

*The sermons that follow make up an 11-part study of Calvinism and Arminianism that we conducted at Calvary Baptist Church and Red Springs Baptist Church during the winter/spring of 2023.*

## Introducing Calvinism and Arminianism

Originally Preached on 1/15/2023

*John answered and said, "Master, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name; and we tried to prevent him because he does not follow along with us." But Jesus said to him, "Do not hinder him; for he who is not against you is for you." - Luke 9:49-50*

One of the major contentions within the church today is the ongoing debate between Calvinism and Arminianism. This has proven to be a divisive issue among Christians since the days of the Protestant Reformation which began in the 16th century. As it relates to us as Southern Baptists, our denominational confession of faith (The Baptist Faith & Message) allows for both perspectives - not firmly siding with one or the other. To that end, according to the most recent statistics I've seen, approximately 30% of Southern Baptist churches and pastors consider themselves to be Calvinistic while another 30% identify themselves as Arminian. Current trends suggest that Calvinism is on the rise within the SBC, especially among younger pastors and congregations. I would speculate that closer to 40% are now Calvinistic.

The same survey reveals that 61% of pastors are either strongly or somewhat concerned about the schism between Calvinism and Arminianism and its potentially damaging implications upon the SBC and its member churches in the areas of evangelism, missions, fellowship, and so forth. Several Southern Baptist churches, including some within our own Association, have wrestled with this issue and have experienced varying degrees of harm as a result. Some have even split over the debate. Considering this, it is important for us to understand and appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of both approaches so as not to be ensnared by either of them.

The Early Church Fathers focused primarily on the issues of Christology and the nature of the Trinity, as these were the predominant questions of their day. Though they certainly discussed God's sovereignty and man's free will to varying degrees, it would be inappropriate and presumptuous to classify them as either Calvinist or Arminian, as their stances were not explicit. It wasn't until the Reformation that the competing doctrinal systems of Calvinism and Arminianism were fully developed and formalized. Since that time, both have been sincerely embraced and faithfully taught by differing groups of Baptists (among others) - starting with the Particular Baptists (Calvinist) and the General Baptists (Arminian). This short series of sermons will not likely resolve or end the centuries-old debate.

My goal is not to convince you that either Calvinism or Arminianism is right or wrong. Rather, I intend to give a balanced presentation of both and let you draw your own conclusions. I believe, as is often the case, that there are elements of truth on both sides of the discussion and hope that this enduring debate will actually strengthen us as Christians rather than hinder us.

## I. WHAT IS CALVINISM?

John Calvin was a French theologian and pastor who lived from 1509-1564. Along with Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli, Calvin was and is regarded as one of the leading reformers during the Protestant Reformation. He was originally trained to be a lawyer and was a brilliant teacher, debater, and critical thinker. Calvin also wrote extensively, and his pinnacle work was titled "Institutes of the Christian Religion". In this book, which he updated, expanded, and re-released on multiple occasions throughout his lifetime, Calvin systematically laid out his theological beliefs on a wide range of topics. Many of his positions differed starkly from those long-held traditions accepted and promoted by the Catholic church. Calvin spent the majority of his ministry preaching in Geneva, Switzerland, and his followers ultimately founded the Presbyterian church, though his ideas have influenced several other denominations as well.

Calvin advocated doctrinal positions in numerous branches of the Christian faith including ecclesiology, eschatology, bibliology, and so forth. His views, as a whole, form the basis of Reformed Theology. However, perhaps his most well-known and controversial teachings deal specifically with soteriology - the study of salvation. These views have, in and of themselves, become known as Calvinism. Thus, it is possible to embrace Calvinism without accepting the broader aspects of Reformed Theology. In other words, it is possible to be a Calvinist without being Reformed. On the contrary, those who are Reformed are always Calvinists.

What exactly is Calvinism? Calvinism is a theological system that emphasizes God's absolute sovereignty in the process of salvation. It argues that man is totally corrupted by sin and wholly incapable of knowing God apart from His divine intervention. To that end, God has arbitrarily and unconditionally chosen and predestined some to be saved and others to be condemned. The elect cannot neither resist the saving grace of God nor lose it once conferred, while the condemned cannot attain it by any means. Mankind plays no role in their salvation or condemnation other than to live out that which God has already preordained.

## II. WHAT IS ARMINIANISM?

Jacob Arminius was a Dutch theologian and professor who lived from 1560-1609, a generation after Calvin. During his collegiate years at Leiden University, he began to question certain tenets of Calvin's Reformed Theology that had gained wide-spread credibility and popularity throughout Europe. He later studied in Geneva directly under Theodore Beza, who had himself been a disciple of John Calvin. Nevertheless, Arminius continued to hold conflicting Scriptural interpretations on several points of Calvinism. For a time, he served as a preacher in Amsterdam where he taught and formalized his own theological perspective. In the final years of his life, Arminius returned to Leiden University and served as a professor. Like Calvin, Jacob Arminius wrote several books and papers expressing his religious opinions on various issues. His views were accepted and endorsed by many believers and his followers became known as the Remonstrants.

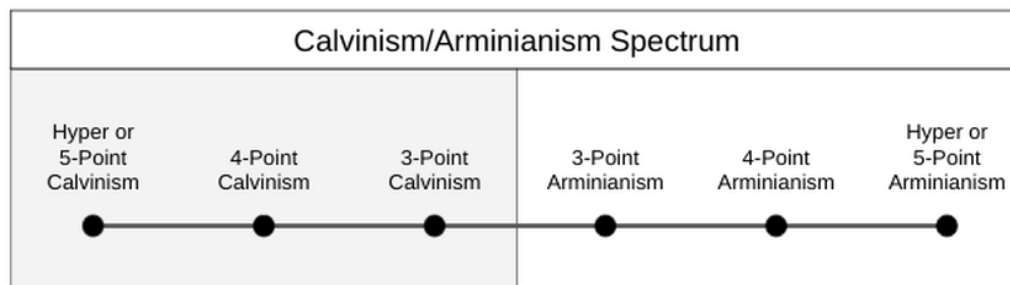
In the years following Jacob Arminius' death, a series of meetings known as the Synod of Dort were held to address the growing controversy between Arminianism and Calvinism. These took place in 1618 and 1619. The Remonstrants had developed and published the Arminian Articles of 1610 (also known as the Remonstrance of 1610) based upon Arminius' teachings. These articles consisted of 5 major points that served to encapsulate the Arminian doctrine on salvation which ran, in most respects, contrary to Calvinism. Ultimately, the minority delegation of Remonstrants were expelled from the Synod of Dort by the Reformed majority which oversaw and controlled the proceedings. The Synod concluded by drafting an official written judgment, called the Canons of Dort, which upheld the views of John Calvin. In the decades that followed, the 5 points of Calvinism were developed from the Canons of Dort to succinctly and directly refute those supported and bolstered by the Arminians.

What exactly is Arminianism? Arminianism is a theological system that emphasizes man's responsibility in the process of salvation. It argues that all people, though gravely corrupted by sin, have been endowed by God with free will and given the ability to choose whether or not to trust in Christ for salvation. Therefore, God predestines and conditionally elects for salvation only those whom He foreknows will accept Him. The Lord's prevenient grace may be resisted or rejected, and - according to the most extreme Arminian position - a person can lose their salvation after having attained it and, subsequently, fall from God's grace. Thus, each individual person plays a critical, determinative role in either their salvation or condemnation and is wholly accountable for it. Although God is sovereign, He does not dictate or compel the free decisions of any person.

## CONCLUSION

As I see it, a leading reason for the fracture between Arminians and Calvinists is their oppositional approach to the debate itself. Both sides tend to think of this argument as an all-or-nothing, either-or proposition in which one side is wholly right and the other is wholly wrong. Thus, both camps defiantly and fiercely defend their position without giving any meaningful consideration to the opposing perspective. To this end, they often reduce or simplify the other's argument to a single statement and then dismiss it outright.

In truth, both theological systems are based upon several underlying points, each of which may be accepted or rejected individually. In other words, a Christian might accept some aspects of Arminianism and others of Calvinism. Such a person would, as a result, maintain a hybrid or mixed point-of-view on the manner of salvation. What's more, an individual believer might have an alternative view on certain points that differs from both Calvinism and Arminianism. Therefore, this discussion should not be regarded as a heads or tails debate, but rather as a spectrum with hyper-Calvinism on one end, hyper-Arminianism on the other, and plenty of room in the middle. This is depicted in the diagram below.



Over the next several weeks, we are going to individually examine the 5 foundational points of Calvinism and the 5 corresponding points of Arminianism. We will read supporting verses for both perspectives, and compare and contrast the 2 systems. Along the way, I will share my opinions and personal stance on each issue. After evaluating the individual points, we will conclude the series by attempting to reconcile, to the extent possible, both schools of thought.

