

# ARMINIANISM FAQ



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ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW**

**ROGER E. OLSON**

# **SEEDBED SHORTS**

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Roger Olson is a Christian theologian of the evangelical Baptist persuasion, a proud Arminian, and influenced by Pietism. Since 1999 he has been the Foy Valentine Professor of Christian Theology of Ethics at George W. Truett Theological Seminary of Baylor University. Before joining the Baylor community he taught at Bethel College (now Bethel University) in St. Paul, Minnesota. He graduated from Rice University (PhD in Religious Studies) and North American Baptist Seminary (now Sioux Falls Seminary). During the mid-1990s he served as editor of *Christian Scholar's Review* and has been a contributing editor of *Christianity Today* for several years. His articles have appeared in those publications as well as in *Christian Century*, *Theology Today*, *Dialog*, *Scottish Journal of Theology*, and many other religious and theological periodicals. Among his published works are: [\*20th Century Theology\*](#) (co-authored with the late Stanley J. Grenz), [\*The Story of Christian Theology\*](#), [\*The Westminster Handbook to Evangelical Theology\*](#), [\*Arminian Theology, Reformed and Always Reforming\*](#), and [\*Against Calvinism\*](#). He enjoys traveling, reading (theology, philosophy, and historical novels) and working out.

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# Contents

- 1: What is classical Arminianism?
- 2: Is Arminianism a sect or denomination?
- 3: Why identify a theology with a man's name? Why not just be Christians?
- 4: Why is there a rising interest in Arminianism? Why have blogs and books about a "man-made theology"?
- 5: Isn't there a middle ground between Calvinism and Arminianism?
- 6: What's the difference between Arminianism and Wesleyanism?
- 7: Does Arminianism include belief in absolute free will? If so, how could God have inspired the authors of Scripture?
- 8: Doesn't Arminianism rob God of his sovereignty?
- 9: Doesn't Arminianism lead to Open Theism?
- 10: Can an Arminian resolve the mystery of divine foreknowledge with Molinism?

- 11: Doesn't Arminianism imply that the decisive element in salvation is the sinner's free decision to accept Christ, thereby giving saved persons permission to boast of partially meriting their salvation?
- 12: Doesn't Arminianism lead to liberalism in theology?
- 13: Is the first principle of Arminianism free will?
- 14: How does Arminianism explain Romans 9?
- 15: Why are there no Arminian spokespersons, great preachers, or leaders, like John Piper, John McArthur, R. C. Sproul, Matt Chandler, et al.?
- 16: What makes a person an Arminian?
- 17: Where is prevenient grace taught in Scripture?
- 18: Doesn't classical Arminianism really say the same thing as Calvinism when it comes to the sovereignty of God? After all, if God foreknew everything that would happen and created this world anyway, wasn't he foreordaining everything simply by virtue of creating?
- 19: Can an Arminian explain the few crucial ideas that distinguish Arminianism from Calvinism for non-scholars?

## **FAQ 1: What is classical Arminianism?**

A: Classical Arminianism has nothing to do with Armenia. It is a type of Christian theology especially associated with seventeenth-century Dutch theologian Jacob Arminius (d. 1609). However, I also refer to it as “evangelical synergism” (synergism here referring to cooperation between God and creature) because Arminius’ beliefs did not begin with him. For example, Anabaptist theologian Balthasar Hubmaier promoted much the same view nearly a century before Arminius. In brief, classical Arminianism is the belief that God genuinely wants all people to be saved and sent Christ to live, die, and rise for everyone equally. It is the belief that God does not save people without their free assent but gives them prevenient grace (grace that goes before and prepares) to liberate their wills from bondage to sin and make them free to hear, understand, and respond to the gospel call. It is the belief that God’s grace is always resistible, and election to salvation—predestination—is conditional: God decrees that all who believe will be saved and foreknows who will believe. Classical Arminianism is a form of Protestant theology, so it assumes (in all of the above) that salvation is a free gift of God’s grace that cannot be merited; it can only be accepted. According to Arminius and all classical Arminians, God’s justification

of sinners is “by grace through faith alone” and solely on account of the work of Christ. God’s grace in and through Jesus is the effectual cause of salvation/justification, but faith is the instrumental cause.

