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THE FOUNDATION OF ELECTION: AN OVERVIEW OF CLASSICAL
ARMINIANISM

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In regards to the academic treatment of the Dutch theologian, Jacob Arminius (ca. 1559-1609), Keith Stanglin writes, “Despite the accessibility of Arminius’ works and his undeniable status as a learned and thoughtful theologian-not to mention all the controversy that Arminius’ and its opponents have generated-Arminius has not been given due scholarly attention.”¹ The controversy, to which Stanglin speaks, predominantly revolves around Arminius’ time at Leiden University where he was the professor of theology. It was here that he was vocal about his grievances against supralapsarianism, a view which was largely held by his fellow professors. Arminius was disturbed by the doctrine which stated that God decreed the salvation of the elect logically prior to the fall.

A large portion of his academic career was dedicated to defending his grievances by means of public disputations and personal letters. Arminius was constantly absolved of any accusations of heresy or heterodoxy but the majority of his life was shrouded with drama until his death in 1609. His death, however, did not bring the end of the dispute. In fact, a year after his death his follower decided to summarize his beliefs in five succinct points known as *Remonstrance 1610*. The document was intended to encourage the leaders of the day to revise the *Heidelberg Confession of Faith* so that it could accommodate the beliefs of the Remonstrants (as they had come to be known).

The Synod of Dordt (1618-19) was convened in order to evaluate the controversy that was stirring among the Dutch churches due to Arminianism. It was there that they condemned Arminianism and responded harshly against the Remonstrants. Schaff writes, “By the decrees of the Synod of Dort, the church services of the Remonstrants were

¹Keith D. Stanglin. *Arminius on the Assurance of Salvation: The Context, Roots, and Shape of the Leiden Debate 1603-1609*. (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2007), 1.

prohibited. Episcopius [Arminius' pupil], with the other Remonstrants summoned before the synod, was deposed, as were more than 200 preachers. Those who were not willing to renounce all further activity as preachers were banished.”²

It would seem, however, that Classical Arminianism is experiencing a bit of a comeback in evangelical Protestantism. Keith Mathison of *Ligonier Ministries*, commenting on the debate between Calvinism and Arminianism, concedes, “The conflict continues, and in terms of numbers alone, Arminianism is clearly winning the war for the hearts and minds of professing Christians.”³ Unfortunately this comeback has been accompanied with a generic and possibly dangerous form of Arminianism. Ligon Duncan opines, “In the last fifty years in evangelicalism (as its Calvinistic moorings slip) we have seen an erosion of commitment to the exclusivity of Christ and the absolute necessity of the Gospel for salvation. This is the consequence of an encroaching, incipient, Arminianism. It has led many an Arminian to stop sharing the Gospel.”⁴

R.C. Sproul makes no qualms about associating Arminianism with the heresy known as semi-Pelagianism stating, “It seems that while we are all born Pelagians, most of us are reborn as semi-Pelagians. That is, we come into the kingdom as Arminians.”⁵ Many Classical Arminians have decided to become more vocal and defensive about their beliefs. For example Arminian scholar Roger E. Olson, comments on the ongoing

² Phillip Schaff, *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, Vol. IX: Petri – Reuchlin* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953) Remonstrants, <http://www.ccel.org/s/schaff/encyc/encyc09/htm/iv.vii.cliii.htm> (accessed February 16, 2013).

³ Keith Mathis, “Why I Am Not An Arminian”, [conclusion], (Sanford: Ligonier Ministries), <http://www.ligonier.org/blog/why-i-am-not-arminian/> (accessed February 15, 2013).

⁴ Ligon Duncan, “Reformed Evangelist”, [conclusion], (Washington DC: Together for the Gospel), <http://t4g.org/2006/02/reformed-evangelists/> (accessed February 15, 2013).

⁵ James White, *The Potter's Freedom: A Defense of the Reformation and a Rebutal of Norman Geisler's "Chosen But Free"* (New York: Calvary Press, 2000), 16.

misrepresentation that predominantly comes from the Reformed community. He writes, “Much of what is said about Arminianism within evangelical theological circles, including local congregations with strong Calvinist voices, is simply false.”⁶ But what are the issues at the heart of the debate? In other words, what are the major grievances that Calvinists usually have with Arminianism?

Typically they revolve around the *modus operandi* of grace, predestination, and the extent of Christ’s atonement. Calvinists believe that God unconditionally predestined those who would be the recipients of Christ’s atonement and they alone receive God’s effectual grace, which enables them to exhibit faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Arminians, on the other hand, believe that God unconditionally decreed believers to be the recipients of Christ’s atonement. God then unconditionally decreed that He would provide fallen man prevenient grace, thus restoring man’s lost ability to exhibit faith in Jesus Christ. God, from eternity past, would then conditionally predestine individuals whom He foreknew would receive His prevenient grace to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ.

This brief thesis will attempt to define and defend the soteriology of Jacob Arminius known as Classical Arminianism. It will speak directly to the doctrines that typically differentiate Arminians from Calvinists such as the *modus operandi* of grace, predestination, and the extent of the atonement. The goal of this project, then, is to provide the reader with a better understanding of Classical Arminianism, and present it as the stronger option (as oppose to Calvinism) in the evangelical community. Admittedly,

⁶ Roger E. Olson. *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities*. (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2006), 9.

this work is not an exhaustive treatment of Classical Arminianism. But hopefully will provide the thoughtful reader with a basic understanding of it nonetheless.

