

**LEROY FORLINES LECTURES
AT FREE WILL BAPTIST BIBLE COLLEGE
November 19-22, 2002
By Dr. Robert Picirilli
“Calvinism, Arminianism, and the Theology of Salvation”**

LECTURE ONE: CALVINISM VERSUS ARMINIANISM

Introduction

When I was asked to give these lectures, it was suggested that I treat the issues dealt with in my new book, published last spring by Randall House, entitled *Grace, Faith, Free Will*: namely, the long-standing differences between Calvinism and Arminianism. These involve some of the keys to our distinctive denominational teachings.

Important: these are differences *among Christians*. I do not mean, therefore, to demonize those I will disagree with: there are Bible-believing Calvinists just as there are Bible-believing Arminians. We ought to emphasize that all genuine Christians agree on the basic truths that give meaning to life. Our differences are relatively minor, compared to our basic agreements. Still, these differences are important for us to understand who we are and what we believe.

Background

Calvinism and Arminianism indicate different ways of thinking about God’s provision for salvation as first systematically defined by two theologians of long ago.

John Calvin (died 1564), one of the early products of the Protestant Reformation in Switzerland, was a great systematic theologian. His formulation of theology remains as one of the most influential systems of doctrine within Christianity, looked to as an authority especially within groups called Reformed or Presbyterian—and some Baptists.

Jacob Arminius (died 1609), a pastor and theologian in the Reformed Church in Holland, though an admirer of Calvin, differed with him on some of the basic doctrines of salvation. His way of thinking, with various developments, prevails in Christian denominations like Methodists, some Baptists (like “free willers”), and most “holiness” groups.

Calvinism and Arminianism mean the ways of thinking about salvation that have developed from the doctrinal differences between Calvin and Arminius.

Summary of Differences: Calvinism

Though overly simplistic, a traditional definition of the differences uses the TULIP as an acrostic to represent the soteriology (doctrines about salvation) of Calvinism:

T = **Total depravity**. This is emphasized to mean that human beings are not able to put faith in Christ until God has *first* changed their nature by regeneration. The new birth precedes saving faith!

U = **Unconditional election**. In eternity, before anything was created, God looked ahead and picked out certain ones to be saved without considering anything on their part, not even faith. The “elect” he determined to save, and all the rest he determined to damn.

L = **Limited atonement**. This means that God sent His Son to die for the sins of the elect only. In a saving sense, Jesus did not die for the whole world.

I = **Irresistible grace**. When in history the “elect” are saved, God’s work of regeneration cannot successfully be resisted by that person. Though all fallen people resist God, but He regenerates the elect without their cooperation. Only after regeneration are they brought to faith and submission.

P = **Perseverance**. Those whom God has regenerated will never become again unregenerate, because of their regenerate nature and the gracious work He does within them.

All these points go together logically to mean that salvation is by the unconditional “decree” of God, decrees meaning the decisions God made in eternity as He planned for things. Thus salvation is by election, not *by* faith.

Summary of Differences: Arminianism

How does Arminianism stand on these “five points of Calvinism”?

Total depravity? Yes. The fall negatively affected the entire person: physically, spiritually, emotionally, and mentally.

A fallen, depraved person is not capable, apart from a supernatural work of God, of putting faith in Christ for salvation. Our FWB *Treatise* says that we “are not willing to obey God, but are inclined to evil.” But where Calvinism says that God’s first work on fallen human beings must be *regeneration* (so that only the elect *can* be saved), Arminians say that God first does a work of enabling, pre-regenerating grace that makes it possible for the unregenerate person to respond in faith to the offer of salvation in Christ. This makes faith possible but does not guarantee faith or produce regeneration until faith is exercised.

Unconditional election? Arminians teach conditional election, instead. Yes, in eternity God chose to save some and not all, but chose those who would meet the *condition* of faith. He chose to save believers and not to save unbelievers. Like salvation, election is by faith.

Limited atonement? Arminians believe the Bible teaches unlimited atonement: that Jesus died for all, for each and every human being, thus making salvation accessible to all.

Irresistible grace? No, God’s saving grace can be resisted. God’s enabling grace, making faith possible for depraved human beings, can be either received or rejected. He graciously works both with those who will believe and those who will not, to make faith possible in spite of their depravity. In response, some believe and are saved; others, who could thereby believe, do not and are lost.

Perseverance? Arminians believe that perseverance itself is conditional, that a truly regenerate person may or may not persevere in saving faith.

Again, the system makes a logical whole: God loves all and provided for the salvation of all in the atoning work of Christ, enabling all who hear the gospel (in spite of their depravity) to respond in faith. But in the end He respects the freedom of each one and does not force salvation on any. Each one, after His gracious work of conviction, makes his or her own choice whether to believe in or reject Christ and be saved or remain lost. And each one perseveres or falls away by virtue of that same freedom of choice. This is salvation by faith: the sovereign,

omnipotent God who is in final control of everything in this universe, freely decided (decreed) to provide for the salvation of everyone and then to save only those who respond (and persevere) in faith.

The “Problem” of Foreknowledge

How do we reconcile God’s knowledge and decisions in eternity with what we do in time? If God knows what we’re going to do tomorrow, aren’t we going to do that? If God foreknew who would put faith in Christ, do they have any other choice?

There is a current movement in theology (in my view, *neo-Arminian*) called “open theism,” which denies that God knows in advance the free decisions that human beings make. Their argument is interesting. They say, if God knows ahead of time what decision I’m going to make, then that’s the decision I’ll have to make because if I made a different one, God would be wrong! So, in order to protect our freedom, they have taken the drastic step, theologically, of denying that God knows the future! How do we respond to this logical conundrum?

First, we distinguish between certainty, contingency, and necessity. A “necessity” *has* to be the way it is, for cause-effect reasons. A “contingency” really *can* be one way or another (or more). It doesn’t *have* to be the way it is, even though it *is* that way; any free decision is in this category. A “certainty,” on the other hand, *is* what was, or is, or will be: a mere fact, in other words.

Note: *all* events are *certainties* (facts). *Some* events are both *certainties* and *necessities* at the same time: laws of physics, for example. On the other hand, *some* events are both *certainties* and *contingencies*: if the Flames *will* lose their next game, it is *certain* that they will (only if they *will*) but whether they win or lose is *contingent*, depending on how they and the other team play, how the referees call things, etc. But *no* event is both a *contingency* and a *necessity* at the same time.

We all believe that there really are free decisions that are contingencies. We really can choose one way or another on all sorts of things, silly and important, moral and non-moral. Though God knows which way we will choose, His knowing does not cause the choices. He knows the choices we will make only if we will make those choices. He can know something in advance without closing the door to other possibilities.

Comparing God’s knowledge to ours may help. While we can’t know the future, we can know the past. I know what suit I put on earlier this morning, for example. Did I *have* to? Could I have chosen a different one? Sure. Is it *certain* that I chose this one? Yes? No one would think of saying that since I know as certain that I wore this suit I couldn’t have worn another one because doing so would have made me mistaken! Had I decided to wear a different one, I would know, now, that I certainly wore that one.

In the same way, God’s knowledge of a future fact is not the cause of the fact. Nor does it mean that the fact *has* to be the way it will be. He knows that the U.S. is going to war with Iraq *only if, in fact, that is going to happen*. When contingencies are involved, free decisions will be made by the people involved when the time comes. God’s prior knowledge of those decisions ahead of time no more causes them or closes the door to other possibilities than my knowledge of the past. He knows what choice I will make only if I will make that choice.