

ARMINIANISM EXAMINED

“For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified.” (Romans 8:29,30)

*by
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Arminianism is that system of doctrine propounded by James (Jacobus) Arminius (1560-1609) and his followers. Arminius studied for four years in the University of Geneva under the tutelage of Theodore Beza (1519-1605), the successor of John Calvin. He was against the Calvinistic doctrines taught in Geneva, and shortly after he passed away, his disciples formulated the five theses of the Remonstrance or the five points of Arminianism (1610) which were: (1) Free Will, or Human Ability, (2) Conditional Election, (3) Universal Redemption, or General Atonement, (4) Resistible Grace, and (5) Insecure Faith.

What is the biblical doctrine of salvation? Is Arminianism a scripturally valid presentation of God's salvific work? There is a need to evaluate the doctrines of Arminius in the light of Holy Writ.

Human Ability or Total Depravity?

Arminians believe that although man is sinful, he is not in a state of utter spiritual helplessness. He possesses a free will. He is able in and of himself, independent of all others, to decide whether he wants to believe in Christ or not. The faith he exercises when he believes in the gospel is entirely his. Faith is not God's gift to him, but his gift to God. In this way, he contributes to his salvation. Thus, the work of salvation is not totally God's. Man has a part to play in his personal salvation. If he does not exercise that faith

which is intrinsic to him, God cannot save him even if He wanted to.

What does the Bible teach concerning man's free will? Is there any spiritual goodness in sinful man that may cause him to turn to God? Yes, man had a free will in the Garden of Eden prior to the Fall. Adam and Eve, our first parents, were created perfect and good in the Garden (Gen 1:26-31). Although they were morally innocent and without sin, they were still not in a state of eternal spiritual sonship. In other words, they still did not possess eternal life. If they wanted eternal life they must work for it. The Lord placed them under probation in the Garden. They were subjected to a test. What was this test? The Lord placed two special trees in Eden, the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen 2:8). The Lord then commanded man, "Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat (including the tree of life, cf. Gen 2:8, 3:22): But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (Gen 2:16-17, parenthesis mine). Man was given a choice: to obey God by eating of the tree of life, and obtain the reward of eternal life, or rebel against Him by eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and incur the punishment of eternal death. Adam and Eve, given absolute freedom of will, chose to disobey God by partaking of the forbidden fruit (Gen 3:1-7).

From that time onwards, man became sinful. What was the extent of his sinfulness? It was total! Man became utterly corrupt. There is no goodness at all in man. What became of man after the Fall? Gen 6:5 records, "And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." Jer 17:9 reiterates the extreme wickedness of man, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?" Being wholly infected with sin, is man able to do good and to choose God? the Apostle Paul in Rom 3:10-12 says, "There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one." Man's freedom of choice has been forfeited since the Fall. He is absolutely helpless in matters spiritual, and vain are his attempts to gain eternal life through his own efforts. As the prophet Isaiah says, "But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away. And there is none that calleth upon Thy name, that stirreth up himself to take hold of Thee: for Thou hast hid Thy face from us, and hast consumed us, because of our iniquities" (Isa 64:6-7). The Bible teaches human inability and total depravity.

Election: Conditional or Unconditional?

According to Arminians, the doctrine of election ought to be seen as God's choice of certain individuals to salvation on the basis of His foreknowledge of their positive response to the gospel when it is preached to them. It has to be explained that election, as understood by Arminians, was not God's initiative but man's. God chose man because man *first* chose Him. God elected in the sense that He being all-knowing knew beforehand those in human history who would believe the gospel out of their own free will. It is conditional election since God chose the people He knew would independently come to the saving knowledge of the gospel without any action or motivation on His part. God's foreknowledge was not an active but a *passive* one. Man has himself to thank for being elected to salvation.