As we engage in this discussion, may we remember that both Calvinists and Arminians are first and most importantly Christians. Proponents of both positions have repented of their sins and accepted Jesus Christ for forgiveness and salvation. Though they differ on their interpretation of exactly how it occurred, both are born-again believers. As such, they are not adversaries and should not regard each other as such. Rather, as brothers and sisters in Christ, they should respect and appreciate one another as fellow members of His body. May this be our mindset as we move forward through these sermons. God bless you.

# Total Depravity

Originally Preached on 1/22/2023

*When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate. - Genesis 3:6*

Last Sunday morning we began a new sermon series titled “Reconciling Calvinism and Arminianism”. I introduced and summarized the 2 opposing theological systems, giving a brief history of their origin. I explained that both approaches were built upon 5 underlying points, which we would discuss individually. This morning, we will be that process.

Today’s message focuses on the 1st point of Calvinism. It is commonly known as the doctrine of “Total Depravity”. We will define what it means (and what it doesn’t mean), look at its Biblical support, and consider its implications.

## I. WHAT IS TOTAL DEPRAVITY?

Total depravity is a term used to describe the dismal spiritual condition of fallen mankind. It states that every person, as the result of Adam and Eve’s sin in the Garden of Eden, is born with a sinful nature and is completely corrupted by sin. This depravity affects all of our being - including our thoughts, our speech, and our actions - rendering us wholly tainted and utterly defiled. As such, we are as filthy rags before the LORD (Isaiah 64:6) who is, in contrast, perfectly holy and pure. We are vile sinners both by nature and by choice (Romans 5:12; Ephesians 2:3).

The Bible teaches the total depravity of man throughout. Our hearts are deceitful and desperately wicked (Jeremiah 17:9). We are spiritually dead from the moment of our birth as the result of our sin and iniquity (Psalm 51:5, Psalm 58:3, Ephesians 2:1). Our corrupt nature captivates us with a love for sin (John 8:34), an affinity for darkness (John 3:19), and a willful desire to live a sinful lifestyle that seems right to us (Proverbs 14:12). We are completely perverted, lacking any spiritual good.

The wicked nature of man is described thoroughly in Romans 3:10-18, Psalm 14:1-3, and Psalm 51:1-3. These passages teach that all people are unrighteous sinners, that no one seeks or understands God, that no one does good, that everyone’s speech and actions are spoiled by sin, and that no one fears the LORD. As such, there is no one who does good - not even one.

## II. WHAT ISN’T TOTAL DEPRAVITY?

Total depravity teaches that all people are wholly corrupted by sin, spiritually dead, and stand guilty before God. This does not mean, however, that we all behave as badly as we could. In other words, some people may act more wickedly than others. We see examples of this all the time. However, the excessive wickedness of some does not justify or excuse that of those who

may appear less wicked from a human perspective. Think of it this way - rather than saying that some people are good and others are bad, recognize that we are all bad, though some behave worse than others.

Second, total depravity does not mean that people can't or don't have a conscience. You can be a moral person with a strong sense of right and wrong while still being spiritually dead. Third, total depravity doesn't mean that a person cannot do good things as measured by an earthly standard - even things that superficially comply with the commands and will of God. But, though they may appear so outwardly, no human deed is of any good apart from saving faith (Romans 14:23; Hebrews 11:6). Jesus explained that a bad tree cannot bear good fruit, but only bad (Matthew 7:17-18).

There is no such thing as a "good" person. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). Even Jesus, the sinless Son of God, refused to call Himself good while adorned in human flesh (Mark 10:18). Now if Jesus wouldn't call Himself good during His earthly ministry, how arrogant would we have to be to think or even suggest that we are good?

### III. THE IMPLICATIONS OF TOTAL DEPRAVITY

As stated previously, those who are totally depraved do not understand, seek, nor fear God. Being spiritually dead, they are simply unable to understand the things of God because such things are spiritually discerned (1 Corinthians 2:14). They regard the gospel as foolishness (1 Corinthians 1:18) and suppress the truth in unrighteousness (Romans 1:18). Their minds are totally hostile towards God and they will not submit to Him - in fact, they cannot (Romans 8:7).

Thus, a totally depraved person is unable to be saved apart from God's divine intervention. Their desperate spiritual condition renders them completely hopeless and helpless apart from His grace. Sinners cannot approach God on their own prerogative following the inclination of their own free will. It is impossible. This hindrance is sometimes referred to as "Human Inability". Rather, God must initiate the interaction and overcome a person's spiritual depravity before he or she can see, recognize, and/or surrender to Him.

In the gospels, there is a scene in which Jesus speaks with a rich young ruler. After the young man departs, Jesus tells his disciples that it is difficult for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. Having assumed it would be easier for someone of his status and privilege, they are astounded and ask, "If not a rich man, who then can be saved?" Jesus answers, "With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." He is addressing the issue of human inability, and the truth that no person, by their own strength, can be saved. Only God can affect salvation (Matthew 19:25-26).

### CONCLUSION

In my opinion, the doctrine of total depravity is arguably the strongest point of Calvinism. It is thoroughly and plainly taught in the Bible. The numerous scriptures given in today's sermon are

merely a sampling of the numerous verses and passages that teach this vital doctrine. I am in full and wholehearted agreement with the Calvinists on this issue. So is almost every Christian I've ever known. In fact, so were Jacob Arminius and the original Remonstrants. In the Arminian Articles of 1610, which we discussed last week, the Arminians agreed with John Calvin on the total depravity of man. They shared his views on the wretched state of sinners and their inability to seek God apart from His grace. Their dispute was on the manner by which God resolved man's corrupt condition, not upon the condition itself.

To the Calvinist, God must - of necessity - be the catalyst for a person's salvation. A depraved sinner cannot approach God or make a saving profession of faith unless the LORD acts first. Therefore, the Calvinists believe that the new birth, or regeneration, must precede an individual's confession of faith. Otherwise, how can a depraved person recognize their need? When a person is made spiritually alive by God saving grace, they are gifted with faith and the ability to see and know Him. Then their confession and conversion is expressed outwardly or visibly. In other words, a person's profession of faith is a result of their new birth - not the impetus for it. We will explore the Arminian argument next week.

In closing, the doctrine of total depravity states that man is totally corrupted by sin and wholly incapable of knowing God apart from His divine and gracious intervention. This isn't an absolute refutation of man's free will, but rather an argument that man is simply unable to use his or her free will to attain salvation. Therefore, salvation is entirely an act of God's grace.

# Partial Depravity

Originally Preached on 1/29/2023

*I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants, by loving the Lord your God, by obeying His voice, and by holding fast to Him; - Deuteronomy 30:19-20a*

Good morning. Last week we began the process of evaluating each of the underlying points of Calvinism and Arminianism. We started with "Total Depravity", which is the 1st point of Calvinism. The doctrine of total depravity states that man is completely corrupted by sin and wholly incapable of knowing God apart from His gracious and divine intervention. Thus, a person cannot utilize their free will, if in fact such a thing even exists, to choose salvation. This limitation is referred to as "Human Inability".

Today's message will concentrate on the 1st point of Arminianism, which serves as a counterpoint to total depravity. It is referred to as "Partial Depravity". We will define and explain partial depravity, consider its implications, and look at its Biblical support.

## I. WHAT IS PARTIAL DEPRAVITY?

Partial Depravity is a term used to describe the dismal spiritual condition of fallen mankind. Unfortunately, the name "Partial Depravity" is a bit misleading and has resulted in some confusion - even among Arminians - about the proper interpretation of this doctrine. The original Remonstrants, students of Jacob Arminius, actually agreed with Calvin that mankind is totally depraved. However, they argued that God confers prevenient grace upon all people, which enables them to understand and respond to the gospel despite their depravity. In other words, a person is by nature totally depraved, but by the power of God's grace they are enabled to exercise their free will unto salvation. This, in practical effect, renders a "partial depravity".

Some Arminians have misunderstood and/or perverted the original stance held by Jacob Arminius and his followers relating to man's spiritual condition and have replaced it with a semblance of the heretical teachings of Pelagius, a 5th century British monk. His was a much more extreme view, which was and continues to be widely hailed and promoted by our worldly culture. It states that man isn't totally depraved. Though tainted by sin, people are still basically good, moral beings that retain the ability to see, understand, know, and fear the LORD. Their ability to accept or reject God is a function of their own nature, not an act of His grace. Sin is certainly an obstacle in their lives, but it is something that can be overcome. Thus, someone's depravity is partial to the extent that they choose it to be. Again, this is not the original Arminian position, yet some have unwittingly accepted it as though it were.

The notion that mankind is not spiritually depraved and is therefore able to accept salvation apart from God's grace has little, if any scriptural support. After creating man on the 6th day of creation, God saw that everything was "very good" (Genesis 1:31). But man's goodness, which



admittedly allowed Adam and Eve to walk in harmony with the LORD for a time, was lost as a result of the fall and led to their expulsion from the garden (Genesis 3:24). Since then, people have been totally corrupted and ruined by sin. God doesn't love humanity because of their alleged moral goodness. On the contrary, He loves sinners in spite of their wicked depravity because of His goodness (Romans 5:8).