## **FAQ 2: Is Arminianism a sect or denomination?**

A: It is neither, but there are denominations that either assume classical Arminianism as their theology of salvation and/or have written it into their doctrinal confessions. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was an Arminian as were most of his followers. Methodism, in all its forms (including ones that do not bear that name), tends to be Arminian. (Calvinist Methodist churches once existed. They were founded by followers of Wesley’s co-evangelist George Whitefield. But, so far as I am able to tell, they have all died out or merged with traditionally Reformed-Calvinist denominations.) Officially Arminian denominations include ones in the so-called “Holiness” tradition (e.g., Church of the Nazarene) and in the Pentecostal tradition (e.g., Assemblies of God). Arminianism is also the common belief of Free Will Baptists (also known as General Baptists). Many Brethren churches are Arminian as well. But one can find Arminians in many denominations that are not

historically officially Arminian, such as many Baptist conventions/conferences.

### **FAQ 3: Why identify a theology with a man's name? Why not just be Christians?**

A: This would be ideal, but it is too late for that. Arminians do not venerate Arminius; he was nothing more than an especially clear expounder and defender of a biblical perspective on salvation. Arminians only use that label to distinguish themselves from Calvinists and Lutherans—two Protestant traditions that historically and theologically hold to what is known as “monergism” and reject all forms of synergism in salvation. (Monergism is the belief that salvation does not involve a cooperation between God and the sinner; God saves without the sinner’s free consent.) Arminians put no stock in the label “Arminianism.” Many do not even use it. However, it is a theological category and label often misrepresented by its critics (especially conservative Calvinists), so those who know they are Arminian feel the need to defend it against false accusations and misrepresentations. Some who do that prefer to call themselves simply “non-Calvinist,” but that is no better than “Arminian” and is less clear (because Lutherans, for example, are also “non-Calvinist,” but

are often just as opposed to Arminian belief in evangelical synergism as are Calvinists). Arminians are not a movement, party, or tribe of Christians. They are simply Protestant Christians who, unlike many others, believe in grace-restored freedom of the will to resist or accept saving grace.

#### **FAQ 4: Why is there a rising interest in Arminianism? Why have blogs and books about a “man-made theology?”**

A: Beginning around 1990, Arminianism and Arminian theology came under new pressure from outspoken proponents of Calvinism—belief that God elects people to salvation unconditionally, that Christ died only for the elect, and that saving grace is irresistible. These new, aggressive Calvinists were not willing to take a “live and let live” approach to evangelical differences of theology but have attempted to marginalize, even sometimes exclude, Arminians from evangelicalism—portraying Arminianism as more Catholic than Protestant. One leading Calvinist theologian, editor of an evangelical monthly magazine, said in print that one can no more be an “evangelical Arminian” than one can be an “evangelical Catholic.” Over the past twenty to thirty years

Calvinism has been on the rise, especially in American evangelical Christianity. Along with that rise has come an increasingly negative portrayal of Arminians as defective Christians who are not truly, authentically evangelical. American evangelicalism had long been ecumenical—including Protestant Christians of many theological perspectives. Suddenly, many Reformed/Calvinist evangelicals were calling Arminianism “humanistic,” “man-centered,” “heterodox,” “on the precipice of heresy,” “not honoring the Bible,” etc. Gradually, evangelical Arminians felt the need to defend their theology against misconceptions, misrepresentations, and distortions. Every theology is “man-made,” including Calvinism. But that is not to say theologies are solely human inventions. They are people’s best attempts to interpret the Bible under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Christian tradition, and reason. Many Calvinists claim that Calvinism is a “transcript of the gospel,” but Arminians reject that claim for any theology, including Calvinism and Arminianism. We (theologians, interpreters of the Bible) are but “broken vessels” (as the apostle Paul called himself) seeking to follow the light of God’s Word wherever it leads.