If the election of God was conditional, then man has every reason to boast of his salvation. Glory is not only due to God but also to man. What does the Bible teach concerning man's salvation? Eph 2:8-9 says, "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast." Paul gives us to know that not only salvation but also the faith to believe is God's gift. Is it true that we are the ones who have chosen God? Moses told Israel, "The LORD did not set His love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people: for ye were the fewest of

all the people: But because the LORD loved you...” (Deut 7:7). There was nothing worthy in Israel that warranted God’s choice of her as His special nation. God chose her in spite of her lowly status because He loved her. Israel did not choose God. Rather it was God who chose her. The same is true with the Church. Jesus made this very clear when He told His disciples, “Ye have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you” (Jn 15:16). God is the One who is entirely responsible for our salvation. He chose some to be saved from eternal damnation before the foundation of the world out of His own good will and pleasure (Eph 1:4-5). Election is not dependent on the foreseen obedience of man but on the independent sovereign will of God.

In Rom 9:11-13, Paul demonstrated this truth by citing the example of Jacob and Esau. God chose Jacob and not Esau. Why did God prefer Jacob over Esau? Was it because Jacob was morally a better person? The answer is no. Paul explained, “For the children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of Him that calleth” (Rom 9:11). The sons of God were elected “according to the purpose of Him who worketh all things after the counsel of His own will” (Eph 1:11). Acts 13:48 makes it very clear that man’s belief is a result of God’s election, not the other way round: “and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed.” The election of God was thus *unconditional*. God’s sovereign will in election is clearly spelled out in His declaration to Moses, “I will

have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy” (Rom 9:15-16).

Universal Redemption or Limited Atonement?

Arminians argue that when Christ died on the cross, He died for all men without exception or distinction. Christ’s atoning work was intended and designed to save everyone but the sinner is saved only if and when he appropriates it for himself. In other words, the redemptive work of Christ only made it *possible* for sinners to be saved, it did not in any way secure their salvation. Salvation is dependent on the sinner. It is up to him to either accept or reject the redemption offered by Christ. It was God’s responsibility to *provide* salvation but it is man’s responsibility to *procure* it.

What is the scriptural teaching on the atonement? Does the Bible teach a limited or unlimited atonement? The Bible teaches that the atonement of Christ was *intended* to save a particular group of people, namely, the elect. The angel Gabriel, announcing the birth of Christ, said that Jesus will “save *His* people from their sins” (Mat 1:21). And who are His people? They are those whom the Father has chosen to be saved, who form the Church, for Christ “loved the church, and

gave Himself for it” (Eph 5:25). Christ both procured and secured the salvation of the elect. He had in mind His chosen ones when He died on the cross. His atoning work on the cross was specifically and specially for them. Jesus Himself indicated this when He said, “I came down from heaven, not to do Mine own will, but the will of Him that sent Me. And this is the Father’s will which hath sent Me, that of all which He hath given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day” (Jn 6:38-39).

Having understood that the atoning work of Christ was definite and positive in both its design and accomplishment—He died in order to procure and secure the salvation of the elect only—it needs to be explained that Christ did, in a certain sense, die for the world. Augustine said that Christ’s death was “Sufficient for all, efficient for the elect.” Dr J. O. Buswell, himself a Calvinist, explained that the atonement of Christ was unlimited or universal in that it was *sufficient, applicable, and offered* to all. There is no disagreement with the Arminians here. The disagreement with them lies in the fact that the Arminians do not see the atonement as being limited or particular in its *design and intention*. They regard the atonement of Christ as being sufficient and efficient for the world generally. Neither is it right to go to the other extreme that the atonement of Christ is sufficient and efficient for the elect only, as avowed by hypercalvinists.