## II. HUMAN ABILITY OR FREE WILL

The proper and original position of Arminianism declares that all people, though wholly corrupted by sin, have been created by God with a free will that, when enabled by His grace, becomes capable of knowing and accepting Jesus Christ unto salvation. This is often referred to as "Human Ability". It is made possible solely by God's prevenient, or assisting, grace.

The Bible teaches the free will of mankind throughout. God, either directly or through His agent, repeatedly calls on people to obey, choose, and/or believe in Him (John 15:10; Joshua 24:15; John 3:18). Why would God call people to do something they couldn't do? He constantly tests people, allowing them to undergo various trials and temptations, strongly implying their ability to either pass or fail based on their choices (Genesis 22:1; James 1:12; 1 Peter 1:6-7; 1 Corinthians 10:13). Why would God test people if the outcome was already determined?

God urgently pleads with sinners to repent - to voluntarily turn from their own sinful ways (Ezekiel 18:23-32; 33:11). Why would He make such a plea if repentance wasn't up to them? The LORD also judges people, bestowing either rewards or punishments upon them as a consequence of their decisions (1 Corinthians 3:10-15; Revelation 20:11-15). How could God justly do this if people weren't free to make their own choices?

Even if free will doesn't exist or plays no meaningful role in salvation, as some argue, the Bible frequently and emphatically instructs us to live, act, and function as if it does. If freewill is merely an illusion, it is clearly one we are meant to believe. Why then would anyone adopt a theology that denies it?

## III. HOLY SPIRIT CONVICTION

Many Arminians believe that, because of God's grace, a person can come to the LORD for salvation on their own volition at the time of their choosing. While I agree wholeheartedly that all people have free will, I recognize that it is limited in some respects by our own sinful nature. I strongly reject the notion that God's prevenient grace perpetually rests upon a person. This approach inflates and overemphasizes the aspect of human ability while overlooking the critical importance and necessity of Holy Spirit conviction.

The Bible teaches that the Holy Spirit of God convicts people of their sin (John 16:8). True conviction can only occur when people see the beauty, purity, and holiness of God and are sincerely appalled by their own sinful depravity (Isaiah 6:5). Conviction is not the result of a guilty conscience, fear of judgment, or intellectual assent. It is an act of God's grace that

enables an individual to catch a glimpse of His glory and recognize the depth of their own depravity. But a glimpse is not a gaze, and a person's conviction is not continuous. In other words, a person will not stay under conviction in perpetuity and there is no guarantee if, or when, they might come under conviction again. God sends moments of conviction (ie, brief windows of prevenient grace) intermittently in accordance with His divine will. For this reason, a person should seize the opportunity when it comes, because there may never be another (2 Corinthians 6:2; Psalm 95:7–8).

The Bible states that no one can come to Christ unless they are drawn by the Father (John 6:44). This verse, and many others like it, seamlessly and simultaneously teach both total depravity and free will. On the one hand, a person must be drawn by God. On the other, they are drawn so that they can come to Him (if they choose to). From my perspective, the best way to reconcile these 2 truths is through Holy Spirit conviction. A person is unable to be truly saved unless they are under Holy Spirit conviction when they make a profession of faith. All other professions are counterfeit and ineffectual (Matthew 7:21-23).

## CONCLUSION

The 1st foundational points of Arminianism and Calvinism both pertain to man's spiritual condition - either partial depravity or total depravity. As stated previously, I accept the Calvinistic view that all people are totally corrupted by sin and, therefore, unable to approach God in any meaningful way unto salvation apart from His gracious intervention. The lingering question, central to this debate, is how exactly does God administer His grace in order to overcome man's depravity? We will revisit this question again and again throughout this series.

On my scorecard, that is 1 for Calvinism and 0 for Arminianism. Still, it appears clear to me that doctrine of free will has considerable Biblical support and does play a role in the salvation process. Hmm... I guess we should keep exploring.

# Unconditional and Conditional Election

Originally Preached on 2/5/2023

*But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. - John 1:12-13*

Welcome and thank you for joining us in worship today. We are a few sermons into a new series titled, "Reconciling Calvinism and Arminianism". We're learning about and analyzing both of these theological frameworks in order to better understand and appreciate them as well as those who adhere to them. Remember, this is a debate among Christians - fellow members of the family of God - and we must approach it with due candor and respect, so as not to promote division and factions within the body of Christ.

Over the past 2 weeks we have focused on the 1st points of Calvinism and Arminianism. These deal with the spiritual condition of mankind as a result of their sin. These arguments are "Total Depravity" and "Partial Depravity". This morning we will consider the 2nd points of Calvinism and Arminianism which are commonly called "Unconditional Election" and "Conditional Election". We will define them, look at the Biblical support for both, and see how they fit into their respective theological points of view.

Before we begin, let's clarify what election and predestination are. To "elect" simply means to choose, and therefore election can be thought of as God's selection process. More specifically, it is God's designation of certain people or groups to fulfill His divine purposes, primarily pertaining to salvation. Predestination is related to election, stating that God has made these selections or designations in the eternity past. In other words, the destiny of those elected (chosen) has already been determined by God's sovereign will.

## I. WHAT IS UNCONDITIONAL ELECTION?

"Unconditional Election" is a term used by Calvinists to describe the Biblical concepts of election and predestination. It describes the manner by which God chooses and predestines some people to be saved and allows others to be condemned. It proposes that the eternal destiny of every individual person is determined wholly by the LORD's will, not their own. God's election is completely unconditional, meaning that it is not based on any foreknowledge of a person's future choices or actions. Instead, He elects and predestines people exclusively in accordance with His own good pleasure, for reasons we do not know.

There are several passages in Scripture that are used to support the doctrine of unconditional election. God has chosen, from the foundation of the earth, to bestow His kind, gracious favor on certain persons (Mark 13:20; Ephesians 1:4-5; Revelation 13:8; Revelation 17:8). They have been chosen from all the nations based solely on God's sovereign will and not as the result of their own merit or choice (Romans 9:11-13; Romans 9:16; Romans 10:20; 2 Timothy 1:9).

Though God has the power to save everyone, He is not obligated to save anyone, and has chosen to save some and not others (Exodus 33:19; Romans 9:10-24; Acts 13:48; 1 Peter 2:8).

Calvinists argue that, because man is totally depraved and unable to make a decision unto salvation, God must graciously choose to save (ie, regenerate) him. The Bible clearly teaches that not all people will be saved - in fact, the majority will not be. Therefore, it is apparent that God chooses some to be saved and permits others to be condemned. The elect are recipients of God's mercy, while the non-elect are the subjects of His wrath. Rather than questioning why God would save some and not others, we should celebrate the fact that He would lovingly save anyone at all!

Unconditional election is illustrated by God's selection of Israel as His special, covenant people. God did not choose Israel on the basis of their own merit (Deuteronomy 7:7-9). Nor did He choose them because He foreknew they would follow or obey Him - in fact, they did just the opposite, ultimately rejecting the Messiah whom He sent to be their Savior (Mark 12:10). God chose Israel unconditionally by His own good pleasure, without respect to them or their future actions, and in like manner He unconditionally chooses those who will be saved.

## II. WHAT IS CONDITIONAL ELECTION?

"Conditional Election" is a term used by Arminians to describe the Biblical concepts of election and predestination. It sets forth an alternative manner by which God chooses and predestines some people to be saved and allows others to be condemned. It asserts that God's election is conditional, based upon His foreknowledge of whether or not an individual will choose Him unto salvation. In other words, God elects and predestines only those whom He foreknows will place their faith in Christ.

There are multiple verses in Scripture used to support the doctrine of conditional election. In his greeting to scattered believers, Peter described them as elect according to the foreknowledge of God (1 Peter 1:1-2). In his letter to the Romans, Paul wrote that God predestined those whom He foreknew (Romans 8:29). Furthermore, numerous verses indicate that it is God's desire for all people to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9; John 12:32). If this is true, why would an omnipotent God not choose all people to be saved rather than allowing the majority to be condemned? A person's free will seems to be the most likely answer, which argues for conditional election.

Original Arminians argue that, although man is totally depraved, they are enabled by God's grace to exercise their free will and make their own decision regarding salvation. To this end, the elect are those persons who have not only been chosen by God, but have also chosen Him. Predestination does not mean that a person's decisions have been predetermined, but simply preknown. Appealing to God's character, Arminians insist that God would never choose to send anyone to hell when He could easily prevent it.

Earlier in this series, during our discussion of total depravity, we spoke about Jesus' encounter with the rich young ruler. Let's revisit that story for a moment. After speaking briefly, the wealthy young man departed in disappointment, and Jesus turned to His disciples and said, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God (Luke 18:25)." Now, if election is unconditional - without any consideration of the individual being elected - how does this statement make sense? Surely it is not harder for God to regenerate some than others (assuming all are totally depraved)! The implication strongly suggests that the difficulty in coming to salvation rests in the person themselves and their own fleshly, worldly, and materialistic desires. The rich are less likely to choose Jesus than the poor, a function of their own free will. Jesus' statement seems to argue for conditional election.