Conditional Election: Defined and Defended

To many, the debate between Calvinism and Arminianism is that the former affirms the doctrine of predestination whereas the latter rejects it. Admittedly, many laymen may share this understanding but they are, unfortunately, misinformed. The fact of the matter is that both sides affirm the doctrine of predestination. Adamant about this, Forlines writes, “Predestination is just as essential for Classical Arminianism as it is for Calvinism. If there is no predestination, there is no gospel.”⁷ So where does the debate lie? The debate is whether or not one must meet a condition in order to be part of the elect or is it unilaterally determined by God. Simply put, is election conditional or unconditional? Before answering this question, it is best to get some preliminary work out of the way. Both sides affirm that God is in control of all the affairs of human history but differ as to how that looks. Here we will discuss some differing views of God’s sovereignty as it is displayed in His salvation for mankind.

The Decrees of God According to Calvinism

Calvinists typically fall into one of two camps when discussing the logical order of decrees pertaining to the salvation of man known respectively as supralapsarianism and infralapsarianism. The former holds to the following formula:⁸

1. The decree to save (elect) some and reprobate others
2. The decree to create both the elect and the reprobate
3. The decree to permit the fall of both the elect and the reprobate

⁷ F. Leroy Forlines, *The Quest for Truth: Answering Life’s Inescapable Questions* (Nashville: Randall House, 2001), 394.

⁸ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 842.

4. The decree to provide salvation only for the elect

Infralapsarianism, on the other hand, holds to a slightly different understanding:⁹

1. The decree to create human beings
2. The decree to permit the fall
3. The decree to elect some and reprobate others
4. The decree to provide salvation only for the elect

There is a core difference between supralapsarianism and infralapsarianism. The latter believes that God unconditionally decreed the salvation of the elect logically prior to the fall whereas infralapsarianism believe that the decree was logically after. This is an internal debate amongst Calvinists and most likely will not be settled anytime soon. Both, mind you, affirm that God unilaterally determined who would be the recipients of God's salvation without any consultation from the individual being saved. This seems to be the language of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*.¹⁰ They would surely reject that idea God predestines according to foreseen faith.

Notice the language of both positions. While Calvinists believe that God exhaustively determined all the events of the world, they still like to use words such as "permit" when pertaining to the fall of man. This gives us insight as to how the Calvinists understand God's providential care of His world. Paradoxically, it would seem, He wants the best of both worlds. On one hand, God determines all things, but on the other hand, He permits certain things.

The Decrees of God According to Arminianism

Arminians reject both supralapsarianism and infralapsarianism. The primary grievance against them is that they both fail to make Christ the primacy of divine

⁹ Ibid., 843.

¹⁰ "As God has appointed the elect unto glory, so has He, by the eternal and most free purpose of His will, foreordained all the means thereunto" (Chapter 3, Article 6).

election. Notice that both frameworks understand the elect to have been appointed to salvation logically prior to the provision of salvation. Arminian theologian Roger Olson comments: “Arminius considers the Calvinist doctrine insufficiently Christocentric. Jesus Christ seems to arrive as an afterthought to God’s primary decree to save some and damn others.”¹¹ Matthew J. Pinson, speaking for Arminius, concurs “Arminius is arguing against the Calvinistic idea of election to faith rather than in view of faith or in view of one’s union with Christ. He believes that this concept involves God settling his elective love on people without regard to Christ’s work or one’s participation in it.”¹²

Another point of contention is that Arminians embrace a slightly different understanding as to how God carries out His decrees. Calvinism seems to teach that God is controlling all things whereas Arminianism teaches that He is in control of all things. Arminius certainly affirmed that God “ordained all things” but with certain qualifications in mind. Consider his own words:

Nothing is done without God's ordination," [or appointment]: if by the word "ordination" is signified, "that God appoints things of any kind to be done," this mode of enunciation is erroneous, and it follows as a consequence from it, that God is the author of sin. But if it signify, that "whatever it be that is done, God ordains it to a good end," the terms in which it is conceived are in that case correct.¹³

Arminius rejected the idea that God ordained the events within the world with the greatest, microscopic detail. If God operated in such a manner, Arminius contended, the

¹¹ Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities*, 183.

¹² Matthew J. Pinson, “The Nature of the Atonement in the Theology of Jacobus Arminius.” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 53/4 (2010) 780.

¹³ *The Works of Arminius*, trans. James and William Nichols, vol. 1, *Declaration of the Sentiments of Arminius* (Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1825), 705-705.

logical conclusion would be that God is the author of evil. Arminianism teaches that God determines everything but in the cases of evil, He simply permits them. Olson writes, “according to Arminius, everything is governed by God’s eternal, though not equal, decrees, and nothing at all can happen without God’s permission and cooperation.”¹⁴ So with this understanding in mind, Arminians believe that God does consider the will of man in the scheme of salvation. Particularly, he considers the man’s faith. This in no way infringes on God’s sovereignty because He wanted it that way. So in one sense, the decrees of salvation are unconditionally made but incorporated a condition into them that man must meet in order to the part of the elect. Robert Picirilli agrees when he states:

When God decreed the plan of salvation, He did so with nothing outside Himself imposing any conditions on Him. Whatever He decreed, He did so in absolute sovereignty, being under no obligations to any consideration except those reflecting His own nature. The decree was made unconditionally; its content is conditional salvation.¹⁵

So then what is the Arminian understanding of God’s decrees of salvation? Henry C. Thiessen offers a modified form of sublapsarianism. Sublapsarianism, in its original form teaches:¹⁶

1. The decree to create human beings.
2. The decree to permit the fall.
3. The decree to provide salvation sufficient for all.
4. The decree to save some and reprobate others.