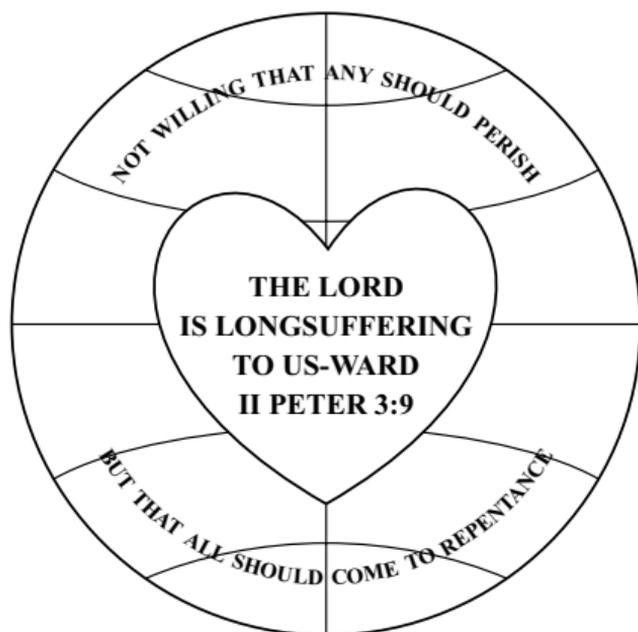
It is because Christ did die for the world sufficiently that John was able to offer the gospel to all when he wrote, “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (Jn 3:16). Does the word “world” here mean the world of the *elect* only? Are unbelievers the objects of God’s love? Calvin understood God’s love here to be universal. On “For God so loved the world,” Calvin wrote, “faith in Christ brings life to all, and that Christ brought life to all, because the Heavenly father loves the human race, and wishes that they should not perish.”

Did Calvin understand this love of God to apply only to the elect? Calvin’s commentary on 2 Pet 3:9 which is a parallel text to the above revealed that he did not. On “The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance,” Calvin wrote, “So wonderful is His love towards mankind, that He would have them all to be saved, and is of His own self prepared to bestow salvation on the lost. But the order is to be noticed, that God is ready to receive all to repentance, so that none may perish; for in these words the way and manner of obtaining salvation is pointed out. Every one of us, therefore who is desirous of salvation, must learn to enter in by this way.” That is why Jesus in Jn 3:16 “employed the universal term *whosoever*, both to invite all indiscriminately to

partake of life, and to cut off every excuse from unbelievers. Such is also the import of the term *World*, which He formerly used; for though nothing will be found in the world that is worthy of the favour of God, yet He shows Himself to be reconciled to the whole world, when He invites all men without exception to the faith of Christ, which is nothing else than an entrance into life.”

God’s desire for all men to be saved comes under His “desiderative will.” Murray and Stonehouse,

“Sufficient For All, Efficient For The Elect”



The heart represents God’s Decretive Will in electing us, and the sphere His Desiderative Will towards all mankind. [Taken from *The Clock of the Sevenfold Will of God* by Timothy Tow]

former professors of Westminster Theological Seminary, explain this aspect of God's will, "This will of God to repentance and salvation is universalized and reveals to us, therefore, that there is in God a benevolent lovingkindness towards the repentance and salvation of *even those whom He has not decreed to save*. This pleasure, will, desire, is expressed in the universal call to repentance" (italics mine).

It may, however, be asked: If God does not desire that any should perish, how is it that the majority of the people do in fact perish? Calvin replied, "To this my answer is, that no mention is here made of the hidden purpose of God, according to which the reprobate are doomed to their own ruin, but only of His will as made known to us in the gospel. For God there stretches forth His hand without a difference to all, but lays hold only of those, to lead them to Himself, whom He has chosen before the foundation of the world."

Augustine's formula, "Sufficient for all, efficient for the elect," was affirmed by Calvin in his commentary on 1 Jn 2:2, "And He is the propitiation for our sins: and not for our's only, but also for the sins of the whole world."

In discussing the third point of Calvinism, namely, limited atonement, we are addressing the *intent*, not the *extent* of the atonement. It needs to be reiterated that a correct understanding of Calvin's doctrine of the atonement requires one to accept that the atonement of Christ is "sufficient for all, efficient for the elect."

Grace: Resistible or Irresistible?

In regard to the matter of calling, the Arminians say that it is the Holy Spirit who issues the outward and inward call as the gospel is preached. The Spirit does His best in persuading every sinner who hears the gospel to embrace it. That is all the Spirit can do—to prompt the sinner to believe. If the sinner refuses to receive the gospel there is nothing the Holy Spirit can do about it. His convicting work can be effectively thwarted and finally frustrated. His regenerating work is dependent on man's response to the gospel by faith which is sourced in the sinner himself, and does not come from God. God can thus fail in His efforts to win a person to Himself. The grace of God can be resisted, rejected, and frustrated by men.

