional* upon faith; Calvinist believe that election is *unconditional* upon God's grace and purposes. In a nutshell, the question is this: what is the basis of election? Arminians say faith ("conditional election"); Calvinists say God's grace/purposes ("unconditional election"). You can't have it both ways.

Note that reprobation was also a discussion between Calvinist and Arminians. For the sake of time, we cannot talk about reprobation. We have taught on it at other points at GCBC.⁸

Biblical Support for Unconditional Election

The Scripture offer several lines of evidence for believing in unconditional election:

- Romans 9:11, 16: for though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God's purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls. . . . So then it [election] does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy.
- Ephesians 1:5, 11: He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, . . . also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will.

⁸ For more on the doctrine of election and reprobation, see: Dan Burrus, "Systematic Theology, Lesson 24: Soteriology, Part 2," available at gracelakeville.org.

- 2 Timothy 1:9: who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity.

Why Does Any of This Matter?

At the end of the day all of this matters because it answers this question: who takes the initiative in our salvation? God? or humans? I believe that the Calvinist view teaches that God alone takes the initiative in our salvation, so he gets all the glory and praise. God is sovereign; his grace is free to bestow on whom he wills.

Besides this overarching issue, one's view on election matters for several reasons:

1. Assurance of salvation

Can a person have true assurance of salvation in an Arminian framework? If their election is ultimately based on their belief, how do you know if you believed enough? How do you know if your faith is genuine? For me personally, I lacked assurance of salvation for many years. But once I came to understand unconditional election, I came to have assurance. The reason is because it took the focus off of me and on to God. My salvation is not about me at all! And that is utterly liberating!⁹

2. Humility

While Calvinists are stereo-typed as the “frozen chosen,” “heartless,” and proud-know-it-alls, the doctrine of unconditional election should drive us to our knees. If our salvation is truly, solely, and all of the Lord, how can we boast about anything? It brings absolutely humility to know that God set his love on us even when we did not want it.¹⁰

But some offer objections to a Calvinistic view of election.

1. That's not fair!

On the surface, it sure sounds like the Calvinist view of election is not fair. Why doesn't God give everyone a chance—that's unfair? But the truth is, as one pastor says, “Fairness does not consist in treating everyone equally; fairness consists in giving everyone what he deserves.”¹¹ And what do we all deserve? The anger and judgment of God! This is why the first article in the first head of doctrine states: “Since all people have sinned in Adam and have come under the sentence of the curse and eternal death, God would have done no one an injustice if

⁹ See Canons of Dordt, I.12.

¹⁰ See Canons of Dordt, I.13.

¹¹ Jim Scott Orrick, *Mere Calvinism* (Phillipsburg, PA: P&R, 2019), 61.

it had been his will to leave the entire human race in sin and under the curse, and to condemn them on account of their sin.” We don’t want God to be fair; we want God to be merciful.

2. Election removes incentive for evangelism

If people are going to be elected and then eventually saved, what use is evangelism? This common objection forgets that God has not only decreed to elect a certain people, he has decreed to provide the means necessary: namely, Christ, repentance, and faith. In other words, the elect are only saved when they repent and believe the gospel. And this requires them to be evangelized.¹² But all the elect will be saved!

So, the only reason we can evangelize with effectiveness is because God has his people that he has elected that will hear the gospel and are guaranteed to believe. In an Arminian framework, there is no guarantee any will believe, because election is based on the faith of man. And why would any believe if they are dead in trespasses and sins (Eph 2:1-3).

Conclusion

At the heart of the Calvinist and Arminian debate is the matter of divine election. Both Calvinists and Arminians believe in election. But does God chose you on the basis of your choice of him or does God chose you on the basis of his choice of you? Depending on which option you chose determines if you are an Arminian or a Calvinist.

Next time, we will look at the most controversial of points in the Canons of Dordt, so called “limited atonement.” Is God’s atonement really limited? Find out next week!

Main idea: The basis of election is the key difference between Calvinists and Arminians.

¹² See Canons of Dordt, I.2-3.

Calvinism and Arminianism, Lesson 4: Atonement

Introduction

By way of review, we have looked at the following three things: (1) History matters, for history is important and necessary for contemporary discussions of Calvinism and Arminianism. If someone is not willing to engage the history, then they are not worth engaging. (2) The specific history is that in the early seventeenth century, the Canons of Dordt were a response to the Five Articles of the Remonstrance to settle the Calvinist-Arminian controversy. (3) A person's position on the *basis* of God's election is the key difference between Calvinists and Arminians.

The next logical step in the doctrine of salvation (i.e., what the Bible teaches about salvation) is the extent of the atonement. The question is: who did Jesus die for?

Two Views: Universal Atonement and Particular Atonement

Remonstrant Article 2:

That, agreeably thereto, Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, died for all men and for every man, so that he has obtained for them all, by his death on the cross, redemption, and the forgiveness of sins; yet that no one actually enjoys this forgiveness of sins, except the believer, according to the word of the Gospel of John iii. 16: "God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life"; and in the First Epistle of John ii. 2: "And he is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.

Canons of Dordt, II.8:

For it was the entirely free plan and very gracious will and intention of God the Father that the enlivening and saving effectiveness of his Son's costly death should work itself out in all his chosen ones, in order that he might grant justifying faith to them only and thereby lead them without fail to salvation. In other words, it was God's will that Christ through the blood of the cross (by which he confirmed the new covenant) should effectively redeem from every people, tribe, nation, and language all those and only those who were chosen from eternity to salvation and given to him by the Father; that he should grant them faith (which, like the Holy Spirit's other saving gifts, he acquired for them by his death); that he should cleanse them by his blood from all their sins, both original and actual, whether committed before or after their coming to faith; that he should faithfully preserve them to the very end; and that he should finally present them to himself, a glorious people, without spot or wrinkle.

