Divine Sovereignty & Human Freedom

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From the very beginning, the Bible exhibits a paradox between God's power and human freedom. On the one hand, God is depicted as the Creator (Ge. 1:1). The existence of the universe comes not from a series of accidents but by a divine choice. God was free to create or not to create. He did not struggle with preexisting material, but he freely chose to create the universe and sustain its functions (He. 11:3). The universe was not a necessary condition (as in pantheism), but rather, the consequence of God's wisdom and gracious choice (Pr. 8:22-31). Hence, in this broadest sense of the word, only God is free.[1] The universe exists alongside God in a contingent dualism. It could not nor cannot exist apart from his Creatorship (He. 1:2-3; Rv. 4:11). If the initial stage of raw creation was formless and empty, God imposed order on the whole (Ge. 1:2-3). In the end, all that exists comes from his hand (Col. 1:15-17).

Furthermore, God is not bound by the conventions of time as are created things. He is without beginning or end (Ps. 90:2; 102:25-27; 1 Ti. 1:17; 6:16; Rv. 1:8, 17). If time, as commonly understood, is measured by succession, God is free from all succession of time and simultaneously possesses total duration (He. 13:8).[2] This divine quality of total duration is best expressed in God's self-description, "I am who I am" (Ex. 3:14).

On the other hand, alongside God's sovereign power, the Bible also describes a considerable degree of human freedom. Since humans are creatures, this freedom obviously is a conferred privilege. To say that God is sovereign does not suggest that history is fixed and unalterable (as in fatalism), but rather, that God interacts with creatures to whom he allows limited freedom. The first humans' freedom to choose against God demonstrated that God did not manipulate his creatures as though they were puppets (Ge. 2:16-17; 3:6). Instead, he issued to them moral injunctions and allowed them the freedom to obey or disobey. Again and again the divine call is to choose the good (Dt. 30:19-20; 1 Kg. 18:21; Eze. 18:30-32). Hence, God's sovereignty can never be defined as arbitrary caprice. God is not a prisoner of his

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[1] G. Bromiley, "Only God is Free," *Christianity Today* (Feb. 4, 2002), pp. 72-75.

[2] W. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 2nd ed. (rpt. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1980) I.343.

own power. His power must be distinguished from power itself, for he is in control of his own power. He not only has the power to overrule all other powers, he also has the power of self-restraint, or as Barth puts it, "We can say that it also belongs to God's will not to will many things."[3] His power does not violate his love or holiness (Job 37:23). The various biblical passages that describe God as "repenting"[4] suggest that he has the freedom to be grieved, the freedom to withhold judgment, and the freedom to reconsider (Ge. 6:6-7; Ex. 32:9-14; 1 Sa. 15:10-11, 35; 2 Sa. 24:16; Je. 18:5-10; Am. 7:1-6; Jonah 3:9-10; 4:2). Such repeated expressions forbid defining God's power as immobility or impassiveness. God is immutable, that is, his character and attributes do not change. At the same time, God is not immobile.[5]

The Paradox in Detail

The Sovereignty of Yahweh

Everywhere in Scripture, God's sovereignty is extolled. His role as the Creator means that he is sovereign over all the earth (Is. 37:16; Ac. 17:24). He is the power above all other powers (Job 42:2; Ps. 22:28; 1 Chr. 29:11; Is. 40:22-26). Daniel declares, "The Most High God is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and sets over them anyone he wishes" (Da. 5:21; cf. 2:47; 3:29; 6:26-27). Even the pagan emperor of Babylon was forced to admit of Yahweh, "His dominion is an eternal dominion…he does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth" (Da. 4:34-35; cf. Ps. 75:7). God's judgments cannot be thwarted (Je. 30:24). His divine word accomplishes whatever he intends (Is. 55:11). His own plans always succeed (Ps. 33:10-11), while the plans of those who oppose him are brought to naught (Job 5:12-13; cf. 1 Co. 3:19). In a word, as described in the New Testament, God is the one who *works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will* (Ep. 1:11).

In story after story, the Bible describes and extols the sovereignty of God. He promises future events and fulfills his word in spite of incredible hindrances and even impossibilities. The first extended account of such a promise and its fulfillment is the story of Abraham to whom God promised posterity like the dust of the earth and the stars of the heavens (Ge. 12:2, 7; 13:16; 15:5). To this childless man in his old age, such a promise seemed absurd. Nevertheless, when the question was posed, "Is

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[3] K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1957) II.1.544.

[4] The Hebrew verb נָחַם (naHam = repent) carries several nuances, such as, having regret, having a change of heart, relenting, cf. W. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), p. 234.

[5] D. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), I.27.

anything too hard for the LORD?" the answer surely was: "Nothing!" (Ge. 18:14). From the birth of Isaac to the birth of Jesus, the biblical witness has been that nothing is impossible for God (Lk. 1:37; cf. 18:27; Je. 32:17, 27).

One of the most potent types of Old Testament literature extolling the sovereignty of Yahweh comes in the contest narratives between Yahweh and various pagan deities and/or heads of state. In the story of the exodus, God's sovereignty is deliberately pitched against the divine claims of the Egyptian Pharaoh.[6] As the god-symbol of the state, Pharaoh represented a direct challenge to Yahweh's claim of sovereignty. Hence, Yahweh's hardening of Pharaoh's heart becomes part of his divine claim of power over Pharaoh (Ex. 7:1-5; 9:16).[7] The contest in Egypt was a battle of divine wills and divine claims. Only Yahweh was able to demonstrate the truth of his sovereign claim, and the hardening of Pharaoh's heart become the occasion for the sending of the plagues.

A very similar contest between divine claims of power can be seen in the contest between Elijah and Jezebel, each respective representatives of Yahweh and Ba'al.[8] When Elijah bearded Ahab in his den with the judgment, "As Yahweh lives…there will be neither dew nor rain these years except at my word" (1 Kg. 17:1), his challenge was a frontal assault upon the claims of Ba'al, the Canaanite deity of storm, rain and fertility. The final contest on Mt. Carmel three years later (1 Kg. 18:16-46) was nothing less than a showdown! Elijah stood as the lone representative of Yahweh; 850 prophets stood as the representatives of Ba'al. The deity who answered by fire (lightning) would be truly God! In the end, Ba'al was impotent, while Yahweh sent not only fire, but also torrents of rain.

In a much different context, but with the same import, are the prophetic oracles pitting the power of Yahweh against Marduk, the patron deity of Babylon. It was typical of ancient Near Eastern imperialists to claim that their victories were the

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[6] In Egyptian religion, Pharaoh was himself a god who was believed to have come from the realm of the gods, not from any province or town in Egypt. There was no need to codify law, since the word of the god-king was present to make law, cf. J. Wilson, *IDB* (1962) pp. 773-774.

[7] Of course, the hardening of Pharaoh's heart is described in more than one way. In some passages, Pharaoh hardens his own heart (Ex. 8:15). In others, the verbs are passive and neutral (e.g., Ex. 7:13). However, the most striking are those texts that describe Yahweh as making Pharaoh's heart hard (Ex. 7:3; 10:1-2; 14:4). In these latter references, it is Yahweh's sovereignty that is at stake. Yahweh will brook no rival, and certainly not from the god-king of Egypt!

[8] Ba'al (= lord, owner) was the most prominent Canaanite deity, and his connection to rain is clear in the following Ugaritic text, cf. H. Ringgren, *Religions of the Ancient Near East*, trans. J. Sturdy (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973), pp. 131-133:

> H*e will give abundance of rain,*
> *Abundance of moisture with snow,*
> *He will utter his voice in the clouds*
> *And his flashings and lightnings on earth.*

consequence of the superiority of their gods.[9] When Yahweh allowed his chosen people to go into exile and the temple that bore his name to be burned to the ground in 586 BC, it remained for the prophets to explain that this debacle was a judgment due to Israel's and Judah's sins rather than the weakness of God. The exile was not a sign of Marduk's superiority, but rather, Yahweh's faithfulness to his covenant judgments (cf. Dt. 28:64-68; 2 Chr. 7:19-22; Je. 37:6-10). The exile, just as much as the creation and the exodus, was a mighty act of God (Da. 9:4-14)! Similarly, when God determined to allow his people to return to their homeland, it was his divine power over Cyrus of Persia that made the return from exile possible. Cyrus was no more than a tool of Yahweh (Is. 44:24—45:7).

Finally, this same theme reaches a crescendo in the New Testament when, in his passion, Christ faced the evil power of Satan working through the Roman governor and the religious authorities in Judea (Jn. 11:49-53; 12:31; 14:30; 16:8-11; 1 Co. 2:7-8). Jesus' resurrection from the dead was a sign of God's sovereignty over all the forces of evil (Ac. 2:23-24, 32, 36; Rv. 12:4-5). In his resurrection, the Father exalted Jesus to the highest place in heaven and on earth (Phil. 2:9-11), disarming the powers and authorities of evil (Col. 2:15). His reign will continue until the last enemy, death, has been destroyed forever (1 Co. 15:24-28).

The Limited Freedom of Humans

In the midst of all these stories illustrating and celebrating God's sovereignty lie other stories that show the incredible freedom God has allowed humans, and in fact, a dynamic interaction between humans and God himself. That God has allowed humans limited freedom seems just as evident as that God is sovereign, and this freedom is not merely confined to the pre-fallen condition in Eden but extends into the very fabric of subsequent biblical history.

A fundamental example is the covenant of Torah established by Yahweh with Israel at Mt. Sinai. To be sure, this covenant is imposed on the Israelites, that is, it came at God's initiative, not through human effort. Nevertheless, the reciprocal character of the covenant is clear. Both in apodictic (absolute) and casuistic (case) law, God offered a choice between obedience and disobedience with consequences either way. Clearly enunciated blessings or cursings attended the covenant based on obedience or disobedience (Lv. 26:3-45; Dt. 28:1-68).

Human interaction with God repeatedly surfaces in the stories of the Bible. Hezekiah, for instance, was confronted by a prophet with the announcement of his imminent death (2 Kg. 20:1//Is. 38:1). However, when he prayed for a reprieve, God

[9] All war in the ancient Near East was religious to the extent that the gods of the nations were believed to fight on the sides of the opposing armies.

allowed him another fifteen years (2 Kg. 20:2-11//Is. 38:2-8; cf. 2 Chr. 32:24). A reflective edition of his prayer and thanksgiving were preserved by Isaiah (Is. 38:9-20). Similarly, though Jonah delivered God's word of judgment to Nineveh (3:1-4), an Assyrian capital, God relented when the citizens of Nineveh repented (Jonah 3:5-10). Such reciprocity is especially apparent with regard to prophetic predictions. Human decisions and actions seem to play a role in whether divine judgments will be carried out (Je. 18:1-10; cf. Eze. 18). Abraham even carried on a running dialog with God over the judgment of the cities of the plain (Ge. 18:16-33). When God told Moses to step aside so that he could destroy the entire Israelite nation because of the golden calf and begin all over again with Moses himself (Ex. 32:7-10), Moses successfully interceded for the people (Ex. 32:11-14).

Some of the most cogent examples of this reciprocity between God and humans comes in the healing ministry of Jesus. To be sure, Jesus' miracles were signs of his messiahship and the coming of the kingdom of God. At the same time, compassion and the call for faith also play a role. Compare, for instance, two pleas to Christ for healing in Marks' gospel. In one, a desperate father pleads with Jesus, "If you can do so…help us" (Mk. 9:22), and Jesus responded, "Everything is possible for him who believes" (Mk. 9:23)! Here the implication is that human trust in Christ is a significant factor in the outcome. In the other, a leper desiring to be healed says, "If you will, you can" (Mk. 1:40). Here, Jesus responds with compassion (Mk. 1:41-42). It is hard to extract reciprocity out of these healing accounts. Further examples could be multiplied!

In the end, these two features of the biblical story have generated considerable discussion in the history of the Christian church, and that discussion still is ongoing! Attempts to resolve the issue philosophically and exegetically punctuate every major era. Christians have divided and continue to divide from each other over their respective answers to this tension.

Augustine and Pelagius

The theological debate over divine sovereignty and human freedom is not confined to the Christian religion. Materialists like B. F. Skinner can be determinists, for instance, where human behavior is believed to be entirely controlled by genetics and environmental factors. Here, while human choices are admitted, they are not free. All choices are determined by physical factors. In eastern pantheistic religions, determinism plays a large role on philosophical grounds. While Hinduism formally rejects the charge of fatalism, all Hindus acknowledge that life and reality operate according to the laws of *karma* and rebirth. *The* essential problem of Indian philosophy, whether Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism or Yoga, is the achievement of

liberation from karmic bondage.[10] Even the Jewish sectarians at Qumran held to a theology of the predestination of all things and the double predestination of the saved and damned.[11]

In Christian theology, the problem is first and foremost exegetical and only secondarily philosophical. Christian thinkers do not start with the observable human condition and reason outward, but rather, they start with Holy Scripture. The earliest major controversy in Christian history along these lines was between Augustine and Pelagius in the early 5th century. It is to this debate that we now turn.

Pelagius (d. after 418)

Pelagius was a British ascetic[12] who came to Rome in 384 accompanied by his disciple, Coelestius. In 409, to escape the Visigoth invasion, they crossed the Mediterranean to North Africa. While Pelagius soon traveled further east, Coelestius stayed behind, because he hoped to gain ordination in Carthage. Instead, he was rejected because of his views. He later rejoined Pelagius, who by this time had gone to Palestine to meet Jerome, and together they found some eastern churches more receptive to their theological position.

What were Pelagius' controversial ideas? The heart of his thought concerned human unconditional free will and moral responsibility. In the first place, he rejected the notion of original sin, that is, that the human proclivity toward sin is derived from Adam. Instead, he countered that humans are born as innocent as Adam before the fall, and human sin was not a tendency inherited from our first parents, but rather, was the result of our own free choice. Adam's rebellion had no ongoing consequence for his descendents. Human action derived from *posse* (power), *velle* (will) and *esse* (realization). God gives the power, while humans produce the other two. Consequently, human action fully deserves either commendation or blame.[13] Humans could, so to speak, lift themselves up by their own bootstraps. They did not need divine grace to do God's will, but rather, a stronger determination and more rigorous self-discipline. While most humans sinned, it was possible to live without sinning. In fact, the goodness of human nature had enabled many pagans to develop the highest virtues.[14] Baptism was not for the removal of original sin, but it served to give a higher degree of sanctification through union with Christ.[15]

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[10] J. Koller, *The Indian Way* (New York: Macmillan, 1982), pp.256ff.

