

# The Triumph of Arminianism (and its dangers)

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For the last several hundred years, the church in America has been mostly Calvinist while Arminianism has been a minority position. All that has changed.

The evangelical church today is basically Arminian in its approach. For now, Arminianism has triumphed and Calvinism is in retreat. I don't mean that the Calvinist denominations have officially changed their doctrine. Most Calvinistic theologians have stuck with their five-points (see TULIP Calvinism Compared to Wesleyan Perspectives). But most of the ordinary people have drifted from traditional Calvinism toward the Arminian position. The average Christian today might claim to be Calvinist, but they function as a "practical Arminian." While many Calvinist pastors still ascribe to the Calvinist shibboleths, in their practical theology, they are functioning Arminians.

Arminianism has triumphed. This great theological battle was won without warfare, with few debates, with "dueling magazine articles." How ironic that in a day when theology no longer matters to most people, one of the great theological battles of all times seems to have been settled. Doves of Calvinists have become Arminians—at least in practice..

## Some historical background

The terms "Calvinist" and "Arminian" are derived from the names of two individuals who promoted differing theological approaches. Calvinism comes from John Calvin who was a French reformer who lived in the early 1500's. He was a main leader of the Protestant Reformation. An organized and systematic thinker with an excellent legal mind, John Calvin promoted the doctrines that eventually came to be called "Calvinism." Actually Calvinism was not a new doctrine at all. The approach was pretty similar to the theology of Augustine who lived about a thousand years earlier.

Arminianism derives from James Arminius who lived in the late 1500's. When Calvin died, Arminius was only four years old. James Arminius is not as well known in history as Calvin. But the Arminian approach was not new either. His approach was taken in the 400's and 500's by many of the early church's "Eastern fathers." One early church leader, Pelagius, even took this approach to the extreme and was ultimately condemned as a heretic by the Western church.

## The Differences between Calvinism and Arminianism

### Does man have a role in getting saved?

A true Calvinist begins and ends his discussion of salvation with God. God alone. For the true Calvinist, man has no ability to move toward God. He cannot even recognize his own sin. Salvation is something which happens wholly as God's work. What man does or is makes no difference. Confession, repentance, or "going to the altar" does not make a difference. To the true Calvinist, salvation happens totally apart from anything man does or is. It is purely God's work done without man's participation in any way whatsoever.

Today's church has drifted to a more Arminian approach. Most church people today believe the Christian's relationship with God is **bi-lateral**, not **uni-lateral**. While maintaining that God alone does the saving, today's church figures that men and women have a part to play—confessing sins and receiving Christ. To today's average Christian, Christ's death on the cross provided completely for our salvation, but

forgiveness is not effective until an individual receives God's forgiveness. In this most Christians are "practicing Arminians."

## **How shall we approach evangelism?**

Since a Calvinist believes salvation is wholly God's work without any partnership with man, he or she approaches evangelism nonaggressively. Calvinism teaches there is nothing whatsoever a person can do to become saved—we can't "decide for Christ" or "receive Christ" enabling a person to "become a Christian." To do this would give man a part in salvation. Calvinists believe salvation is from God and God alone. To make salvation hinge on an individual's "accepting Christ" or "receiving Christ" makes salvation partially a human endeavor. A true Calvinist believes that nothing whatsoever a person does or is contributes anything at all to salvation. Salvation is God's work alone and we play no part in it—not even receiving salvation counts.

Today's evangelical church is far more Arminian in its approach to evangelism. Most Christians and even prominent Calvinistic churches emphasize our personally receiving Christ as Savior and invite attenders to "receive Christ" or "make a decision" to become a Christian.

## **Are people totally and completely evil?**

Calvinism teaches that men and woman are totally depraved—absolutely evil from birth. Every single baby coming into the world is born with an evil heart—totally depraved and completely inclined to wickedness. Total depravity teaches that men and women from birth are rotten to the core. A man or woman can do nothing whatsoever good or pleasing to God—it is impossible, for we are born absolutely and altogether sinful. Since we are born so sinfully inclined, we are therefore totally incapable of any good. Even little babies are absolutely sinful. (see Body and Soul: Greek and Hebraic Tensions in Scripture.)