Based on these statements, the main issue at stake in the difference between Calvinists and Arminians on the atonement is the extent. The Arminian says the extent of the atonement is for all. The Calvinist says the extent of the atonement is for the elect.

So, the question must be asked: which view—the Arminian or Calvinist—is deriving their position on the extent of the atonement from Scripture? Let's look at this.

Biblical Basis for a Particular Atonement

The extent of the atonement is bound up in the nature of the atonement. What I mean by this is that the atonement is actual and effective. Here are some passages that teach the death of Christ actually and effectively accomplish salvation:

- Rom 3:25a: who God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. *Through the blood shedding of Christ on the cross, he actually propitiated sins. He did not provisionally do it; he actually did it.*
- Rom 5:10a: for if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, . . . *Reconciliation is accomplished at the cross. Reconciliation is not accomplished by my faith; reconciliation is applied by my faith.*
- Eph 1:7: In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace. *Again, we actually have redemption through Christ's death, not the provision for it.*
- Col 1:22: yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach. *He has reconciled you—past tense—through his death. Not a provision reconciliation but an actual reconciliation.*
- Heb 9:26: Otherwise, He would have needed to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but now once at the consummation of the age he has been manifested to put away sins by the sacrifice of Himself. *Christ's death actually and effectively forgives sins!*
- 1 Pet 2:24a: and He Himself bore our sins in His Body on the cross, . . . *Christ substituted for sin—he actually (not provisionally) bore sins on the cross.*

Now, why have I emphasized the fact that Christ's death actually and effectively accomplishes propitiation, redemption, reconciliation, forgiveness, and substitution? Because, as I stated earlier the extent of the atonement is bound up in the nature of the atonement. Neither Calvinist or Arminian would deny that that the atonement is actual and effective.

Let me put it is this way. Since Christ's death actually and effectively saves people, and since only some people are saved, Christ, therefore, died only to save some people. This conclusion makes sense if we look at other alternatives.

- Alternative 1: Christ's death accomplished the salvation of *all* the sins of *all* people. This is universalism. But we reject universalism because not all are saved; some will suffer punishment of sins for eternity.
- Alternative 2: Christ's death accomplished the salvation for *some* of the sins of *all* people. This is Arminianism. But this is not true because all men have some sins to answer for and thus none are saved.
- Alternative 3: Christ's death accomplished the salvation of *all* of the sins of *some* people. This is Calvinism. And this is the only possible solution because Christ's death actually accomplished the forgiveness of sins.

The conclusion is that Christ died only for the sins of believers. There is a particularity in the atonement, which is why sometimes this is called "particular atonement."

And this conclusion is in keeping with clear statements of Scripture. Here are a sampling of some:

- Matt 1:21: She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.
- John 10:11, 15: "I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. . . . even as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep."
- John 17:2-3, 6, 9: "even as You gave Him authority over all flesh, that to all whom You have given Him, He may give eternal life. This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent. . . . I have manifested Your name to the men whom You gave Me out of the world; they were Yours and You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your word. . . . I ask on their behalf; I do not ask on behalf of the world, but of those whom You have given Me; for they are Yours.
- Acts 20:28: Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.
- Eph 5:25: Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her.

That's merely a sampling; there are more passages, but we don't have time.

The Arminian Conception of the Extent of the Atonement

How do Arminians understand the extent of the atonement?

The Arminian, in a nutshell, believes that Christ died for all, but only believers are saved. The Arminian wants to maintain that Christ died for all. But this is problematic, because if Christ died for all, doesn't it mean that all are saved? Logically, this is the only option, but the Arminian, obviously, does not believe that all are saved. For the Arminian, Christ died for all, but only believers are saved.

To tease this out a little more. Arminians say that Christ's death obtained actual and effective forgiveness for all. The first part of this formula is consistent with what I stated earlier: that Christ's death obtains actual and effective salvation. But it becomes problematic when they say that Christ's death obtained actual forgiveness *for all*. The problem is that if Christ obtains actual forgiveness *for all*, then all would be saved; what ground does God have for sending someone to hell?

The only conclusion you are left with is that the atonement in the Arminian understanding is ineffective or powerless. The Arminian simply can't have it both ways. Christ either died for all and so all are saved. Or Christ died for some and so some are saved. The Arminian says Christ died for all but only some are saved. The atonement, then becomes ineffective and powerless because there are people in hell that Christ atoned for.¹³

Thus, in summary, the Arminians limit the atonement as do the Calvinists: neither group is a universalist. The Arminians limit the power of the atonement; the Calvinists limit the scope (i.e., the elect) of the atonement. Or, put another way: the Calvinist limits the atonement to God's elect (who in time believe); the Arminian limits the atonement to believers.

The Arminians, to be fair, want to say the atonement is "universal," in the sense I have described above, because of what they see in Scripture. We don't time to delve into their arguments. Suffice it to say: I believe their exegesis of Scripture regarding a "universal atonement" is incorrect.

Clarifying Misconceptions of Particular Atonement

The doctrine of "particular atonement" has been much misunderstood, partly because people have used the unhelpful word: "limited atonement." The word "limited atonement" is inherently offensive and damaging to convey what the Calvinist believes—no one wants to "limit" the atonement! But every position that is not universalism must limit the atonement. So, if you identify as a Calvinist, stop using the words "limited atonement"—the word does more harm than good. Instead, use the term "particular atonement" or "definite atonement."

With that said, let me clear up some misconceptions of the Calvinist position:

¹³ A modification of Arminianism was made in the seventeenth century. The modification rightly saw the problem with Arminianism, namely, forgiveness for all but only some saved. The modification said, instead, that Christ's death obtained *potential* forgiveness for all. The problem with this view, however, is that Christ's death is no-where presented in Scripture as having obtained *potential* forgiveness (as already shown in this lesson).