This understanding embraces any view that wishes to hold to general atonement (salvation offered to all). This would include those who adhere to Molinism,

¹⁴ Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities*, 124.

¹⁵ Robert E. Picirilli, *Grace Faith Free Will: Contrasting Views of Salvation: Calvinism & Arminianism* (Nashville: Randall House, 2002), 45.

¹⁶ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 843.

Amyraldianism, and other positions. But here is the modified position that Thiessien believes better represents Arminianism¹⁷:

1. The decree to create human beings.
2. The decree to permit the fall.
3. The decree to provide salvation sufficient for all.
4. The decree to apply that salvation to some, to those who believe.

Notice the modification is made on the fourth point. It makes a point to emphasize that faith is a very necessary and real element in the plan of salvation.

Election According to Arminianism

With the preliminary work out of the way, we can now focus our attention on what conditional election is. According to Arminius, predestination is simply “the election of men to salvation, and the reprobation of them to destruction.”¹⁸ Then election would be defined as, “the decree of God, by which, of Himself, from eternity, He decreed to justify in (or through) Christ, believers, and to accept them unto eternal life, to the praise of His glorious grace.”¹⁹ The decrees of salvation, according to Arminius, are as follows:

1. The first decree of predestination would be “to appoint his Son, Jesus Christ, for a Mediator, Redeemer, saviour, Priest and King”.²⁰ Paul makes it perfectly clear that God “chose us in Him” (Eph. 1:4) which would assume that Christ was the first to be predestined. Peter elsewhere states that Jesus was “foreordained before the foundation of the world” to be the savior of God’s people (1 Peter 1:20).

¹⁷ Henry C. Thiessien, *Introductory Lectures in Systematic Theology*, rev. ed., rev. by Vernon D. Doerksen (Grand Rapids: Wm. B Eerdsman Publishing Company 1949), 343.

¹⁸ Arminius, *The Declaration of the Sentiments of Arminius*, 614.

¹⁹ *The Works of Arminius*, trans. James and William Nichols, vol. 3, *The Theses of Dr. Francis Junius* (Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1875), 236.

²⁰ Arminius, *The Declaration of the Sentiments of Arminius*, 653.

2. God's second decree would be "to receive into favour those who repent and believe, and, in Christ" and to leave unbelievers under their just condemnation.²¹ This is what Jesus clearly said to Nicodemus when he said, "whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).
3. Third, God "decreed to administer in a sufficient and efficacious manner the means which were necessary for repentance and faith; and to have such administration instituted".²²
4. The fourth and final decree states, "God decreed to save and damn certain particular persons. This decree has its foundation in the foreknowledge of God, by which he knew from all eternity those individuals who would, through his preventing grace, believe, and, through his subsequent grace would persevere."²³

To put it succinctly, God determined that Christ would be the savior of those whom God foreknew would respond positively to His prevenient grace. To be predestined, one must meet the condition of faith, and thus election is conditional.

Biblical Considerations: Romans 8:29

A few things need to be said before looking into the Bible for evidence of conditional election. First, the thesis of this paper is not to offer an exhaustive, exegetical treatment of all relevant passages pertaining to election. That would exceed the amount of space allotted. Second, Romans 9-11 are admittedly the chapters one must address when studying the doctrine of election. This is where the heart of the debate lies. Again, due to limited space, it is advised to the reader to consult the articles provided in the footnote that provide Arminian alternatives to a Calvinist interpretation of Romans 9-11.²⁴ Third

²¹Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Since this purpose of this paper is not to provide an exhaustive treatment on the doctrine of predestination, it is recommended that the reader take the time to review Brian Abasciano's *Paul's Use of the Old Testament in Romans 9:1-9: An Intertextual and Theological Exegesis* <http://evangelicalarminians.org/?q=abasciano-Pauls-Use-of-the-Old-Testament-in-Romans-9.1-9-An-Intertextual-and-Theological-Exegesis&page=4> (accessed February, 2013). In it, Abasciano argues that

and finally, there is an internal debate amongst Arminians themselves about the nature of predestination. Arminius himself taught that election is in accordance with divine foreknowledge. Other variations of Classical Arminianism affirm what is known as a corporate election which teaches that election primarily revolves around the group and secondarily around the individuals. The election of the group (i.e. the church) is unconditional but in order to be a part of the group, one must meet the condition of faith.

Since this thesis is about Jacob Arminius' soteriology, it will not adequately address corporate election, but will rather address election according to foreknowledge. With that being the case, the one verse primarily being considered will be the one verse that contains the word "foreknew" in the context of salvation (Rom. 8:29).