[11] 1QM 15:14-19.

[12] Augustine calls him a Briton, but Jerome says he was Irish. Perhaps he was an Irishman who settled in Britain, cf. F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), p. 334.

[13] B. Shelley, *EDT* (1984) 834.

[14] O. Heick, *A History of Christian Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965), p. 197.

[15] Bruce, pp. 335-336.

Of course, Pelagius could hardly deny the word grace itself, since it is common enough in the Bible. However, he considered grace to be an external aid provided by God rather than an internal action of the Holy Spirit upon the soul. Divine grace forgives sin and offers revelation about God's moral laws, but it does not influence human will. Grace, in this sense, was hardly more than free will itself. By their self-determined action alone humans could advance in holiness.

Similarly, Pelagius could not extract the word predestination from the biblical text. Here, however, predestination only meant that God foresaw who would believe and who would reject the message of salvation. Predestination was based on the human choices that God knew humans would make.

In the end, all humans are without excuse, because all humans are free. Freedom comes from God, and humans have the power within themselves not to sin (*posse non peccare*). The devil may seek human failure, but humans have the power to resist him. The flesh, also, is powerful, but God has given humans the power to overcome it.[16]

Augustine (354-430)

Augustine of North Africa became Pelagius' most ardent opponent.[17] If Pelagius held that humans were untainted by Adam's sin, Augustine held that nothing less than God's grace could save him from his sin. In his *Confessions*,[18] Augustine plumbed the depths of human inability to overcome sin vis-a-vis his own experience, a man confused by fears and alien desires. In the confessions, Augustine held high the sovereignty of God: *Give what thou commandest, and command what thou wilt*.[19]

For Augustine, Pelagius made unnecessary the salvation provided by Christ. If all humans were innocent and could live by God's moral standard simply on their own power, then Christ died for naught! Contra Pelagius, Adam's rebellion had enormous consequences for his descendents. The power to do right was now gone. Since the whole human race was "in Adam", no one anywhere could rise above the corruption of the whole apart from God's grace. Any power to do good came as God's free gift.

To be sure, Augustine held that the first humans were created with free will and without sin, but after the rebellion of Adam, humans lost the ability to do good

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[16] J. Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971) II.29-30.

[17] Some of Augustine's most important works were written to combat Pelagius, including *On the Spirit and the Letter, On Nature and Grace* and *On Original Sin*.

[18] A readable translation can be found in *The Confessions of St. Augustine* (rpt. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977).

[19] *Confessions* 10.29.

apart from divine grace. When Adam sinned, all his posterity sinned in him seminally. Now, humans were free only in the sense of the freedom to choose between various sinful alternatives. Though the image of God in humans was not cancelled, it was deeply marred. Every person from birth to death deserved nothing but damnation. Hence, no one could take initiative to come to God without the help of grace. For salvation it was necessary for divine grace to work inwardly. Infant baptism was not merely aimed at a higher level of sanctification, as Pelagius taught, but was essential for remitting original sin and for receiving regenerating grace.[20] In fact, unbaptized infants could not be saved, since they were guilty of Adam's sin.[21]

For Augustine, the basic concept of grace also required the predestination of some to salvation. All humans stand condemned, but by God's grace, some had been predestined to be rescued. Such predestination meant that the precise number of the elect is fixed.[22] Saving grace was irresistible in the sense that it strengthened the human will to the point that men and women would desire the good without coercion. Humans were not saved by their own efforts, nor were they saved against their wills. True freedom, then, was the ability to do good, and only those redeemed by Christ possessed it.

Furthermore, to the elect God gave the gift of perseverance. This gift, also, was necessary for salvation. While members of God's elect might stumble and fall, they would never do so permanently. In fact, the difference between the elect and the non-elect is not necessarily apparent, since the non-elect may appear to be Christians. No one could be certain that he or she would be saved, even if at the present the Christian life was embraced. Christians must rejoice in their salvation with fear and trembling, for if they were not elected to salvation, they would not receive the gift of perseverance to salvation. In this way Augustine defended the view that humans had no power or worthiness in themselves. Salvation was entirely from God from first to last. In fact, Augustine theorized that it was possible for some elect to be saved even though they may never have heard the gospel in the present life.[23]

The question as to why God chose some for salvation and not others Augustine simply consigned to the mystery of God's will. Humans are in no position to question the counsels of the Almighty. God would have been righteous even if he had decided to condemn everyone. All deserved damnation; only by God's inscrutable grace would the elect be saved.

It is fair to say that, notwithstanding some reservations about his views on

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[20] N. Geisler, *EDT* (1984) p. 106.

[21] Heick, II.202.

[22] Gonzales, II.45-46.

[23] Heick, p. 205; B. Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), p. 146.

predestination, Augustine's theology carried the day. Augustine was successful in gaining the condemnation of Pelagianism at a general synod in Carthage in 418. After his death, the whole church condemned the teachings of Pelagius at the Third Ecumenical Council of Ephesis in 431. Still, the condemnation of Pelagius did not mean the full acceptance of all facets of Augustine's theology. Many (the so-called "semi-Pelagians" or "semi-Augustinians") were convinced to reject the teachings of Pelagius but, while accepting Augustine's case for grace, were not willing to follow him to his conclusions about predestination.[24] Vincent of Lerins, for instance, argued that the essential faith of the church was "that which has been believed everywhere, always, and by all" (*quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus*). Augustine's doctrine of predestination, whatever its worth, did not fit such a description.

The Reformers

The thought of St. Augustine significantly shaped the thought of medieval churchmen for the next millennium, especially his philosophy of history. God, who is sovereign, became the creator of history in time. He is lord over history. Everything that happens is a result of his will and action. Human progress is primarily along moral and spiritual lines as the result of the conflict with evil, and in this conflict, God's grace, not human ability, makes it possible for humans to advance. The dualism between good and evil is temporal, and in the end, God has decreed final victory for the City of God.

In spite of his emphasis on grace, it was Augustine's ideas on the visible institution of the church and its sacraments that seem most influential in medieval theology. A thousand years later it would be left to the Protestant Reformers to revive Augustine's theology of grace and predestination.

Protestantism, a 16th century development in western Christianity, addressed several critical questions: How is a person saved? Where lies religious authority? What is the church? The Protestant Reformers came to fundamentally different answers to these questions than the ones traditionally upheld in the Roman Catholic Church. The principles of *sola gratia* and *sola fide* (grace alone and faith alone) well express the Protestant conclusion, that is, that salvation is by grace alone and through faith alone rather than by human merit or religious effort. Whereas the Roman Church embraced a theology of "both/and" (i.e., both grace and free will, both faith and works, both Scripture and tradition, both Christ and Mary), the Protestants were adamant: it was grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone and Christ alone!

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[24] Gonzales, II.54-61.

Luther (1483-1546) and Erasmus (1466?-1536)

One of the early "rounds" in this theological boxing match was Luther's confrontation with the Dutch Roman Catholic scholar and humanist, Desiderius Erasmus. Even though early on Erasmus was sympathetic to Luther's cause and was even accused of being a "Lutheran at heart", he could not agree with Luther that the church needed to entirely revamp its theology or that the church should divide. In his *Diatribe On Free Will*, Erasmus attacked a point at which he most disagreed with Luther. Here, Erasmus championed the full freedom of the human will. He argued that apart from true free will, the ideas of God's justice and mercy have no meaning. Morality is entirely dependent upon the human consciousness of real freedom. What would be the sense of the teachings, rebukes and admonitions in the Bible if humans were not free? Why should obedience be praised or disobedience chastised if humans were not free?[25]

Luther responded with his *The Bondage of the Will*,[26] in which he argued for the grace of a sovereign God and the total incapacity of humans to save themselves. Human sin is so deeply embedded from birth that men and women cannot even discover its magnitude by themselves. In Luther's view, Erasmus had no clear understanding of the gospel, and any affirmation of full freedom in which men and women could choose good by their own power was a fundamental denial of sinfulness. Rather, Luther argued, the human will was in bondage to evil. Humans can only will evil. Their best virtues, though praiseworthy from a secular point of view, could bring them no nearer to God. The problem was not so much that human wills were constrained, as though God manipulated people into doing evil, but rather that their wills were so imbued with sin that they freely chose evil. After the fall of Adam, nothing remained in the human will to move one toward God or to move one to actively please God. The human will is like a beast standing between two riders, God and the devil, and the devil is now in the saddle. There is nothing humans can do to unseat him. Instead, all they can contribute is the passive capacity to be turned in the right direction, and only God can do the turning. God turns human wills towards himself, and this, in fact, is the gospel of grace![27]

The Influence of John Calvin (1509-1564)

As the Reformation moved forward, the theological ideas of the Reformers were further developed and systematized. John Calvin, a second generation Reformer, though not the creative genius of Martin Luther, nevertheless was a

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[25] J. Huizinga, *Erasmus and the Age of Reformation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), pp. 161-164.

[26] M. Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. H. Cole (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976).

[27] Gonzales, III.48-50.

formidable intellect and theologian. He was not so much a prophet as one who "possessed the wonderful talent of comprehending any given body of religious ideas in its most delicate refinements and giving appropriate expression to the results of his investigations."[28] In short, he was a scholar, an exegete, a systematizer, and a logician. Though he never met Luther, Calvin was very familiar with Luther's writings and accepted most of them. However, whereas Luther was bombastic and explosive, Calvin was a statesman and an aristocratic republican.[29]

Though he wrote many theological treatises, without question his most influential work was the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, which Will Durant heralded as "one of the ten books that shook the world".[30] Here, Calvin systematically collected, organized and further developed Reformation theology, and among the most important of these doctrines was the sovereignty of God. Here, Calvin drew most heavily from St. Augustine.

God's sovereignty was such that he determined in advance the salvation or damnation of individual men and women.

> *By predestination we mean the eternal decree of God, by which he determined with himself whatever he wished to happen with regard to every man. All are not created on equal terms, but some are preordained to eternal life, others to eternal damnation; and, accordingly, as each has been created for one or other of these ends, we say that he has been predestinated to life or to death.*[31]

Calvin frankly conceded that this decree was "dreadful," but he felt driven to it just the same.[32]

Like Augustine, Calvin saw the human race as a mass of sinners, condemned through Adam's original sin. Infants are born into the world with "a hereditary corruption and depravity…which makes us [them] liable to the wrath of God".[33] Without exception, all humans are under the power of sin, and the central agent in sin is the human will.[34] While humans have a will that is central to their being, this will has been corrupted so that it is "chained as the slave of sin" and "it cannot make a movement towards goodness, far less steadily pursue it."[35] At the same time, the

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[28] R. Seeberg, *Text-Book of the History of Doctrines*, trans. C. Hay (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1954), II.394.

[29] Heick, II.421.

[30] J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. H. Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 2 vols.

[31] *Institutes*, III.21.5.

[32] *Institutes*, III.23.7.

[33] *Institutes*, II.1.8.

[34] *Institutes*, II.2.27.

[35] *Institutes*, II.3.5.

human will has "the strongest affection towards sin," and the true condition of fallen humans is not that they have no will, but that they have no capacity for choosing righteousness. "Man, when placed under this bondage [is], being deprived not of will, but of soundness of will."[36]

If Luther's central teaching was justification by faith, Calvin's was the sovereignty of God. Luther's theology pointed toward the miracle of forgiveness, Calvin's toward the impregnability of God's purpose.[37]

After Calvin left France and settled in Geneva, where he was offered the position of "Professor of Sacred Scriptures," he helped change the city into a kind of theocracy. He wrote a confession of faith to be signed by everyone wanting to become a citizen. Education and moral discipline in the city was controlled as much by clerics as by city council members. Those citizens who did not measure up to Calvin's standards were excommunicated and expelled from the Lord's Supper. Though he was forced to leave Geneva for some three years due to his extreme measures, when he was brought back by supporters, his power and influence increased all the more. Church elders became responsible for the moral supervision of the city, and they outlawed behaviors such as missing public worship, drinking, adultery, gambling and dancing. When Michael Servetus, a humanist Spanish physician fleeing persecution from the Catholics, sought refuge in Geneva, Calvin (somewhat reluctantly—he would have preferred a more merciful death) gave his consent to have Servetus burned at the stake for heresy (Servetus denied the doctrine of the Trinity). In fact, the severity of penalties for transgressing Geneva religious law had by 1546 resulted in 58 executions and 76 exiles.[38] In 1545 some 21 women had their right hands severed for heresy and/or witchcraft.

Calvinism, as Calvin's theology came to be called, moved in several important directions throughout Europe. In France, where Calvin's followers were called Huguenots (the origin of the name is unclear), his disciples were ruthlessly massacred on St. Bartholomew's Day in 1572 by the Roman Catholics. Calvinism was never able to supplant the Roman Catholic Church in France. In the Netherlands, however, Calvinism became the dominant faith. In Scotland, especially under the leadership of John Knox, Calvinism also won the day, in spite of persecution under the bloody reign of Mary I. By 1560, the Calvinists were in control of Edinburgh, Knox drafted the articles of religion which parliament accepted, and Roman Catholicism was abolished. In England, Calvinism had a significant impact upon Anglican theology, and the Westminster Confession was thoroughly Calvinist. In

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[36] *Institutes*, II.3.5.

[37] Shelley, *Church History*, p. 275.

[38] E. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954), p. 338.

America, the Puritans brought Calvinism to New England.

The 16th century Reformation gave rise to various Protestant confessions of faith. After those in various parts of Europe accepted Protestant teaching, an individual or group in that area was commissioned to write a definitive statement of faith. Several of these confessions became hallmarks of Calvinist theology. One was the Belgic Confession, an apology for persecuted Reformed Christians in the lowlands and adopted in 1561. Another was the Heidelberg Catechism, adopted in Germany in 1563, which affirmed the election of the saints, though it did not address the reprobation of the damned nor the issue of limited atonement. At the Synod of Dort (1618-1619) in the Netherlands, an international assembly of Calvinist clerics convened to combat those who questioned the doctrine of predestination and issued the Canons of Dort, which specified the unconditional election of those chosen by God and the limited atonement of the cross by which Christ died not for the whole world but only for those whom God had chosen. In the British Isles, the Calvinists within the Anglican Church composed the Westminster Confession in 1643 of which follows some of the constituent parts that are specifically Calvinistic.