First, as we have presented the doctrine of “particular atonement” it does not mean that Christ’s death was somehow insufficient to save all people without exception. Canons of Dort, II.3 states: “This death of God’s Son is the only and entirely complete sacrifice and satisfaction for sins; it is of infinite value and worth, more than sufficient to atone for the sins of the whole world.” The truth is, as first phrased by Peter Lombard in the twelfth century: Christ’s death is sufficient for all but effective for only the elect. Particular atonement is not an issue regarding the *sufficiency* of Christ’s death.

Second, “particular atonement” does not mean that since Christ accomplishes the salvation of the elect, these people do not have to believe in Jesus Christ. The Bible clearly teaches that believing in the Lord Jesus Christ is necessary for salvation (Acts 16:31; Rom 10:13). Belief is the means by which Christ’s accomplishment is applied to the believer.

Third, related to the first, is the misconception that there are people who believe in Jesus but are not saved because Christ did not die for them. This is not a biblical option. Biblically, if you believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, Christ died for you. “Whoever will” may come to Christ for salvation, and no one who comes will be turned away.

Fourth, some object: “If Christ only died for the elect, then we should not give the gospel to all people without discrimination.” But this is a conclusion the Bible never draws. We commanded to give the gospel to all peoples of the earth (Matt 28:18-20). Even the Canons of Dort say: “Moreover, it is the promise of the gospel that whoever believes in Christ crucified shall not perish but have eternal life. This promise, together with the command to repent and believe, ought to be announced and declared without differentiation or discrimination to all nations and people, to whom God in his good pleasure sends the gospel” (II.5).

So, you see, the framers of the Canons of Dort were not intent on “limiting” Christ’s death. Their intent was to preserve the accomplishment (i.e., power and effectiveness) of Christ’s death. For if Christ’s death does not accomplish anything in and of itself, but needs human faith to make it powerful and effective—as in the Arminian scheme, then Christ’s death is weak and impotent and cannot powerfully and effectively save anyone. In fact, the Canons were careful to encapsulate a “limited atonement” in unlimited language.¹⁴ Yet, in popular opinion, people reject the teaching of the Canons of Dort on “limited atonement,” at least some do, because they do not understand the point of the discussion; they are offended that Christ’s atonement is “limited.” But who really limits the atonement?

Why This Matters?

And who really limits the atonement is why all this matters. This issue matters because the death of Christ is on the line. If according to the Arminian understanding, Christ died for all

¹⁴ See the following examples in the Canons of Dort: Christ’s death is of *infinite* value, *sufficient* for all (II.3); proclamation of the gospel is for *all* (II.5); Christ’s death is effective for *all* the elect (they could have said “only” the elect) (II.8); Christ’s death is effective for *every* kind of people (II.8).

people without exception, yet it is only applicable to those that believe, Christ's death does not accomplish salvation for anyone. But if, according to the Calvinist understanding, Christ died for all people without distinction—for all those the Father has given him—then Christ's death was an effective and powerful accomplishment of salvation!

Main idea: The key difference between the Calvinist and the Arminian on the atonement is the extent of the atonement and thus its accomplishment and effectiveness.

Calvinism and Arminianism, Lesson 5: Sin

Introduction

By way of review, here is where we have been in this series: (1) History matters, for history is important and necessary for contemporary discussions of Calvinism and Arminianism. (2) The specific history is that in the early seventeenth century, the Canons of Dordt were a response to the Five Articles of the Remonstrance to settle the Calvinist-Arminian controversy. And then we started to walk through each of the five points at issue. (3) First, a person's position on the *basis* of God's election is the key difference between Calvinists and Arminians. (4) Point two: Calvinists believe the atonement is limited to the elect, unlimiting the atonement effect and power. Arminians believe the atonement is unlimited to all, limiting the atonement effect and power.

When we come to the third article, human sinfulness, there were vast amounts of agreement between the Arminians and Calvinists with respect to human sinfulness. In fact, so much so, that the framers of the Canons of Dordt put the article on human sinfulness (Article III) with the article on God's grace (Article IV). In other words, standing alone, by itself, the Arminian view of human *sinfulness* was orthodox. But the Arminian view of *grace* was not orthodox, which made the Arminian view of human *sinfulness* less than orthodox. To see these differences, we need to turn to the documents themselves.

Remonstrant Article III:

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 anything that is truly good (such as having 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 xv. 5: "Without me ye can do nothing."

On the surface, this sounds really good. In fact, many of you thought this was a Calvinistic statement when we first started the series. You had good intuition, because as I already stated, the framers of the Canons of Dordt thought that by itself, Remonstrant Article III was orthodox, which is why they included the third and fourth articles into one "head" or "chapter" in the Canons of Dordt. Yet it is helpful to compare and contrast this statement with what the Calvinistic churches said. The key paragraph is the following paragraph on "total inability":

Canons of Dordt, III/IV.3:

Therefore, all people are conceived in sin and are born children of wrath, unfit for any saving good, inclined to evil, dead in their sins, and slaves to sin; without the grace of the

regenerating Holy Spirit they are neither willing nor able to return to God, to reform their distorted nature, or even to dispose themselves to such reform.

What I want to do in this lesson is to contrast these two different positions on sin. As we will see, there is much similarity. And, if you've been at GCBC for a good length of time, what I'm about to say regarding human sin from a Calvinistic point of view will sound very familiar to you because we embrace a Calvinistic view of human sinfulness at this church because we believe it is biblical.

Calvinistic View of Sin

Strictly speaking, there are only three paragraphs on the doctrine of sin in the Canons of Dordt. Paragraph 1 states this:

Man was originally created in the image of God and was furnished in his mind with a true and salutary knowledge of his Creator and things spiritual, in his will and heart with righteousness, and in all his emotions with purity; indeed, the whole man was holy. However, rebelling against God at the devil's instigation and by his own free will, he deprived himself of these outstanding gifts. Rather, in their place he brought upon himself blindness, terrible darkness, futility, and distortion of judgment in his mind; perversity, defiance, and hardness in his heart and will; and finally impurity in all his emotions.