## CONCLUSION

Both Calvinists and Arminians agree that God chooses some individuals to be saved and allows others to be condemned, but they starkly differ on the manner by which He makes this choice. Calvinists believe that God elects people unconditionally - solely on the basis of His sovereign will - while Arminians hold that God elects people conditionally - based on His foreknowledge of those that will accept Him. Both perspectives seemingly have reasonable Biblical support. So... which is it?

Next week, I will share my own thoughts on election and predestination and tell you where I land in this debate. That said, may we never become so enamored by the process of salvation that we miss the Person of Salvation. I want to invite you to accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. Only He can provide forgiveness for your sins and salvation for your soul. Have you trusted in Jesus?

# More Thoughts On Election

Originally Preached on 2/12/2023

*He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him. - John 3:36*

Last week we began a discussion on the doctrine of election. Calvinists hold that God chooses and predestines certain people to be saved and allows others to be condemned solely on the basis of His sovereign will, without respect to their future decisions. This is referred to as “Unconditional Election”. Arminians believe that God chooses certain people to be saved and allows others to be condemned on the basis of His foreknowledge of whether or not they will choose Him unto salvation. This is referred to as “Conditional Election”.

In today’s sermon, I will share some of my thoughts on this issue. I will try to support my theological positions with Scripture. Perhaps these observations will be helpful as you formulate your own opinion. Finally, I will reveal whether I side more closely with Calvinism or Arminianism as it pertains to election.

## I. A CLOSER LOOK AT FOREKNOWLEDGE

Last Sunday, we talked about the concept of foreknowledge. My Bible dictionary defines foreknowledge as “awareness and anticipation of events before they occur”. To a limited degree, all of us have some foreknowledge of upcoming events or happenings that will take place in our lives. We utilize this foreknowledge to plan, prepare, and so forth. However, God’s foreknowledge is much greater than our own, as He perfectly knows everything that will happen in the future from the most spectacular events to the tiniest and most trivial details (Isaiah 46:9-10; 55:9; Psalm 139:4).

I personally don’t like the word foreknowledge, as it sometimes leads to a misunderstanding and diminishing of God. Let me explain my concern. To begin with, I have no doubt that God knows all things - past, present, and future. He is omniscient. There is nothing hidden from Him. That said, He is also eternal. God exists outside of time. In fact, He created time (Genesis 1:3-5, 14-19). From God’s perspective, there is no past, present, or future! He is the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end (Revelation 22:13). He is the great “I AM”, ever present, and not constrained in any way by time (Exodus 3:14; John 8:58).

So when we say that God knows the future we are speaking from a human perspective. As creatures bound by time, this is our reality. It’s not wrong for us to say this, as long as we remember that God self-exists beyond the dimension of time. Therefore, we must be careful to understand that the glorious nature of God exceeds our feeble vocabulary. What we speak of as His foreknowledge is, to Him, simply knowledge. Just as HE IS, so also HE KNOWS. May we never limit God’s abilities or attributes by our inability to describe them! Rather than saying God foreknows, let’s just say that He knows, okay?

God knows who will be saved and who will be condemned. He knows the exact number of people who will spend eternity in Heaven (in His presence) and in Hell (separated from Him). But does His knowledge mean that our fates are predestined? Is it determinative? I don't think so. I believe that God has fashioned each of us with a free will that, by His grace alone, enables us to make the choice unto salvation. And this free will, even if just imaged or impotent, is to be exercised unto repentance, belief, and obedience.

## II. UNDERSTANDING CORPORATE ELECTION

I am not an advocate of either "Conditional Election" or "Unconditional Election", because both state that God chooses or elects individuals to either salvation or condemnation. While I readily acknowledge that God chooses and/or calls certain people to particular offices or stations in this life, such as the 12 apostles in the Gospels or Ruth in the Old Testament, I reject the idea that He chooses which individual people will be saved and which will not. Personally, I believe that corporate election is the more Biblically sound approach to this question.

Corporate election teaches that God chose a group of people to be saved rather than particular persons. The foundation of this view is that God first chose Christ (Ephesians 1:4; Matthew 12:18; Isaiah 42:1). Therefore, all who come to Christ through faith become part of this chosen group through their association to and relationship with Him. This group of the elect is referred to by several names in the Bible including "the Body of Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:13), "My church" (Matthew 16:18), "a people belonging to God" (1 Peter 2:9), and "the Bride of Christ" (Revelation 19:7).

I generally believe that it is healthier and more appropriate for us to read and understand the Bible in terms of "we" rather than "me". While it is certainly true that Jesus loves me - and during difficult times I desperately cling to this truth - in a broader and more mature sense He loves us. As a redeemed child of God, I am a member of a family, a body, a collective group... While He is my only Shepherd, I am not His only sheep. This perspective helps keep me humble, allows me to rightly focus on others rather than myself, and promotes the importance of fellowship and community. It doesn't erase or nullify my individuality, but rather sets it in the proper context.

In keeping with this view, the concept of predestination is not applied to individual persons either, but rather to the overarching purposes of God. He determined, from ages past, that all who accepted Him by faith in Christ would be saved and all who rejected Him would be lost. These 2 destinies, and only these 2, have been preordained by the sovereign will of God. Simply put, the way of salvation, or the gospel, is what has been predestined. Stated another way, "God chose the plan, not the man".

## III. WHO ARE THE ELECT?

Continuing in this line of thought, God chose all of humanity to be the recipients of His favor and grace. Through Christ, all people have become candidates for salvation. His decision to offer the gift of salvation to all men was made unconditionally, solely on the basis of His good pleasure.

He didn't choose the angels or any other created beings - He chose us! In this respect, corporate election resembles Calvinism in that God's election of mankind was not based on any human merit or foreknowledge.

That said, only those who accept Christ by faith actually receive the salvation He offers. Thus, the elect are those who have first been chosen by God and then have chosen Him in response. In this respect, corporate election resembles Arminianism in that it involves a person's free will.

Consider this illustration. Though it pertains specifically to the Jews, I believe it has a broader application for all people. As Jesus approached Jerusalem in the days immediately prior to His crucifixion, He wept over the citizens of the city. Jesus lamented that He wanted to save them all "as a hen gathers chicks under her wings", but they were unwilling (Matthew 23:37). He had chosen them collectively, as His own special people. But, as a whole, they had rejected Him. Only those who repented individually would become members of the elect, secured in Christ.

## CONCLUSION

Well, let's wrap things up. The 2nd points of Calvinism and Arminianism pertain to election and predestination. They are called "Unconditional Election" and "Conditional Election", respectively. Both argue that God chooses and predestines individuals unto salvation either solely on the basis of His sovereign will (Calvinist) or on the basis of His foreknowledge of their future decisions (Arminian). For reasons discussed in today's message, I am not a proponent of either view. I tend to favor the doctrine of Corporate Election, which has shades of both perspectives.

Seeing that I side fully with neither the Calvinists nor the Arminians on this issue, I will award both 1/2 of a point. This gives neither the advantage. As a result, my personal scorecard now reads 1 1/2 - 1/2 with Calvinism in front. I agree with Calvin that mankind is totally depraved, but my stance on election and predestination differs somewhat from both Calvinism and Arminianism. Ultimately, what matters most is that I am a born-again believer who has become a member of God's elect. Hallelujah! I am His, and He is mine.



# Limited and Unlimited Atonement

Originally Preached on 2/19/2023

*Therefore when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, "It is finished!" and He bowed His head and gave up His spirit. - John 19:30*

I hope you are enjoying our current sermon series, "Reconciling Calvinism and Arminianism". Today's message is the 6th of this series, and it marks the halfway point, as I anticipate that there will be 11 sermons in all. Over the next 45 minutes we are going to examine the 3rd points of Calvinism and Arminianism which deal with the cross - specifically, who did Jesus die for and what did He accomplish through His death and resurrection? The issue at hand is atonement - the manner by which God reconciles sinners to Himself. I have named this morning's message, "Limited and Unlimited Atonement". Before we begin, let's summarize what we've learned so far.

Calvinists believe that all people are totally corrupted by their sin, spiritually dead, and unable to see, understand, know, or fear God. They are totally depraved and cannot approach Him for salvation apart from His gracious intervention. God has, since eternity past and based solely on His sovereign will, unconditionally chosen certain people to be the recipients of His saving grace and others the subjects of His just wrath. Those individuals who God has predestined to salvation are collectively known as the elect. This is all done by the LORD alone, without respect to a man's free will.

The Arminians (who hold to the original position of Jacob Arminius) agree that all people are totally depraved by sin and unable to approach God or make a genuine profession of faith apart from His gracious intervention. However, they argue that God extends His grace to everyone, enabling them to exercise their own free will unto salvation. God conditionally chooses and predestines certain people to be saved and allows others to be condemned on the basis of His foreknowledge of their future decisions. The elect are those whom God foreknows will accept Him and be born again.