The word "to foreknow" comes from the Greek word *proginosko* which occurs five times in the New Testament (Acts 26:5; Romans 8:29; 11:2; 1 Peter 1:20 and 2 Peter 3:17). The word "foreknowledge" comes from the Greek word *prognosis* and is only found in Acts 2:23 and 1 Peter 1:2. Romans 8:29 states that, "For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren." The Arminian interpretation would claim that God, in His vast wisdom, knew precisely who would respond positively to His prevenient grace. Based on

Romans 9-11 teaches that election is primarily corporate with the individual being secondary. In other words, Christ is unconditionally elected to be the head of the corporate entity known as the church. Individuals then can be grafted into the body providing that they meet the condition of faith. He writes, "To be sure, election and its appellation (i.e., calling) have to do with eschatological salvation, which necessarily affects individuals. But both of these divine actions apply first and foremost to the people of God as a group, and then to individuals as members of the elect people. Therefore, election and calling are conditional upon faith in Jesus Christ. In traditional theological terminology, Paul's use of the OT in Romans 9:1-9 argues for an Arminian rather than a Calvinistic interpretation of Romans 9, albeit on untraditional grounds."(352). Robert Shank has a similar understanding of election when he writes, "The certainty of election and perseverance is with respect, not to particular individual men unconditionally, but rather with respect to the *ekklesia*, the corporate body of all whom, through the Living Covenant between God and all who trust in His righteous Servant." Robert L Shank, *Elect in the Son: A Study of the Doctrine of Election*, (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1989), 206.

this foreseen faith, God predestines the individual to be the recipient of the atonement provided by the cross of Jesus Christ.

Prominent Calvinist scholar R.C. Sproul objects stating, “the conclusion that God’s predestination is determined by God’s foreknowledge is not taught by the passage. Paul does not come out and say that God chooses people on the basis of his prior knowledge of their choices.”²⁵To a certain degree, we can understand Sproul’s objection. After all, the text does not explicitly state that God foreknew those He predestined as believers. But this merits a simple question, who else would God predestine if it were not believers? Arminius states, “No one is in Christ, except he is a believer. Therefore no one is elected in Christ, unless he is a believer.”²⁶After all, it is not unbelievers who are conformed to image of Christ but believers. The word “foreknew” is better understood that God affectionately knew them and not only what He knows about them. Forlines shares the same sentiment, “If God foreknew the elect as being His it is necessarily inferred that this foreknowledge presupposes the person’s belief in Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior.”²⁷

Furthermore, Sproul also needs to admit that the text does not say what he needs it to say. That is, it does not say that God predestined individuals to become believers. The passage primarily discusses what is in store for those who have already been predestined. But Sproul would also have to admit that his scheme implies that God decrees

²⁵R.C. Sproul, *Chosen by God: Know God’s Perfect Plan for His Glory and His Children* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1986), 130.

²⁶ *The Works of Arminius*, trans. James and William Nichols, vol. 3, *Examination of Dr. Perkin’s Pamphlet* (Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1825), 452.

²⁷ F. Lerory Forlines, *Classical Arminianism: A Theology of Salvation*. ed. J. Matthew Pinson (Nashville: Randall House, 2011), 181.

unbelievers to be predestined into the body of Christ logically prior to their confession of faith; which seems to go against the biblical pattern that says “we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand” (Rom. 5:2).²⁸

Possible Objection to Conditional Election

One possible objection to conditional election is that it makes salvation rest ultimately in the hands of man. “Salvation is made to depend ultimately on the individual’s will, not on the sovereign will of almighty God. Faith is understood to be man’s gift to God, not God’s gift to man.”²⁹ The problem with this objection is that it fails to take the other decrees of God into consideration. The second decree of predestination in Arminian thinking states that God unconditionally decided to receive into His good favor those who did repent and respond in faith. If God had chosen not to honor faith, then man’s faith would amount to nothing. Thus, God’s decision to honor man’s faith is the deciding factor in salvation. Furthermore, man’s faith would not even be a possibility if God had not supplied His prevenient grace as stipulated in the third decree of God.

Another problem with this objection is that it assumes that the Calvinistic understanding of sovereignty is true which believes that God exhaustively determined all things. The problem with this understanding is that, followed to its logical conclusion, it makes God the author of evil. But most Calvinists, rightly so, believe that God decreed

²⁸ I understand this ties into the debate about the order of salvation (*ordo salutis*). The Calvinist believes that regeneration logically precedes faith. That is, we are regenerated so that we can have faith. The Arminian believes that faith logically precedes regeneration, That is, we believe, therefore, we are regenerated. Space does not allow to fully engage this matter but suggested further reading in support of the Arminian view is given by Robert L Hamilton’s “The Order of Faith and Election in John’s Gospel: You Do Not Believe Because You Are Not My Sheep” <http://evangelicalarminians.org/files/Hamilton.%20The%20Order%20of%20Faith%20and%20Election%20in%20John%27s%20Gospel..pdf> (accessed February, 2013).

²⁹ David N. Steele, Curtis C. Thomas, and S. Lance Quinn, *The Five Points of Calvinism: Defined, Defended, and Documented* (Philippsburg: P&R, 2004), 162.

He would permit certain things to happen; especially in the cases of evil. So this would allow Him “off the hook”, so to speak. But all Arminians are doing is applying the same principle except in the plan of salvation. That is to say, God decreed that He would graciously permit and endowed fallen man to respond to His salvation offered to them. Why then is this an infringement on God’s sovereignty when Arminians use this principle but not when Calvinists use it?