In a nutshell, this teaches that mankind is "totally depraved."

Now, the Canons of Dordt do not use this term. And the term "total depravity" is often misunderstood, so let me explain what the concept means.¹⁵

Total depravity does not mean:

- That every person has exhibited his depravity as thoroughly as he could.
- That non-Christians do not have a conscience in which they can discern between good and evil.
- That non-Christians indulge in every form of sin.
- That non-Christians do not perform actions that are good and helpful in the sight of God.

If that is what total depravity does not mean, here is what total depravity does mean:

- "Total": sin extends to every facet of humanity: mind, will, emotions, and heart. This is why the language of the Canons of Dordt states that human-kind, as a result of the Fall,

¹⁵ For a fuller treatment of "total depravity" and surrounding theological context, see: Dan Burrus, "Systematic Theology, Lesson 17: Anthropology, Part 2," available at gracelakeville.org.

is in this condition: “blindness, terrible darkness, futility, and distortion of judgment in his mind; perversity, defiance, and hardness in his heart and will; and finally impurity in all his emotions” (Canons of Dordt, III/IV.1).

- “Depravity”: non-Christians lack any spiritual good in terms of relationship with God.

We summarize “total depravity” like this . . . not every human being is Adolf Hitler. But every human being has the same sinful nature as Adolf Hitler, and is capable, apart from God’s grace, to commit the same atrocities.

Here are a few biblical passages that teach “total depravity”:

- Eph 4:17-18: So this I say, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind, being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart.
- Rom 7:18: For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh [my fallen nature]; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not.
- Gal 5:24: Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions [emotions] and desires.
- Jer 17:9: The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it.

Based on the truthfulness of total depravity, it follows logically and biblically that humankind is “totally unable.” This is why Canons of Dordt III/IV.3 states: “Therefore, all people are conceived in sin and are born children of wrath, unfit for any saving good, inclined to evil, dead in their sins, and slaves to sin; without the grace of the regenerating Holy Spirit they are neither willing nor able to return to God, to reform their distorted nature, or even to dispose themselves to such reform.”

Again, the term “total inability” has been often misunderstood. Here is what the term does not mean:

- That non-Christians by nature are not able to do good in any sense of the word. Many well know philanthropists are not Christians. Yet, these acts of benevolence toward humanity are not ultimately done out of a love for God.
- That human beings have no physical ability to perform actions; total inability has to do with moral inability. A simple illustration with elucidate the important distinction between physical inability and moral inability. My son once got mud on a brand-new pair of shoes. We were both distraught over the issue, so I told him to wipe the mud off

his shoes in the grass. He said, “I can’t.” Now, as a point of truth, he was physically capable of wiping the mud off his shoes in the grass. But he did not want to. His inability was a “moral” inability – it had to do with his will—not wanting to wipe off his shoes.

This then leads to what “total inability” teaches:

- “Total”: the non-Christian cannot do, say, or think that which totally meets God’s law and approval.
- “Inability”: the non-Christian is morally unable apart from God’s special work of grace to change the basic disposition of his heart and life.

Here are a few biblical texts that teach “total inability”:

- Rom 8:7-8: because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, and those who are in the flesh [i.e., non-Christians] cannot please God.
- Eph 2:1: And you were dead [i.e., a picture of total inability] in your trespasses and sins.

Now, having said this, what is the Arminian perspective on sin? Don’t Arminians, as stated earlier in Remonstrance Article III, believe humankind is totally unable? Yes and no.

Arminian View of Sin

As stated earlier, the Calvinistic or Reformed ministers did not have a problem, per se, with Article III of the Remonstrance. As a way of reminder, here is what it stated:

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 anything that is truly good (such as having 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 xv. 5: “Without me ye can do nothing.”

Here’s the idea: because mankind is completely corrupt in mind, will, and emotions, mankind is in bondage to sin and thus is totally unable to do any spiritual good—even unable to believe in Christ by his own power. So, the question is: how is this view different than the Calvinist?

In a certain sense, it is not different. We only see that it is different when we get to the Rejection section of the Canons of Dort. If you remember, the Canons of Dort are divided into two sections: positive and negative. In other words, what the Bible teaches and what the Bible rejects. When we come to the what the Bible rejects, we see that Arminius’ views differed

in a few areas. You can read those areas in your handout later. (If you're really interested, I wrote a paper for a class on this issue that points out the differences.)

What we can say is that at the heart of their view of sin, for both the Calvinist and Arminian, God's grace must come first. Why? Because man is a sinner who cannot save himself; he cannot even believe in Christ by his own power.

Conclusion

And this is actually the one implication I want to make from this lesson. As Arminian, Roger Olsen, as rightly stated, "The gospel preached and the doctrine of salvation taught in most evangelical pulpits and lecterns, and believed in most evangelical pews, is not classical Arminianism but semi-Pelagianism if not outright Pelagianism."¹⁶ Many Christians believe that God through his Spirit, does what he can do to save someone, but they ultimately have the power in and of themselves to choose or reject Christ. This is not what Arminius believed and not what the Reformed believed. What did they believe about the grace of God toward sinners? Find out in our next lesson.

Main idea: Though with some differences, both Arminians and Calvinists are agreed that humankind is totally depraved and totally unable to come to Christ.

¹⁶ Olsen, *Arminian Theology*, 30.

Calvinism and Arminianism, Lesson 6: Grace

Introduction

By way of review, we have looked at the following items: (1) History matters, for history is important and necessary for contemporary discussions of Calvinism and Arminianism. If someone is not willing to engage the history, then they are not worth engaging. (2) The specific history is that in the early seventeenth century, the Canons of Dort were a response to the Five Articles of the Remonstrance to settle the Calvinist-Arminian controversy. Then we looked at the Canons of Dort themselves, walking through each point. (3) First, election . . . a person's position on the *basis* of God's election is the key difference between Calvinists and Arminians. (4) On atonement . . . Calvinists believe the atonement is limited to the elect, unlimiting the atonement effect and power. Arminians believe the atonement is unlimited to all, limiting the atonement effect and power. (5) Last time we saw that though with some differences, both Calvinists and Arminians believe the humankind is totally depraved and totally unable to come to Christ on their own.