## I. LIMITED ATONEMENT

The Calvinist doctrine of "Limited Atonement" states that Christ's redeeming work was intended to save only the elect and that it actually secured salvation for them. He died as a substitute to pay the full penalty of sin for certain, specified sinners. His death actually accomplished the justification and redemption of those for whom He died, rather than merely making it possible. Put another way, Jesus died in order genuinely to save people, not just to make them savable.

There are a few key verses used to support the concept of limited atonement. Before Mary gave birth, an angel appeared to Joseph and told him that his son, Jesus, would someday "die to save His people from their sins (Matthew 1:21)." Notice the emphasis on His people, not all people. Years later, during the Lord's earthly ministry, Jesus referred to Himself as the Good Shepherd who "lays down His life for His sheep (John 10:15)." Again, the emphasis is exclusively on His sheep, the elect, and not on all people.

Isaiah 53 is perhaps the most well-known of the Suffering Servant passages. It says that Jesus was pierced for our iniquities, bruised for our transgressions, and by His stripes we are healed. But this chapter also asserts that He was cut off or crucified for the transgressions of His people (Isaiah 53:8), in order to justify many (Isaiah 53:11), by bearing the sins of many (Isaiah 53:12). This passage stresses the nature of Christ's atoning sacrifice for a certain people, many in fact, but not necessarily for everyone.

## II. UNLIMITED ATONEMENT

The Arminian doctrine of "Unlimited Atonement" argues that Christ's redeeming work made it possible for everyone to be saved, but did not actually apply the effects of salvation to anyone. Although Christ died for all men and for every man, only those who believe in Him are saved. His death enabled God to pardon sinners on the condition that they believe, but it did not actually put away anyone's sins. Christ's redemption becomes effective only if a person chooses to accept it.

The Bible contains numerous verses, passages, and language that support the principle of unlimited atonement. Jesus died for the sins of the entire world (John 1:29, 6:51; 1 John 2:2). His mercy is for all people, even the disobedient (Romans 11:32). He is the ransom for all of humanity (2 Corinthians 5:14; 1 Timothy 2:5-6), and the Savior who tasted death for everyone (Hebrews 2:9). Jesus even died for those whom He knew would deny Him (2 Peter 2:1), thereby proving that His sacrifice was not only for believers.

The most popular verse in the Bible, sometimes called "the gospel in a nutshell", provides a compelling case for the doctrine of unlimited atonement. "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life (John 3:16)." God sent His Son to atone for the sins of the entire world, so that whosoever believes in Him can receive salvation for their sins. This offer and invitation is not limited to only a particular group of elect people, but rather is made to all and applied to any who receive it.

## III. ARGUMENTS AGAINST LIMITED ATONEMENT

Limited Atonement is the weakest and most disputed point of Calvinism. There are only a handful of verses used to support it and even they are not conclusive. The Bible never states that Jesus died exclusively for the elect. Passages that highlight Christ's redemption for "His people" or for "His sheep" don't explicitly rule out its availability to others. Sure He died for them, but was it only for them? Might they be part of a larger group? These few verses, which in context focus on a select group, do not adequately refute and can be easily incorporated into the numerous passages that plainly declare Christ's death was for all people.

In the opening sermon of this series, we talked about the Canons of Dort which were the official written judgments made by the Synod of Dort held in 1618-1619. The 5 points of Calvinism were crafted from these Canons to directly refute the 5 points of Arminianism laid out in the

Remonstrant Confession of 1610. This means that the underlying points of Calvinism - including the doctrine of Limited Atonement - were formalized by Calvin's followers almost 60 years after he died. Ironically, some of John Calvin's own writings seem to cast doubt on the concept of limited atonement and call into question whether he himself would have agreed with their interpretation of his teachings. Suffice it to say that the long-standing tradition of Christianity, dating back to the early church, strongly favors Unlimited Atonement.

Many moderate Calvinists, who embrace every other point of Calvinism, reject the notion of Limited Atonement. There is simply not enough Biblical support for it. In order to reconcile this stance with their belief in Unconditional Election, they argue that Jesus did, in fact, die for all people, yet God graciously elected and predestined only some for salvation. While this is their sincerely held position, and I respect them for it, honestly to me this makes no sense. Why would Jesus die on the cross for those whom God had already predestined to be condemned?

## CONCLUSION

Well, I'm about out of time so let's draw our discussion to a close. The 3rd points of Calvinism and Arminianism both pertain to Christ's atoning work on the cross. They are Limited Atonement and Unlimited Atonement. On this point, I agree with the Arminians that Jesus' death was for all people, making salvation available to and possible for every person. Anyone who freely accepts Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior will be saved. Although we call this Unlimited Atonement, in a sense, it is limited - not in its capacity or power to save everyone, but rather in its application to everyone. Salvation is not universal or automatic - you must believe!

That brings my score to 1½ for Calvinism and ½ for Arminianism. I agree with Calvin that mankind is totally depraved. I agree with Arminius that Christ's atonement is unlimited. I agree with neither fully on the doctrine of election and predestination. So, it's a tie with just 2 more points to discuss. How exciting! I can't wait to see what happens next week.

# Irresistible Grace

Originally Preached on 2/26/2023

*For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus, - Titus 2:11-13*

For the past few weeks, as a part of our series on Calvinism and Arminianism, our sermons have focused on the recipients of salvation. We have talked about election and predestination which deal with the manner by which God chooses particular people to be saved. Is His election conditional or unconditional? We've also discussed how and to whom the atonement that Christ secured on the cross is applied. Is it limited or unlimited?

Starting with this morning's message we'll move on to a new topic, though we've already touched on aspects of it during our earlier conversation about mankind's depravity. How should we properly describe and understand the grace that God bestows upon sinners that produces salvation? As we seek to answer this question, we will delve into the 4th fundamental points of Calvinism and Arminianism. They are "Irresistible Grace" and "Resistible Grace".

## I. UNDERSTANDING GRACE

Before we begin debating the competing viewpoints of God's grace, let's begin by simply defining what it is. The most common definition of grace used by many Christians is simply, "God's unmerited favor towards mankind." The LORD extends His kindness and generosity to sinful humanity in spite of the fact that we don't deserve it and have not earned it. The Bible describes God's grace as a gift, which we receive freely, without any strings attached (Ephesians 4:7). His merciful and abundant blessings upon us are an act of His grace.

It is important to note that God's grace is endowed with His almighty power. It enables us to overcome obstacles in our lives (Zechariah 4:7). It sustains and strengthens us as we endure persecution, hardship, and/or affliction (2 Corinthians 12:9). Grace gives us hope for tomorrow and comfort for today (2 Thessalonians 2:16). It provides us with access to God and help in times of need (Hebrews 4:16). These are just some of the many positive effects of God's grace in and on our present lives.

God's grace extends beyond this passing world. It is central to the gospel message (Acts 20:24) and is exceedingly greater than our sin (Romans 5:20). By His grace, we as sinners are justified before God (Romans 3:24; Titus 3:7). Jesus, our wonderful Savior, is the very embodiment of grace and truth (John 1:14). Most importantly, it is the power of God's grace that saves us from the just penalty of our sins giving us the promise of eternal life (Ephesians 2:4-5).

## II. TYPES OF GRACE

Christians of various denominations and backgrounds have identified several different types of grace. For the purposes of this series, we are going to highlight 3 of them. First, there is common grace, which refers to God's kind benevolence upon all people up to, but short of, salvation. Common grace includes God's earthly, temporal blessings which are experienced in this life. Since all people receive common grace, even the wicked may and often do experience the blessings of God. By this grace, the LORD patiently withholds His judgment against fallen sinners and society - for a while.

Second, prevenient grace is that which assists or enables a sinner to be saved. It is often associated with Holy Spirit conviction, and allows an otherwise spiritually blinded person to see God and exercise their free will unto salvation. Prevenient grace does not actually bring about salvation, but rather makes it possible should the sinner choose to receive it.

Third, there is efficacious or saving grace which actually regenerates the spiritually dead person causing them to be born again. It is a special grace, bestowed by God specifically on certain people, not everyone. This grace always and infallibly results in the salvation of the person to whom it is granted.

Calvinists focus primarily on common grace and saving grace, but not so much on prevenient grace. Arminians emphasize all 3 forms of grace, though there are differing perspectives among them. We will make this distinction in the upcoming discussion...

### III. WHAT IS IRRESISTIBLE GRACE?

"Irresistible Grace" is the Calvinistic belief that those whom God has chosen or elected to be saved will inevitably come to salvation by the gracious work of the Holy Spirit. Such an outcome is unavoidable and irresistible - it is a foregone conclusion. Whenever God conveys His grace upon a chosen sinner, the Holy Spirit instantly affects regeneration and justification in their lives. Once they have been made spiritually alive, the newly saved person immediately encounters the glorious wonder of God and cannot help but to joyfully and immediately make a profession of faith in Him.