> *God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass. By the decree of God, for the manifestation of His glory, some men and angels are predestined unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death… Neither are any redeemed by Christ…but the elect only. The rest of mankind God was pleased…to pass by, and to ordain them to dishonour and wrath…*
>
> *Those whom God effectually calleth, he also freely justifieth…Although they can never fall from the state of justification, yet they may by their sins fall under God's fatherly displeasure…*
>
> *They whom God hath accepted…can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace; but shall certainly persevere therein to the end and be eternally saved…*[39]

Jacob Arminius

If John Calvin thought the decree of Almighty God to predestine some to salvation and others to damnation was "dreadful", others made it even more dreadful. Under Theodore Beza (1519-1605), Calvin's scholastic successor and son-in-law, Calvinism became increasingly rigid. Beza introduced the concept that even before Adam's sin God had decreed the fall as a means for saving the elect from sin. The logical order of the divine decrees were believed to be:

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[39] H. Bettenson, ed., *Documents of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University, 1963), pp. 245-246.

1) God decreed to glorify himself by the election of some and the damnation of others.
2) As a means to that goal, he decreed to create those elected and those damned.
3) He then decreed permission for the fall.
4) Finally, he decreed to provide salvation for the elect only through Christ Jesus.[40]

Of course, the Bible says nothing about any of these decrees. They are deduced, and some thinkers were very doubtful about whether the deduction was accurate. One of these was Jacob Arminius, a Dutch theologian and the former student of Beza.

Jacob Arminius (1560-1609), educated at the universities of Marburg and Leiden, and later at the academies in Geneva and Basel, pastored a congregation in Amsterdam while serving as a professor at the University of Leiden. In his studies of Romans 7 and 9, he concluded that the Calvinist viewpoint of unconditional predestination was in error, and in fact, that what the New Testament taught was conditional predestination (i.e., a predestination that depended not upon divine decrees before the creation, but rather, upon God's foreknowledge of what individual humans would do of their own free will). He particularly disagreed with Beza's supralapsarianism. Arminius did not reject the word predestination, since it was in the Bible, but he taught that individual destiny was not a foregone conclusion. Humans were free, within the context of prevenient grace (i.e., grace that comes first), to either accept or reject Christ. Predestination only referred to the fact that God knew in advance what choice they would make, and so "election" was based on this divine foreknowledge, not some imaginary "decree" by God before creation.

Though often accused of Pelagianism (an attempt at guilt by association), Arminius was by no means a carbon copy of Pelagius. For one thing, he believed in original sin and supported the baptism of infants. He taught that the human will was entirely incapable of turning to Christ apart from divine grace. He strongly defended the Reformation ideal of justification by grace alone. Further, he taught that there is no merit in human faith that prompts justification. Rather, only through God's grace that comes first can any fallen man or woman exercise faith. God's decision in advance—his divine predestination—consisted of his intention to save anyone who repented and believed the gospel. Christ died for everyone, not just some. Arminius' arguments against Calvinism included such things as:

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[40] This viewpoint is called supralapsarianism (from the Latin *supra* = "before" and *lapsus* = "the fall"). A less severe view puts the divine decree of election and reprobation as secondary rather than primary, hence infralapsarianism (*infra* = "after"), cf. F. Klooster, *EDT* (1984) 1059-1060.

1) A divine decree to damnation before the creation of the world was hardly "good news", and therefore, was not a gospel.
2) Such decrees were against God's essential nature, which was wise, just and good.
3) Such decrees were dishonorable to Jesus Christ and "hurtful" to the salvation of men and women.
4) Such decrees inverted the order of the gospel, which says we are justified *after* we believe, and turned it into justification *before* we believe.
5) In the end, such decrees makes God the author of sin.[41]

The Remonstrance

At the University of Leiden, the views of Arminius clashed sharply with those of another professor, Franciscus Gomarus, a supralapsarian. To add insult to injury, when Arminius died, the university replaced him with Simon Bisschop, whose viewpoints were more or less the same as those of Arminius. Gomarus resorted to church politics, and the year after Arminius died, he attempted to have removed from their offices and teaching positions all sympathizers. In protest, forty-six Dutch pastors signed the *Remonstrance* (1610). This protest, composed by John Uyttenbogaert, rejected both supralapsarianism and infralapsarianism. It denied that grace was irresistible. It denied the theory of limited atonement, that is, the idea that Christ died only for those he had predestined to salvation. Since all these objections to traditional Calvinism stemmed from the teachings of Jacob Arminius, the signers of the *Remonstrance* and their disciples came to be called Arminians.[42]

It should be noted at this point that this entire debate among Dutch Protestants was within the family of Calvinists. Sometimes the debate is perceived to have been between Calvinists and anti-Calvinists, but that charge cannot be sustained. Arminians did not object in general to the theology of John Calvin. Arminius until his death always considered himself to be a Calvinist, even though he disagreed with his esteemed predecessor at several points. It was primarily on the issue of predestination that the disagreement focused, not Calvin's theology as a whole. Though some have suggested that Arminians were simply humanists, that they toyed with the idea that humans could save themselves, that they doubted original sin, that they denied justification by faith, that they questioned the atonement of Christ and even the deity of Christ,[43] these accusations are overstated and smack of *ad hominem*. In some ways, Arminius' theology was closer to Calvin than the theology of Gomarus, since it was more Christocentric. Arminius had argued that if one wishes to

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[41] J. Grider, *EDT* (1984) 79-81.

[42] Gonzales, III.254-256.

[43] This is the suggestion of M. Osterhaven, *EDT* (1984) 332.

use the language of divine decree before the creation of the world, it must be used to describe God's decision to save sinful humans by appointing Jesus Christ, his Son, as the Mediator.[44] In fact, by 16th century standards, Arminius and the Remonstrants would have been viewed as thoroughly Protestant. By the early 17th century, their Calvinist fellows considered them heretics.

The Synod of Dort

The theological battle spilled over into the political realm. When Rotterdam sided with the Arminians, for instance, Amsterdam, its traditional rival, sided with the Calvinists. To settle the debate and to avoid civil war, the Synod of Dort (1618-1619) was convened by the States General of the Netherlands. The Arminians anticipated that they would be recognized as equals and able to discuss the disputed issue. Instead, they discovered they were appearing as defendants in a heresy trial.[45] Their doctrines were condemned, and the Canons of Dort, which delineated the position of unconditional predestination and limited atonement, were set forth as church law.

The aftermath was severe for the Arminians. Some 200 ministers were deprived of their pastorates and teaching positions. Eighty were banished from the country. Several were sentenced to life imprisonment. Heavy fines were imposed upon any who sympathized or attended meetings held by the Remonstrants. Arminian churches were exposed to abuse from government troops and public violence. The conclusions at Dort were required of all schoolmasters and all clergy—a requirement sometimes even extended to church organists! Persecution of the Arminians continued until 1625, when after the death of Maurice of Nassau, the politician most devoted to the position of Gomarus, it began to subside. By 1631, the Remonstrants were allowed to establish congregations in the country.[46]

The Calvinist and Arminian Churches

The debate between strict Calvinism and its softer Arminian cousin did not remain restricted to the Dutch churches. As Protestantism continued to spread and thrive, various Protestant expressions aligned themselves with one or other sides of the debate. What came to be called "the Reformed tradition" (to distinguish it from Lutheranism and the Anabaptists) found its strongest support in northwestern Europe, Switzerland, France, the Netherlands, Germany, eastern Hungary and among the

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[44] Gonzales, III.254-256.

[45] It may be worth noting in passing that the same thing had happened to Luther when he appeared at the Diet of Worms.

[46] H.Sheldon, *History of the Christian Church* (rpt. USA: Hendrikson, 1999) III.255-257.

Waldensians in Italy. Across the English channel, it became influential among Anglicans, Puritans, Presbyterians and "Particular" Baptists (as opposed to free-will Baptists). From there, it crossed the Atlantic to America. Today in America, most Presbyterians uphold the Westminster Confession; most Reformed churches uphold the traditional confessions of Europe, such as the Belgic, Heidelberg and/or the Canons of Dort.

Arminianism, for its part, was adopted by two important streams of Protestant thinking. First, leaders in the Anabaptist movement had doubted Calvin's doctrine of predestination from the beginning.[47] In subsequent years, Anabaptists thinkers rejected Augustine's interpretation of the sovereignty of God, and further, asserted their belief in the freedom of the human will without which, they believed, no real repentance or faith commitment was possible.[48] Groups with roots in the Anabaptist movement, such as the various Brethren denominations and the Menonnites, have often followed in kind. With even more influence, John Wesley and the emerging Methodists were Arminian. Wesley stoutly opposed the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination, and he felt that the Calvinistic system made God into the devil. He strongly supported the view that God's salvation was for all people, and further, that men and women had enough freedom to accept or reject God's offer of grace. To be sure, Wesley also championed prevenient grace, that is, the quickening power of God that assists the will prior to any human decision. In fact, this belief put Wesley at odds with George Whitefield in America's Great Awakening, even though they were friends and both were prominent leaders in the movement. A residual of this tension led to two parties among the Methodists, those with Arminian sympathies following Wesley and those with Calvinistic sympathies following Whitefield.[49] Methodism and its heirs, such as those groups deriving from the 19th century Holiness movements (Wesleyans, Nazarenes, Pentecostals), all preserve the Arminian tradition.

Calvinism—What Is It?

The theological conclusions of St. Augustine and John Calvin make clear that the central concern from which all Calvinism derives is the sovereign grace of God. This sovereignty was conceived as God's comprehensive plan or decree for the history of the world. God exercised his sovereignty within the historical plane by his creation of the world, his providence, and his plan of redemption. All events in

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[47] W. Balke, *Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), pp. 110-111, 131.

[48] H. Loewen, "Anabaptist Theology," *New Dictionary of Theology*, eds. S. Ferguson and D. Wright (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), p. 18.

[49] Shelley, pp. 357-360.

history, including the fall of Adam and Eve as well as the crucifixion of Jesus (Ge. 2:16-17; Ac. 2:23; 4:27-28), were ordered by God's advance planning. Human experience, whether prosperity or disaster, are ordered by divine arrangement (cf. Is. 45:7; Ep. 1:11).

The systematization of God's sovereignty was spelled out precisely in what has popularly come to be known as "the five points of Calvinism." These five doctrines were direct rebuttals to the five articles in the Remonstrance, the protest signed by the followers of Jacob Arminius. The Arminians had summarized their protest to classical Calvinism in the following five points:

1) *Election and reprobation are founded on God's foreknowledge of human faith or unbelief,*
2) *Christ's death was for all, but only believers can enjoy God's forgiveness,*
3) *Fallen humans cannot do good or achieve saving faith without the regenerating power of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit,*
4) *Grace is the beginning, continuation, and end of all good, but it is not irresistible,*
5) *Grace can preserve the faithful through every temptation, but Scripture does not clearly say humans cannot fall from grace and be lost.*[50]

Against these articles, the Synod of Dort (1618) responded with the five Calvinistic canons (or five points). They were:

1) *Unconditional election and faith are a gift of God,*
2) *While the death of Christ is abundantly sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world, it's saving efficacy is limited to the elect,*
3) *All humans are so corrupted by sin that they cannot effect their salvation,*
4) *In sovereign grace God calls and regenerates them to newness of life,*
5) *Those thus saved he preserves until the end; hence, there is assurance of salvation, even while believers are troubled by many infirmities.*[51]

By a slight rearrangement of these points, the system of Calvinism came to be

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[50] J. Douglas, "Remonstrants," *EDT* (1984) 933.

[51] M. Osterhaven, "Dort, Synod of," *EDT* (1984) 332.

symbolized by a tulip (especially appropriate for a system developed by Dutch theologians!), since as an acronym the word "tulip" covered all five points:

Total Depravity
Unconditional Election
Limited Atonement
Irresistible Grace
Perseverance of the Saints

The Biblical Defense of the Five Points

Of course, all orthodox theology depends upon Holy Scripture. If John Calvin accepted what he called "the dreaded decree" of God, he did so because he believed this was what Scripture actually required. Calvin's goal was to speak where the Scriptures spoke and to remain silent where the Scriptures were silent.

Total Depravity

By total depravity, the Calvinist theologians intended to say that humans were beyond self-help, that is, they were incapable of doing or desiring anything pleasing to God. The Calvinists did not mean that humans were incapable of any natural goodness in any way. Humans could admire truth, appreciate beauty, participate in civil justice, and exhibit generosity. Still, they were corrupt at the very center of their being, and every part of the human constitution was infected by this corruption so that humans were completely unable to please God or come to him unless moved by his divine grace. Even though some cultures and people groups might seem less corrupt than others, all humans everywhere are corrupted nonetheless.[52]

The biblical testimony to this corruption is extensive. Humans are vile, corrupt, brazen, deceitful, self-gratifying, hardened, sensual, impure and beyond cure (Ps. 14:1-3; 36:1-4; Je. 17:9; Ho. 6:4; 7:6-7, 11, 16; Ro. 7:18; Ep. 2:3; 4:18-19). Every inclination is "only evil all the time" (Ge. 6:5). Not even a single person can be considered righteous (Ps. 53:1-3; Ro. 3:10-18). Everyone has gone astray like a wandering sheep (Is. 53:6a), and in the end, "all have sinned" (Ro. 3:23). The minds of sinners are openly hostile to God, refusing to submit to his law not merely because they choose against it, but because they cannot help but do so (Ro. 8:6-7; 1 Co. 2:14). Unless drawn by the Father, no human can come to God (Jn. 6:44). As far as approaching God is concerned, unregenerated humans are "dead" (Ep. 2:1).

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[52] D. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978) I.90.

Unconditional Election

The critical term here is "unconditional" as opposed to "conditional." The Arminians had argued that there *was* a condition for God's choice of individuals to be saved. That condition was God's foreknowledge of human decisions. Hence, God chose as the elect those whom he knew in advance would choose him. The Calvinists, on the other hand, argued that if any conditions affected God's choice, then the doctrine of salvation by sovereign grace would be undermined. Salvation then would depend upon human merit, not divine election. As such, Paul's statement that "no one may boast before him" would have to be ignored (1 Co. 1:29).