In this lesson on "grace," which is what the fourth article of the Remonstrance was about, we pick up with what God's grace is and does considering human sin. And this is the key question that distinguishes Calvinism and Arminianism on this issue of grace: why do some believe and not others? How do Arminians and Calvinists answer this question?

Contrasting Calvinism and Arminianism on Grace

Both Arminians and Calvinists, as we saw last time in Lesson 4 on Sin, believe that mankind's will is in bondage to sin. Without the grace of God to first act on the sinner, mankind is hopelessly lost.

Yet this is precisely the issue that is the problem for the Arminian. They are not consistent. And this is why the Reformed put the third article of the Remonstrance with the fourth. You see, the Arminians said that the will is in bondage to sin and needs the supernatural grace of God to act first. So far, so good. Yet, they undermine this teaching by a concept called prevenient grace.

Prevenient grace simply means "preceding grace." And what the Arminian believes is that God gives to every human being without exception "prevenient grace."¹⁷ At this point, then, the person can choose to accept God's grace or reject it. So, in one sense, this view of grace is consistent with the idea of "conditional election" and "universal atonement," but it is inconsistent with "total inability." And here is how. If a person is totally unable to come to Christ by their own will, something needs to change in the sinner's will in order for him to want to choose Christ. Prevenient grace puts humanity in a place where they can choose to accept or

¹⁷ There is debate among Arminians about whether prevenient grace is given to every human being without exception or whether prevenient grace is given to only those who hear the gospel. It is beyond the scope of this lesson to deal with this issue.

reject Christ. So, prevenient grace doesn't go far enough. It leaves mankind as the decisive actor once again. Thus, grace, for the Arminian, is "synergistic"—God and man cooperates.

The Calvinist rightly saw the mistake of the Arminian. For the Calvinist, grace is not "prevenient," grace is "effectual" (a word used in the Canons of Dordt to describe grace).¹⁸ In other words, because a sinner is completely helpless without Christ and doesn't want to come to him (moral inability), the sinner needs a change of heart and will. And this is exactly what God does for his elect and for those that Christ died for. Do you see the consistency? There is consistency. This grace can be called "monergistic" because it is God's working alone, not a cooperation with God and man. But more importantly this latter understanding of grace is the biblical teaching on God's grace.

Biblical View of Grace¹⁹

Because we are spiritually in bondage and dead in sins, we need God to act. The acting of God is supernatural in that it is not a human activity but a divine activity.

- Titus 3:5: "He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit."
- 1 Pet 1:3: Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

The point is that regeneration is supernatural because we are spiritually dead . . . it has to be.

But the Arminian agrees to some extent, that God's grace is supernatural. The difference lies in the fact that regenerating grace is not synergistic but monergistic. This means that it is not the cooperative work of God and humankind but the work of God alone. For the Arminian, faith actuates regenerating grace. But the Calvinist maintains that faith cannot actuate regenerating grace because humankind is spiritually in bondage.

- John 3:3, 7-8: Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God. . . . Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Just as we cannot cause or physical birth, so we cannot cause our spiritual birth.

¹⁸ Canons of Dordt, III/IV.10, 11, 12, 17.

¹⁹ For more on God's grace as it relates to salvation, see: Dan Burrus, "Systematic Theology, Lesson 25: Soteriology, Part 3," available at gracelakeville.org.

- James 1:18: In the exercise of His will he brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures.

What this all means is God's grace in salvation is not offered for man to choose, it is actually bestowed on God's people, so that he believes. God does not bestow the *potential* to believe and awaits the assent of human's choice. God works willing and acting and produces in his elect the will to believe and even produces belief itself (i.e., faith is a gift of God). In this way, grace is effectual and monergistic!

A Helpful Analogy—Drowning or Drowned?

Let me take all that I have said on "grace" and "sin" (from last week) and give an analogy that will help.

The typical evangelical believes something like this. You are drowning in water, and God comes on a rescue boat. God holds out his hand, and you chose to grab his hand. This is, at best, Semi-Pelagianism.

The Calvinist and Arminian understanding is like this. You are not drowning, you are drowned. You are dead at the bottom of the water. Now comes the difference between Arminians and Calvinists.

For the Arminian, God gives you and every other human being a "preceding grace" that awakens you to some extent so that you can now cooperate with God and swim to the shore. For the Calvinist, God comes to you, dives in the water, brings you to the shore, gives you CPR, and you start breathing again.

In summary, then, for the Arminian, saving grace can be resisted and must be cooperated with. For the Calvinist, saving grace cannot be resisted and is God's work alone.

Clarifying Misconceptions

Part of the problem with this section of the Canons of Dordt is that it has been defined and described by their opponents, the Arminians. This section is often described as "irresistible grace." The irony is that the Canons of Dordt never use the term "irresistible grace;" it was the Arminians who used the term. Here is Article IV of the Remonstrants: "But with respect to the mode of the operation of this grace, it is not irresistible; inasmuch as it is written concerning many, that they have resisted the Holy Ghost, Acts 7, and elsewhere in many places." So, like the term "limited atonement," I don't prefer the term "irresistible grace" because it was not used by the Canons of Dordt, and the term is often misunderstood in a least two ways.