There is Biblical support for the doctrine of Irresistible Grace. The Bible teaches that when God calls, His people always listen to His voice and comply (John 6:37, 10:16). It states that God commands light to shine in the darkened heart, implying that this redemptive illumination is unstoppable (2 Corinthians 4:1-6). Likewise, He alone opens the heart - it can't be prevented - so that a person can respond to Him (Acts 16:14). Paul wrote that those who are called by God are also justified and glorified (Romans 8:30). These things happen together. In other words, if and when God calls someone they are irresistibly saved.

One of the premiere illustrations of Irresistible Grace is the resurrection of Lazarus. Lazarus was physically dead, and therefore unable to see, hear, or do anything. Jesus came to the tomb where His friend had been buried, cried out "Come forth!", Lazarus rose from the dead, and came out to Him (John 11:43). Now, how could Lazarus have heard and responded to Jesus'?

calling unless He had already been brought back to life? The same principle is true spiritually. God first regenerates the person's dead soul, thereby enabling them to hear and answer His call (John 3:3). This miraculous work of grace is always effective upon and cannot be refused by those to whom it is conferred.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, Calvinism argues that God extends common grace to all people, even the non-elect, but saving grace only to the elect, inevitably leading to their salvation. In other words, a person cannot thwart or negate their election. Regenerating grace is irresistible. That said, why would anyone want to resist it?

Calvinists often refer to their teachings on salvation - that is, all 5 points collectively - as the "doctrines of grace". I have purposely tried to avoid using this title for Calvinism during this series because I don't want to imply that Arminians don't also believe in grace. They most certainly do. They simply have a different understanding of how it works. Next Sunday, we will introduce the Arminian position of "Resistible Grace" and compare it to the Calvinistic view of "Irresistible Grace" which we've discussed today.

Let me close by reciting the final verse and chorus of a beloved Christian hymn. These lyrics warm my heart and offer a beautiful invitation to those who are lost. "Marvelous, infinite, matchless grace, Freely bestowed on all who believe! All who are longing to see His face, Will you this moment His grace receive? Grace, grace, God's grace, Grace that will pardon and cleanse within; Grace, grace, God's grace, Grace that is greater than all our sin!"

# Resistible Grace

Originally Preached on 3/5/2023

*You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life. - John 5:39-40*

Good morning! Last Sunday we began our discussion on the 4th points of Calvinism and Arminianism. Both of these deal with God's amazing grace. We learned that Calvinists believe the LORD's grace is irresistible. In other words, the Holy Spirit will inevitably bring about the regeneration and salvation of those elected by God. Such an outcome has already been predestined by His sovereign will and nothing - including man's free will - can prevent it. God's saving grace is always effective.

In the upcoming message, we will consider the Arminian view of how God's grace functions in the process of salvation. As always, we will look at the Scriptural support for this position. I will also share my own personal leanings on this point. Let's get started...

## I. WHAT IS RESISTIBLE GRACE?

"Resistible Grace" is the Arminian doctrine that God gives prevenient grace to all people which enables them to exercise their free will unto salvation. This grace effectively overcomes their sinful depravity and allows them to see and recognize God. Sometimes called pre-regenerating grace, it precedes a person's actual conversion. Each individual person therefore has a choice to make - whether to trust in Jesus Christ for salvation or not. They can either submit to the convicting call of the Holy Spirit and be saved or resist it and remain in their sin.

There are several verses and passages in the Bible which suggest that people can resist and/or oppose the gracious calling of the Holy Spirit. Ananais and his wife lied to the Holy Spirit and put Him to the test (Acts 5:3,9). Paul urged the Ephesians not to grieve the Holy Spirit by their own stubborn disobedience (Ephesians 4:30-31). In the Old Testament, God's people Israel constantly rebelled against the Holy Spirit (Isaiah 63:10, Psalm 106:33). The Thessalonians were warned not to quench the Spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:19). Stephen directly charged the Jews who stoned him with resisting the Holy Spirit (Acts 7:51).

After healing a demon-possessed man, Jesus was accused of casting out demons by the power of Beelzebul. Jesus declared that a house divided against itself could not stand, and declared that He cast out demons by the Spirit of God. He went on to say that those who blaspheme the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven (Matthew 12:31-32, Mark 3:29, Luke 12:10). This is generally referred to in Christianity as "the unpardonable sin". It can be understood as willfully denying, slandering, and rejecting the gracious work and calling of the Holy Spirit.

An excellent example of resistible grace is found in Paul's conversation with Felix, the governor of Judea and Samaria. At the time of their meeting, Paul was being held prisoner in Caesarea, having not yet been sent to Rome. Paul was brought before Felix and his wife, where he boldly

presented the gospel to them. He spoke to them passionately about faith in Jesus Christ. The Bible says that Felix became frightened - but of who? Certainly not Paul! Clearly he was under conviction, fearing the judgment of Almighty God against sinners. Yet, rather than yielding to the Holy Spirit and repenting, he resisted and hastily sent Paul away (Acts 24:25-26).

## II. MY STANCE ON THIS ISSUE

Let me begin by agreeing with the Calvinists that God's saving grace is irresistible and efficacious. When the LORD ultimately chooses to save someone, the Holy Spirit perfectly and infallibly regenerates that person. God's saving grace, when employed, is inescapable and never fails. When God determines to do something, no person is able to stop Him. But there is a difference between what God can do and what He actually does.

I don't believe that God conveys His saving grace upon someone unless it is preceded by a profession of faith. As I've indicated throughout this series, I believe that a person must exercise their free will, as enabled by God's prevenient grace, in order to accept Christ. They must believe! This is the Arminian view. Stated simply, I believe that a person must surrender to God's prevenient grace (which is resistible) before receiving His saving grace (which is irresistible). If a person isn't free to say no, they aren't free at all.

Some Arminians believe that God's prevenient grace is virtually synonymous with His common grace, and is bestowed upon all people continuously throughout their lives. In effect, this means that a person can come to Christ whenever they choose to. I firmly disagree. I side with those who believe that God's prevenient grace is granted to people on occasion in conjunction with Holy Spirit conviction, typically brought about by the presentation of the Gospel. Should the person resist the Holy Spirit's call while under conviction, the LORD will withdraw His prevenient grace, thereby returning the sinner to their state of depravity until another opportunity is granted. Thus, a person cannot come to Christ whenever they choose, but only as He draws them.

There is an interesting story mentioned in the Bible which, in my opinion, properly portrays the process of salvation. While in Bethsaida, the crowds brought a blind man to Jesus to be healed. Jesus led the man out of the village, spat on his eyes, laid His hands on him, and asked if he could see anything. The blind man answered that He could see a little, but it was still very blurry. Then Jesus placed His hands on the man's eyes and his vision was completely restored so that he could see clearly (Mark 8:22-26). Notice the 3 stages of this miracle - total blindness, an intermediate stage of blurred vision, and finally clear and perfect sight.

In the same way, we are all spiritually blinded by our sin. We are in darkness and cannot see God or know Him. However, by the convicting power of the Holy Spirit, at moments of the Lord's choosing, God extends His prevenient grace upon individual sinners. Though it does not remove their blindness completely, it enables them to see sufficiently enough to recognize their need. In these moments, if the sinner makes a profession of faith, the LORD imparts His saving grace upon them and they are born again - their spiritual blindness is healed so that they can see clearly!



## CONCLUSION

As we close, let's restate the 4th points of Calvinism and Arminianism. "Irresistible Grace" teaches that those whom God has predestined and elected will inevitably be saved by the efficacious power of the Holy Spirit. "Resistible Grace" asserts that God grants prevenient grace to all people which overcomes their spiritual depravity and enables them to exercise their freewill unto salvation.

On this particular point, I agree with the Arminians. I believe that a person can resist the calling of the Holy Spirit. That brings my score to 2½ points for Arminianism and 1½ points for Calvinism. Next Sunday we will consider the 5th and final points of these 2 competing perspectives.

Is the Holy Spirit calling out to you this morning? Is He convicting you of your sin and the terrible penalty it demands? Is He revealing your need for forgiveness? My friend, if He is... don't resist Him. Surrender to His call, repent of your sins, trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and be saved by the mighty grace of God!

# Persevering and Indefinite Salvation

Originally Preached on 3/12/2023

*For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised. - Hebrews 10:36*

For the past 8 weeks we have been learning about Calvinism and Arminianism. These 2 differing interpretations of the Bible formally originated during the Protestant Reformation over 400 years ago from the teachings of John Calvin and Jacob Arminius. Each seeks to explain the manner by which a person is saved (soteriology). Since that time, there has been ongoing debate within the Christian church - becoming heated at times - between proponents of each side. Such is the case even among Southern Baptist Churches.

Most people have an incomplete and oversimplified view of Calvinism and Arminianism which, unfortunately, leads to further division and frustration between the 2 camps. In truth, both theological systems are built on 5 underlying points - each of which can and should be considered separately. This is what we have been doing over the last 2 months, with the goal of better understanding and appreciating both perspectives.

