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Can the Calvinists and Arminians Be Friends? Yes

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Abstract

The Calvinists and Arminians are generally known from ecclesiastical history to be two parallel lines that can never meet, largely owing to their sharp doctrinal differences, especially in the areas of predestination and salvation. However, this paper upholds the view that in spite of their well pronounced differences, the two can still to some extent be friends. In the light of this, the thrust of this paper therefore is to critically identify the areas in which both the Calvinists and Arminians share somehow the same view even in the areas of predestination and salvation in which they are often known to

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characteristically disagree. The paper submits that the Calvinists and Arminists can still be friends considering these areas of agreement.

Introduction

In spite of some doctrinal differences, the Calvinists and Arminists can still be friends. Calvinism and Arminism were two of the soteriological discussions that trasversed the landscape of church history in the seventeenth century. The two systems are often viewed as rivals within Protestantism and Evangelicalism because of their disagreement over the doctrines of predestination and salvation. Nonetheless, they share both history and many doctrines in common. The task of this paper therefore is to examine the two doctrines to reveal their postulations, disagreements, and areas of agreement on the grounds of which they can still be friends.

A. The Distinctive Features of Calvinism

Calvinism, variously known as Reformed tradition, the Reformed Faith, or Reformed theology is a theological system and an approach to the Christian life that emphasizes the sovereignty of God over all creatures.⁵ Calvinism is a series of theological beliefs first promoted by John Calvin (1509-1564), one of the leaders of the Protestant reformation. John Calvin postulates that “God preordained...a part of the human race, without any merit of their own, to eternal salvation, and another part, in just punishment of their sin, to eternal damnation.”⁶ According to Calvinism, salvation is accomplished by the almighty power of the Triune God. The Father chose a people, the Son died for them; the Holy Spirit makes Christ's death effective by bringing the elect to faith and repentance, thereby causing them to willingly obey the gospel. The entire process (election, redemption, regeneration) is the work of God and is by grace alone. Thus God, not man, determines who will be the recipients of the gift of salvation.⁷

Calvinism stresses the complete ruin of humanity’s ethical nature against a backdrop of the sovereign grace of God in salvation. It teaches that fallen humanity is morally and spiritually unable to

⁵ Benjamin B. Warfield "Calvinism". *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*. Ed. Johann Jakob Herzog, Philip Schaff, Albert Hauck, p. 359.

⁶ See www.reformed.org/calvinism for "Calvinism" at Center for Reformed Theology and Apologetics.

⁷ Michael Marlowe, "What is Arminianism?" @ www.gotquestions.org.

follow God or escape their condemnation before him and that only by divine intervention in which God must change their unwilling hearts can people be turned from rebellion to willing obedience.⁸ Calvinism is often summarized by *The Five Points of Calvinism*, which are easy to recall by using the acrostic "TULIP", which are discussed below :

i. Total Depravity or Total Inability: Following the fall, man has lost all it takes to savingly believe the gospel. The sinner is dead, blind, and deaf to the things of God; his heart is deceitful and desperately corrupt. His will is not free, it is in bondage to his evil nature, therefore, he will not - indeed he cannot - choose good over evil in the spiritual realm. Consequently, it takes much more than the Spirit's assistance to bring a sinner to Christ - it takes regeneration by which the Spirit makes the sinner alive and gives him a new nature. Faith is not something man contributes to salvation but is itself a part of God's gift of salvation - it is God's gift to the sinner, not the sinner's gift to God.

ii. Unconditional Election: God's choice of certain individuals unto salvation before the foundation of the world rested solely in His own sovereign will. His choice of particular sinners was not based on any foreseen response of obedience on their part, such as faith, repentance, etc. On the contrary, God gives faith and repentance to each individual whom He selected. These acts are the result, not the cause of God's choice. Election therefore was not determined by or conditioned upon any virtuous quality or act foreseen in man. Those whom God sovereignly elected He brings through the power of the Spirit to a willing acceptance of Christ. Thus God's choice of the sinner, not the sinner's choice of Christ, is the ultimate cause of salvation.

iii. Limited Atonement: Christ's redeeming work was intended to save the elect only and actually secured salvation for them. In addition to putting away the sins of His people, Christ's redemption secured everything necessary for their salvation, including faith which unites them to Him. The gift of faith is infallibly applied by the Spirit to all for whom Christ died, therefore guaranteeing their salvation.