The biblical argument for unconditional election depends upon a number of statements by Paul and others. First, God's election of individuals for salvation depended upon his preordained plan (Ro. 8:28-29). The elect were called by God "according to his [God's] plan", not according to their human choices. God's election stood on the ground of his divine purpose, not human works (Ro. 9:11). There was absolutely nothing inherent in any human that could serve as a condition for God's choice (Ro. 9:15-16). In fact, God demonstrated the sovereignty of his grace by deliberately choosing some who were foolish, weak, lowly and despised, precisely so that "no one may boast before him" (1 Co. 1:26-29). God's calling was not because of anything humans had done but purely because of his own purpose and grace, and furthermore, this grace was given before time began (2 Ti. 1:9-10; Ep. 1:4). It was not that men and women chose Christ, but rather, that he chose them (Jn. 15:16). Hence, only those whom the Father enables can come to Christ (Jn. 6:37), and apart from this enabling, no one can come at all (Jn. 6:44, 65; 3:27; 1 Co. 12:3). The actual implementation of salvation by unconditional election, then, is clearly described in the apostolic evangel, when it says, "…as many as were ordained to eternal life believed" (Ac. 13:48).

Limited Atonement

The doctrine of limited atonement, by far the most controversial of the Canons of Dort, asserted that the sacrificial death of Jesus was only for a limited number of humans from within the human race. Centuries earlier, St. Augustine had argued that the precise number of the elect was fixed. Later, John Calvin had spoken of God's "dreaded decree". The logical end, by this definition of predestination, was that the sacrificial work of Christ was performed only for the benefit of those who were chosen. Christ died for Peter, but not for Judas Iscariot, since Peter found repentance and faith, while Judas committed the unpardonable sin. The same is true across the human spectrum. Christ died for the elect, but he did not die for those who were passed over in God's sovereign choice. In this way, sovereign grace was maintained, and no human person could boast on any ground whatsoever.

If Calvin hoped to speak where the Scriptures spoke and to remain silent where the Scriptures were silent, here his followers were most vulnerable to accusation.[53] There is no unambiguous biblical passage stating that Christ died only for the elect but not for others. For biblical support, Calvinists first adopt a defensive posture concerning Scriptures that, on the face of it, seem to teach otherwise. Some of the most critical of these passages are:

For God so loved the world…(Jn. 3:16).

…your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.

(Mt. 18:14)

Just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men (Ro. 5:18).

For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all (Ro. 11:32).

We are convinced that one died for all… (2 Co. 5:14).

God was reconciling the world unto himself in Christ… (2 Co. 5:19).

…God our Savior…wants all men to be saved… (1 Ti. 2:4).

[Christ Jesus]…gave himself a ransom for all men… (1 Ti. 2:6).

The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men… (Tit. 2:11).

Jesus…suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone (He. 2:9).

He [the Lord] is patient…not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance (2 Pe. 3:9).

He [Christ] is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only ours but also for the sins of the whole world. (1 Jn. 2:2).

Here, Calvinists argue that words such as "all" and "the world" are not intended universally. Rather, "all" means "all [of us who are the elect]", and "world" means "people from within all the ethnic groups in the world".[54]

In addition to defensive hermeneutics, Calvinists also point toward passages that link redemption to the Christian community. As such, God made Christ to be sin for *us* (2 Co. 5:21). In Christ's death God demonstrated his love for *us* (Ro. 5:8). Christ loved the church and gave himself for *it* (Ep. 5:25). Christ gave himself for *our* sins to rescue *us* (Ga. 1:3). Jesus lay down his life for the *sheep* (Jn. 10:14-15). Jesus

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[53] In fact, it is at least arguable that Calvin himself did not believe in limited atonement, cf. N. Geisler, "Was Calvin a Calvinist?" *Chosen But Free*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2001), pp. 160-166.

[54] D. Spencer, *Tulip* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), pp. 49-53.

came to save *his people* from their sins (Mt. 1:21).

Irresistible Grace

By irresistible grace, Calvinists refer to their belief that, since God is omnipotent, his purpose of grace for the elect cannot be resisted. Resistance to God's calling would nullify God's sovereignty. Those whom God chose will inevitably be saved. God chose the elect, he calls the elect, and they cannot help but respond positively. To borrow the words of a well-known Calvinist theologian, "The person who is called will surely be saved!"[55] Centuries earlier, Augustine had argued that, given the conditions of divine election and the fact that the preaching of the gospel did not reach all the world at any given time, it was possible for some elect to be saved even though they may never have heard the message of Jesus.

Biblical support for this irresistible calling includes Jesus' statement, *The Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it* (Jn. 5:21), and further, *All that the Father gives me will come to me* (Jn. 6:37a). Jesus also said, *No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day* (Jn. 6:44). Paul, after saying that God has mercy on those whom he wants and hardens those whom he wants, poses the question, *Who resists his will?* (Ro. 9:15-19). The implied answer is obvious: no one does!

Perseverance

The final point in the Calvinist system is the logical conclusion to the preceding four points. Those whom God has chosen and called will persevere in their faith to the end, not by their own efforts, but by God's sovereign grace! The Arminians had argued that it was possible to fall from grace. The Calvinists argued that it was not possible for one who was truly elect to fall from grace. What might seem to be a fall from grace was no more than a fall from Christendom by those who were not divinely chosen in the first place.[56]

Biblically, the support for the doctrine of perseverance is somewhat stronger than for some of the other tulip petals. Jesus affirmed in his prayer on the night he was betrayed that he had the authority to give eternal life to all those given him by the Father (Jn. 17:2). Furthermore, of those given him by the Father, he would lose none (Jn. 6:39)! On another occasion, Jesus said that his disciples would never perish; they were in his and the Father's hands, and no one could remove them (Jn. 10:28-29). Paul urged that the God who began the work of salvation would surely

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[55] L. Berkhof, *Manual of Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1933), p. 234.

[56] John Calvin wrote extensively about the "false semblance of faith", *Institutes* III.2.10-12. R. C. Sproul, a modern Calvinist, says, "…we may think that we have faith when in fact we have no faith," cf. *Chosen by God* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1986), pp. 165-166.

bring it to completion (Phil. 1:6). His gifts and callings were irrevocable (Ro. 11:29). The ones God predestined could be certain of their divine call, justification, and glorification (Ro. 8:30). They are inseparable from his love (Ro. 8:35-39). By God's power they will be preserved for final salvation (1 Pe. 1:5; cf. 2 Ti. 4:18).

Variations and Developments Within Calvinism

Argument over Divine Decrees

In spite of the fact that traditional Calvinists agree on the so-called "five points", it is fair to point out that Calvinism is not monolithic. There are variations, some with added severity and some with attempts at ameliorating the seeming harshness of the system.

One of the earliest variations concerned the chronology of God's decrees at the very beginning. Of course, as mentioned earlier, these decrees are not directly described in the Bible; they were deduced by Calvinist theologians on the basis of New Testament passages alluding to God's plan before the universe began (cf. 1 Co. 2:7; Ep. 1:4; 3:11; 2 Ti. 1:9; He. 4:3; 1 Pe. 1:20;). Nevertheless, the logic and order was significant, because they affected the relationship of God's decree to human sin. Was Adam's fall included in God's eternal decree? At issue was the tension between God's sovereignty and human freedom, that is, "how can [the] one be affirmed without denying the other?"[57] The debate even antedated the Calvinists, for it had been addressed by Augustine and Pelagius as well as other theologians in the Middle Ages. It also surfaced in the debate between Luther and Erasmus. Supralapsarians (from the Latin *supra* = above or before, and *lapsus* = fall) said Adam's fall was preordained. Hence, the election of some to salvation and others to reprobation was decided even before the creation. Infralapsarians (*infra* = below or after), for their part, said God's choice of the elect was decreed only after Adam's fall, thus protecting Adam's freedom. Here, Adam was "allowed" to fall; still, God did not "cause" him to fall.

Luther, Zwingli and Calvin all agreed that in some way Adam's fall was involved in God's decrees, but they described it as "permissive" rather than "active" so as to protect God from being the author of sin. Supralapsarians argued that the goal of predestination was God's glory, and hence, Adam's fall must have been part of God's active plan all along. Infralapsarians, for their part, argued that God first decreed to permit the fall and only afterward decreed the salvation of the elect from among Adam's fallen race. At the Synod of Dort, representatives from both positions were present, and in the end, the Synod did not offer any conclusion one way or

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[57] R. Schnucker, "Infralapsarianism," *EDT* (1984) pp. 560-561.

another. It is fair to say that infralapsarianism has been the doctrine most common among Reformed Churches, though supralapsarianism is tolerated.[58]

Development of Covenant Theology

From the writings of the Reformers Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) and Bullinger (1504-1575) in Zurich, a new development in Calvinism, called Covenant Theology, spread to Geneva, Germany, the Netherlands and Britain. Coming from within the infralapsarian camp, it outlined three covenants by which God dealt with the human race. Like the decrees of God, these covenants are not described in the Bible; rather, they are deduced.[59] The first was the *covenant of works*, by which God, after he created the first humans, established a covenant in which he promised them eternal life if they perfectly obeyed him for a probationary period in Eden, threatened them with death if they disobeyed, and presented them with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil as a test of obedience. Before the fall, Adam was perfect, free, and without compulsion to sin, though of course, he also was free to sin. Had he retained his perfection, he would have been confirmed in righteousness and passed into a state where he would be unable to sin. His test of obedience served not only for himself but also for his posterity. As the Genesis story recounts, Adam freely chose disobedience, thereby infecting his entire posterity with his sin. Apart from God's intervention, all would have been lost forever.[60]

In mercy, God established a second covenant, the *covenant of redemption*. This covenant was between the Father and the Son concerning the salvation of humans. The Father appointed the Son to be the mediator between fallen humans and himself. As the "second Adam," the Son would give his life for the condemned race. The Son accepted the Father's commission, promising to accomplish the task set out for him to do. Hence, creation was not destroyed by human sin, and a solution was given for human rebellion to be overcome by God's grace. Christ Jesus, God's Son, would be the head of a new humanity, and through this, God would be glorified.[61]

The third covenant, the *covenant of grace*, was established between God and those elected from among fallen humans. In it God offered salvation to all those who would come to Christ Jesus in faith. Of course, no one could do so without God's special grace, so this covenant preserved the basic tenets of Calvinism. The covenant of grace rests, in turn, upon the covenant of redemption, and God's grace in calling and preserving a people throughout biblical history is evident in Abraham, Moses,

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[58] F. Klooster, "The Decrees of God" and "Supralapsarianism," *EDT* (1984) pp. 302-304, 1059-1060.

[59] The first use of the term *beri't* (= covenant) in the Genesis record is 6:18, where it concerns Noah and the flood. Covenant theology postulates all three covenants to be well in advance of Noah.

[60] M. Osterhaven, "Covenant Theology," *EDT* (1984) pp. 279-280.

[61] Osterhaven, pp. 279-280.

and finally, the Christian church.[62]

Covenant theology received creedal status in the Westminster Confession. It has served as an important foundation for infant baptism within the Reformed churches. The ancient covenant between God and Abraham was represented in the act of circumcision, and the new covenant between God and the elect is represented in the act of baptism. Covenant theology has continued as an important feature of Reformed theology to the present day.[63]

Postmillennialism and Amillennialism

Traditionally, Calvinist theologians have embraced either postmillennialism or amillennialism, eschatologies that champion the sovereignty of God in particular ways. Postmillennialism is the belief that the church, by God's enablement, ultimately will conquer the world. After a long period of successful evangelism, the world largely will become Christianized. Evil will be reduced to negligible proportions, and the world will pass into a golden age in which most people in the world will be Christian. After a long period of Christian dominance, Christ will return (hence, "post-millennial," where "post" refers to after the golden age). Postmillennialists hold that God, by his sovereign power, intends to bring back his creation to its original purpose. His covenants of redemption and grace point in this direction, and in the end, God's will shall be done "on earth as in heaven".[64]

Relatively recently, a further development of postmillenialism arose in the 1960s called Christian Reconstructionism. Here, the vision of a Christianized world was linked to a return to Old Testament legislation to be applied in a socio-economic-political way. Reconstructionists argue that the judicial laws of Moses should be enforced as civil law during the golden age.[65]

Amillennialism, on the other hand, is the belief that the church already enjoys the golden age, albeit in a spiritualized way. The golden age is now; it does not lie in some ambiguous future. The struggle of the Christian church against the world is symbolized in John's visions in the Book of Revelation. The victory of God's people shall be complete, in spite of worldly opposition. This final book in the New Testament does not concern only the last part of the present age (as premillennialists would have it), but portrays in symbolic language the entire time between the first

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[62] Osterhaven, p. 280.

[63] P. Lillback, "Covenant," *New Dictionary of Theology*, eds. S. Ferguson and D. Wright (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), pp. 175-176.

[64] L. Boettner, *The Millenium* (USA: Prebyterian and Reformed, 1957).

[65] K. Gentry, "Postmillennialism," *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, ed. D. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), pp. 19-22.

and second comings of Christ.[66]

Both postmillennialism and amillennialism emphasize the sovereignty of God who works out his advanced plans in world history. Hence, both are especially compatible with Calvinism, a theological system that emphasizes God's sovereign control over history.

Universal Atonement, the Baptist Wild Card

All along one of the most difficult aspects of Calvinism has been the doctrine of limited atonement. While some of the "five points" seem biblically defensible without special pleading (e.g., human depravity, perseverance), the view that Christ only died for some, especially in the face of many biblical passages that say he died for the world, has encountered considerable resistance. Among Baptists, who generally espouse Calvinism in at least a modified way, this resistance has been strong. Though by 1994 there were no less than 27 Baptist denominations in the United States, most of them, other than the Free Will Baptists, embraced at least a modified Calvinism.[67]

This modification especially concerns limited atonement. Baptists, generally, are "four pointers" or "three pointers" rather than "five pointers", though of course, there are exceptions. Norman Geisler is typical of modified Calvinism. He defends universal atonement and human freedom, opposes limited atonement, and denies that the gift of faith is exclusively given only to the elect.[68] Still, he considers himself to be within the larger community of Calvinists.

