

Arminianism

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Origin of Arminianism

Arminianism describes the theological stance of James Arminius (1560–1609) and the movement which arose from his views. Arminius was born in the Netherlands, studied under Theodore Beza (Calvin's successor at Geneva), served as a pastor in Amsterdam, and was a professor at the University of Leiden the last six years of his life.

Arminius taught and wrote against certain Calvinist doctrines of the Reformed Church. He taught **conditional predestination**— predestination based on God's foreknowledge, i.e., His knowledge of whether a person would freely reject Christ or freely accept him. In Arminius's view unconditional predestination makes God the author of sin.

Related to Arminius's understanding of predestination was his view of **human freedom**. He believed man was totally unable to do any good thing because of original sin; however, because of the benefits of God's **prevenient grace** for all people through the death of Christ, all men are genuinely free either to accept or reject Christ for salvation.

Connected to Arminius's view of man's freedom was his position on **universal atonement**: Christ suffered for everyone, the benefits of that suffering including grace which enables anyone who so chooses to accept Christ. Because Christ suffered for all, God is able to forgive all who freely choose to believe. However, though God has given this enabling grace to all people, people are free either to accept or reject God's offer of salvation. In other words, God's **saving grace is not irresistible**.

Finally, Arminius held that human freedom was genuine and God's grace could be resisted even after salvation. A believer could willfully fall into sin and fall away from God to the extent that he could experience the **loss of salvation** and be eternally lost.

Arminian Controversy

In one sense the Arminian controversy that developed in the Netherlands in the early 1700s was one installment in the age-long struggle to come to grips with the divine sovereignty-human responsibility tension of Scripture. Theological disagreement between Arminius and a Calvinist colleague over the nature of predestination and free will spread throughout Holland, but Arminius died before it all came to a head.

The Reformed Church of Holland met at the Synod of Dort in 1618–19 to deal with the controversy. Several men sympathetic to Arminius's views prepared their Arminian creed in the form of five articles called the Remonstrance. Their five points were:

- Predestination is conditioned upon foreseen faith
- Christ died for all men
- Apart from God's grace man has no ability to do good and save himself
- God's saving grace is not irresistible
- Perseverance in salvation depends on one's own efforts in cooperation with God's help

The Calvinists won the day and formulated counter-points to Arminianism, the famous five points of Calvinism (easily remembered by the acrostic TULIP):

- Total depravity
- Unconditional election
- Limited Atonement
- Irresistible grace
- Perseverance of the saints

Difficulties with Arminianism

Since Arminianism largely centers on an understanding of God's sovereignty and man's free will, I will focus on particular problems with those two points in Arminianism.

Conditional Predestination

First, let's think about God's sovereignty in relation to predestination or election. Arminius rejected unconditional predestination because he believed it made God the author of sin. Calvinists respond that Arminianism doesn't reflect biblical teaching on God's sovereign control over all things, including those He chose for salvation. For example, according to Ephesians 1 the only reason Paul gives for why God chose us in Christ for salvation is this: it was according to the kind intention of His will (vv. 5, 9) and according to His own purpose (v. 11); and it was to the praise of the glory of His grace (v. 6; cf. v. 14).

Furthermore, while Arminian predestination conditioned upon foreseen faith appears to protect undetermined free will choices, upon further reflection it does not. If God can look into the future and see that person A will come to faith in Christ and person B will not, then those facts are already fixed and determined. The question is: by what are those destinies determined? If by God, then election is based solely on God's sovereign will unconditioned by man's choice. But if destinies are not determined by God, then by what are they determined? Some impersonal force or fate operative in the universe which makes things turn out the way they do? Further, if I somehow determine my own election (God looked ahead and saw that I would believe and chose me on that basis), then God does not receive ultimate credit for my salvation.

What about the concern to protect God's righteousness in relation to evil? In seeking to guard God's holiness the Arminian ends up sacrificing God's sovereignty. But Scripture seems insistent upon upholding God's sovereignty even though doing so appears to make God culpable in relation to evil. In Romans 3 Paul anticipates objections related to the righteousness of God and the responsibility of man. If God uses sin to display His righteousness, then isn't it unjust for God to punish sin (v. 5)? If sin brings glory to God, then why should I be condemned as a sinner

(v. 7)? Here Paul simply affirms these twin truths: God is righteous when He judges sin; man is responsible for the sins he commits.

In Romans 9 Paul returns to the same two objections. If God chose Jacob over Esau, “so that God’s purpose according to His choice would stand” (v. 11), “What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there?” Paul’s answer is “May it never be!” Simply put, God has the sovereign right to have mercy on whom He has mercy (v. 15). But if God has mercy on whom He has mercy, and hardens whom He desires, “Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?” (v. 19). Paul’s answer is that God is not answerable to man, and man has no right to defame the character of God.

Libertarian Free Will

Arminianism is based on a particular definition of free will called libertarian. Libertarian free will means that man can always choose either of two courses of action, and there is no antecedent power, whether internal or external, which determines the choice. But logically speaking, there are always antecedent causal influences which determine the choices we make. According to the Calvinist man is free to the extent that he chooses as he wills without compulsion. This definition of free will is compatible with God’s sovereignty over all things, including all our choices. This is why the Calvinist notion of free will is called compatibilistic free will, or compatibilism.

Furthermore, on a libertarian notion of free will, how can God know the future? Arminians respond several ways. First, open theists conclude that God cannot know the future free choices that people will make. This seems to be the most logically consistent view, but it certainly flies in the face of God’s ability to make exact predictions concerning the future. Second, many Arminians conclude that God just knows intuitively or passively all that will happen, but He does not plan or cause things to happen. In response, if God knows all future events, then they have been predetermined by something. The question again is, by what? If our future choices are known by God, then they are fixed, and if they are fixed, then they are not free in the libertarian sense. Third, some Arminians respond with a view called middle knowledge. Because God knows all future possibilities and how every person would freely respond in any set of circumstances, God can choose to bring about one particular set of circumstances in which the person freely chose. But in response, if God knew what a particular choice would be ahead of time, and brought to pass the circumstances in which the choice would occur, then the choice was guaranteed ahead of time, which sounds like the Calvinist view of free will compatible with God’s sovereign control of all events.

Conclusion

The Calvinist-Arminian debate reflects the divine sovereignty-human responsibility tension in Scripture. Can God determine all things that happen, including the free (and even sinful) choices men make, and yet at the same time men remain responsible for their sins and God remain just? The Calvinist says yes, not because this can be reconciled in his thinking, but because he sees it taught in Scripture. The twin truths that God is sovereign over all things and yet man is still responsible are simply juxtaposed in Scripture: “This Man, delivered over by the predetermined

plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death” (Acts 2:23); “For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur” (Acts 4:27–28). The Calvinist in the end appeals to mystery: we do not understand how these things can be, but we accept them by faith because the Scriptures teach them.