## **FAQ 5: Isn't there a middle ground between Calvinism and Arminianism?**

A: No, there isn't, not that is logically coherent. In fact, Arminianism is the middle ground between Calvinism and semi-Pelagianism, which is the heresy (so declared by the Second Synod of Orange in 529 and all the Reformers agreed) that sinners are capable of exercising a good will toward God unassisted by God's grace. Like semi-Pelagianism (still an extremely popular view in American Christianity), Arminianism holds that sinners have free will. However, Arminianism also holds (like Calvinism) that free will, in matters of salvation, must be given by God through prevenient, assisting grace. Left to themselves, without the liberating power of grace, sinners will not exercise a good will toward God. But under the pressure of liberating, enabling grace many do reach out to God, who has already reached down and into them, calling them to repent and believe. Against semi-Pelagianism and with Calvinism, Arminianism believes and teaches that the initiative in salvation is God's and that all the ability in salvation is God's. But against Calvinism and with semi-Pelagianism, Arminians believe sinners can resist God's grace and, in order to be saved, must accept it freely.

## **FAQ 6: What's the difference between Arminianism and Wesleyanism?**

A: Not all Arminians are Wesleyans. Certainly Arminius wasn't! He lived a century before Wesley. Free Will Baptists, many Pentecostals (e.g., Assemblies of God), and Restorationists (e.g., Churches of Christ and Independent Christians) are Arminians without being Wesleyans. But all Wesleyans (that I know) are Arminians (although not all like that label). Wesleyans *add* to Arminianism the idea of "Christian Perfection" (which different Wesleyans define differently). Non-Wesleyan Arminians do not believe in "entire sanctification." (Although, interestingly, my own study of Arminius has led me to think he *may* have agreed with Wesley and Wesleyans about that.)

## **FAQ 7: Does Arminianism include belief in absolute free will? If so, how could God have inspired the authors of Scripture?**

A: No, Arminianism does not (and never has) included belief in absolute free will. Not even God has absolute free will. God's will is governed by his character. Arminianism focuses on sin and salvation. It says (with regard to free will) that sinner's wills are bound to sin until freed

by God's prevenient grace (thus, "freed will," not "free will!"). Arminianism includes no particular belief about whether or to what extent God manipulates the wills of men (human persons) with regard to bringing his plans (e.g., Scripture) to fruition.

### **FAQ 8: Doesn't Arminianism rob God of his sovereignty?**

A: No, not at all. It only says God is sovereign over his sovereignty. In other words, God can (and apparently does) limit his power to permit humans to oppose his will—up to a point. Everything that happens (Arminianism says) falls within the sovereign will of God—either God's antecedent will or God's consequent will. God's antecedent will is that all be saved; God's consequent will (consequent to the fall) is that all who believe be saved.

### **FAQ 9: Doesn't Arminianism lead to Open Theism?**

A: Open Theists and Calvinists both think so, but classical Arminians don't think so. According to classical Arminianism, God knows the future exhaustively—as already settled in his own mind although not already

determined. How God can know future free decisions and actions (ones not already determined by anything) is a mystery classical Arminians are willing to live with because they believe it (divine simple foreknowledge without comprehensive divine determinism) is taught in Scripture and because it is the only alternative to other views of God's foreknowledge they (classical Arminians) cannot embrace. There is no logical contradiction in this mystery. Every theology includes mysteries at some points. So do the natural sciences.

### **FAQ 10: Can an Arminian resolve the mystery of divine foreknowledge with Molinism?**

A: Some classical Arminians think so. Others do not. Two unsettled questions bedevil this intra-Arminian debate. First is a philosophical one: Is the counterfactual *libertarian freedom* a viable concept? Second is a theological one: Can God make use of *middle knowledge* (assuming he has such knowledge) in arranging human affairs without determining them? Classical Arminians are divided about these questions and their answers.

**FAQ 11: Doesn't Arminianism imply that the decisive element in salvation is the sinner's free decision to accept Christ, thereby giving saved persons permission to boast of partially meriting their salvation?**

A: No. Under no circumstances would a person freely receiving a free gift be thought to have merited it simply because he/she accepted it. A gift received is still a gift. This is intuitive to most people—the only exception is Calvinists who accuse Arminianism of importing merit into the free acceptance of salvation. But those same Calvinists would never allow someone to whom they gave a gift to claim they merited it.