Arminianism—What Is It?

The debate between Calvinists and Arminians is of long standing. Though simmering in the background for decades, in recent years proponents of both views have become more vocal. Some of those advocating Arminianism have moved beyond the early theology of Jacob Arminius and the early framers of the Remonstrance into what might be called "neo-Arminianism". The Calvinist reaction to these trends have been sharp, since some modern Arminians have been willing to depart from treasured historical doctrines that traditionally were upheld by both Calvinists and Arminians. A good example is the neo-Arminian idea that in order to allow human freedom, God does not concretely foreknow all the future free acts of

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[66] A. Hoekema, "Amillennialism," *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, ed. R. Clouse (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1977), pp. 155-187.

[67] Free Will Baptists trace their roots to Arminians who migrated to America from England, cf. F. Mead and S. Hill, *Handbook of Denominations in the United States*, 10th ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), p. 64.

[68] N. Geisler, *Chosen But Free*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2001), pp. 150-214.

human beings. For the present, we shall postpone discussion of these more recent trends. Instead, it will be important to hear first the Reformation theology of Jacob Aminius and the first generation Arminians as detached from what came later.

Jacob Arminius died before his supporters composed the Remonstrance. However, certain key elements in his thinking laid the groundwork for an alternative to the Calvinistic definition of predestination. First, Arminius believed that the critical passage in Romans 7:14-24 referred to an unregenerate person, while the high Calvinists had always taken it to refer to a regenerate person. For Arminius, if a regenerate person is "sold as a slave to sin" and incapable of carrying out consistent moral decisions, then God's power to preserve was ineffective. For this Arminius was accused of Pelagianism, which he stoutly denied. Second, while Arminius gave his assent to the Belgic Confession, which stated "all whom he [God], in his eternal and unchangeable counsel, of mere goodness hath elected in Jesus Christ", he took the term "all" to mean "all [believers]" rather than all upon whom God bestowed an arbitrary decree for salvation. In short, Arminius advocated a form of conditional election, that is, that God's choice was conditioned upon his knowledge of the future response of believers. Predestination was not arbitrary, else God would not be just. Arminius concluded that Romans 9 taught "God's mercy, whereby he alone determines who shall be saved, namely the believer." Arminius was deeply concerned that God not be made the author of sin, a concern that was especially potent in view of supralapsarianism. Also, he was concerned to show that election was "Christocentric", that is, that salvation was by the redemptive work of Christ, not by an arbitrary decree made before the world was created.[69]

In his *Declaration of Sentiments*, prepared at the order of the High Court of the States General of the Netherlands, Arminius argued that God's decree of election was to save those sinners who would repent and believe in Christ. Such a decree was based on God's foreknowledge of their faith or unbelief. He confessed to being unsure about the doctrine of perseverance: *I never taught that a true believer can either totally or finally fall away from the faith and perish, yet I will not conceal that there are passages of Scripture which seem to me to wear this aspect.*[70] Arminius, whose health was failing, was never able to resolve his conflict with the high Calvinists. He and Gomarus, his primary opponent, were ordered to present their views in writing. Arminius died on October 19, 1609 before he could complete his submission.

Arminius had gained a substantial following, however. Within the year, his

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[69] R. Picirilli, *Calvinism, Arminianism and the Theology of Salvation* (Unpublished Manuscript: Free Will Baptist College, 1997), pp. 11-17.

[70] Arminius, I.254.

supporters presented to the States General the Remonstrance in which the Arminian viewpoint was expressed in five articles:

1) *Election and reprobation are founded on God's foreknowledge of human faith or unbelief,*
2) *Christ's death was for all, but only believers can enjoy God's forgiveness,*
3) *Fallen humans cannot do good or achieve saving faith without the regenerating power of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit,*
4) *Grace is the beginning, continuation, and end of all good, but it is not irresistible,*
5) *Grace can preserve the faithful through every temptation, but Scripture does not clearly say humans cannot fall from grace and be lost.*[71]

The Arguments in Defense of Arminianism

It must first be said that the Arminians had no quarrel with the Calvinistic definition of God as sovereign. God created everything, he was omniscient, and no force existed in the universe to thwart his eternal purpose. They also agreed that humans were fallen and thoroughly depraved. Salvation was wholly the gracious work of God, and no credit for salvation could accrue to any human person on any grounds. In short, the Arminians built upon the same Reformation foundation as the high Calvinists. Where they disagreed, however, was concerning the nature of God's foreknowledge of the future. The Arminians argued for contingency, that is, that events could take place in more than one way without thwarting God's eternal purpose, diminishing his foreknowledge or compromising his grace. Regarding the rebellion of Adam, God foreknew what would happen without actively willing it to happen. God's foreknowledge did not cancel out human freedom. The biblical chronology was not predestination first (the high Calvinist view) and then foreknowledge, but rather, foreknowledge first (the Arminian view) and then predestination, and this seemed to be the order expressed most clearly by St. Paul: *For those God foreknew he predestined…* (Ro. 8:29).[72] Hence, according to Paul, predestination was based on foreknowledge, not vice versa.

Furthermore, the Arminians did not adopt the Pelagian view that the human will was unconditionally free. Rather, they argued for a limited human freedom to make real choices between two courses of action. Since all choices have been

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[71] J. Douglas, "Remonstrants," *EDT* (1984) 933.

[72] Picirilli, pp. 50-58.

provided by God in the first place, human freedom was not unconditional but governed by the possibilities God provided. Further, after Adam's fall human freedom had been deeply affected in that what a person might theoretically do he cannot practically do. An unregenerate sinner, for instance, is not free not to sin. Apart from God's enabling grace, no sinner is free to accept the salvation God offers. As in Luther, the human will is depraved and bound by sin. Arminius' own words were: *The will is, indeed, free, but not in respect to that act which cannot be performed or omitted without supernatural grace.*[73] He further adds, *Nothing good can be performed by a rational creature without this special aid of His grace.*[74] And again, *I place in subjection to Divine Providence both the free will and even the actions of a rational creature, so that nothing can be done without the will of God, not even any of those things which are done in opposition to it.*[75] As far as God was concerned, he could not be made the author of sin without compromising his holiness. As far as humans were concerned, they could not be held fully accountable for their sin if it did not originate in the free exercise of their wills. Sin, therefore, was incorporated into the overall plan of God. Though sin was not necessary, God in sovereign wisdom foresaw it and planned for its eventuality.

Everywhere, the Bible demonstrated this kind of limited human freedom. Ancient Israel was challenged to "choose life or death" (Dt. 30:19-20). Obedience and disobedience would issue in either blessing or cursing (Lv. 26:3-45; Dt. 28:1-68). When confronted with the faith of Yahweh and the faith of Ba'al, the people must not limp along between two opinions but make a committed choice (1 Kg. 18:21). They were to turn away from their offenses and get a new heart in order not to die, since God did not take pleasure in anyone's death (Eze. 18:30-32)! In the New Testament, those confronted with the Christian gospel were challenged to believe it (Jn. 3:16; Ac. 16:31; Ro. 10:9; 1 Jn. 3:23).

As to the redemptive event of the cross, Arminians were firm that the Bible plainly taught Christ's death to be for the whole human race. Many New Testament passages seemed clear to them in this regard. God loved the whole world (Jn. 3:16). Christ's one act of redeeming righteousness was for all people in the world (Ro. 5:18). His sacrifice was for the sins of the whole world (1 Jn. 2:2), so that Paul could say "one died for all" (2 Co. 5:14). Through Christ God was reconciling the world to himself (2 Co. 5:19). God wanted all to be saved (1 Ti. 2:4; 2 Pe. 3:9), and hence, Christ's ransoming death was for all (1 Ti. 2:6; He. 2:9). Divine grace had appeared to all, not so much in the sense that all people had heard about it, but in the sense that

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[73] Arminius, III.196.

[74] Arminius, III.287.

[75] Arminius, I.251.

it was intended for the benefit of all without discrimination (Tit. 2:11). To argue, as did the high Calvinists, that "all" meant only "some" seemed to twist the Scriptures.

At the same time, while the death of Christ was for all, it was effective only for those who believed. Arminius felt that the system of high Calvinism was not sufficiently centered in Christ, since the primary foundation for salvation was not the cross but the decree of God before the creation of the world. If the high Calvinists were right, then the cross of Christ was only secondary, or as Arminius put it, *only a subordinate cause of that salvation which had been already foreordained.*[76] For Arminius, Christ himself should be the foundation of election, rather than election being the preexisting condition making necessary the cross. Arminius was willing to talk about divine decrees before creation, but if so they were substantially different than those of high Calvinism.

High Calvinism	**Jacob Arminius**
God decreed the election of some and the damnation of others	God appointed Christ as Savior.
He then decreed to create those elected and those damned.	He then determined to accept those who repented and believed and condemn those who did not.
He then decreed permission for the fall.	He determined to give the means to repentance and faith in a manner commensurate with his wisdom and justice.
Finally, he decreed to provide salvation for the elect only.	He determined to save particular persons according to his foreknowledge of who would believe. [77]

In this way, Arminius held that divine election first of all concerned Jesus Christ, not the salvation and damnation of humans. This is why Paul says believers are chosen "in Christ" (Ep. 1:4). The Pauline chronology is Christ first, then divine election, not vice versa. Hence, Christ is the foundation of salvation, and the gospel is about Christ, not about the decrees of election.[78] To be sure, election is eternal, since it was "before the foundation of the world" (Ep.1:4; Ac. 15:17-18). Before he created the universe, God determined to justify believers. Nevertheless, election is conditional, and the faith of the individual is the condition. For Arminius, if salvation

[76] Arminius, I.230.

[77] Arminius I.217, 566; III.323.

[78] Picirilli, pp. 72-73

was through faith (Ep. 2:9), then election must also be through faith (Mk. 16:16). Faith is not a work of merit, since it stands as the opposite of works (Ro. 4:16).

As to the favorite high Calvinist New Testament passages, none of them advocated that God arbitrarily chose some to be saved and some to be damned. Rather, what God predetermined was that believers would be "holy and blameless," a condition that presupposed moral freedom. This predetermination included the rights and responsibilities as full-fledged sons of the family (Ep. 1:4-6; cf. Ga. 4:1-7). In Romans Paul argues *against* the notion of Jewish unconditional election. No Jew could say, "God chose the Jews; I am a Jew; therefore, I will be saved." Rather, Paul urges that lineage guarantees nothing (Ro. 9:6-18). Those Israelites who reject faith will themselves be rejected (Ro. 9:31--10:4), and those who believe will be saved, whether or not they are of the Jewish lineage (Ro. 9:24-30; 10:5-13; 11:23).

In the end, then, divine foreknowledge precedes predestination (Ro. 8:29). The Pauline chronology is: foreknowledge, predestination, calling, justification and glorification. Predestination is not an arbitrary decision to save some and damn others, but rather, a predetermined goal for those whom God knew in advance would believe. Those he foreknew would become like his Son!

If Christ died for all and God wants all people to be saved, was it possible to reject the offer of salvation? Yes! God allowed humans this extent of freedom. The Pharisees and lawyers "rejected God's purpose for themselves" when they rejected the preaching of John the Baptist about repentance and faith (Lk. 7:30). The citizens of Jerusalem, whom Christ "longed to gather…as a hen gathers her chicks", in fact rejected him because they were not "willing" (Mt. 23:37). God's will is that none would perish, so he allows more time for them to respond to the gospel (2 Pe. 3:9; 1 Ti. 2:4).

As mentioned above, Arminius was not completely committed to the possibility of apostasy from saving faith, though he admitted that some biblical passages seemed to suggest it. Consequently, in the Remonstrance his followers also preserved this ambiguity in saying, *Grace can preserve the faithful through every temptation, but Scripture does not clearly say humans cannot fall from grace and be lost.* Some passages did seem to suggest the possibility of falling from true faith. Paul, for instance, speaks of believers for whom Christ died being destroyed (1 Co. 8:11; Ro. 14:15). Even from within the Christian circle, false teachers would bring destruction on themselves because they "deny the Lord who bought them" (2 Pe. 2:1). Other passages sternly warn against apostasy for those who "have known the way of righteousness" and then turned their backs on it (2 Pe. 2:18-22), or to use the language of the Book of Hebrews, who have "been enlightened… [and] tasted the heavenly gift…[and] shared in the Holy Spirit" but fall away (He. 6:4-6). Even those who had been sanctified by the blood of the covenant could trample under foot God's

Son (He. 10:26-31). To say, as did the Calvinists, that these situations were hypothetical seemed to require special pleading. Still, the Remonstrants were content to express doubt about the issue rather than a firm conclusion.

Variations and Developments within Arminianism

The triumph of the Synod of Dort did not cancel out Arminian thought or the deep belief by the Arminians that they were theologically faithful to the Holy Scriptures. Current expressions of triumphalism by Reformed theologians does not intimidate Arminians today, either.[79] Of course, Arminians are not exempt from the same sort of triumphalism.[80] Calvinists accuse Arminians of Pelagianism, theological liberalism, and religious syncretism. Arminians say that Calvinists leave no option but to believe in a God who is capricious, unfair, and the author of sin. The debate continues unabated, and in response to some modern trends, it has accelerated among conservative theologians in recent decades.

Just as with the Calvinists, the Arminians, also, developed some variations within their theological system. Here we shall explore some of the more important ones.

Revivalism and Holiness

It probably is fair to say that the most important figure in Arminian thought after Jacob Arminius himself was John Wesley. As an Anglican priest, the young Wesley noted, "My chief motive is the hope of saving my own soul." In an Aldersgate Street Bible study on May 24, 1738, this same Wesley, after listening to a reading from Luther's commentary on the Book of Romans, said he felt his heart "strangely warmed." That night he was assured that his sins were forgiven and that Christ alone was his salvation.[81]

In many ways, Wesley's experience became a paradigm for the later theme of Methodist revivals, which stressed "inward religion, the religion of the heart". By the late 1730s under the direction of the Wesley brothers, John and Charles, aggressively

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[79] This sort of triumphalism is blunt in some Reformed treatments of the subject. M. Osterhaven, for instance, says of Dort that it "preserved the Augustinian, biblical doctrines of sin and grace against the [Arminian] claim…", thus implying that the Arminians were sub-biblical, cf. *EDT* (1984) 332. Duane Spencer, a committed five point Calvinist (converted from Arminianism), dismisses Arminian theology as based on emotions, denominational traditions, and human reasoning, while assuming, of course, the high ground of biblical fidelity for himself, cf. *Tulip* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), p. 70.

