

Calvinism and Arminianism

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The Bible instructs us that we should generally be simple concerning that which is evil (Rom. 16:19). The same principle applies in connection with erroneous teachings which may be found in the Christian profession today: we are commended to the Word of God (Acts 20:28–32), as opposed to a detailed understanding of the false teaching by which the devil may be seeking to lead us astray (see also Eph. 6:17).

Having said this, two false systems of teaching in connection with God's sovereignty and man's responsibility are prevalent in Christendom and appear to attract many adherents. It may therefore be helpful to identify them and briefly address some of their errors.

The two systems of teaching are Calvinism (which is sometimes referred to as 'reformed' theology) and Arminianism. Each emphasises one side of the truth (God's sovereignty or man's responsibility) at the expense of the other, sometimes taking the Scriptures to the extreme. C H Mackintosh aptly described both as 'one-sided theology'.

This article does not seek to judge the men whose names have been applied to these theological schools or the genuineness of the hearts of those who might call themselves Calvinists or Arminians. We only wish to highlight the serious errors concerning God's sovereignty and man's responsibility in each system of teaching.

Some may have heard of the 'five points of Calvinism', which include the following:

(a) unconditional election: in His absolute sovereignty, God has chosen, from eternity past, those whom He would bring to Himself;

(b) limited atonement: the work of the Lord Jesus on the cross was only for those who were chosen to be the beneficiaries of God's unconditional election; and

(c) irresistible grace: God will bring to Himself every person He has chosen, and nothing which a sinner who is part of the elect can do will stop this.

The first point set out above largely reflects Scripture (e.g. Eph. 1:4). However, some Calvinists teach that God has also determined that those whom He has not chosen should suffer eternal judgment (or, put another way, that God has chosen some for eternal judgment). This is a terrible idea, and is wholly inconsistent with the fact that God is love (1 John 4:8, 16) and positively desires that all should come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9; Ezek. 33:11). Judgment on the other hand is His strange work which He does not wish to carry out (Isa. 28:21) although He must do so because He is holy and righteous. Hell was prepared for the devil and his angels (Matt. 25:41), not for human beings.

The second point above amounts to a serious disparagement of God's character and the work of Christ. God so loved the entire world — including everyone who has ever lived — that He gave the greatest gift possible, His only-begotten Son, so that whoever believes on Him should have eternal life (John 3:16). The well-known gospel verse does not state that God only loved some people or that He sent forth His Son solely to save the elect. We need to distinguish two aspects of Christ's work: propitiation and substitution. It was a work towards all as He made propitiation for the sins of the world — that is, He met God's righteousness insofar as an affront had been committed to Him by those sins such that God could, while maintaining His righteousness, offer a way of salvation to all (1 John 2:2). However, only those who believe on Him enjoy the benefit of His work. It was only their sins which He bore in His body on the cross (1 Pet. 2:24). Both aspects of His work are referred to, but distinguished, in Romans 3:22: *'righteousness of God by faith of Jesus Christ towards all, and upon all those who believe'*.¹

While the third point set out above might appear to conform with verses such as John 6:37, the Bible does not present a doctrine of irresistible grace. This idea also

¹ Sadly, many modern translations of the Bible miss the distinction between propitiation and substitution. One factor which readers should take into account when considering which translation of the Bible to read is whether it contains accurate translations of verses such as Romans 3:22.

negates man's responsibility altogether. As a result, some in the reformed school suggest that gospel work is unnecessary. Given that the gospel was preached by the Lord Himself, and in His own words was an open invitation to everyone (e.g. 'Come unto me, **all ye that ... are heavy laden**': Matt. 11:28), and He gave us a commission to preach it to all (Mark 16:15; Luke 24:47), denigration of gospel work is a serious matter. It is also expressly stated that people who reject the gospel will be judged for that very reason (2 Thess. 1:8–9), as well as for all of their sins.

While not exhaustive, the observations above demonstrate that Calvinism is indeed a one-sided theology. Caution is therefore required when referring to the works of those who are part of the so-called reformed school, including A W Pink, J I Packer and John MacArthur.

At the other end of the spectrum, Arminianism overemphasises man's responsibility so as to ignore God's sovereignty. While recognising the need for evangelisation, Arminianism teaches that man has a free will such that he is able to come to the Lord of his own volition but is also free to refuse His voice. Accordingly, Arminians hold that God's election is conditional — that is, that the references in the Bible to believers being elect simply mean that God knew, beforehand, that they would believe on His Son. Worse still, one of the blessed results of the Lord's work, namely the eternal security of every believer, is also made conditional. Arminian theology supposes that a believer may commit apostasy and break their relationship with God such that they lose their salvation.²

While it is true that God permits both believers and unbelievers a degree of liberty in the decisions they make, an unbeliever does not have a 'free will' in the sense in which that term is generally used today. 'The mind of the flesh is enmity against God' (Rom. 8:7). The fundamental tenet of Arminianism that we can choose to come to God ignores our hopeless and incurable state by nature: dead because we are part of Adam's race (Rom. 5); at enmity with God and wanting nothing to do with Him (Col. 1:21); and, because we are in the flesh, having absolutely no capability to please God (Rom. 8:8). According to Romans 3:11, not one person who has ever lived has sought after God.

Salvation is entirely God's gift, even the faith in Christ by which we enter into it (Eph. 2:5–9). When we recognise that it was entirely by grace that we were

² The eternal security of the believer was the subject of an earlier issue of this magazine (2010, vol. 11, no. 7). We recommend this to any who have questions about this subject or the verses of Scripture that some use to suggest we can lose our salvation.

convicted that the things we enjoyed doing were sinful and repented of them, thereby receiving forgiveness, we are struck by the marvels of God's counsels of grace and His sovereign, and perhaps otherwise unexplainable, election of us to enjoy His blessings.

If our salvation were something we could achieve, we would have fallen from grace (Gal. 5:4). One might also question what sort of a salvation it would be if we could be worthy of attaining it by our works, particularly bearing in mind that even our best works are as filthy rags in the sight of a perfect, holy and righteous God (Isa. 64:6). Arminianism therefore also falls far short of the 'great salvation' which God had planned for us before the world was created and which, in His grace, He has brought us into.

As other articles in this issue have noted, we need to hold both God's sovereignty and man's responsibility fully and in equal measure. The former strengthens us while we await the fulfilment of His counsels when we shall be '*conformed to the image of his Son*' so that the Lord Jesus '*should be the firstborn among many brethren*' (Rom. 8:29–30), while the latter should spur on our efforts to spread the gospel so that the glories of the grace of our God, who is love, might be enjoyed by others. The Lord Jesus came into the world for that very purpose: to save sinners (1 Tim. 1:15).

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