⁸ "Calvinism" in Wikipedia www.en.wikipedia.org.

iv. Irresistible Grace: In addition to the outward general call to salvation which is made to everyone who hears the gospel, the Holy Spirit extends to the elect a special inward call that inevitably brings them to salvation. The internal call (which is made only to the elect) cannot be rejected; it always results in conversion. By means of this special call the Spirit irresistibly draws sinners to Christ. He is not limited in His work of applying salvation by man's will, nor is He dependent upon man's cooperation for success. The Spirit graciously causes the elect sinner to cooperate, to believe, to repent, to come freely and willingly to Christ. God's grace, therefore, is invincible; it never fails to result in the salvation of those to whom it is extended.

v. Perseverance of the Saints: All who are chosen by God, redeemed by Christ, and given faith by the Spirit are eternally saved. They are kept in faith by the power of Almighty God and thus persevere to the end.⁹ What about Arminianism? The next section discusses Arminianism and its affirmations.

B. The Distinctive Features of Arminianism

Arminianism is used to define those who affirm the original beliefs of James Harmensen, which in Latin means Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609). Arminius was a professor and preacher of the Presbyterian Church. His doctrine, Arminianism was coined after his name, Arminius, while his followers were known as the Remonstrants. The fundamental principle in Arminianism is the rejection of predestination and a corresponding affirmation of the freedom of the human will. Arminianism affirms that salvation is accomplished through the combined efforts of God (who takes the initiative) and man (who must respond) - man's response being the determining factor. God has provided salvation for everyone, but His provision becomes effective only for those who, of their own free will, "choose" to cooperate with Him and accept His offer of grace. The Arminians maintained that God gives indispensable help in salvation, but that ultimately it is the free will of man which decides the issue. At the crucial point, man's will plays a decisive role; thus man, not God, determines who will be recipients of the gift of

⁹ David N. Steele and Curtis Thomas, The Five Points of CALVINISM - Defined, Defended, Documented at www.the-highway.com.

salvation.¹⁰ The following is the summary of the soteriological doctrine of Arminianism:

i. Free-will or Human Ability: Although human nature was seriously affected by the fall, man has not been left in a state of total spiritual helplessness. God graciously enables every sinner to repent and believe but does not interfere with man's freedom. Each sinner possesses a free will, and his eternal destiny depends on how he uses it. Man's freedom consists in his ability to choose good over evil in spiritual matters; his will is not enslaved to his sinful nature. The sinner has the power to either cooperate with God's Spirit and be regenerated or resist God's grace and perish. The lost sinner needs the Spirit's assistance but he does not have to be regenerated by the Spirit before he can believe, for faith is man's act and precedes the new birth. Faith is the sinner's gift to God; it is man's contribution to salvation.

ii. Conditional Election: God's choice of certain individuals unto salvation before the foundation of the world was based upon His foreseeing that they would respond to His call. He selected only those whom He knew would of themselves freely believe the Gospel. Election therefore was determined by or conditioned upon what man would do. The faith which God foresaw, and upon which He based His choice, was not given to the sinner by God (it was not created by the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit) but resulted solely from man's will. It was left entirely up to man as to who would believe and therefore as to who would be elected unto salvation. God chose those whom He knew would, of their own free will, choose Christ. Thus the sinner's choice of Christ—not God's choice of the sinner—is the ultimate cause of salvation.

iii. Universal Redemption or General Atonement: Christ's redeeming work made it possible for everyone to be saved but did not actually secure the salvation of anyone. Although Christ died for all men and for every man, only those who believe on Him are saved. His death enabled God to pardon sinners on the condition that they believe, but it did not actually put away anyone's sins. Christ's redemption becomes effective only if man chooses to accept it.

¹⁰ Ibid.

iv. The Holy Spirit Can Be Effectually Resisted: The Spirit calls inwardly all those who are called outwardly by the gospel invitation. He does all that He can to bring every sinner to salvation. But inasmuch as man is free, he can successfully resist the Spirit's call. The Spirit cannot regenerate the sinner until he believes; faith (which is man's contribution) precedes and makes possible the new birth. Thus, man's free will limits the Spirit in the application of Christ's saving work. The Holy Spirit can only draw to Christ those who allow Him to have His way with them. Until the sinner responds, the Spirit cannot give life. God's grace, therefore, is not invincible; it can be—and often is—resisted and thwarted by man.

v. Falling from Grace: Those who believe and are truly saved can lose their salvation by failing to keep up their faith, etc. All Arminians have not agreed on this point; some have held that believers are eternally secure in Christ, that once a sinner is regenerated, he can never be lost.¹¹

C. Areas of Disagreement Between the Calvinists and Arminians

Nature of Election – Arminians hold that election to eternal salvation has the condition of faith attached. The Calvinist doctrine of unconditional election states that salvation cannot be earned or achieved and is therefore not conditional upon any human effort, so faith is not a condition of salvation but the divinely apportioned means to it.

Nature of Grace – Arminians believe that through God's grace, he restores free will concerning salvation to all humanity, and each individual, therefore, is able either to accept the Gospel call through faith or resist it through unbelief. Calvinists hold that God's grace to enable salvation is given only to the elect and irresistibly leads to salvation.