[80] Observe, for instance, Arminian Clark Pinnock's response to John Feinberg's Calvinism: "From my reading of books, I have always known that die-hard Calvinists existed. But I had not expected to run into one like Feinberg in the late twentieth century. Here we have a medicine much worse than the ailment," cf. D. and R. Basinger, eds., *Predestination & Free Will* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986), p. 57.

[81] P.Mickey, "Methodism," *EDT* (1984) p. 712.

evangelistic preachers urged people to openly confess their sins, to pray for each other, and to discipline themselves toward inner holiness and good works. Weekly prayer meetings, annual conferences, the establishment of chapels, and a proliferation of tracts, sermons and hymns spread revivalism from Ireland, Scotland, England and Wales to the frontier colonies of America.[82]

Methodist theology was explicitly Arminian, since John Wesley had adopted the thought of Jacob Arminius. Wesley accepted the doctrine of original sin, but he also developed the doctrine of prevenient grace, the idea that sinners experience the gentle wooing of the Holy Spirit that enables them to freely respond with a "yes" to the gospel. A "decision" for Christ was paramount. Since divine grace came at God's initiative, human salvation could never be said to have been merited. The human sinful condition was one of total inability to make any contribution toward salvation apart from the miracle of new birth.[83] With regard to justification by faith alone, Wesley insisted that he and John Calvin were "but a hair's breadth apart".[84] Still, if the Calvinists taught that only the elect could be saved, Wesley taught that anyone could be saved. Wesley's theology also urged sanctification after conversion, that is, the process of going on toward perfection. The watchword was, "Go on to perfection: otherwise you cannot keep what you have."[85] Justification might be the initial work of grace, but sanctification should follow. It could occur as a process, but it could be instantaneous as well.

By the late 1800s in America, the disciples of Wesley had launched what came to be known as the American holiness movement, an Arminian branch of theology preoccupied with instantaneous sanctification (also called perfectionism). Wesley had taught that even Christians retain a "residue of sin." This remaining sin had to be countered by a "second blessing," an experience of sanctification that inwardly purified the believer, giving him perfect love for God and others. For Wesley, this level of sanctification was a perfection of motives and desires. Second generation radical Methodists in America developed Wesley's perfection theology into a call for instantaneous sanctification. Often, experiences of instant sanctification were accompanied by deeply emotional experiences, including weeping, trembling, fainting and shouting for joy.[86] By the end of the 19th century, the experience of instant sanctification began being called "the baptism of the Holy Ghost," a vocabulary change that set the stage for the emergence of Pentecostalism.

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[82] Mickey, p. 713.

[83] P. Hughes, *EDT* (1984) 480-481.

[84] R. Tuttle, Jr., *EDT* (1984) 1165.

[85] Tuttle, p. 1164.

[86] V. Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Movement in the United States* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), pp. 19-21.

Atonement Theories

Calvinists had championed the penal satisfaction theory of the atonement of Christ. When he died, Christ paid the penalty for the sins of the elect. Therefore, the elect would be saved. Formally, the Arminians denied the penal theory of atonement, since if Christ paid the penalty for all sin, then all would be saved. Instead, Arminians emphasized that in his death Christ suffered for all humans, but he did not pay the penalty of sin for all humans. Because of his suffering in behalf of all, the Father now could forgive those who repent and believe. Forgiving sin was not the same as penalizing sin. The death of Christ made salvation possible, but it did not intrinsically atone for anyone in particular.[87]

More recently, however, the penal theory of atonement has crept over into much of Arminian thought, especially due to cooperative efforts between conservative Christians in missions and evangelism. The Billy Graham crusades, for instance, became one such cooperative endeavor in which Arminians were willing to lay aside their non-penal theology of the death of Jesus in order to work more closely with their Calvinist cousins.[88] On the other hand, and perhaps because of this spill-over, some Arminian theologians have become more overt in defining the atonement of Christ along the lines of reconciling love rather than penal substitution.[89]

Infant vs. Believer's Baptism

For its longer history, Arminians practiced infant baptism, as did the Protestant Reformers, Arminius himself, and John Wesley. However, the influence of Baptists upon Arminians was substantial enough that many Arminians began to reject infant baptism in preference for believer's baptism only. The Anabaptist tradition, which generally followed Arminian rather than Calvinist teachings, had long rejected infant baptism. Further, many Methodist societies in frontier America became Baptist churches, further augmenting the influence of each upon the other. A new generation of Baptist missionaries helped establish believer's baptism as the norm in many foreign countries, and Arminians, if anything, were missions-minded!

Eternal Security

Yet another spin-off arising from the relationship between Arminians and Baptists concerned the issue of whether or not truly saved persons could renounce

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[87] R. Letham, "Arminianism," *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. S.Ferguson and D. Wright (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1988), p. 46.

[88] J. Grider, "Aminianism," *EDT* (1984) p. 80.

[89] A good example is Myron Augsberger, who in his discussion of reconciliation approves of J. Oliver Buswell's conclusion: "In the course of justice, it is impossible that a third party, not concerned in the sin, could bear the punishment in the place of the sinner," *The Robe of God* (Scottsdale, PN: Herald Press, 2000), p. 96.

their salvation and be lost. Jacob Arminius had left the question unresolved, and while his followers were more inclined to say that such a thing was possible, many Baptists, who also had affinities with Calvinists, contended it was not possible. Against this belief in eternal security, many leaders in the holiness revivals were quite outspoken about the possibility of "back-sliding", so much so, that many of their followers lived in perpetual fear of doing so. Dire warnings against lukewarmness, backsliding and apostasy came to characterize the movement.

Freedom of choice loomed large in this discussion. Arminians argued that if humans are free to accept Christ, why should they not be free to reject him? The Baptists, for their part, insisted upon the certainty of salvation for all who truly came to faith. All who truly believed would be kept by God's power so that they would never finally deny their faith. Anyone who did so simply did not have true faith to begin with. Consequently, while Baptists agreed with Arminius that Christ's sacrificial death on the cross was universal, they agreed with Calvin that the saints would certainly persevere. On the whole, Arminians generally have been more inclined to reject the Baptist position, and among the holiness groups, the viewpoint that apostasy was a real danger was nearly universal.

Eschatology

Formally, Arminians have no necessary preference for any of the major systems of eschatology. Postmillennialism, amillennialism and premillennialism are all possible without compromising basic Arminian theological tenets. Nevertheless, the rapid growth of dispensationalism among conservative American Christians in the late 1800s and early 1900s resulted in its increasing acceptance among the holiness-oriented Arminians and their Baptist cousins. By the late 20th century, many if not most Arminians had adopted dispensationalism as their eschatology of choice. The nature of John Darby's dispensationalism, particularly its charge that the mainline denominations were either compromised or apostate, meant that the interpretive systems in the mainline denominations—postmillennialism and amillennialism—were suspect as well.

Modern Issues and Developments

The Rise of Protestant Liberalism

Both Calvinist and Arminian traditions have remained divided up until the present. It is fair to say that both traditions have been susceptible to theological liberalism, as have all the mainline Protestant denominations as they adopted post-Enlightenment thought with its skepticism about religious authority and its optimism

about human reason and culture. Classical Protestant liberalism rejected religious belief based on authority alone, whether institutional or biblical. The Bible was not infallible. It was the work of writers limited by their own times and culture. All religious beliefs had to pass the test of reason and experience, and no questions were considered closed. God did not interrupt nature (i.e., by miracles), and to find God, one must look inward rather than upward. God was immanent in history, rationalism, and the liberal effort toward social justice, and hence, there existed a natural religion by which people, who were basically good (as opposed to depraved), could advance the kingdom of God through social progress. God was the Father of all; all humans were brothers and sisters, God's children. No one was alienated from God; people only needed to discover that God was present and working in the world, and in particular, working in them, too.

Jesus, in the liberal viewpoint, was a social-ethical model for morality rather than a propitiatory sacrifice for sin. The gospel was social reform. Scripture, though important, now stood alongside reason, conscience, science, intuition and feelings. The historical-critical method dominated biblical studies. The mission of the church was not to be a body "called out" of the world, but rather, a socially-conscious group "called into" the world. The four gospels could not be taken simply at face value. They were shot through with exaggeration, embellishment, mythology and the theological interests of Christians who lived decades after the time of Jesus. The task of the critical scholar was to get behind the Jesus portrayed in the gospels, peeling back the layers of accumulated Christian tradition, to the obscured but real Jesus, who was a simple, Jewish teacher of moral goodness, not the divine Son of God from heaven.

Over time, mainline denominations of both Calvinists and Arminians increasingly adopted the modernist posture, epitomized in the left wing of the Presbyterian Church USA, on the one hand, and the left wing of the United Methodist Church on the other.[90] Nevertheless, in both groups there were conservative thinkers who stoutly resisted this theological drift. They continued to uphold the authority and infallibility of the Bible, the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as God's Son, who was both truly God and truly human, the depravity of humans, and salvation by grace through faith in the atoning death of Jesus. A considerable number of denominational splits resulted from these differences, resulting in multiple conservative Presbyterian and Methodist spin-offs. Those who did not wish to leave their mainline denominations for the "come-outers" were left to nurture a more traditional form of Christianity in the midst of an encroaching modernism.

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[90] There were, of course, many other mainline Protestant denominations not strictly aligned along Calvinist or Arminian sympathies that succumbed to theological liberalism, including Lutheran, Congregational and Anglican-Episcopal expressions.

Among those who withdrew from the mainline denominations, a strong call for separatism emerged, leading to the development of American fundamentalism. Fundamentalists from both Calvinist and Arminian persuasions isolated themselves from the culture at large and what they regarded as the "worldly" church. They claimed that the way doctrines were formulated in earlier eras was correct, and any attempt to reformulate them or restate them in terms of modernism was bound to be false. Increasingly, they became closed to change and closed to dialogue with anyone from outside their own circles.

Karl Barth and Jesus Christ, the Elect of God

Fundamentalism was not the only reaction to theological modernism, however. Karl Barth, coming from the Reformed tradition in Switzerland and educated in Germany under a veritable "who's who" of liberal scholars, withdrew from the university and rejected the classical liberal agenda. Instead, he, along with others, began a counter movement dubbed neo-orthodoxy. One aspect of his theology attempted to capture the Reformed theology of predestination but expound it in a new way.

For Barth, the traditional Reformed theology of double predestination, whereby God chose some people to be saved and left others to be damned, was intolerable. It was unjust from a human perspective, and it was against God's eternal covenant of grace in Christ Jesus. Instead of individuals who are either elected or doomed before the world began, Barth argued that it was Jesus Christ himself who was God's elect before the world began (cf. Is. 42:1; Jn. 1:1-2; 17:24; Lk. 9:35; 23:35; 1 Pe. 1:20; Rv. 13:8). In a sense, Christ was both the elect and the condemned. Barth interpreted predestination in Christocentric terms so that Christ was the one truly rejected by God in the cross, but he also was the one truly elected by God to give his life for others. He was both the one who elects and the one who is elected. Contrary to Calvin, there was no "terrible decree," saving some and damning others. In Christ, God elected Himself for rejection and death, but also in Christ he elected sinful humans for eternal life in Christ. Humans are elect "in him" (Ep. 1:4). They all are chosen by God, because God chose Christ. God's "no" was spoken to Christ alone (Mt. 27:46//Mk. 15:34). His divine "yes" is spoken to all humans whom he elected for fellowship with himself. Jesus Christ is "the original and all-inclusive election." The election of Christ "carries in it and with it the election of the rest."[91] The fatal error of Calvin, according to Barth, was that he separated the electing God from Jesus Christ so that the dark decree of predestination always stood apart from and behind Christ. This separation cannot be sustained if one accepts that Christ was

[91] K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. Bromiley and T. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), II.2.115-118.

truly God himself from all eternity![92] In the end, the biblical order of election is thus:

1) Jesus Christ, who is fully God, is both the Elector and the Elected
2) Then follows the Elect Community, which is Israel and the church
3) Finally, there is the elect individual who is elected "in Christ"

One cannot begin, as did Calvin and his disciples, with individual men and women. One must begin with Christ himself! Neither can one go directly from the election of Christ to the individual, for the mediate election is the community, not the individual.

Barth's theology of election led his critics to charge him with universalism.[93] This charge Barth denied, though he maintained that God alone truly knew the full scope of election, and only God could know what it meant that he was reconciling the world to himself (2 Co. 5:19).[94] At the same time, Barth was clear that "no one could put limits on the loving-kindness of God as revealed in Jesus Christ."[95]

Barth, therefore, offered a third approach to Reformed theology. In addition to both traditional Calvinism and its fundamentalist framework and Protestant liberalism, which long ago had given up on the traditional formulation of church doctrine, Barth offered a form of orthodoxy that was not tied to either fundamentalist or liberal assumptions.

Open Theism

If Barth offered a new version of Calvinism, a group of evangelical theologians in the last decade of the 20th century began exploring a new version of Arminianism, a theological innovation that has come to be called Open Theism (sometimes dubbed neo-Arminianism). Major players in this new approach include Clark Pinnock (McMaster Divinity College), John Sanders (Huntington College), and Gregory Boyd (Bethel College).

As Arminians, these thinkers already embraced the concept of a God who had the power of self-limitation. They accepted the traditional Arminian framework of affirming that God had the power to totally control every element and event of the

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[92] D. Mueller, *Karl Barth [MMTM]* (Waco, TX: Word, 1972), pp. 102-105; J. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought: From the Enlightenment to Vatican II* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), pp. 338-339.

[93] In particular, Barth's comments on Romans 5 seemed to suggest that all eventually would be saved. For instance, he wrote, "In the light of this act of obedience [i.e., Christ's obedience] there is no man who is not—in Christ. All are renewed and clothed with righteousness, all are become a new subject, and are therefore set at liberty and placed under the affirmation of God," *The Epistle to the Romans*, 6th ed., trans. E. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University, 1933), p.182.

[94] Barth, II.2.419, 415ff.

