

## The debate that won't die Calvin V Arminius 17<sup>th</sup> August 2008 RBC

Tonight we are going to look at Calvinism and Arminianism, whose very different and often opposite doctrines of God, Jesus and salvation have caused huge debate and division in the church for a long time.

I will begin by very briefly outlining the basic beliefs of each of them, and I will try my best to give an unbiased view of each of these but it won't take a genius to work out which I gravitate to.

Let me begin with Calvinism.

Calvinism is the system of thought popularised by those who followed on from the great reformer John Calvin who lived in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, but it has its roots in the teachings of early church fathers such as Augustine. I think Calvinism more than Arminianism has evolved over the early years and there are some that would say that what we have today as Calvinism isn't actually what John Calvin himself taught. Indeed, strictly speaking what most people call Calvinism would be better described as Reformed Theology because it's not really Calvin's teaching anymore.

Calvinism today covers a wide range of thought about all aspects of life but perhaps its key belief is the supreme sovereignty of God. What that means is worked out in the 5 points of Calvinism known by the acronym TULIP. These 5 points aren't the sum total of Calvinism but provide a good summary of the key beliefs.

1. **Total Depravity.** In this view, sin or rebellion against God has corrupted us so much that we have an inability to choose God unless God chooses us.
2. **Unconditional Election** Our election for salvation is not based on any merit in us or on God foreknowing a good choice by us. God, before the beginning of time elects some to be saved.
3. **Limited Atonement.** Jesus only died for the those elected for salvation.
4. **Irresistible grace.** You cannot resist God's call if you are part of his elect.
5. **Perseverance of the Saints.** You can't lose your salvation, If you are elect then you are eternally secure. Once saved always saved.

Calvinists often emphasis the penal substitution view of the cross, that is that Jesus died in our place to pay the price for our sin, he was punished so we don't have to.

They tend to have a high view of scripture seeing it as a blue print which gives explicit mandate for our activities. And they tend to have a rigid interpretation of it. This tends to result in a subordinate or marginal role for women. And a pretty tough stance on homosexuality. And Calvinists tend to believe in God appointed leaders of nations who are given authority to rule and impose Christian rules.

And traditional Calvinists tend to be sceptical about the use of Charismatic gifts today. But there are increasing numbers of Charismatic Calvinists who hold to Calvinistic teaching but believe in the exercise of spiritual gifts today.

Key Calvinist leaders over the years have included people like Dr Martyn Lloyd Jones and RT Kendall – who was only a four pointer – he denied limited atonement.

And it was Kendall who made Calvinism popular for a new generation with his snappy “once saved always saved” and “God meant it for God slogans”.

Other groups or organisations that can be put in the Calvinist camp include the student group UCCF, which is organised around a Calvinistic creed and the Fellowship of Independent Churches, FIEC.

New Frontiers, led by Terry Virgo, is also Calvinistic but unlike traditional Calvinists promotes the use today of charismatic gifts.

And there are a whole stream of new young leaders emerging who are taking over the mantle, Wayne Grudem, John Piper, and Mark Driscoll from Seattle, who is a big hitter in the States.

So that’s a very brief intro to Calvinism – now what about Arminianism.

Jacob Arminius was a 16<sup>th</sup> Century Dutch theologian who provided a system of biblical interpretation that came to quite different conclusions from that of Calvinism. Its most popular ideas are again summarised under five points

1. **Partial Depravity.** Humanity has been tainted deeply by sin but not to the extent that we are unable to choose, of our own free will, whether to accept Christ or not.
2. **Conditional election.** God chose those who he knew would accept him anyway. Verses about predestination are understood to be saying that God is the origin of salvation and we can respond only because of God’s prior grace. (Some Arminians believe in a variant called open Theism. They believe that God doesn’t know the exact details of people’s futures until they make their choices, but God is capable of knowing their likely direction and will therefore provoke those who make good choices towards his bigger purposes in history)
3. **Unlimited Atonement.** Jesus’ death means that potentially everyone can be saved, although many will reject the offer of salvation.
4. **Resistible Grace.** People can resist God’s call to salvation.
5. **Conditional Salvation.** Christians can lose their salvation if they fall away from God or return to persistent habitual sin.

Arminians tend to want to explore several ways of looking at the cross not just relying on the penal substitution model. So they will talk about Sacrifice, redemption, and so on.

Strictly speaking, traditional Arminian theology would reject the penal substitution explanation of the cross because they would say that if Christ has paid the punishment for everyone, as opposed to the elect only, which is the Calvinist view, then everyone will be saved. So instead they talk about Christ suffering on the cross opening the door to salvation.

Arminians also tend to be less rigid in their approach to the bible, and see it not as a blue print but as a guide book. And they tend to be more open in their interpretation of it. As a result they would tend to be open to women having an equal role in the church and society, and have a strong commitment to social justice, because they reject the view of God appointed leaders ruling on Christ's before.

Those of you who were here two weeks ago when we talked about homosexuality, I mention a book called *Slaves Women and Homosexuals* by William Webb. Well he would be more at home in the Arminian camp with his view that scripture evolves as God reveals more of himself to us over time. Which doesn't sit well with most Calvinists, who question his interpretation.

Perhaps the key Arminian leader in the recent past was Billy Graham. During the last half of the last century he was the person most influential for promoting an Arminian way of thinking and single handedly negated the influence of the Calvinists.

The whole thrust of his Crusades was based on free will and making an individual choice to respond to the gospel. There was no room for talk of election, you were presented with a choice of either accepting God or rejecting God and you would face the consequences of whatever choice you made. Classic Arminian thinking.

Other more recent figures include Steve Chalke, Rob Bell of the Nooma DVD fame, Roger Forster of the Ichthus network, Pete Greig, and Greg Boyd, who is the most high profile advocate of open Theism today.