Most Christians today are far more Arminian. They may not use a theological term like "prevenient grace" or "common grace" but they have a hunch that God has granted some sort of grace or "light that lighteth every man" to all people on earth. In fact, even these worldlings sometimes do good things out of this positive impulse in them—an impulse planted there by God. Though this impetus is not enough to save them... it is a "God-shaped Vacuum" drawing them toward God. This prevenient grace—the "grace that precedes"—enables naturally sinful men and women to seek God and to feel conviction over their sins. Most of today's Christians have a hunch that their unbelieving associates at work are really hungry for God deep inside. This approach is a mostly Arminian view.

## **Did God pick who would be saved?**

The Calvinist doctrine of election teaches that long before the beginning of time, God chose who would be saved. He "predestined"—set their destiny before hand—some to be saved and go to heaven. This teaching says that out of all the people who would ever live in future history, God selected some to be saved. Some were "picked," others were not picked. The chosen ones would be the only ones saved. No one else.

This view easily grows out of the conviction that man is wholly and totally depraved and unable to choose God. So, God must choose him. True Calvinists believe that God did this selection based on nothing whatsoever the individual might do or be in the future. In other words, God did not look down through history and pick those who would later choose Christ. Such a notion would make salvation based somewhat on man's later decision and not fully on God alone. Calvinists believe that God chose whom He wanted based wholly on His own criterion (see God's Foreknowledge, Predestination, and Human Freedom).

Since God chose only some, those left out are destined to go to hell. There is nothing at all persons can do to escape hell if they were not chosen by God long ago. The elect are picked for salvation, no matter what they do.

Most Christians today take a far more Arminian approach to "election." They suspect that God has not limited salvation to a "select few" chosen long ago. Most people today figure God has chosen all men and women to be saved, but some reject this offered salvation and thus exclude themselves from heaven. Many today think that "according to God's foreknowledge" God elected us to salvation. That is, because He knew beforehand who would accept His salvation, He elected these ones who would later repent and receive Christ. And when it gets "real practical"—such as the funeral for a baby—most folk have a strong intuition that God's grace extends to innocent babies. Few Christians today really believe that a dead baby will go to hell because it is not "on God's list."

### **For whom did Christ die?**

The Calvinist doctrine of a "limited atonement" teaches that Christ died only for a limited number of people—only for those chosen ahead of time to be saved. No one else. Calvinists believe that God chose beforehand exactly who would be saved. Thus there is no need to "waste" Christ's blood on those not chosen. Thus Christ did not die for all men and woman, but only for the elect, those God picked to be saved. Christ did not die for all men.

Most Christians now believe that Christ died for all men, as a ransom for all, for the whole world. They think that any person could be saved. They are basically Arminian in this approach to the Atonement.

### **Can you keep from being saved?**

The Calvinist teaching of "irresistible grace" argues that there is nothing whatsoever a man or woman can do to keep from being saved if he or she were already chosen. The grace of God is totally irresistible. Those elected by God will be saved. They can't help it and they can't resist it.

Arminians believe that Christ died for all men, and thus He granted common grace to all so that "whosoever will" may be saved, not just those picked beforehand. Most Christians today lean toward the Arminian approach that anyone may be saved and a person can refuse God's grace.

### **Can you quit being a Christian?**

The Calvinist doctrine of the "perseverance of the saints" teaches that once you are a Christian, you are forever a Christian. Once born into God's family, you can't quit being a family member. God will never disown you. Once made alive in Christ, you can never die—"once saved, always saved." To the Calvinist, you can never divorce God out of your life, and he won't divorce you under any circumstance. In a word, "you can't, He won't."

While this doctrine is the best surviving Calvinist teaching, even "eternal security" is eroding from the strictly Calvinist position. Many Christians in the pew today do not believe that a person living in wicked, flagrant, open, continual and habitual sin is on their way to heaven. More likely they will say that such a person never was a Christian in the first place. And many even believe that while it is unlikely, there is indeed a possibility that a person who was once saved could apostatize and leave God's family. While this single point of Calvinism remains, even the Calvinist doctrine of absolute unconditional security is moderating toward Arminianism.

## **The Triumph of Arminianism**

There is little doubt about it: Arminianism has triumphed in the pew, if not in the seminary. The average Christian is a practicing Arminian, even if he claims to be a Calvinist in theory. "Practical" modern church

members are increasingly rejecting traditional "five-point Calvinism." While Arminianism has been a "minority view" for decades, today there is a major drift toward Arminianism in most Calvinist churches.