[95] Livingston, p. 338.

world and history, but in the interests of loving responses from his creatures, he chose to allow the freedom for a reciprocal relationship. This human freedom deliberately was allowed for the sake of fostering freely chosen relationships as opposed to human automatons. Further, as is the traditional critique among Arminians, the Calvinistic view of a God who could only gain glory for himself by determinism was neither glorious nor relational. It left God as the author of evil, since he ordained all things. Arminians could not accept the Calvinist conclusion that in spite of all its atrocities, the world was exactly as God intended it to be. Rather, they opted for the view of a God who permitted freedom, refused to coerce his wayward creatures, but instead chose to woo them back to himself. Further, they contended that this view better spoke to God's glory than a deity who was bound by the need to maintain control.[96] In these assumptions, the new Arminian theologians maintained general continuity with their Arminian heritage.

However, they offered a new "twist", something that traditional Arminians did not espouse. They suggested that human freedom necessitated that God could not concretely know the future, since he could not concretely know what decisions his free creatures would make until they made them. Whereas traditional Arminians had agreed with their Calvinist cousins that God stood outside the time continuum, the Open theologians suggested that God was not "timeless". Biblically, they pointed to the various scripture references where God was said to change his mind (Ge. 6:5-7; 1 Sa. 2:30ff.; 13:13-14; 15:10; Joel 2:13-14; Jonah 3:1, 4-10; 4:2). Especially, they pointed to the idea of prevailing prayer (Ge. 18:16-33; 32:22-30; Ex. 32:9-14; Isa. 38:1-8; 2 Kg. 4:32-35; Mt. 15:21-29; Ac. 12:3-14). God may not always prevent evil (Ge. 37:28), though he certainly can bend evil to his own good purposes (Ge. 45:4-8; 50:19-20; Ac. 28:30-31).[97] Further, they pointed to biblical passages that directly seemed to imply a level of freedom in which God himself did not seem to know which way things would turn out (Eze. 12:1-3; Je. 3:7; 7:5-7; 26:2-3; 32:35; 38:17-23). God could even say he "now knew" something he did not "know" before (Ge. 22:1, 12). About some eventualities, Jesus seems to say that things could have been different than they turned out (Mk. 6:4-6; Lk. 13:34; 19:41-44).

Traditionally, such language has been treated as divine accommodation to human limitation, or as John Calvin put it, "in so speaking, God lisps with us as nurses are wont to do with little children."[98] The Open theologians, on the other hand,

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[96] C. Grant, *A Salvation Audit* (Scranton, PN: University of Scranton, 1994), pp. 339ff. and C. Pinnock, "Open Theism: 'What is this? A new teaching? – and with authority!' (Mk. 1:27)," *Ashland Theological Journal* (Vol. XXXIV 2002) pp. 39-53.

[97] Seminal works in this theological expression are C. Pinnock, R. Rice, J. Sanders and W. Hasker, *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994) and J. Sanders, *The God Who Risks* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998).

[98] *Institutes* I.XIII.1.

are more inclined to treat such passages as actually describing God's relational method rather than an accommodation. In fact, some can even go so far as to say that the cross itself as the means of Christ's sacrifice was not "planned" prior to the creation of the world, or at least, if it was planned it was only one of several possible outcomes.[99]

In the end, Open theists contend that while God knows all that is logically possible for him to know (e.g., he knows the past and the present), his knowledge of the future is partly definite (closed) and partly indefinite (open). He knows what he intends to do unilaterally (definite). He also knows the entire range of possibilities, though the actual future is contingent upon human decisions (indefinite).[100] God has goals, but to use the language of John Sanders, he uses "open routes."[101] Since this theology is quite new, it remains to be seen whether it will be accepted as a responsible evangelical option or rejected as a novel heresy.

Analysis and Response

The Calvinist-Arminian debate is of such long standing and acrimonious history that one hesitates to enter the fray for fear of additional detriment to the body of Christ. The unity among his followers for which Christ prayed on the night of his arrest (John 17) has hardly been enhanced by the bitterness of this theological rhubarb. As long ago as the development of Augustine's later theology and the semi-Pelagian controversy that followed,[102] Vincent of Lerins was surely near the mark when he urged that the core of Christian theology should be *quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus*, that is, that which has been believed "always, by all, and in every place". Vincent urged that this principle should distinguish catholic truth from heresy on the foundation of Holy Scripture. The different interpretations of Scripture meant that the arbiter of these differences must be what is supported by *universality* (the whole church), *antiquity* (from the earliest times) and *consent* (the acknowledged belief of all).[103]

In actual fact, the early church fathers prior to Augustine were generally favorable to the idea that humans have limited freedom, particularly the freedom to

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[99] Sanders, pp. 101-104.

[100] C. Hall and J. Sanders, "Does God Know Your Next Move?" *Christianity Today* (May 21, 2001) p. 41. For further discussion, see "Does God Know Your Next Move: Part 2," *Christianity Today* (June 11, 2001), pp. 50-56.

[101] Sanders, p. 63.

[102] In Augustine's earlier theology, he was more open to free will, but in response to the extremes of Pelagius, Augustine moved increasingly toward a more rigidly determinist position, cf. N. Geisler, *Chosen But Free*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2001), pp. 167-180.

[103] C. Heurtley, trans., "'Introduction' to the Commonitory of Vincent of Lerins," *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, P. Schaff, ed. (rpt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) XI.128.

say "no" to the gospel. This was true of Justin Martyr (100-165),[104] Irenaeus (130-200),[105] Athenagorus (2nd century),[106] Theophilus of Antioch (2nd century),[107] Tatian (late 2nd century),[108] Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-220),[109] Tertullian (160-230),[110] Origen (c. 185-254),[111] Cyril of Jerusalem (c. 312-386),[112] Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335-395),[113] Jerome (c. 340-420)[114] and John Chrysostom (345-407), to name some of the more prominent.[115] Hence, it is fair to say that Augustine's later theology of determinism was more the exception than the norm.

Whether or not one wants to follow all of Vincent's leads (his judgment of Augustine's theology was unnecessarily harsh), it still remains that his basic rubric has value. At the very least, the theologies of Calvinism and Arminianism should be relegated to a position no higher than the second tier of Christian theology. Like the vigorous modern debates in eschatology, the Calvinist-Arminian debate has its proper place. That place is not foremost in Christian theology, however, nor should it ever be. It is reflected in not a single one of the earliest Christian creeds. Each side has had proponents and opponents from very early times. Generally (though there have been exceptions) both sides have refrained from carrying their theological preferences to the point of declaring their opponents apostate.

Where Calvinists are Clearly Right

The clearest biblical support for the Calvinist position surely lies in the definition of human depravity. In fact, human depravity—the inability of humans to please God by their own efforts or to come to him unless moved by his divine grace—was at least one point upon which the Calvinists and Arminians generally agreed. Only Pelagius argued for an unconditional free will, and only Pelagius rejected the notion of an ongoing consequence of Adam's rebellion. Augustine, Luther, Calvin and Arminius all stood in agreement that every facet of the human constitution was infected by sin, and apart from God's grace, all humans were

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[104] *Dialogue with Trypho*, CXLI.

[105] *Against Heresies*, IV.xxxvii.

[106] *Plea for Christians,* XXIV.

[107] *To Autolycus*, II.xxvii.

[108] *To the Greeks,* XI.

[109] *Stromata*, IV.xxii.

[110] *Against Marcion*, II.v.

[111] *De Principiis*, III.i.

[112] *Lecture*, IV.18, 20, 21.

[113] *On Virginity*, XII.

[114] *Letters,* 133; *Against the Pelagians*, III.10.

[115] *Homily on Hebrews*, XII.5.

beyond self-help.

To be sure, the high Calvinists argued against any synergism in salvation between humans and God. God elected, atoned, called, and preserved the faithful without any active contribution by the human recipients of grace. Arminius, on the other hand, contended that humans could contribute to the process as enabled by the gracious power of God. Still, even Arminius and the remonstrants were clear that "fallen humans cannot do good or achieve saving faith without the regenerating power of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit."[116] In saying so, both camps seem to do justice to the biblical parameters of human depravity and the necessity of divine grace to respond:

…whoever does not believe stands condemned already… (Jn. 3:18b)

We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin (Ro. 3:9)

As it is written: 'There is no one righteous, not even one. (Ro. 3:10)

…for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God… (Ro. 3:23)

…sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned… (Ro. 5:12)

No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day. (Jn. 6:33)

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world… (Ep. 2:1-2a)

Where Arminians are Clearly Right

Arminius' contention (later echoed by Karl Barth) that salvation must be seen in Christocentric rather than anthropocentric terms surely must stand. To address the role of Christ as subsidiary to any supposed decrees before the creation of the world seems to directly conflict with the New Testament's testimony to the centrality of Christ:

In the beginning was the Word… He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. (Jn. 1:1-3)

He [Christ] is before all things…he is the beginning…so that in all things he might have the supremacy. (Col. 1:17-18)

…the mystery of God [is], namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. (Col. 2:2-3)

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[116] J. Douglas, "Remonstrants," *EDT* (1984) 933.

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever! Amen. (Ro. 11:36)

To the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ. (Ro. 16:27)

...to him [the God of peace], through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. (He. 13:21)

To the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore. Jude 25)

I am the First and the Last. (Rv. 1:17b)

While he was not from the Arminian tradition, Karl Barth was surely on the mark when he said that the traditional Calvinist position, which defined the beginning of God's salvific purposes as eternal decrees about human election and damnation, left Jesus Christ in the shadow. Rather, in the New Testament the glorification of God is mediated directly through Christ Jesus as the Savior, and the concept of election, however it is to be explained, must be subordinate to Christ himself (Jn. 11:4; 13:31-32; 17:1, 5).

Where Calvinists are Likely to be Wrong

The most difficult part of the Calvinist schematic is the doctrine of limited atonement. As a theology, it is driven by logic, not biblical exegesis, that is to say, it logically follows so long as one accepts other Calvinistic premises, but it is not a doctrine easily derived from the documents of the Bible without special pleading. It is at least moot whether or not Calvin himself supported this idea.[117] Certainly many in the Calvinist tradition have themselves rejected this petal of the tulip.[118] Even those who embrace it sometimes do so with reluctance and discomfort.

To be sure, many high Calvinists in the Reformed Churches still contend for double predestination. However, they like their predecessors are hard pressed to do so without special interpretative pleading. To say that "all" or "the world" means only "some" is a hard case to sell linguistically, theologically or exegetically.

Perhaps even more serious is the charge that if limited atonement is true, then God cannot be viewed as all-loving. His choice to damn a portion of the human race, even before they were created, seems to fit awkwardly with other divine attributes, such as, lovingkindness, compassion, justice and the negation of favoritism.

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[117] Geisler, pp. 160-166.

[118] Presbyterians, for instance, in general do not promote it. With regard to the Westminster Confession, they advise that the "high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care," and as one Presbyterian bluntly put it, this essentially means that "it should be passed over in complete silence," G. Hendry, *The Westminster Confession for Today* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1960), pp. 50-51, 55, 124ff.

Where Arminians are Likely to be Wrong

Arminians, for their part, tend to reject the idea of Christ's death as penal substitution. Classical Arminians argue that while Christ suffered for the sins of the whole world, he did not pay the penalty for the sins of the whole world, and in fact, the cross was not an event of penal satisfaction. Rather, Christ suffered for everyone's sins so that God would forgive those who repented and believed. There can be either punishment or forgiveness, but there cannot be both.[119] Hence, Arminians tend to emphasize reconciliation as the controlling metaphor for salvation rather than justification. In their view, justification, as a juridical term, seems too easily interpreted in terms of penal satisfaction.

Once again, as with some aspects of Calvinism, this feature of the Arminian system seems driven more by logic than by exegesis. In fact, the ideas of substitution and payment seem virtually impossible to extract from the gospel. To be sure, justification means acquittal so that the sinner's sins will never be counted against him or her (Ro. 4:7; 2 Co. 5:19), but at the same time, this gracious act by the divine Judge is based on the reality that God's wrath against sin has been satisfied in the death of Jesus (Is. 53:5, 10, 12; Ro. 5:9; 8:30-34; 1 Th. 1:10; 1 Pe. 2:24). The concept of propitiation, in which God's anger against sin is appeased, his holiness placated and his righteous law satisfied, cannot easily be extracted from the preaching of the cross (Ro. 3:25-26; 1 Jn. 2:2; 4:10). That Christ died "for us" (Ro. 5:8; 1 Co. 15:3), that is, that his death on the cross was a substitution for our death penalty because of our sin (Ga. 3:13; 2 Co. 5:21), seems difficult to avoid.[120] To be sure, penal satisfaction must never be the single paradigm by which to understand the cross. The metaphors of reconciliation, redemption, adoption and sanctification all are equally important in their own right. Still, substitutionary atonement must remain a constituent part of that biblical definition.

A Questionable Mindset

Another critique that applies equally to both Calvinists and Arminians is their respective tendency to construct their theologies out of the context of Renaissance individualism and western rationalism. With all due respect to John Calvin and Jacob Arminius, they were to greater or lesser degrees children of their times, as are all theologians. Theology never is done in a vacuum, and this is as true of Augustine, who was shaped by the Donatist Controversy and the extremes of Pelagius, as it was

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[119] J. Grider, *EDT* (1984) p. 80.

[120] For a fuller theological discussion of this idea, see D. Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1981), pp. 464-471. For a full treatment of the idea of propitiation as punishment effecting the turning away of God's wrath, see L. Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), pp. 144-213.

of the framers of the Remonstrance and the clerics who responded with the Canons of Dort.

The Renaissance brought the western world's focus back to the dignity of the individual. Children of the Renaissance developed a high appreciation for the nobility and possibilities of the single human person. It is hard to doubt that the theological focus of individual salvation in the work of both Calvin and Arminius was significantly shaped by this value. To be sure, Calvin's response tended to be more negative, while Arminius' response was more positive. Nevertheless, both of them constructed their theologies in terms of the individual human person—the single man or woman who was elected by God. While this perspective is not irrelevant to the biblical world view, it is at least lopsided. In the ancient Near East, ideas of corporate personality and community were much stronger than in western civilization.[121] This feature of the ancient world was largely ignored both by Calvin and Arminius (not to mention Pelagius, Augustine, Luther, and a host of their disciples).