Prevenient Grace: Defined and Defended

Contrary to what many think, Classical Arminianism affirms the total depravity of man. That is to say, due to original sin, man does not have the natural capacity to practice any good work or exhibit faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, some Calvinists have been less than charitable in their description of the Arminian view of human depravity. Consider the following quote from a Calvinist describing Arminianism:

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 He does so in such a manner as not to 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 of his ability to choose good over evil in spiritual matters; his will is not enslaved to his sinful nature.³⁰

From this quote, we can see where a great deal of confusion can enter into the debate. But Arminius had a strong view on the necessity of grace:

In this manner, I ascribe to grace the commencement, the continuance and the consummation of all good, and to such an extent do I carry its influence, that a man, though already regenerate, can neither conceive, will, nor do any good at all, nor resist any evil temptation, without this

³⁰Ibid.,5-6.

preventing and exciting, this following and co-operating grace. From this statement it will clearly appear, that I by no means do injustice to grace, by attributing, as it is reported of me, too much to man's free-will. For the whole controversy reduces itself to the solution of this question, "is the grace of God a certain irresistible force?" That is, the controversy does not relate to those actions or operations which may be ascribed to grace, (for I acknowledge and inculcate as many of these actions or operations as any man ever did,) but it relates solely to the mode of operation, whether it be irresistible or not. With respect to which, I believe, according to the scriptures, that many persons resist the Holy Spirit and reject the grace that is offered.³¹

So it is not fair to assert that Arminianism denies the depravity of man or the necessity of grace. Both Calvinists and Arminianism are in agreement about man being so desperately wicked that he needs God's enabling grace. The difference, however, reveals itself when the two groups debate as to how God counteracts the depravity so that man can freely respond to His offer of salvation. So the debate is not about the necessity or nature of grace but the operations of grace.

Free Will and Grace According to Calvinism

It is very unfortunate, that Calvinism (along with Arminianism) is often misrepresented at this point. A common characterization of Calvinism is that it denies that man has a free will. But this is not the case at all. They simply have a differing understanding as to what free will is. Calvinism believes in what is called compatibilism. This is the idea that divine determinism is compatible with man's free will. But where did the will of man come from? After all, total depravity teaches that man is both unable and unwilling to respond to the call of salvation.

³¹ Arminius, *Declaration of the Sentiments of Arminius*, 664.

To counteract this depravity, Calvinism teaches that God extends a call of salvation to all but a special inward call to the elect only. “Through this special call”, they say, “The Holy Spirit performs a work of grace within the sinner, which inevitably brings him to faith in Christ.”³²This grace is irresistible or efficacious meaning that it will necessarily accomplish what it set out to do apart from the will of man.

For the Calvinist, fallen man is free in that he can choose within his own nature. He cannot choose to do otherwise, but no external forces coerce him to make those decisions within his corrupt nature. In order for man to exhibit faith in God, the Holy Spirit must regenerate him so that he can freely choose to follow Christ from his redeemed nature. This in no way infringes on the person’s free will so long as free will is understood in the compatibilistic sense. So to summarize, those whom God predestined to salvation will receive efficacious grace which will necessarily result in their free expression of faith.

Free Will and Grace According to Arminianism

As stated before, Arminians do agree with Calvinists about the adverse effects sin has had on man. Contrary to Calvinism, Arminians believe in what is called libertarianism. This teaches that divine determinism is incompatible with free will. God can strongly influence the man’s decision but cannot determine the decision and it still be considered free. Grace is necessary but it is not determinative and can be resisted. This is not to say that man has absolute free will. Man is completely submissive to the governing power of God. Picirilli writes, “What freedom human beings have is therefore relative, entirely subject to God’s government of all things for the accomplishing of his will. Even

³² Steele, *The Five Points of Calvinism: Defined, Defended, and Documented*, 53.

so, in the image of God, persons have a will and are constitutionally free to make moral choices and responsible for them. God is not the only actor in the universe; man also acts-for good or evil.”³³

Prevenient Grace According to Arminianism

The Arminians, therefore, have a differing solution to the depravity of man; and that is the doctrine of prevenient grace. Prevenient grace would be then that preparatory grace that enables a person to respond to the gospel if it were to be offered to them. This grace is offered to all in the form of a call. Thomas Oden speaks of three aspects of calling: external, internal (“addressed to the heart through the Spirit”) and efficacious (“wherein God’s intent is fulfilled through grace awakening a fitting human response”).³⁴ According to Arminianism, God offers both the external and internal call to all men. But whether or not the recipient receives efficacious grace is contingent on the recipient’s response. Olson writes, “Arminians believe that if a person is saved, it is because God initiated the relationship and enabled the person to respond freely with repentance and faith...No person can repent, believe and be saved without the Holy Spirit’s supernatural support from beginning to end. All the person does is cooperate by not resisting.”³⁵ Arminius wrote:

This is my opinion concerning the free-will of man: In his primitive condition as he came out of the hands of his creator, man was endowed with such a portion of knowledge, holiness and power, as enabled him to understand, esteem, consider, will, and to perform the true

³³ Robert E. Picirilli, “Foreknowledge, Freedom, and the Future” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43, no. 2 (June 2000) 259-271.

³⁴ Thomas C. Oden, *The Transforming Power of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 78.