Groups that would say they are based around an Arminian understanding of God include the Pioneer network, which includes the church in Chichester that started the 24/7 prayer initiative. And they also started Fusion, the alternative university Christian Union. Fusion was originally formed to counter a perceived hostility of UCCF to charismatic students, but the Arminian roots of Fusion has led it to very different doctrinal conclusions and emphasis than the predominantly Calvinistic UCCF.

So, that is a very brief introduction to these two systems of belief. But why are we talking about this now?

This debate has been going on for a long time, but it hasn't been held in public for 20 years or so. Most evangelical leaders have tried not to fight about it because Clive Calver and Joel Edwards, the two most recent leaders of the Evangelical Alliance asked them not to, which by and large they did.

But that truce has been broken by leaders such as Steve Chalke, do you remember he was asked not to speak at Spring Harvest a few years ago – do you know why? It is alleged that it was because the organisers of the week he was meant to be attending, the Word Alive week, are very Calvinistic in their thinking and they took offense at some of Steve Chalke's teaching about the cross, which was very Arminian.

And all of a sudden other important and respected leaders were laying their own views about God, Jesus and salvation on the table, throwing their weight behind either a Calvinistic or Arminian understanding. And after 20 years the debate is back out in the open.

So that is why it is back on the agenda, but does it matter? At this point we have to say that it isn't a life or death matter. Whichever view you are more inclined to agree with has no effect on your standing with God. Both Calvinism and Arminianism are orthodox, both are biblical. We haven't had time to go through the key texts used to support each of the different doctrines, but there are verses in the bible for all of them. So choosing between these two views is what I call a second order issue.

But, what we believe about the world, about God affects our behaviour and as we have already seen Calvinists and Arminians engage with the world in different ways because of their beliefs.

We have already said that Calvinists tend to have a less open view towards the role of women in the church and in the home.

And we have mentioned the disagreement between Steve Chalke and Word Alive over the way we talk about the cross.

And we have said that Arminians tend to be more focused on issues of social justice. Where as Calvinists because of their high view of God's sovereignty see less of a role for social action, and more of a role for governments to bring about God's rule. You can see how that might play out in America for example if you get a traditional Calvinistic president who sees himself and his country as God's vehicle for ushering in God's rule.

Other ways this debate might impact us day to day is through the songs we sing. For example, the song blessed be your name by Matt Redman has the line "you give and take away". A very Calvinistic view of God. Also, the song In Christ Alone has the line "from life's first breath to final plea, Jesus commands my destiny", which is again very Calvinist – command doesn't sit well alongside free will.

Some churches don't sing these songs because they reject the theology they contain.

Also, battling for the Arminians is Doug Horley with his song "we want to see Jesus lifted high". That has the line "every prayer a powerful weapon, bringing strongholds tumbling down".

Which is a very Arminian understanding of prayer – and we haven't mentioned prayer yet, but this is a major area of disagreement between the two views.

Calvinists hold to a very high view on the Sovereignty of God, unchanging all knowing and so on, which results in prayer being about us hearing God's will and changing the person praying rather than effecting change on God.

Arminians on the other hand would see prayer as a two way encounter, yes God changes us, but in ways that are not clear, our prayers also have an effect on God. Prayer leads to God doing things he might otherwise have not done. For Calvinists, us changing God through prayer is ridiculous.

Whether you are a Calvinist or an Arminian then will have a profound effect on what you think you are doing when you pray. Arminians will be more inclined to urge God to send his power and so on, while Calvinists will be more reflective and seek to understand what God is trying to say to them. And perhaps you can see why traditional Calvinists would be less open to the charismatic gifts of God, especially healing, which seem to be about inviting God to act in power in response to our request.

And finally, it also has a big effect on your understanding of evangelism. Calvinists believe that God elects some people to be saved and if elected they can't resist that call. Which to many non Calvinists seems to take away the need for evangelism.

Calvinists would argue that it doesn't, but it does change your focus. Rather than seeing your role as pivotal, that you can determine through your own efforts if people are saved or not, you see yourself as the conduit for God to bring about his will. Which is still pretty exciting.

But because Arminians believe in free will and our ability to choose or reject God, they see their role as pivotal in presenting people with that opportunity to respond or not. For them evangelism is more urgent and personal. They believe that what they are doing is having an impact, and can change things, just as their prayer can change things.

So, hopefully that has helped you see why it is important to think about which of these views about God you lean towards, because it affects how you behave in a whole load of ways. And it will affect the shape and focus of our church.

And I think I want to finish by saying that having said all of that, I am not convinced that it is an either or choice.

One of the things that strikes me about God is that he doesn't like to be put in a box, he doesn't like to be pinned down, and whenever people claim to have got God labelled, he does something unexpected. And God is a God of the impossible, he is 1 God yet 3 Gods, 3 Gods yet 1 God. Jesus is both fully God and fully man. He is the Alpha and the Omega, he is inside and beyond time.

So, while it may be impossible for us to get our heads around, is it not possible that God is both sovereign, all knowing and all powerful, without negating our free will. And perhaps we are both chosen by God before the beginning of time, Calvin's view, and yet have the free will to accept or reject that choice, Arminius's view.

I'm not sure that that view is orthodox by the way. But then the God that I see revealed in the bible doesn't often do orthodox either.

*Sources include various internet sites, bible dictionaries and Christianity Today*

## Questions

Which of these two views are you drawn to and why?

What are the biggest strengths in Calvinism?

What do you think are the problems with Calvinism?

What are the biggest strengths in Arminianism?

What do you think are the problems with Arminianism?

Can you see how they affect how we engage with the world?

How do they affect our understanding of suffering or evil?