This morning we will examine the 5th and final points of Calvinism and Arminianism. Both of them deal with the enduring nature of salvation and seek to answer the question, "Once someone has been saved, can they lose their salvation?" For the purposes of this series, I will refer to these 2 positions as "Persevering Salvation" and "Indefinite Salvation".

## I. WHAT IS PERSEVERING SALVATION?

Persevering Salvation, more commonly referred to as "The Perseverance of the Saints", is a Calvinistic doctrine. It states that once a person has been born again or saved, they can never lose their salvation. God keeps or preserves the believer forever by the indwelling presence and power of the Holy Spirit. This is sometimes called "eternal security" or "the eternal security of the believer".

There is significant Biblical support for this position. Believers are sealed by the Holy Spirit and His presence is the guarantee of their future inheritance (Ephesians 1:13-14). How is this guarantee valid if salvation can be lost? God promises to complete the good work He has begun in the life of the Christian (Philippians 1:6). How could He make this promise if salvation can be lost? No one, not even Satan himself, can snatch a believer out of God's hand (John 10:28-29). All those who come to Christ will never be cast out or lost (John 6:37-39). All of these verses, and others, argue for persevering salvation.

Jesus taught that those who have been born again already have eternal life (John 5:24). It began the moment that they were saved. They don't have to wait on it until they die. Now think about this... How could this new life be lost if it is eternal from the moment of salvation? It can't!

Otherwise it wouldn't be eternal, would it? The believer is eternally secure, having passed from death to life at the instant of their regeneration, and is exempt from God's judgment!

## II. WHAT IS INDEFINITE SALVATION?

It should be noted that Jacob Arminius and the original Remonstrants were undecided on this particular issue. They did not take a firm stance one way or the other on the enduring nature of salvation. However, in the centuries following his death, many Arminians adopted an opposing position to that of Calvinism.

Indefinite Salvation, more frequently called "Falling from Grace", is a modern Arminian doctrine. It states that a saved person can lose their salvation. A believer's salvation is conditionally secure based upon their own faithfulness and obedience. In other words, they must contribute something to it in order to retain it. Those who turn from the Lord and abandon the faith, after having been saved, forfeit their redemption and return to their unrepentant, depraved state.

Those who hold this view point to several different passages. A person must stand firm to the end in order to be saved (Matthew 24:13). Only those who actually live by and are led by the Holy Spirit will be saved (Romans 8:12-14). A believer must hold firmly to the Word, lest their belief is in vain (1 Corinthians 15:1-2). In order to reap the harvest, a person must not give up (Galatians 6:7-9). All of these verses suggest that a Christian must do certain things in order to maintain their salvation.

Paul wrote in his letter to the Galatians a stern warning to those who sought to be justified by the Law. He stated that they had "fallen from grace" (Galatians 5:4). They had forsaken their Christian faith and reverted to Judaism, which requires human works in order to attain God's favor. Could it be that they lost their salvation? I don't think so...

## III. ETERNAL SECURITY

I, and virtually every Southern Baptist I've ever known, support the doctrine of "The Eternal Security of the Believer". There is a popular saying within our denomination. I am sure you've heard it and probably even said it a few times - "Once saved, always saved". This expression is synonymous with Persevering Salvation. In this respect, almost all Baptists, myself included, agree with Calvinism.

What about those people who once professed faith in God and later turned from it? How do you explain that, if salvation is eternally secure? The Bible answers this question by stating that a person who abandons the faith was never truly saved to begin with. Perhaps they claimed to be, and may have even acted the part, but their profession wasn't genuine (1 John 2:19). A truly saved person is a changed person - a new creation in fact - and will never wholly abandon the LORD (2 Corinthians 5:17). They may backslide or wander away for a season, but they will always return to Shepherd. True believers will endure to the end.

Some critics argue that this stance gives Christians a license to sin because they cannot lose their salvation. However, if a sinner has been truly saved by the grace of God and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, they will not want to sin. Instead, they will strive to keep the Lord's commandments. Those who profess to be Christian yet are content living sinful lifestyles are liars - they are not truly saved (1 John 2:3-4). Faithful obedience to God is evidence of our salvation, but not the reason for it. We are saved by grace to do good works, not by good works to attain or retain God's grace (Ephesians 2:8-10).

## CONCLUSION

We have completed our presentation and discussion of the 5 points of Calvinism and Arminianism. Let's go over them quickly.

As it pertains to man's spiritual condition, Calvinists believe in "Total Depravity" and Arminians believe in "Partial Depravity". I agree with the Calvinists.

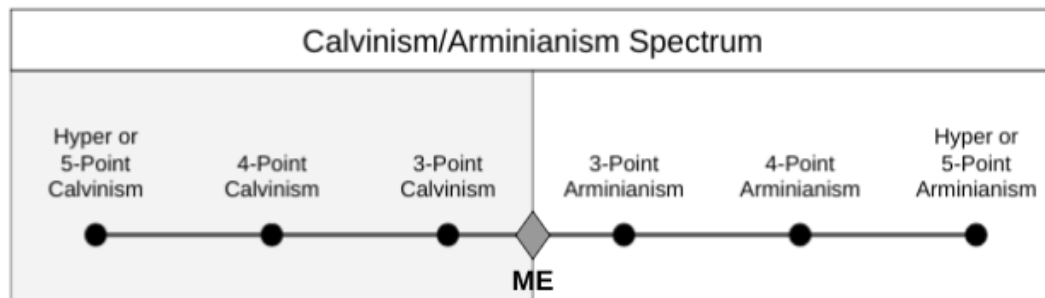
As it pertains to election and predestination, Calvinists believe in "Unconditional Election" and Arminians believe in "Conditional Election". I disagree with both and prefer corporate election.

As it pertains to Christ's death and resurrection, Calvinists believe in "Limited Atonement" and Arminians believe in "Unlimited Atonement". I agree with the Arminians.

As it pertains to the allure of God's grace, Calvinists believe in "Irresistible Grace" and Arminians believe in "Resistible" grace. I agree with the Arminians.

As it pertains to the enduring nature of salvation, Calvinists believe in "Persevering Salvation" and Arminians believe in "Indefinite Salvation". I agree with the Calvinists.

If we look back at the Calvinism/Arminianism Spectrum that I introduced at the beginning of this series, I land exactly in the middle. I think there are strengths and weaknesses on both sides of the debate. Where are you on this scale?



# Living Obediently

Originally Preached on 3/19/2023

*If you love Me, you will keep My commandments. - John 14:15*

Last Sunday we wrapped up our discussion of the 5 foundational points of Calvinism and Arminianism. During this study we have discovered strengths and weaknesses on both sides of the debate. Truth be told, most Christians agree to some extent with both perspectives - though they likely don't even realize it. My personal beliefs place me right smack in the middle of the Calvinist/Arminian spectrum. Therefore, it doesn't behoove me (or any of us) to demonize or degrade either side.

What really matters is how our beliefs contribute to godly living. As born again Christians, are we faithfully following the clear and unambiguous commands found in Scripture? Whether we lean towards Calvinism or Arminianism, are we doing the things that God expressly instructs us to do? Are we living obediently?

While there are numerous commands and instructions for Christians in the Bible, this morning we are going to focus broadly on just 2 of them - the Great Commission and the Great Commandments. These 2 directives are comprehensive and cover most, if not all, of the others. If we abide by them, we will do well. As we explore each of these, we'll identify potential pitfalls for those who hold extreme Calvinist or Arminian views.

## I. THE GREAT COMMISSION - MAKE DISCIPLES

During His earthly ministry, Jesus declared the kingdom of God in and throughout Israel. Following His death and resurrection, before ascending into heaven, Jesus instructed His disciples to continue the work He'd begun by carrying the gospel message from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria and on to the uttermost parts of the earth (Acts 1:8). He charged His followers to go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them and teaching them the things of God (Matthew 28:28-30). This charge was and continues to be a fundamental purpose of the church and a task that all Christians are called to share in. We are to be His witnesses and herald His message to all the world.

That said, the Calvinist believes that God has elected certain individuals to be saved and others to be condemned. Each person's eternal future has already been predestined and predetermined by God and is unchangeable. Taken to the extreme, this point of view might lead someone to downplay the importance of the Great Commission and/or lack a zeal for it. After all, what is the point of evangelism if everyone's destiny is already determined?

The Arminian believes that God has effectively done everything on His end to make salvation available to the world. It is now completely upon His disciples to carry the gospel to the world and convince people to be saved. Taken to the extreme, this point of view can lead someone to feel overly burdened and stressed out by the magnitude of this task. Despite their best efforts,

they might perceive their inability to win some people to Christ as a personal failure and a source of discouragement.

As it pertains to the Great Commission, I once heard an analogy that I found insightful. For the Calvinist, evangelism is like searching for needles in a haystack. God has already fashioned the needles and the hay and neither will change. It is the evangelist's job to find the needles among the hay by sharing the gospel so that God's elect are discovered and revealed. For the Arminian, evangelism is like talking to the entire haystack with the hope that each piece of hay might choose to become a needle. Either way, we as Christians are called to diligently carry out the Great Commission.