³⁵ Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities*, 160

good, according to the commandment delivered to him. Yet none of these acts could he do, except through the assistance of Divine Grace. But in his lapsed and sinful state, man is not capable, of and by himself, either to think, to will, or to do that which is really good; but it is necessary for him to be regenerated and renewed in his intellect, affections or will, and in all his powers, by God in Christ through the Holy Spirit, that he may be qualified rightly to understand, esteem, consider, will, and perform whatever is truly good.³⁶

With the terms defined, it is clear that Arminians believe in the *freed* will of man rather than the *free* will of man. Keith Stanglin writes, “Arminius was willing to elevate grace as much as possible, provided that it does not undermine the free choice that God has justly granted to humanity; in other words, like many of his contemporaries, he was attempting to strike a balance between divine grace and human freedom to salvation”.³⁷

Arminians are often accused of having some morbid infatuation with the autonomy of man and thus we desire to ascribe to fallen man free will. Arminius believed this doctrine to be important for two reasons. One, it ensured that God could not somehow be accused of being the author of evil. Two, it made man responsible for his actions resulting in his just damnation. These are the only two reasons Arminians are willing to ascribe to man a will that has been freed by God’s prevenient grace

Biblical Consideration and Possible Objection

This portion of the paper will combine both what the Bible says about prevenient grace and objections to it. The reason being is that because the primary objection to prevenient grace is that it simply lacks biblical support. Although many people are drawn

³⁶Arminius, *Declaration of the Sentiments of Arminius*, 659.

³⁷ Stanglin, *Arminius on the Assurance of Salvation: The Context, Roots, and Shape of the Leiden Debate 1603-1609*, 80.

to the idea of prevenient grace, they find this to be a great stumbling block. If prevenient grace is not affirmed by the Bible, then it should be automatically dismissed regardless of how reasonable it may be.

Thomas Schreiner writes, “Prevenient grace is attractive because it solves so many problems, but it should be rejected because it cannot be exegetically vindicated.”³⁸ Admittedly, it is difficult to find Arminians who are willing to offer what Schreiner is asking for. This, however, does not necessarily mean that the doctrine does not have any biblical basis. The doctrine could be upheld if it is implied in other biblical teachings and not negated by scripture.³⁹ To some, this may sound disturbing but this is exactly how Christianity arrived at the doctrine of the Trinity. For instance, the Bible teaches that there is only one God and that three persons claim to be God. So the conclusion we are forced to reach in order to avoid heresy is to affirm that there is a God who is one in essence but three in persons. There is no one verse that explicitly teaches this to be true, but it is strongly inferred by other teachings and not negated elsewhere in scripture.

So does the doctrine of prevenient grace operate in the same manner? This paper believes that it does. First, what other clear teachings of the Bible imply the doctrine of prevenient grace? One, the Bible declares that God is genuinely remorseful when sinners do not respond to His calling. Jesus was clearly distraught when Jerusalem was unwilling to be gathered to Him (Matt. 23:37-39). God was disheartened to find that Israel yielded

³⁸Thomas Schreiner, “Does Scripture Teach Prevenient Grace in the Wesleyan Sense?” Chapter 9 in *Still Sovereign* (Grand Rapids:Baker, 2000) http://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/pdf/schreiner_prevenient.pdf (accessed Feb, 2013).

³⁹This is the exact criteria Terrance Tiessen uses to support the doctrine of prevenient grace. Terrance Tiessen, “Scriptural Support for the Concept OF Universally Sufficient Enabling Grace” Appendix 3 in *Who Can Be Saved?* (Grand Rapids:IVP) http://thoughtstheological.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/Appendix-3.mss_.pdf (accessed Feb, 2013).

Him no fruit regardless of the fact that He had done everything for them in order to do so (Isa. 5:4). Jeremiah wrote, “Hear and pay attention, do not be arrogant, for the Lord has spoken. Give glory to the Lord your God before He brings the darkness...But if you do not listen, I will weep in secret because of your pride; my eyes will weep bitterly, overflowing with tears, because the Lord’s flock will be taken captive” (Jer. 13:15-17).

We know that Judah failed to listen to God, the solution that the Calvinists offers is that God only offered them an external call rather than the inward call that would have resulted in their repentance. Walls and Dongells aptly point out, “Although the text seems to identify salvation as God’s deepest desire, the Calvinist must conclude that at a deeper level God never intended to bestow transforming grace on Jeremiah’s hearers. In other words, the true intentions of God cannot be discerned from his words.”⁴⁰ So if irresistible grace is true, why would God be remorseful over the lack of repentance of individuals when He could have made them repentant without infringing on their free will? It would seem that prevenient grace better explains these passages in that it teaches that God genuinely wants them to repent but they refused His grace; thus explaining His saddened reactions.

Second, Scripture charges us to preach the gospel, without exception, to all of humanity. This seems to be what Jesus was clearly saying when He said, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). Paul tells us that we are ambassadors of Christ who are pleading on God’s behalf to the world, to be reconciled to Him (2 Cor. 5:20). Jesus said, seemingly without exception, “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned”

⁴⁰ Jerry L. Walls and Joseph R. Dongell, *Why I Am Not A Calvinist* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 51.

(Mark 16:16). How would this work if prevenient grace were not true? On one hand, Jesus is offering salvation to those who believe. But why make such an offer to everyone if He does not give the grace to everyone enabling them to believe? On the other hand, He condemns those who refuse to believe. But would it be considered just to require someone to do something they lack the capacity to do? The Calvinists are, of course, aware of such passages. “The gospel invitation extends a call to salvation to everyone who hears its message. It invites all men without distinction to drink freely of the water of life and live. But this outward general call, extended to the elect and nonelect alike, will not bring sinners to Christ”.⁴¹ But this explanation seems to make God guilty of double speak. Outwardly, He gives the appearance that He desires all to be saved, but inwardly He withholds grace to make it so. This is one of the more alarming implications of Calvinism’s compatibilism which teaches that God can save anyone He wants without infringing on their free will. The only reason, therefore, someone ultimately winds up in hell is because God chose not to save them. So, in order to make God’s universal call to repentance sincere, prevenient grace must be true.

