

What is Arminianism?

Arminianism is the name for a certain set of beliefs (based on the Bible) about how God relates to humans. The key belief usually associated with evangelical Arminianism is that people have a real choice in the matter of whether they will be saved or not. This may sound like a common sense idea to many people, but not all theologians would agree. The theology commonly known as Calvinism (based on the 16th-17th century Reformed theology of men such as Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin, and Theodore Beza, with roots going all the way back to Augustine in the early 5th century) teaches that God decides everything that will happen, even who will be saved and who will not, and he decides this all by himself, without any consideration whatsoever of what people might independently choose to do or not do. According to this Calvinist view, God then gives faith as a gift only to those people (the elect) that he has already decided will be saved, and to no others. Against this view, the Dutch Protestant theologian and pastor Jacob (James) Arminius (1560-1609 A.D.) argued (in line with the pre-Augustinian consensus of the early church, and various theologians since) that God takes into consideration whether a person is willing to have faith in Christ or not, and he chooses to save only to those people who themselves are willing to accept salvation by faith in Christ. Another way to say this is that according to Arminianism there is a genuine *condition* placed on salvation: Salvation is conditioned on a person's willingness to place his faith in Christ.

Though this is perhaps the central belief of Arminianism, there are other points that are related to it. A brief summary of the key points of evangelical Arminianism that distinguish it from Calvinism might look like this:

1. God's decisions are often contingent on human decisions. God created and allows a measure of genuine human free will. (This contrasts to the Calvinist idea that God unilaterally determines or decrees everything that happens, including all decisions—both good and evil—that people make.)
2. Though humans are unable to seek God on their own, they may cooperate with God's wooing (traditionally called “prevenient”) grace to draw them to Christ. If a person responds positively to God's wooing grace, the person may eventually be drawn to faith in Christ and receive salvation. This grace can be resisted, however, and God will not force anyone to believe in Christ or follow him. (This stands over against

the Calvinist idea of irresistible grace and faith given as an irresistible, unconditional gift only to the elect.)

3. Christ died for all people, though only those who choose to have faith in him benefit from his death by receiving salvation. (This contrasts to the Calvinist idea that Christ did not die for everyone, but only for those people that God unilaterally decided beforehand would be saved.)
4. Most Arminians also believe that a Christian's salvation may be forfeited if he at some point rejects his previous faith in Christ. Those who are in Christ are secure in salvation, but a person is only "in Christ" if he continues having faith in Christ (in the same sense taught, e.g., in John 15).

This is by no means a complete description of Arminianism, and there is, as you might expect, various differences of opinion on some points even among Arminians (e.g., does God elect individuals to salvation based on his foreknowledge of whether they will accept Christ—as Arminius himself believed—or is God's election strictly corporate in nature, as many modern evangelical Arminians have come to believe?). Hopefully, though, the above description highlights some of the most important differences between Arminian and Calvinist theology.