The Bible informs us that the inward call of the Holy Spirit is so powerful that it cannot be effectively resisted. When a person hears the good news of Jesus Christ, he receives the outward call from the preacher to believe in the gospel, but the inward call issued by the Spirit is that which saves the individual. Jesus made this very clear when He said, "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent Me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day" (Jn 6:44). "For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God" (Rom 8:14). Man cannot come to God unless he is called, led, and drawn by the Spirit. And when the Holy Spirit beckons a sinner to accept the gospel, he may fight it for a season but will finally

succumb to His grace for “whom He did foreknow, He also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He did predestinate, them He also called: and whom He called, them He also justified: and whom He justified, them He also glorified.” The process of God’s redemptive work and plan can neither be discontinued nor hindered. Once God has predestined someone to be saved, He ensures that this person is thoroughly saved through the process of calling, justification, sanctification, and glorification. The chain of salvation cannot be broken. This leads us to our final question: Can a Christian fall from grace?

Insecure Faith or Perseverance of the Saints?

Classic Arminianism advocates the loss of salvation to those who subsequently fail to uphold their faith. There is therefore no assurance of salvation for the Arminian. He must always be on his toes. There is no such thing as a *backslidden* Christian. A person who becomes cold towards his walk with God loses salvation. He needs to reconfess Christ and be saved again. If he does not repent in his lifetime, he is eternally lost.

If man is the author of his own salvation, it is logical to see why he can have no assurance that he will ultimately be saved. By his own strength, he tries

his level best to stay Christian. But he finds that he does not always succeed in warding off temptations or keeping away old habits. The Christian life is not always victorious. The Christian is not sinlessly perfect. The Apostle Paul himself testified that he faced tremendous spiritual struggles as a Christian. He shared, “For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin. For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I.... For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do ... I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members” (Rom 7:14-16, 18-19, 21-23). Arminians argue that Paul was referring to the time when he was still an unregenerate man. He was not describing his present experience as a believer. If Paul was indeed writing about his past experience as an unbeliever, it is strange that he wrote his testimony throughout in the *present tense*. This strongly suggests that Paul was really speaking of his experience at that point in time as a Christian and as an Apostle. Augustine called Rom 7:14-25, “The Christian Struggle.”

Although Paul went through such struggles he was never in doubt of his salvation. He had the assurance of salvation because He knew it was God who was keeping him, and God never fails. Paul himself said, “Being confident of this very thing, that He which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Christ Jesus.” In Rom 8:35-39 Paul states unequivocally that nothing whatsoever “shall separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” The love that Paul speaks of here is not our love for God but God’s love for us. We are protected by the love of God forever. Jesus assures all Christians that it is He who gives them “eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand” (Jn 10:28).

“Once saved always saved” is not licence to sin. For Paul issued this exhortation to Christians, “Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil 2:12). This is human responsibility. Paul then went on to say, “For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure” (Phil 2:13). Herein is divine sovereignty. As Christians we can do nothing without God. All true believers, under God’s preservation, will persevere in their faith to the very end (Mat 10:22, Mk 13:13). A person who is truly born again will never be lost. All glory be to God.

The five points of Arminianism were found wanting in scriptural validity, and were rejected by the Synod of Dort in 1619. The Synod formulated five points to explain the biblical doctrine of salvation. As already discussed, in contradistinction to Arminianism, the five points are (1) Total Depravity, (2) Unconditional Election, (3) Limited Atonement, (4) Irresistible Grace, and (5) Perseverance of the Saints. These five points became known as the five points of Calvinism, and are rooted in the Holy Bible, in particular, the doctrines of Paul. As Rev (Dr) Timothy Tow says, “Calvinism is Paulinism systematized.” The acronym, TULIP, helps us to remember the five points.



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