First, some will say that Calvinist do not believe that mankind can reject the grace of God or the gospel. But this notion is simply not true. Canons of Dordt, III/IV.9:

The fact that many who are called through the ministry of the gospel do not come and are not brought to conversion must not be blamed on the gospel, nor on Christ, who is offered

through the gospel, nor on God, who calls them through the gospel and even bestows various gifts on them, but on the people themselves who are called. Some in self-assurance do not even entertain the Word of life; others do entertain it but do not take it to heart, and for that reason, after the fleeting joy of a temporary faith, they relapse; others choke the seed of the Word with the thorns of life's cares and with the pleasures of the world and bring forth no fruits. This our Savior teaches in the parable of the sower (Matt. 13).

The Reformed or Calvinist position does not mean that God's grace or the gospel cannot be resisted. In fact, mankind is born resisting the gospel!

Second, in conjunction with the first misconception is a second. Some will say that the Calvinist view of grace teaches that God forces or coerces his grace upon a person whether that person wants it or not. The framers of the Canons of Dordt knew this misconception so they wrote: ". . . so also this divine grace of regeneration does not act in people as if they were blocks and stones; nor does it abolish the will and its properties or coerce a reluctant will by force, but spiritually revives, heals, reforms, and—in a manner at once pleasing and powerful—bends it back" (III/IV.16). The Calvinist believes that grace can be resisted but God's grace overcomes human resistance!

Conclusion

At the end of the day, when it comes down to it, though both Arminians and Calvinists insist God's grace precedes any human action, Arminians respond with "prevenient grace," which requires the cooperation of man to be effective. Calvinist respond with "effectual grace," which is effective to overcome man's stubborn and bound will. In the end, then, we have two different answers to this question: why did you believe the gospel? My faith or God's grace are the two answers and the stark difference between Calvinism and Arminianism.

Main idea: Arminians answer man's need with prevenient grace (synergistic); Calvinists answer man's need with effective grace (monergistic).

Calvinism and Arminianism, Lesson 7: Perseverance

Introduction

By way of review, as some of you have missed some of the lessons, we have looked at the following items: (1) History matters, for history is important and necessary for contemporary discussions of Calvinism and Arminianism. (2) The specific history is that in the early seventeenth century, the Canons of Dordt were a response to the Five Articles of the Remonstrance to settle the Calvinist-Arminian controversy. Then we looked at the Canons of Dordt themselves, walking through each point. (3) First, election . . . a person's position on the *basis* of God's election is the key difference between Calvinists and Arminians. (4) On atonement . . . Calvinists believe the atonement is limited to the elect, unlimiting the atonement effect and power. Arminians believe the atonement is unlimited to all, limiting the atonement effect and power. (5) On human sin, both Calvinists and Arminians believe the humankind is totally depraved and totally unable to come to Christ on their own. (6) Last time, on God's grace in salvation, we saw two fundamentally different understandings of what God's grace does in response to the sinner. For the Arminian, grace is prevenient and synergistic. For the Calvinist, grace is effectual and monergistic. For all of these issues, you can go back to the corresponding lesson to get more detail.

Today we arrive at the final point, namely, how Christians persevere in the faith. Conceptually, we move from what God does in eternity (election), to what Christ did on the cross two thousand years ago (atonement), to what God does in time with human beings (sin and grace), to what happens to Christians throughout their lives and at the end of their lives (perseverance). The big question that is answered in the lesson is this: can a true Christian ultimately and finally fall away from the faith? The answer of the Calvinist is clear; the answer of the Arminian is not so clear.

Arminianism and Calvinism on Eternal Security

Initially, the Arminians (or Remonstrants) were undecided about the issue of whether or not a true Christian can lose their salvation. Here is what Article V stated:

That those who are incorporated into Jesus Christ and thereby become partakers of his life-giving Spirit have abundant strength to strive against Satan, sin, the world, and their own flesh and to obtain the victory; it being well understood (that this is) through the assistance of the grace of the Holy Spirit, and that Jesus Christ assists them through his Spirit in all temptations, extends the hand, and—if only they are prepared for warfare and desire his help and are not negligent—keeps them standing, so that by no cunning or power of Satan can they be led astray or plucked out of Christ's hands, according to the word of Christ, John 10, 'No one shall pluck them out of my hands.' But whether they can through negligence fall away from the first principle of their life in Christ, again embrace the present world, depart from the pure doctrine once given to them, lose the good conscience, and neglect grace, must first be more carefully determined from the Holy Scriptures before we shall be able to teach this with the full persuasion of our heart.

I commend these brothers for wanting to “carefully determine from the Holy Scriptures” the issue of eternal security. What is clear, though, is the original Remonstrance of 1610 were undecided about the question of eternal security of the believer.

As Arminianism developed, as early as 1611 at the Hague Conference, and finally at the Synod of Dordt in 1618, the Arminians came to the position that Christians can fall from the faith. This is seen in the *Opinions (Sententia) of the Remonstrance* presented at the Synod of Dordt, in which they elaborate on the Five Articles published back in 1610. Here is point 4 explaining Article V of the 1610 Remonstrance: “True believers are able to fall through their own fault into shameful and atrocious deeds, to persevere and to die in them; and therefore finally to fall and perish.” Note that this position is consistent with the rest of the Five Articles, a position which they believe to be biblical.

The summary of Arminianism on this issue, then, is that true believers can ultimately and finally fall away from the faith.

In contrast to the Arminians, the Calvinist (or Reformed) taught a nuanced doctrine of eternal security. The Calvinists taught two simultaneous truths: (1) God *preserves* believers and (2) Believers *persevere*. Let’s look at these two truths in the Canons of Dordt. First, believers *persevere* in the fight against sin:

Hence daily sins of weakness arise, and blemishes cling to even the best works of God’s people, giving them continual cause to humble themselves before God, to flee for refuge to Christ crucified, to put the flesh to death more and more by the Spirit of supplication and by holy exercises of godliness, and to strain toward the goal of perfection, until they are freed from this body of death and reign with the Lamb of God in heaven (V.2).