Rationalism, also, played a significant role. While the Reformers lived a century or so before the so-called Age of Reason, still they labored on the cusp of what would develop later. The drive for logical extension and the abhorrence of paradox is abundantly clear in their writings. That thinkers like Beza could come near to psychoanalyzing God and accounting for his thought and actions before the creation of the world—particularly in the absence of any definitive biblical statements—seems reckless and unnecessary. What is particularly disheartening is the nearly total absence of any theological humility. One would think that anyone who truly espoused human depravity might at least entertain the notion that human rationality had its shortfall. Instead, there is a cheerful and unwitting optimism about the human capacity to "get it right".

The ancient Near Eastern mindset, by contrast, did not rebel at paradox. Core elements in the Christian message were prime examples of mystery, not the least of which was the incarnation of Christ. The western obsession with resolving paradox and leaving no logical stone unturned ended with both the Calvinists and the Arminians extending their theological trajectories well beyond the biblical data. Had they taken more seriously the ancient Near Eastern mindset, they may well have restrained some of their more radical conclusions. God is mystery, and in those areas of sublime and supra-rational speculation, the sentiments of Israel's poets concerning the problem of evil seem equally appropriate for the mystery of God's eternal purposes in election: *surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know* (cf. Job 42:3; Ps. 139:6).

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[121] One seminal study in this regard is H. Robinson, *Corporate Personality in Ancient Israel*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), where Robinson demonstrates that a significant feature of the ancient Near Eastern world view was the place, role and relationships of family, tribe and nation.

Corporate Election

The preoccupation of both the Calvinist and the Arminian camps with individual predestination and salvation have blinded them to a glaring exegetical omission. This omission is the fact that Calvinist and Arminian theology both begin with a begging of the question. Rather than asking, "What does it mean when the Bible says God chose us to be his people?" or "How do the biblical writers use the term election", they started with the assumption (largely without investigation) that election essentially concerns individuals, and further, that it specifically concerns each individual person's salvation or damnation. The discussion of election both by Calvinists and Arminians generally ignores the Old Testament and proceeds almost entirely on New Testament grounds, and to a large degree, within the Pauline corpus. I suggest that this assumption and methodology itself should be questioned, particularly in light of the fact that election does not begin as a New Testament category, but rather, as an Old Testament category. Further, I suggest that significant attention should be given to the idea that election in the Old Testament was primarily corporate and only secondarily individual, and further, that the New Testament largely follows this same paradigm. Finally, I also suggest that the outcome of election is primarily for service rather than privilege.[122]

Election in the Old Testament

Anyone even cursorily familiar with the Old Testament knows of the designation for ancient Israel as "God's chosen people." The Mosaic affirmation is paradigmatic:

> *Yahweh your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession.*
>
> Dt. 7:6

The God who chooses is central to Old Testament theology. The majority of passages using election terminology refer to the nation (e.g., Dt. 10:15; 14:2; Ps. 33:12; 135:4; Is. 41:8-9) or to sacred sites within the nation, such as, Jerusalem (e.g., 1 Kg. 11:36; 2 Kg. 23:27), Mt. Zion (e.g., Dt. 12:5, 11, 14, 18; Ps. 132:13-14) and even the land of Israel itself (Ps. 47:4). By definition, this act of election was corporate.

Did God choose individuals? Yes, though it must be admitted that references to the election of individuals are less common than references to the election of the

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[122] In the following discussion, I shall draw extensively from William W. Klein's work, *The New Chosen People: A Corporate View of Election* (Grand Rapids: Academie, 1990). I already had explored this viewpoint myself before the publication of Dr. Klein's work, but he gave such careful exegetical articulation to this perspective that I am bound to both use and recommend his excellent treatment.

nation. God's choice of individuals is largely within the context of their roles in carrying out God's will. God chose the patriarchs as the ancestors of the nation (Ne. 9:7), he chose the family of Aaron for high priesthood (Nu. 16:1-7), he chose the dynasty of David from the tribe of Judah for kingship (Ps. 78:67-72).

Two things, especially, stand out in this Old Testament record. First, divine election was not aimed primarily toward salvation or damnation, but rather, service to God. The nation of Israel was called to be a holy people, to keep covenant with Yahweh, and to be a kingdom of priests for the nations (Ex. 19:3-8). When the nation failed in this fundamental task, the prophets excoriated its citizens for their shortfall (Am. 3:2; Is. 44:1; 42:14-25). Even with respect to individuals, the idea of being a conduit of blessing for others was embedded deeply within the primordial covenant with Abraham (Ge. 12:1-3). Hence, the fundamental purpose of election was for service, not privilege.[123] Whether the nation, a prophet, a priest or a king, God chose both groups and individuals, putting them under obligations and requiring of them accountability for their calling to serve his divine purposes.

The second thing that stands out in Old Testament theology is that election did not necessarily equate with salvation. Though the whole nation of Israel was elected by God, many members of that elect nation rebelled against God and suffered dire consequences (Nu. 16:28-35; 1 Co. 10:1-5). In fact, the language of being "cut off" from the people punctuates the Old Testament text with respect to those Israelites who violated the covenant (Ex. 12:19; Nu. 19:13). In time, the concept of a "remnant", those left over after judgment, came to be central in Israel's self-conception (e.g., Is. 10:20-23; Eze. 9:8; 11:13; Hg. 1:12; Zec. 8:6, 11-12). Paul could summarize this tension between being corporately elected on the one hand but individually rejected on the other by saying:

> *A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code.*
>
> Ro. 2:28-29a

Of the people in this elect nation, Paul could say:

> *They stumbled over the 'stumbling stone.'* Ro. 9:32b

Similarly, though God chose individuals for service, he chose some whom he

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[123] This is the burden of the important Old Testament theological work by H. Rowley, *The Biblical Doctrine of Election* (London: Lutterworth, 1950).

later rejected because of their failure to carry out his purposes. Saul, Israel's first king, is a sad example (1 Sa. 13:13-14; 15:17-19, 26).

In summary, then, the nature of election in the Old Testament is primarily corporate and only secondarily individual, and further, it is primarily election for service rather than for salvation or damnation *per se*. God chose the priests as a category; he chose the dynasty of David as a category; he chose the entire nation of Israel as a category; he chose individuals to special tasks and roles. Election, however, did not equal salvation. Some who were part of the elect community of Israel were certainly judged and rejected by God.

Election in the New Testament

It remains, then, to ask whether this corporate concept of election carries over into the New Testament. I argue that in large measure it does. An excellent example is the election of the twelve apostles, in which Jesus says, "Have I not chosen you, the Twelve, yet one of you is a devil" (Jn. 6:70). Jesus chose the group, the group was elected for service, yet one from among the elect group was rejected (Ac. 1:15-17, 20). Jesus used the language of election to refer to the corporate body of chosen people (Lk. 18:7), especially, those who would suffer for their faith (Mt. 24:22, 24, 31//Mk. 13:20, 22, 27). The emphasis is not on elected individuals, but rather, the entire group of those called "the chosen." The term "the elect" means the corporate body of those who are saved.

Did Jesus speak about the election of individuals? Certainly! Still, it must be admitted that this was primarily a choice for service, not salvation (Mt. 10:1; Lk. 10:1). Jesus, himself, was chosen by the Father in this same sense (Mt. 12:17-18). Someone may ask what Jesus meant when he said, "Many are invited, but few are chosen" (Mt. 22:14). Surely this passage refers to salvation in some sense! The saying comes at the end of the parable of the wedding banquet, and the very story itself makes clear that the concept of being "the chosen" did not depend upon a preliminary wedding list drawn up in advance. In fact, those who originally were invited refused to come, and those originally not invited ended up coming. In their response they became "the chosen." Here, "the chosen" refers to the group who came, not to the pre-selection of individuals in advance. Even here, the idea of being chosen retains a corporate nuance.

In the history of the early church, this same nuance of corporate election continues. The promise of salvation is for "the remnant of men…all the Gentiles who bear my name" (Ac. 15:17). Here, the ancient term remnant, once used exclusively for elect Israel, is broadened out to include non-Jews, too. This is not to say that election vocabulary does not have any relevance for individuals or that it does not have any bearing upon salvation. The election of individuals to special roles is clearly

found in this early history. In the Jerusalem council, for instance, Peter explains his own role as the means by which the gospel first came to non-Jews was a matter of God's choice (Ac. 15:7). Paul and his company were chosen by the Holy Spirit to serve as missionaries (Ac. 13:2), and Paul, especially, was chosen as the instrument of God's mission to the Gentiles (Ac. 9:15). Still, at the very least it must be conceded that much of the language of election refers neither to salvation nor to single individuals. When it does refer to a single individual, it almost invariably refers to service.

In the New Testament letters, the same Old Testament precedent continues. In the first place, Paul's use of plural nouns and pronouns more naturally point to the corporate body rather than to the individual. For instance, Paul says, "God chose *us*…" (Ep. 1:4) and "*we* also were chosen" (Ep. 1:11). Even where Paul uses the second person "you", it appears in the plural form (Ep. 1:13).[124] When Paul says "those God foreknew he predestined" he speaks in the plural (Ro. 8:29). When Paul speaks of the objects of God's wrath or mercy, he speaks in the plural (Ro. 9:22). When Paul writes that God was pleased to save "those who believe", he speaks in the plural (1 Co. 1:21). When Paul asserts that God has chosen to make known Christ among the Gentiles, he speaks in the plural (Col. 1:27). One will search in vain for a New Testament passage concerning salvation in which anyone says, "God chose *me*." There are many passages that either say or carry the meaning that God chose *us*. Hence, the expression "the elect" as used in the New Testament exists more in continuity rather than discontinuity from the Old Testament (cf. Ro. 11:7; 2 Ti. 2:10; Tit. 1:1; 1 Pe. 1:1; 2 Jn. 1:1). The term "the elect" in the New Testament directly corresponds to the Old Testament's "chosen people".

Admittedly, the New Testament writers did not hesitate to use the term προορίζω (προοριζ**O** = to decide in advance). However, a careful examination of the passages that use this term show that what was predestined was God's work of salvation for Christians corporately. About Herod and Pilate, Luke says they did what God's power and will had decided beforehand in condemning Jesus to death (Ac. 4:28). The Pauline literature carries all the other uses of this word, and they are consistently plural categories:

> *For <u>those</u> God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son…* (Ro. 8:29)
>
> *No, we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for <u>our</u> glory before time began.* (1 Co. 2:7)

[124] In New Testament Greek, unlike in English, plural forms are spelled differently than singulars, and they are quite distinguishable.

> *In love he [God] predestined <u>us</u> to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ…* (Ep. 1:5)
>
> *In him <u>we</u> were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.* (Ep. 1:11)

Klein's comment is especially appropriate in this regard: "Paul's concern in predestination is not *how* people become Christians nor *who* become Christians, but to describe *what* God has foreordained on behalf of those who *are* (or *will be*) Christians [emphasis his]."[125] Predestination, in short, is essentially a corporate term, not an individualistic term.

If one responds with the question, how can there be an elected corporate body without elect individuals within that body, then one must respond that such a question seeks to impose a category on the text of the Bible that it does not impose on itself. Logically, such a question presumes what is called a "fallacy of division", that is, the (false) assumption that what is true of the whole must be true of the parts. In any case, such a question does not flow out of the exegesis of the New Testament itself, and therefore, must be set aside.

Embracing Paradox (i.e., mystery)

In the end we must content ourselves with the observation that neither the New nor the Old Testament seek to answer our western, logical questions about individual election. That God is sovereign is declared throughout Scripture. Still, by definition, the idea of sovereignty means the *right* to all power, *not the use* of all power. That God is unconditionally free surely must mean that he has the power to use or not to use his full rights of power, else God becomes the prisoner of his own whims. On the one hand, one must be careful not to make humans into robots. If God desires a relationship with humans, something that all Christians affirm, then such relationship must issue from some amount of free agency, otherwise it is no relationship at all. A homely example, perhaps, is Carlo Collodi's famous story of Pinnochio. What Geppetto wanted was not a puppet, but a real, live boy with whom he could have a relationship. Granted, the creation of a real, live boy entailed the risk that the boy would rebel, go astray and be deceived, and in fact, in Collodi's story, this is exactly what happened. Still, relationship and the learning of moral lessons was made possible by this freedom. On the other hand, we must never view human freedom as autonomous. It comes wholly from God, who created us. It always is a gift; it always is limited.

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[125] Klein, p. 185.

In the end, we must affirm paradox. We must be humble enough to admit that the relationship between divine sovereignty and human freedom, while it is not irrational, may very well be supra-rational. The summary of Donald Bloesch expresses very well this paradox:

> *What is necessary to understand is that the act of salvation is a paradox or mystery which defies and eludes rational comprehension. The lapses into synergism and monergism can be accounted for by the ever-recurring attempts to resolve the paradox of salvation into a rationally understandable formula. When faith is no longer a human decision but solely the work of God in the human soul…then we are no longer doing justice to an important dimension of the gift of salvation. On the other hand when salvation is depicted purely as a human action by which man lays hold of the grace of God which is ever at his disposal, then salvation becomes a human achievement.*[126]

In the late 1800s, Daniel Whittle (1840-1901), a Civil War officer wounded at Vicksburg who lost an arm and ended up a POW, lay in the army hospital, where he found a New Testament to read. Even though not a Christian himself at the time, he knelt by the bed of a dying boy, held his hand, and in a few broken words confessed his own sins, asking Christ to forgive him. When Whittle arose, the boy had died, but Whittle was born anew! Later in life, he became a noted evangelist at the urging of Dwight L. Moody, traveling with the famous musician and hymn writer Philip Bliss (who composed the music to "It Is Well With My Soul"). Regardless on what side of the Calvinist/Arminian issue Whittle fell, his hymn "I Know Whom I Have Believed" expresses the wonder, the paradox, and graciousness of God's salvation.

I know not why God's wondrous grace to me He hath made known,
Nor why, unworthy, Christ in love redeemed me for His own.

I know not how this saving faith to me He did impart,
Nor how believing in His Word wrought peace within my heart.

I know not how the Spirit moves, convincing men of sin,
Revealing Jesus through the Word, creating faith in Him.

But "I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that He is able
To keep that which I've committed unto Him against that day."

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[126] D. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978) I.201.