Extent of the Atonement – Arminians hold to a universal drawing and universal extent of atonement instead of the Calvinist doctrine that the drawing and atonement is limited in extent to the elect only. Both sides (with a few exceptions among Calvinists)

¹¹ David N. Steele and Curtis Thomas, *Romans: An Interpretive Outline*.

believe the invitation of the gospel is universal and "must be presented to everyone they can reach without any distinction."¹²

Perseverance in Faith – Arminians believe that future salvation and eternal life is secured in Christ and protected from all external forces but is conditional on remaining in Christ and can be lost through apostasy. Traditional Calvinists believe in the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, which says that because God chose some unto salvation and actually paid for their particular sins, he keeps them from apostasy and that those who do apostasize were never truly regenerated (that is, born again). Non-traditional Calvinists and other evangelicals advocate the similar but different doctrine of eternal security that teaches that if a person was once saved, his or her salvation can never be in jeopardy, even if the person completely apostasizes.

D. Areas of Agreement and Grounds for Friendship between the Calvinists and Arminians

Ever since Arminius and his followers revolted against Calvinism in the early 17th century, Protestant soteriology has been largely divided between Calvinism and Arminianism. But the overwhelming majority of Protestant and evangelical theologians hold to one of these two systems or somewhere in between. However, in spite of the areas of doctrinal differences identified above which divide the Calvinists and Arminians, both can still be friends considering the areas below in which they share common views:

i. Total Depravity: Critically examined the Arminists and Calvinists both agree over the doctrine of total depravity. The differences come only in the understanding of how God remedies this human depravity.

ii. Unlimited Atonement: Arminists and Calvinists alike share the same belief in unlimited atonement of the blood of Christ to atone for the sin of humanity. Arminists suppose that the Bible indicates that Jesus died for the sins of everyone in the entire world. 1 John 2:2 tells us, "He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world." 2 Peter 2:1 tells us that Jesus even bought the false prophets who are doomed: "But there were also

¹² Roger Nicole, "Covenant, Universal Call and Definite Atonement" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 38:3 (September 1995).

false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves.” This tone of unlimited atonement of Christ’s sacrifice resonates in Ephesians 4: 3-6 where Paul charges believers to keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace noting that there is one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism and one God.

iii. Substitutionary Effect of Atonement – Another area in which the Calvinists and Arminians share the same view is the substitutionary effect of atonement. Arminists affirm with Calvinists the substitutionary effect of Christ’s atonement and that this effect is limited only to the elect. Classical Arminians would agree with Calvinists that this substitution was penal satisfaction for all of the elect, while most Wesleyan Arminians would maintain that the substitution was governmental in nature.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that both Calvinists and Arminians have their high and low points as far as their explanation of the Christian doctrine of predestination and salvation are concerned. Calvinism considers most positions of Arminianism to be unbiblical, to varying degrees. For instance, they argue that Romans 3:10-18 strongly supports man’s total depravity. Using Romans 8: 28-30, they insist that conditional election underemphasizes God’s sovereignty and that resistible grace underestimates the power and determination of God. Moreover, conditional salvation makes salvation a work rather than a gift of grace as emphasized in Ephesians 2:8-10. Philip Schaff describes Arminianism as “an elastic, progressive, changing liberalism”¹³ and “moderate semi-Pelagianism.”¹⁴ Conversely, Calvinism’s doctrine of limited atonement can not be justified in the light of the following scriptures: Matthew 26:28- "For this is my blood of the New Testament, which is shed for many for the

¹³ *The Creeds of Christendom, with a History and Critical Notes*, sixth edition (New York, 1931), vol. 1, p. 509.

¹⁴ Semi-Pelagianism was an ancient heresy which held that man out of his own free will takes the first step in salvation, and is then assisted by God. The Arminians merely reverse the order, saying that man must respond out of his own free will after God first prompts him with "prevenient grace." In both, the decisive thing is the will of man, not the will or decree of God.

remission of sins" and Ephesians 5:25: "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it."

Similarly, the concept of Irresistible Grace falls down flat in the light of the following scriptures: 1 Corinthians 10: 12- "Therefore, let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall." There are problems with both systems. Both systems fail to adequately explain the relationship between God's sovereignty and mankind's free will – due to the fact that it is impossible for a finite human mind to discern a concept only God can fully understand.

These differences, notwithstanding, we still want to conclude by maintaining that both Calvinists and Arminists can still be good friends. All it takes is to consider their areas of agreement and use such as the model or grounds for friendship, and then later sit together on the table of theological dialogue to reconsider or review their areas of differences in the light of balanced biblical interpretation.