Second, God preserves believers:

Because of these remnants of sin dwelling in them and also because of the temptations of the world and Satan, those who have been converted could not remain standing in this grace if left to their own resources. But God is faithful, mercifully strengthening them in the grace once conferred on them and powerfully preserving them in it to the end (V.3).

We could summarize the Calvinist position like this: True believers must and will persevere until the end, and God will preserve true believers until the end through the use of means. In short, true believers cannot ultimately and finally fall away from the faith. Let’s see the biblical basis for the Calvinist position.²⁰

²⁰ For more on the issue of eternal security and implications, see: Dan Burrus, “Systematic Theology, Lesson 29: Soteriology, Part 7,” available at gracelakeville.org.

Biblical Basis for Calvinism on Eternal Security

But before I give some biblical texts that support the Calvinist position, I want to remind you, as I have done with all the biblical texts given in this series, that my purpose is to show you the biblical basis of Calvinism. It is not my purpose here, nor do I have time, to give you the full exegesis of these biblical texts. There are good resources that go into depth on these biblical texts, which I can provide for you if you are interested.

The first set of texts teach that God will preserve true believers until the end.

- John 6:39: This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day.
- John 10:27-28: My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand.
- Rom 8:29-30: For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined *to become* conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.
- Phil 1:6: For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.

We could add many more verses to these, but for the sake of time, let's look at verses that support the proposition that true believers must and will persevere until the end.

- Matt 10:22: You will be hated by all because of My name, but it is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved.
- 1 Pet 1:3-5: Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to *obtain* an inheritance *which is* imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.
- Heb 3:14: For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end.
- Rev 2:10b: Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.

We could summarize this teaching like this: True believers persevere through God ordained means (church, Bible reading, prayer), because of the preservation of God. Here is how the Canons beautifully summarize God's preserving power:

So it is not by their own merits or strength but by God's undeserved mercy that they neither forfeit faith and grace totally nor remain in their downfalls to the end and are lost. With respect to themselves this not only easily could happen, but also undoubtedly would happen; but with respect to God it cannot possibly happen, since his plan cannot be changed, his promise cannot fail, the calling according to his purpose cannot be revoked, the merit of Christ as well as his interceding and preserving cannot be nullified, and the sealing of the Holy Spirit can neither be invalidated nor wiped out (V.8).

Think of the biblical teaching of the "perseverance of the saints" as a ship headed to a destination. Perseverance is the ship, but it needs fuel to arrive at its destination. The fuel is the means that God has provided to keep the ship going in the right direction.

Once Saved Always Saved?

Before ending, I must address one common misunderstanding of the perseverance of the saints. Many people talk about the doctrine of eternal security as "once saved always saved."

"Once saved always saved" is commonly understood to mean that a person can make a profession of faith but then go and live their life as they please. This view is unbiblical and false. Many evangelicals, however, embrace this view of eternal security. However, if by "once saved always saved" we mean that true believers are kept by God's power to persevere until the end, then "once saved always saved" is correct.

My suggestion would be to stop using the phrase "once saved always saved" because it is often misunderstood and does not adequately capture the biblical nuance of both concepts of preservation and perseverance.

Conclusion

As we have seen in each lesson, there are two different views of eternal security. Arminians believe that a person can fall away from the faith. They are quick to point out that the cause is man and not God; nevertheless, falling away can happen. For the Calvinist, true believers cannot ultimately and totally fall from the faith because as they attend to the means that God has provided (perseverance), God preserves them in the faith until the end. Both positions are consistent with the other four points, but only one position is true and correct according to the Scriptures. Christians must, therefore, strive for "holiness without which no one will see the Lord" (Heb 12:14), but at the same time be thankful that God powerfully holds them fast until the end.

Main idea: Arminians believe that true Christians can ultimately fall from the faith; Calvinists believe that true Christians cannot ultimately fall from the faith.

Calvinism and Arminianism, Lesson 8: Conclusion

Introduction

In the very first lesson of this series, someone asked the question: what is Arminianism? My answer was that we are going to unpack what Arminianism is throughout the series. And over the last seven lessons that is just what we have done. We have unpacked Arminianism *and* Calvinism. But as we wrap up this series, my question is: should we use these terms?

Calvinism and Arminianism?

I have called this series “Calvinism and Arminianism.” As I have used these labels, I have not defined them by what I think they mean, but by what the proponents of each side taught in history. To do this, we have looked at the Five Articles of the Remonstrance (Arminianism) and the Canons of Dordt (Calvinism). So, to be fair and accurate with these labels, we have gone back to these foundational historical statements, at which time (early seventeenth century) the line was drawn in the sand on the differences between two perspectives on salvation.

But should we even use the term “Arminianism” and “Calvinism”? Yes and no. As long as you use these terms as they were originally understood in the early seventeenth century, I think these terms are fine to use. But let me nuance this answer a little further.

As you recall the term “Arminianism” comes from a man named Jacob (or James) Arminius. Arminius developed views, primarily on election, that diverged from the teaching of the churches in the Low Countries (modern day Netherlands and Belgium). Arminius died an untimely death in 1609, but his followers came together to summarize his views. These followers were called Remonstrants and they summarized his views in the Five Articles of the Remonstrance.

For the term “Calvinism,” a few things need to be said. First, Calvinism also comes from a man. His name is John Calvin. However, Calvin was born in 1509 and died in 1564, a half century before the Canons of Dordt were published. The teaching in the Canons of Dordt is generally in agreement with the teachings of John Calvin, but the Canons of Dordt were not written by John Calvin as he had already died. Second, the Reformed churches, the official church in the Low Countries in the early seventeenth century, was not started by John Calvin. The Reformed churches can be traced back to a pastor named Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) in the 1520s. So, the Canons of Dordt are not the direct teaching of John Calvin, but the teaching of the Reformed churches in the Low Countries.