**FAQ 12: Doesn't Arminianism lead to liberalism in theology?**

A: No more than Calvinism does. Friedrich Schleiermacher, the “father of liberal theology,” was a Calvinist who became liberal without ever embracing Arminianism. Many, perhaps most, nineteenth-century liberals (in theology) were raised Calvinist and, seeing the damage it does to God's character, jumped into liberal theology without ever even considering Arminianism.

Evangelical Arminianism is theologically conservative. Some evangelical Arminians are fundamentalists. Most have never been tempted by liberal theology. There is no logical or historical connection between classical Arminianism and liberal theology.

### **FAQ 13: Is the first principle of Arminianism free will?**

A: It is not. The first principle is God revealed in Jesus Christ or, put another way, Jesus Christ as the full and perfect revelation of the character of God. Arminians only believe in libertarian free will (power of contrary choice) because 1) it is implied throughout Scripture, 2) it alone preserves God from being monstrous, and 3) it is an experienced reality necessary for responsibility. One might add that it (libertarian free will) was assumed by all the church fathers before Augustine.

### **FAQ 14: How does Arminianism explain Romans 9?**

A: This is without doubt one of the most frequently asked questions by hardcore Calvinists, but even many Arminians want to know as they have always only heard the Calvinist interpretation of Roman 9. First, it's

important to pay attention to the fact that Romans 9 was never interpreted as teaching unconditional double predestination to salvation and damnation before Augustine in the early fifth century. For four centuries, Christians read the New Testament (including Romans 9) and never came up with that interpretation. Second, it's important to read Romans 9 in context—Romans 9 through 11 is a “thought chunk.” The chapter divisions were not in the original autographs. Nobody would have read Romans 9 and stopped there. Romans 10 and 11 complete the argument and show that Paul was not talking about individuals and their salvation (or lack of salvation) but about groups and service in his plan. Arminian interpretations of Romans 9–11 are not hard to find. Look into that section of the Society of Evangelical Arminians' website

([www.arminianevangolics.org](http://www.arminianevangolics.org)). There you will find essays and lists of commentaries. But, for me, what is more important is what Wesley said about the Calvinist interpretation of Romans 9, “Whatever it means it can't mean that!” He was not merely brushing it aside. He meant (and I agree) that *if* the Calvinist interpretation of Romans 9 is true, then God is a moral monster, an arbitrary damner, not in any way like Jesus Christ who wept over Jerusalem and said “I would...but you would not.”

## **FAQ 15: Why are there no Arminian spokespersons, great preachers, or leaders, like John Piper, John McArthur, R. C. Sproul, Matt Chandler, et al.?**

A: This isn't really a question about Arminianism as a belief system; it is a question about a passing cultural fad. About thirty years ago this question would have been asked about Bill Gothard and non-Garthardites. Why do the non-Garthardites not have any influential spokesmen like Gothard? Gothard and his Basic Youth Conflicts seminar movement erupted among evangelicals like a Mount St. Helen's, and then all but died away. Whenever an unusual, strange (even if very old) message is proclaimed loudly and often by one or two or three extremely persuasive proclaimers, it gains a following. That doesn't say anything about the alternatives—that they do not rise to meet the new message/movement with equal fervor and passion. Usually, the new message/movement is extreme and proclaimed by extremists. They gain a following—mostly composed of people attracted to extremes. After a while the extremism dies down and the movement matures and the rough edges and corners are shaved off. All the while, the majority *around* the “new message/movement” are going on with ministry and avoiding the extreme. But the media loves

extremes, so the extremists get all the attention—by being extreme! I consider it a good thing that few Arminians have become loud absolutists to match the leaders of the Young, Restless, Reformed movement (YRR)—most of whom are (in my opinion) fundamentalists.