But are there any passages that demonstrate prevenient grace to be false and irresistible grace is true? Often, Calvinists typically point to John 3:3-5; 6:44; Ephesians 2:1-2; 4-5 as texts that contradict the doctrine of prevenient grace. But all these passages indicate is that grace is necessary in order to respond positively to the gospel invitation. This is the impression Terrance Tiessen gives when he says, “What these passages teach us is that, in our fallen condition, *apart from the gracious intervention of God*, none of us

⁴¹ Steele, Thomas, and Quinn, *The Five Points of Calvinism: Defined, Defended, and Documented*, 52.

comes to God. No one can say that Jesus is Lord, without the working of the Holy Spirit in our minds and wills.”⁴²

So there seems to be strong implications from other clear teachings that prevenient grace is perfectly congruent with the Bible. God’s remorse to unrepentant people would seem nonsensical if prevenient grace were false. God’s universal call to salvation would seem farcical if prevenient grace were false. Furthermore, it cannot be definitively demonstrated that it contradicts the Bible. Lastly, the alternative (irresistible grace) makes God the ultimate reason as why people go to hell. He could have saved them while leaving their will in tact, but simply chose not to.

General Atonement: Defined and Defended

The final point of contention that will be considered in this paper is the scope of the atonement provided by Jesus Christ; or to put into a question, “For whom did Christ die?” Here we will see a crucial difference between Calvinism and Arminianism.

The Extent of the Atonement According to Calvinism

Calvinists believe that while Christ was sufficient to save everyone, it is only intended for those that God unilaterally determined to be the elect. Christ’s redeeming work was “intended to render complete satisfaction for certain specified sinners, and that it actually secured salvation for these individuals and for no one else.”⁴³ There are, without, question many passages in the New Testament that specify that God “will save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21). Christ loved the Church specifically that He “gave Himself for her” (Eph. 5:25). Calvinists are adamant to declare that this in no way

⁴² Terrance Tiessen, “Scriptural Support for the Concept OF Universally Sufficient Enabling Grace” Appendix 3 in *Who Can Be Saved?* (Grand Rapids:IVP) http://thoughtstheological.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/Appendix-3.mss_.pdf (accessed Feb, 2013).

⁴³ Steele, *The Five Points of Calvinism: Defined, Defended, and Documented*, 40.

suggests that God lacks love for the non elect. After all, “He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust?” (Matt. 5:45). The non elect experience the common grace of God everyday of their lives and experiencing great joy along the way.

The Extent of the Atonement According to Arminianism

Arminians, on the other hand, believe that the atonement of Christ was intended for everyone but only applied to those who would freely (in the libertarian sense) believe. To believe that Christ provided salvation for only some, would strongly imply that God does not sincerely love the non elect. Olson concurs, “If God is love (1 John 4:7) but intended Christ’s atoning death to be the propitiation for only certain people so only they have any chance of being saved, then “love” has no intelligible meaning when referring to God. All Christians agree that God is love. But believers in limited atonement must interpret God’s love as somehow compatible with God unconditionally selecting some people to eternal torment in hell when He could save them (because election to salvation and thus salvation itself is unconditional).”⁴⁴

Biblical Considerations

There seems to be several passages that clearly spell out that Christ died for all and desires the salvation for all. John the Baptist, speaking of Jesus, stated, “Behold! The lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). Jesus told Nicodemus that “God so loved the world that He gave His one and only son” (John 3:16). The author of Hebrews says that Christ “tasted death for everyone” (Heb. 2:9). Furthermore, Peter writes that God desires the salvation of all men (2 Pet. 3:8). Jesus bitterly wept over state

⁴⁴ Roger E Olson. “Is God’s Love Limited to the Elect?” [conclusion], (Springfield: The General Council of the Assemblies of God), http://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/201203/201203_044_limited_atonement.cfm (accessed March 15, 2013).

of Jerusalem which would be an odd thing to do considering He could make them freely believe (Matt. 23: 37-38). Paul is clear in his letter to the Romans writes, “Therefore, as through one man’s offense judgment came to *all* men, resulting in condemnation even so through one Man’s righteous act the free gift came to *all* men” (Rom. 5:18). The free gift came to all men without exception in the same way that judgment came to all men without exception.

This is not to mention those verses that “simply cannot be ignored.”⁴⁵ Erickson writes:

Among the impressive is 1 Timothy 4:10, which affirms that the living God “is the Savior of all men, and especially of those who believe.” Apparently the Savior has done something for all persons, though it is less in degree that what he has done for those who believe. Among the other texts that argue for the universality of Christ’s saving work and cannot be ignored are 1 John 2:2 and Isaiah 53:6. In addition, we must consider statements like 2 Peter 2:1, which affirms that some for whom Christ died do perish.⁴⁶

1 John 2:2 claims that Jesus is the propitiation for the world’s sin (1 John 2:2). Isaiah 53:6 could not be any clearer in what it says, “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all” (Isa. 53:6). The conclusion is inescapable. Everyone’s iniquity is laid upon Christ because everyone has turned away. 2 Peter 2:1 is very convincing because it speaks of individuals who ultimately are damned regardless of the fact that Christ bought them.

The passages that seem to restrict the scope of salvation are easily reconciled with the passages that universalize the scope of salvation. For if Christ died for everyone, then that would entail His church. But the converse is not true, it is very difficult to make the

⁴⁵ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 851.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 851.

universal passages fit into the restrictive view. For one, as the Calvinists do, would have to believe that God expresses a desire to save all men but inwardly only wants a portion to be saved. His actions would contradict His speech.