Here is my point with all this. When someone asks me if I am a Calvinist, or someone asks me what an Arminian is, I don’t immediately answer their question. I first want to discuss with them what they understand about these labels. Depending on their answers, I go back to the early seventeenth century and define “Calvinism” and “Arminianism” with the Canons of Dordt and Five Articles of the Remonstrance.

Having said this, from a historical perspective, it is true that theological positions develop over time. Over time, Arminianism became much more diverse than Calvinism. People in the later centuries claimed the name “Arminian,” which the early seventeenth century Arminians would have a hard time recognizing. To a lesser extent, “Calvinism” developed over time as well.

TULIP?

While we are talking about terminology, which is so critical in this discussion of these issues, and any theological issue for that matter, should we use the acronym TULIP to describe Calvinism? TULIP has been used as a memorable way to summarize Calvinism, and the Dutch love their tulips!

T – Total depravity
 U – Unconditional election
 L – Limited atonement
 I – Irresistible grace
 P – Perseverance of the saints

Let me make three observations before I answer the question about whether we should use the acronym TULIP.

First, TULIP originated in the early 20th century.²¹ The framers of the Canons of Dort did not use the acronym.

Second, some of the terms in the acronym are better than others, but all of the terms must be carefully defined.

- “Total depravity” is a one way to convey the concept of the third article on human sinfulness. As pointed out, however, in Lesson 5 of this series, “total depravity” must be defined properly. “Total depravity” does not mean that every human being is as bad as he or she can be; it simply means that sin has affected the entirety of humanity—mind, will, emotions, and heart. Besides, the real crux of the issue is not “total depravity” but “total inability.” Total inability means that the will is in bondage to sin, so that humans cannot do any spiritual good, including accepting Christ as Savior, without the divine intervention of God. A better term than “total depravity” would be “pervasive depravity”—depravity is “pervasive” to every aspect of humanity.
- “Unconditional election” is a sufficient way to describe the concept that God elects a fixed number of people for salvation *based on his mercy/grace and purposes* alone. In this sense, election is “unconditional”—not based on man’s choice. However,

²¹ Kenneth J. Steward, *Ten Myths about Calvinism: Recovering the Breadth of the Reformed Tradition* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 75-96; 291-292.

unconditional election has a corollary doctrine, namely, reprobation. Thus, in a popular discussion and understanding of election, many people forget to discuss reprobation, but the doctrine of reprobation was just as important a doctrine as election for the Calvinists and Arminians.

- “Limited atonement” is my least favorite term of the five in the acronym. As mentioned in Lesson 4, the term “limited atonement” is inherently offensive because no one wants to limit the atonement. The Canons of Dordt are not intent on “limiting” the atonement; they are intent on preserving the atonement’s power and effectiveness. Besides, even Arminians, as discussed in Lesson 4, limit the atonement. So, the term “limited atonement” is unhelpful, even damaging, and should be replaced with “particular atonement” or “definite atonement.”
- “Irresistible grace” is my second least favorite term of the five. Again, the term is often misunderstood. It is often understood to mean that humans cannot resist the grace of God. But this simply is not what the Canons of Dordt teach nor what the Bible teaches. The concept of “irresistible grace” means that at the end of the day, God’s grace overcomes and overpowers man’s sinful resistance. Therefore, better terms would be “effectual grace” or “effective grace.”
- “Perseverance of the saints” is, of all the terms, probably the best because it is taken right out of the title to chapter 5 of the Canons of Dordt. But even this term must be qualified. On the surface, the term can suggest that saints must persevere in the faith, which is true, but it leaves out the fact that God also *preserves* his people. Both facts of perseverance and preservation are true, biblical, and the teaching of the Canons of Dordt.

Third, you might notice that TULIP is not in the same order as the Canons of Dordt, which responded to the same order as the Five Articles of the Remonstrance. Some might argue that the order of TULIP is a better order, as even the first paragraph of the first chapter of the Canons of Dordt begins with human sin.²² The problem is that the order of TULIP fails to take into account that the main issue between Arminius and the Reformed churches was the doctrine of election not “total depravity.”

Should we then use the acronym TULIP? Well, if it helps you to conceptually remember each of the five points at issue, then it can be used. But it must be used with a proper understanding of what each term means. Therefore, because the acronym was not used by the framers of the Canons of Dordt, and because the acronym is often misunderstood, I prefer not to use it when discussing the issues of Calvinism and Arminianism.

²² “Since all people have sinned in Adam and have come under the sentence of the curse and eternal death, . . .”

Summary of the Differences

At the end of the day, by way of summary, here are the main differences between Calvinism and Arminianism:

	Calvinism	Arminianism
Election	Based on God's grace/mercy and purposes	Based on man's faith
Atonement	Limited to the elect; unlimited in effect and power	Unlimited to every human being; limited in effect and power
Sin	Total depravity and total inability	Total depravity and total inability
Grace	Effectual and monergistic	Prevenient and synergistic
Perseverance	True Christians cannot ultimately and totally fall away from the faith	True Christians can ultimately and totally fall away from the faith

Conclusion

There are significant differences between Calvinism and Arminianism. But I want to be clear and fair to both sides as I close: both sides are trying to understand what the Scriptures teach about salvation. Our church believes that Calvinism, as defined by the Canons of Dordt, is an accurate teaching of the Bible. But we must listen and be charitable to our Arminian brothers and sisters.

My purpose in this series, as I have stated many times, is to give you an accurate summary of what each side teaches, representing each side fairly. My hope is that my Arminian brothers, with whom I disagree, would feel that I have represented them fairly—I believe I have.

And this is what I want you to take away from this series. There has been more heat than light on this topic of Calvinism and Arminianism. You know that these issues can get heated and emotional. Therefore, make sure that before you say, "I disagree," you can truly and honestly say, "I understand." When reading and discussing Calvinism and Arminianism, make sure you accurately portray the other side before you disagree. I hope to have done that in this series, so that all Christians can continue to go back to the Scriptures to seek to understand what the Scriptures teach about salvation.