

Arminians and the Gospel of Grace

Arminian theology (not *Armenian*, which is someone from the country of Armenia) is named after its proponent, Dutch theologian Jacob Arminius (1560-1609), who objected to the strong determinism of John Calvin. Arminius died before he could formally present his arguments, but his followers formalized them into five articles in the Remonstrance of 1610, which was later countered when The Synod of Dort (1618-1619) organized Calvinism into five points represented by the acronym TULIP (Total depravity, Unconditional grace, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, Perseverance of the saints).

Arminianism and Calvinism

It is not the purpose of this study to define and explain Arminius's five points. The chief objection he had was to Calvin's determinism which taught that God predestined and elected some people for eternal salvation and some for eternal damnation. Using passages like Romans 8:29 ("For whom He foreknew, He also predestined . . ."), Arminius held that God elected based on foreseeing who would believe in Christ. Like Calvin, Arminius believed in total depravity, but in the sense that people are totally separated from God and unable to respond to Him apart from the convicting and drawing work of the Holy Spirit. Like Calvin, Arminius also condemned Pelagian theology (from the fifth century monk, Pelagius) which taught that people had the ability on their own to respond to God. Rather, Arminius believed that the Holy Spirit worked on unbelievers to open their hearts to the gospel and respond in faith. This is sometimes called prevenient grace, enabling grace, or pre-regenerating grace. Arminian theology also differs from TULIP Calvinism by holding to universal atonement (contra limited atonement), grace that can be resisted (contra irresistible grace), and perseverance to keep salvation (contra perseverance to validate salvation).

Unlike TULIP Calvinism, Arminianism does not teach that a person must be regenerated before he can believe. However, its emphasis on man's free will and ability to exercise faith led to the belief that someone could willfully retract his faith and lose eternal salvation. Arminius had not completely settled his views on the loss of salvation before he died. There is some indication that he thought the loss of salvation was final. He taught that the righteousness of Jesus Christ is imputed to the believer as long as that person remains in Christ through faith. He was reluctant to say that sinful acts alone would lose salvation if someone still had faith in Christ. However, he seemed to make works the evidence of faith and conceded that someone living sinfully has no grounds for assurance of salvation.

Arminianism today varies in its belief system. Some hold that salvation cannot be lost while others believe that salvation can be lost but restored, and others believe it is lost irreversibly. John Wesley (1703-1791) developed Arminianism into its most common form. He believed that one could lose salvation based on apostasy from the faith or by sinful practice. Wesleyan Arminianism is the basis for some major denominations such as Methodist, Church of Christ, Nazarene, Pentecostal, Assembly of God, and some Baptists. Many churches hold a mix of Calvinistic and Arminian beliefs.

Arminianism and the grace of the gospel

The chief defining characteristic of Arminian theology today is the belief that someone who is regenerated can lose their salvation. This creates problems for those who believe in a gospel of free grace and eternal security. Since grace, by definition, is unconditional, it does not depend on human merit or conduct. If grace is apart from works, then salvation by grace through faith means that one cannot obtain salvation or lose salvation by what one does or does not do.

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Arminians deserve credit for recognizing that some difficult texts are addressed to Christians. This is much better than some Calvinistic interpretations that often impose a category of professing believers, unbelieving believers, or potential believers to explain texts that appear to say a believer can lose salvation or texts that speak of a severe judgment (the warnings in Hebrews, for example). Arminians err however, in thinking that these believers can lose their salvation (see *GraceNotes* no. 24 on eternal security). Their theology does not leave much room for the language of God's temporal judgment of sinning believers or the consequences for unfaithful believers at the Judgment Seat of Christ.

Arminians need to explain whether the loss of salvation is final (which Hebrews 6:4-6 would then indicate; see *GraceNotes* no. 39 on Hebrews 6:4-8) and if it is not, then how one can be saved again. Must those who believe in Christ as Savior but then renounce their faith believe again? How many times could this happen? Or how could those who lose their salvation gain it back? They have already believed in Christ as Savior, so what can be done? If it is asserted that they must turn from their sins to be saved again, then serious problems arise. First, this adds to faith a second condition of turning from sins which creates a gospel of works. Unconditional grace is denied or minimized in spite of the teaching of Romans 5:20 which says, "where sin abounded, grace abounded much more." Second, it is impossible to demonstrate what sins cause a loss of salvation. All sin is sinful. The Bible has no list of specific sins that bring a loss of salvation. Third, a person is left to decide whether salvation is lost based on subjective opinion or feeling.

Arminianism and assurance of salvation

Under Arminianism, a believer's assurance of salvation is in crisis. While they may assert that they can have assurance today if they are living righteously, they cannot be sure they will have salvation tomorrow because there is always the possibility of sin and defection. This conditional assurance is not the full assurance that the Bible teaches in passages like John 5:24; 6:37-40; 10:28-29; 17:12; Romans 8:30-39; 2 Timothy 2:13; and 1 John 5:11-13 (see *GraceNotes* no. 6 on assurance in Romans 8).

Conclusion

While Calvinism overemphasizes God's sovereign will, Arminianism overemphasizes man's free will. We must resist the temptation to be pushed to extremes by a theology instead of led to the truth by the Bible, which teaches both God's sovereignty and man's free will. Taken to their theological extremes, both Calvinism and Arminianism compromise the gospel of salvation by grace through faith. God has sovereignly decreed that man has free choice, therefore God's will and man's will work in concurrence when a person believes in Jesus Christ as Savior. Any theological system that requires works to earn, keep, or prove salvation is contrary to God's grace and therefore unbiblical.