Possible Objections

Although it seems that a general atonement was made for all without exception; this does not mean that Calvinists have not posed some challenging objections.

First, Arminians face a similar problem that Calvinists do. Arminians concede that God has the power to force someone to believe. If that is the case, why doesn't God do just that? After all, it would be more loving to force someone to go to heaven than it would be to send them to hell. The objection, however, can be explained in Arminius' view on God's love. He argues that God's love is two fold (*Duplex Dei Amor*): He loves the sinner and He loves His own justice. Arminius contends that to satisfy both His love for sinners and His justice, God served as substitute for sinners on the cross. He writes,

He gave satisfaction to his love for the creature who was a sinner, when he gave up his Son who might act the part of Mediator. But he rendered satisfaction to his love for justice and to his hatred against sin, when he imposed on his Son the office of Mediator by the shedding of his blood and by the suffering of death; (Heb. ii. 10; v, 8, 9;) and he was unwilling to admit him as the Intercessor for sinners except when sprinkled with his own blood, in which he might be made the propitiation for sins.⁴⁷

To answer the objection, God would be violating His own love for His justice if He were to pardon a sinner apart from their repentance. So the Calvinist still has to face the daunting challenge. If God can justly appoint who the elect are without regards to the

⁴⁷ *The Works of Arminius*, trans. James and William Nichols, vol. 2, *Public Disputations*, (Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1828), 221.

works of Christ, why doesn't He do it for all? This is the predicament a Calvinist faces if he endorses either supralapsarianism or infralapsarianism and compatibilism. Since the Arminian rejects all of those, this is a predicament that is only unique to Calvinism.

Some also argue that general atonement necessarily leads to universalism. If Christ died for everyone, so they say, then everyone must be saved. But this greatly misunderstands the Arminian position that Christ's atonement is provisional in nature. His salvation is universal in scope but not in application. But some argue that this somehow limits the power of the atonement. One Calvinist puts it this way, "The Arminians also place a limitation on the atoning work of Christ, but one of a much different nature. They hold that Christ's saving work was designed to make possible the salvation of all men on the condition that they believe, but that Christ's death *in itself* did not actually secure or guarantee salvation for anyone."⁴⁸ But even the Calvinist must concede that the atonement does not automatically save anyone. They can argue that perhaps the application of the atonement is guaranteed but until then, the atonement is considered provisional. Forlines writes, "The only way to deny the provisional nature of atonement is to consider all people for whom Christ died to be justified before they experience faith".⁴⁹

Another objection is that under the Arminian schema, it possible that no one will actually be saved. Terry L. Miethe counteracts this objection with a syllogism:

1. The Bible unquestionably teaches an unlimited atonement
2. The Bible also teaches that same will be saved
3. Therefore, some individuals will accept the free gift of God's grace and will in fact be saved.

⁴⁸ Steele, Thomas, and Quinn, *The Five Points of Calvinism: Defined, Defended, and Documented*, 40.

⁴⁹ Forlines, *The Quest for Truth: Answering Life's Inescapable Questions*, 408.

Furthermore, Miethe challenges an implication of the objection. He writes, “ Doesn’t the Calvinist argument...really say that the Holy Spirit is powerless in his working in the world to convict sinners of sin? Surely there is a great difference between saying that something is effective for some, given free will, and saying it might not be effective for any.”⁵⁰

Conclusion

Calvinism and Arminianism share many similarities. Both affirm the depravity of man, believing that the unredeemed are unable and unwilling to respond to the gospel call. Both affirm necessity of grace, believing that without it, the unredeemed are hopelessly lost. Both affirm the urgency of preaching the gospel, believing that God has ordained the preaching event as the primary means to expand His kingdom.

This being said, however, it has been adequately demonstrated that Classical Arminianism is to be preferred for several reasons. First, Classical Arminianism properly places Jesus Christ at the foundation of election. Both schemas of Calvinism appoint the elect to salvation logically prior thus inadvertently treating Jesus as the means of salvation rather than the source. Second, Classical Arminianism clearly teaches that God is not the author of evil and holds man responsible for his sins. Although Calvinist asserts the same thing, it would seem to be inconsistent with their compatibilism. For God, according to compatibilism, could decree that every man repent and do only good without violating their free will. It then, therefore, follows that God’s unwillingness to save is the only reason someone ultimately goes to hell.

⁵⁰Terry L. Miethe, “The Universal Power of the Atonement” pg. 76 Clark H. Pinnock ed. *The Grace of God and the Will of Man*. Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers. 1989.

Third, Classical Arminianism can consistently affirm God's love for everyone since they believe Christ died for everyone. God's love for the non elect, according to Calvinism, does not seem like real love at all. While it is true that God allows earthly blessings to come to them in this life; what is the point if He God withholds the grace necessary in order to enjoy the blessings in the next? Lastly, Classical Arminians have more freedom in the presentation of the gospel. Calvinists can tell a room full of people that Christ died for them and they should repent because they are uncertain as to whom the elect are. But on individual level, they would have great difficulty in answering John Doe's question, "Did Christ die for me?"

While it is true that most Christians would fall under the umbrella of "Arminianism", it is not true that all can properly articulate their beliefs. Hopefully, a well articulated Arminianism will rise and present itself as a viable option within Christendom.

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