## **Why the switch?**

I spent several years as a determined five-pointer as a young man before changing my mind to accept Arminianism. I made the switch purposefully and with quite a bit of painful study as a student at Princeton Seminary. But many Calvinists today are making the switch for purely pragmatic reasons. They have not become convinced the Bible really teaches the Arminian approach. Frankly, Arminianism is simply more palatable to a secular culture. It "fits in" to the mind-set of the people in their pews. Like it or not, the secular mind is naturally Arminian in its outlook. I've discovered this repeatedly myself by administering a theological questionnaire to secular students in an adult education program. These "unchurched Harrys" invariably register Arminian theologically.

Face it, Arminianism is simply more logical. It makes sense to the person on the street. And today's church is scrambling to make sense to unbelievers. We want to sound sensible, logical, rational, enlightened, fair. Arminianism is so much more appealing to worldly people.

Thus, many Calvinist churches customize worship services, communication styles, architecture, and music, to fit the worldly customers. But they also adapt their theology by quietly creeping away from the "right end" of the theological continuum and drifting over toward Arminianism. The truth of the matter is, they are embarrassed by Calvinistic theology. They have found it offensive to the "customers." The Arminian approach to theology is simply a more "seeker sensitive."

## **The Dangers of Arminianism**

I admit that I am a committed Arminian. Of course I welcome the host of new "practical Arminians" joining ranks with my theological tradition. I think this approach fits better with the Bible, reason, tradition, and experience. But I must be honest. There are some real hazards over here in the Arminian ocean—especially for Calvinistic churches. You can sink your theological ship here. As a local "pilot," I'd suggest you keep your eyes open wide for submerged rocks!

We Arminians tend to put too much emphasis on man and his decisions, and not enough on God and the gospel. Sometimes we are tempted to act as if God is helpless without us and our work. We lean toward pragmatism and are constantly looking for "what works best" as if methodology were more important than the message. Since we believe that all men can be saved, we tend to assume that if they aren't saved, we have not packaged the invitation (or the message) right. We especially love management, leadership, programs, marketing, and research data. We tend to focus more on the "potential convert" than on the eternal gospel. Arminianism easily leans toward a NIKE mentality—"Just do it." We are somewhat less inclined to pray in order to move God to "do it" (see Divine-Human Synergism in Ministry).

And, as has always been true, Arminianism can be taken to the extreme of humanism. Calvinists have a sovereign God and an inactive man. Humanists have a sovereign man and an inactive God. Arminians lean toward the humanist end of this continuum and thus are always in danger of becoming humanists (see Humanism in Scripture and Culture: Recovering a Balance).

So if you are a former Calvinist who has drifted into Arminianism with little thought and for mostly pragmatic reasons, be careful as you navigate in this territory. You probably knew the dangers of your former theology, especially of "hyper-Calvinism." But you may not be aware of the dangers over here. Many of us Arminians have learned to stay out of the humanist end of the spectrum. We've learned that the best place to sail is on the Arminian end, but just over the line from Calvinism.

**Our five points would look something like this:**

## **1. Total Depravity**

Mankind is totally depraved, but God has extended His common grace to all so that every man or woman can search and find God.

## **2. Unconditional Election**

Before the foundation of the world God elected all men to salvation but most refuse His offer.

## **3. Limited Atonement**

The atonement of Christ is open to all men everywhere and is limited only by our refusal to be saved.

## **4. Irresistible Grace**

The "common grace" [prevenient grace] of God is given to all men everywhere and it is irresistible, but saving grace can be refused by a stubborn heart.

## **5. Perseverance of the Saints**

Once saved, a person will always be saved unless by defiant, continual, purposeful, rebellion he or she refuses God's grace and chooses apostasy. Though relatively rare for a truly saved person, apostasy is possible.

If you are recently coming from the Calvinistic end, be careful not to pass right by the middle ground and run off to extreme Arminianism: man-centered humanism. Instead, if you stay on the Arminian side, but at the end near the Calvinist line, you'll be safe in these waters. If you want a name for that area—the area on the Arminian end, but just "a hair's breadth from Calvinism," some call this the "Wesleyan-Arminian" approach.

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