## II. THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT - LOVE GOD

Jesus gave His disciples 2 commandments that together encompass all of the Old Testament Law. The first and greatest of these was for believers to love the LORD with all of their hearts, souls, and minds (Matthew 22:36-38). This command was originally conveyed by Moses to the children of Israel during the exodus (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). We are to love God with all of our being, more than anyone or anything else, and to give Him first place in our lives. We are to worship Him, praise Him, revere Him, fear Him, and serve Him exclusively because He alone is worthy of our wholehearted devotion.

Calvinists champion the sovereignty of God. They argue that a person contributes nothing to the salvation process. God chooses who will be saved, has made their salvation possible, affects their salvation at the time of He deems fit, and secures it eternally without fail. Everything is dependent on God. Taken to the extreme, this view reduces the individual to a mere puppet without any ability to truly love the LORD or anyone else for that matter. True love and commitment demands some degree of choice.

Arminians champion the free will of each individual person. They contend that each person has the ability to come to Christ whenever they choose, to resist the calling of the Holy Spirit when it is issued, and even to renounce the faith and walk away from salvation after having received it. Everything is dependent upon the individual's choices. Taken to the extreme, this view exalts the ability of man while diminishing the greatness and authority of God. Such a position is disrespectful, irreverent, and out of line with the LORD's command to love Him supremely.

## III. THE 2ND GREATEST COMMANDMENT - LOVE OTHERS

The 2nd Greatest Commandment is that believers love their neighbors as themselves (Matthew 22:39). This includes everyone - not just friends, family, and acquaintances, but also strangers, undesirables, and even enemies. The Golden Rule is derived from this command, that we should do unto others as we would have them do unto us. Jesus deepened the meaning of this commandment when He told His disciples to love others as He did (John 13:34-35). Christians are called to love sacrificially by putting the needs of others before their own.

The Calvinist believes themselves to be chosen by God and a member of His elect, while seeing the vast majority of other people as hopelessly and helplessly condemned by God and unsavable. When taken to the extreme, this perspective can lead someone to exhibit a pious and haughty attitude. Rather than loving the lost, showing them compassion and care, and desiring their salvation, some rigidly write them off as non-elect and treat them with indifference and/or disdain.

The Arminian believes that they can lose their salvation if they don't live in obedience to the Lord's commands. When taken to the extreme, this may cause someone to serve others out of fear rather than genuine love. They do it begrudgingly, because they feel that they have to in order to maintain God's favor. Such service is spurred by a sense of duty and obligation, not genuine compassion. Works-based religion is exhausting and displeasing to God.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout this series, we have talked alot about theology - how the doctrinal beliefs of Calvinists and Arminians differ. But in today's message, we've discussed how these beliefs are manifested in practical Christian living. We've tried to identify some potential dangers for those who hold extreme positions on either side of the debate.

Here is the bottom line. Our theology should motivate us to live godly lives. Our beliefs shouldn't hinder or undermine our obedience. Whether we be Calvinist and Arminian, we should live as Christ commanded. Rather than bickering about who's right or wrong, we as fellow believers should harmoniously work together to do the things that God has plainly instructed us to do.

# Reconciling Calvinism & Arminianism

Originally Preached on 3/26/2023

*Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity! - Psalm 133:1*

Greetings everyone. This morning we will wrap up our series on Calvinism and Arminianism. During the past 10 weeks, we have learned a bit about the origin and history of both theological perspectives. We have introduced and individually considered each of the 5 underlying points upon which both interpretations rest, including many of the Bible verses and passages used by proponents on either side of the debate. Last week we talked about the practical implications of these divergent belief systems and how our faith, regardless whether it be Calvinist or Arminian, should lend itself to obedience and godly living.

As I have grown older and more mature in my faith, I have come to discover shades of Calvinist doctrine and Arminian doctrine seamlessly woven together in many Bible passages - sometimes even in the same verse! Might it be better to approach this argument as a both/and issue rather than an either/or issue? In other worlds, could it be possible that both Calvinism and Arminianism are, for the most part, simultaneously true? If so, how might we reconcile them with one another?

## I. THE VANTAGE POINT OF GOD AND MAN

Whenever there are multiple witnesses of a particular occurrence, there will likely be differing details in their respective reports of it. For example, each of the 4 gospels gives an account of Jesus' first coming. Though they share some common stories and teachings, each of them is distinctly different from the others in various ways. The unique vantage point of each author distinguishes their particular testimony. That said, all of the gospels are true and trustworthy. Together they give us a much more complete and comprehensive presentation and record of Jesus' life and ministry.

In like fashion, God's perspective and man's perspective are quite different. God is omniscient, all-seeing, and eternal. He knows and sees everything - past, present, and future. Man doesn't have any of these attributes. His knowledge and sight are limited and the vision of the future is most often uncertain. Thus, it stands to reason that God's perspective of things would be perfect and complete while man's would be imperfect and lacking.

With this in mind, let us hypothetically entertain the notion that God has already elected certain people unto salvation and others unto condemnation. He has already determined and secured each individual's eternal destiny and will affect it at the time of His choosing. Even if this is the case, how can we as finite human beings know with absolute certainty who is elect and who isn't? Can we see into peoples' hearts and rightly judge their spiritual condition? Can we accurately predict who might come to salvation later in life and/or who might turn from the faith? No, we can't... nor should we try. Rather, we should faithfully appeal to everyone and urge sinners to repent and believe while working to restore those who have backslidden.



In other words, perhaps Calvinism most aptly describes God's omniscient, timeless, and divine perspective of salvation, while Arminianism most aptly describes man's limited, finite perspective of salvation. Perhaps God knows that free will doesn't exist, but in practice we should function as though it does. Perhaps God knows that some people can't be saved, but without absolute certainty we must act as though they can be up until the moment of their death. Perhaps the Bible passages that lean Calvinist and those that lean Arminian are both true - they are just viewing salvation from different perspectives.

## II. THE NATURE OF A RELATIONSHIP

I have heard it said that, "Christianity is not a religion, but a relationship." Born-again Christians have been adopted into the family of God. He is our Father and we are His children. True, we still engage in religious practices, but we've been set free by His grace from the demands of the Law. We do not have to earn God's favor through rigorous religion. Instead, our service and obedience should be motivated out of love, joy, and devotion. We are His kinfolks!

In every relationship there are 2 parties. In order for a relationship to be healthy and vibrant, these 2 parties must be committed to one another. Whether it be parent and child, friends, spouses, or employers and employees there must be some level of mutual commitment for the relationship to work. Otherwise, the child will either run away from home or be kicked out, the friendship will be broken, the marriage will separate, or the employee will either quit or be fired. If 1 of the 2 is unable to leave for whatever reason, they are not in a good relationship but rather are being held hostage.

This is the case even if 1 of the 2 is substantially greater, wiser, stronger, and wealthier than the other. Consider this example. Suppose there was a mighty king who had great wealth, power, nobility, and so on. This great king met and fell in love with a poor, peasant girl. He brought her into his palace and gave her food, clothes, and royal status. He essentially saved her from a life of desperation and poverty. Even in such a relationship, the peasant girl still could walk away - though she'd been foolish to do so.

Calvinists emphasize that God chooses man. Arminians emphasize that man chooses God. Perhaps both of them are right - God and man choose each other. Certainly, God's choice of man makes salvation possible. He is infinitely greater than we are. He alone can forgive sins and grant eternal life. Our salvation is wholly dependent on Him, and we contribute nothing to it. Still, we must accept it. Such is the nature of an authentic, loving relationship. We love Him, because He first loved us.

## CONCLUSION

In the end, there isn't any analogy that I'm aware of that perfectly illustrates how Calvinism and Arminianism can be fully reconciled. These that we've discussed today attempt to do so, but

neither is completely accurate. Nevertheless, they both point us toward reconciliation which, in my opinion, is the best approach to this historic debate.

The fact is, there are some truths in the Bible that we can't logically explain or depict. How can there be 1 God who exists in 3 Persons? The doctrine of the Trinity cannot be perfectly illustrated with an analogy, yet we believe it by faith. How can Jesus be fully God and fully man at the same time? The hypostatic union of Christ is beyond human understanding, yet we believe it by faith. In the same way, how can God be absolutely sovereign and have control over all things while simultaneously allowing people to possess and exercise a free will that allows them to make their own independent choices? Again, this is a mystery we can't perfectly explain or analogize, yet can accept by faith. God orchestrates the free choices of His creations in order to accomplish His divine purposes without sacrificing any of His sovereignty!

I hope this series has helped us develop a broader understanding and appreciation of Calvinism and Arminianism. We certainly haven't resolved this debate, nor was this our intention. I suspect that there will always be some who believe that a person's profession of faith precedes their new birth and others who believe that a person's new birth precedes and enables their profession of faith. In either case, what ultimately matters is that the person has been reborn - whether Calvinist or Arminian, they are Christian! As fellow believers, may we live together in unity as we strive to advance the kingdom of God.