## **FAQ 16: What makes a person an Arminian?**

A: The Arminian label is little used outside of Wesleyan circles. Many theologians (and others) who I believe are Arminian (in that their soteriology fits the profile of classical Arminianism) shy away from the label or deny it altogether. I suspect that is because of the ways it has been misrepresented by its (mostly) Calvinist critics. A few years ago I met Thomas Oden and we talked about this. He rejected the label “Arminian” even though he is Methodist and his book [\*The Transforming Power of Grace\*](#) presents one of the best expositions of Arminian theology I’ve ever read. My late friend Stanley Grenz admitted to me that he was Arminian but asked me not to tell anyone. (At the time he was a colleague of J. I. Packer who strongly opposes Arminianism.) Over the years I have had Free Methodists, Pentecostals, and others tell me they are not Arminian but turn right around and

affirm all the historical elements of classical Arminianism. To me this is like a Presbyterian who affirms the *Westminster Confession of Faith* while saying he's not a Calvinist. (I actually heard that recently.) So, *in my mind*, any person is an Arminian who: 1) is classically Protestant, 2) affirms total depravity (in the sense of helplessness to save himself or contribute meritoriously to his salvation such that a sinner is totally dependent on prevenient grace for even the first movement of the will toward God), 3) affirms conditional election and predestination based on foreknowledge, 4) affirms universal atonement, 5) affirms that grace is always resistible, and 6) affirms that God is in no way and by no means the author of sin and evil but affirms that these are only permitted by God's consequent will.

### **FAQ 17: Where is prevenient grace taught in Scripture?**

A: Of course there are individual passages that point to it, but the term itself is not there. It is a theological concept constructed (like "Trinity") to express a theme found throughout Scripture and to explain what would otherwise remain seemingly contradictory. John 12:32 is perhaps the clearest scriptural expression of prevenient grace, which is the resistible grace that convicts, calls,

illuminates, and enables sinners so that they are able to repent and believe in Christ and be saved. There Jesus says that if he be lifted up he will draw all people to himself. The Greek translated “all” is *pantas* and clearly refers to all inclusively, not to “some” (e.g., “the elect”). The Greek word translated “draw” is much debated. Calvinists usually argue that it should best be translated “compel.” However, if that were its meaning here, the result would seem to be universalism. However, belief in prevenient grace does not depend on proof texts. The concept is everywhere taught implicitly in Scripture. It is the only explanation for the following clearly scriptural chain of ideas: 1) no one seeks after God (total depravity), 2) the initiative in salvation is God’s, 3) all the ability to exercise a good will toward God is from God, 4) salvation is God’s gift, not human accomplishment, and 5) people are able to resist God’s offer of salvation. All of that is summed up in the phrase “prevenient grace.” Arminians disagree among themselves about the details, such as who is affected by prevenient grace and under what specific conditions. All agree that the cross of Jesus Christ mysteriously accomplished something with regard to prevenient grace, but there is some disagreement about the necessity of evangelism (communication of the gospel) for the fullness of prevenient grace to have its impact upon sinners.

**FAQ 18: Doesn't classical Arminianism really say the same thing as Calvinism when it comes to the sovereignty of God? After all, if God foreknew everything that would happen and created this world anyway, wasn't he foreordaining everything simply by virtue of creating?**

A: This is a very good question but one based on a misunderstanding of divine foreknowledge. Classical Arminianism does not imagine that God “previewed” all possible worlds and then chose to create this one. God chose to create a world and include in it creatures created in his own image and likeness with free will to either love and obey him or not. God's knowledge of what happens in this world corresponds (the best word) to what happens; it does not cause it or even render it certain. Admittedly we cannot fully explain God's foreknowledge without slipping into determinism. But the mysteries of free will (the power of contrary choice) and divine non-determining foreknowledge are mysteries much more easily accepted than any form of divine determinism which, given the shape of this world, would inevitably cast shadows on God's character.

## **FAQ 19: Can an Arminian explain the few crucial ideas that distinguish Arminianism from Calvinism for non-scholars?**

A: Yes. There are three of them. First, God is absolutely, unconditionally good in a way that we can understand as good. (In other words, God's goodness does not violate our basic, divinely given intuitions about goodness.) Second, God's consequent will is not God's antecedent will except that God antecedently (to the fall) decides to permit human rebellion and its consequences. All specific sins and evils are permitted by God according to his consequent will and are not designed or ordained or rendered certain according to God's antecedent will. Third, salvation of individuals is not determined by God but is provided for (atonement and prevenient grace) and accomplished by God (regeneration and justification by grace through faith).



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