The Calvinist – Arminian Debate: A Brief History

Pelagius and Augustine

The Calvinist – Arminian debate goes back at least as far as the 5th century to Pelagius, a British monk, and Augustine. Pelagius preached a gospel that began with justification through faith alone but finished through human effort and morality. His followers went farther than Pelagius and removed justification through faith, setting up a morality- and works-based salvation now known as Pelagianism. In response, Augustine adopted a theological system that embraced double predestination, limited atonement and irresistible grace. He reasoned that man cannot even accept the offer of salvation – it must be God who chooses for himself individuals for everlasting life.

Luther, Calvin and Arminius

Martin Luther was an Augustinian monk who rebelled against the Catholic Church's doctrines of indulgences and salvation through works. He based his arguments, at least in part, on the Augustinian doctrines of predestination, irresistible grace, limited atonement and perseverance of the saints.

John Calvin (1509 – 1564) redefined and clarified the theological system that began with Augustine. His work has been called "Systematic Augustinianism." Calvin was a French Christian theologian whose *Institutes of the Christian Religion* is still read today. He also produced many volumes of commentaries on most of the books of the Bible. He taught that the Bible alone – not church leadership – is the final authority in matters of faith and morals, and that salvation comes by grace without any contribution of good works from the believer. He also was well known for his teaching on predestination.

Jacobus Arminius (1559 – 1609) was a Dutch pastor who studied under Calvin's hand-picked successor, Theodore Beza. Arminius was only five years old when Calvin died, so the debate between the two is about their teachings but did not involve them in face-to-face discussions. Arminius wrote and spoke highly of Calvin's commentaries and his *Institutes*. Nevertheless, he did not agree with Calvin on some points of his teaching. Specifically, Arminius taught that Calvinist predestination and unconditional election made God the author of evil. Instead, he insisted, God's election was an election of believers and therefore was conditioned on faith. Further, he said God's exhaustive foreknowledge did not require a doctrine of determinism.

Arminius and his followers called for a national synod to win tolerance of their views. His opponents maintained the authority of the local synods and denied the necessity of a national convention. When the Dutch State General finally called together both parties, the opponents of Arminius accused him of errors on the authority of Scripture, the Trinity, original sin, and works salvation – charges he denied profusely. He was acquitted of doctrinal error but was greatly weakened by the ordeal.

The Remonstrants & Calvinist Reaction

After the death of Arminius, his followers submitted a petition to the State General, called a Remonstrance, which highlighted five aspects of their theology: 1) election was conditional on faith; 2) Christ's atonement was unlimited in extent; 3) total depravity; 4) prevenient and resistible grace; and 5) the possibility of apostasy. Behind the scenes was a political battle that turned the tide against the Arminians. When the State General called for a synod in 1618, its outcome was predetermined. The Synod of Dort included Calvinist representatives from Great Britain, Switzerland, Germany and France; Arminians were denied acceptance. The synod ruled that Arminius' teachings were heretical. One of the results of the synod was the formation of the five points of Calvinism in direct response to the five article of Remonstrance. Further, all Arminian pastors – 200 of them – were deprived of office; any who would not agree to be silent were banished from the country. Spies were paid to hunt down those suspected of returning to their homeland. Some were imprisoned; one was beheaded.

Post-Reformation Debates

Debates continued between the followers of Calvin and Arminius. The heated discussions between friends and fellow Methodist ministers John Wesley and George Whitefield were characteristic. Wesley championed the teachings of Arminius. He defended Arminius against charges of semi-Pelagianism, holding strongly to beliefs in original sin and total depravity. At the same time, he attacked the determinism that he claimed characterized unconditional election and maintained a belief in the ability to lose salvation. Whitefield challenged Wesley on every point except total depravity.

To this day, Methodism and its offshoots – Pentecostals, the Holiness denominations, Charismatics and Third Wave Charismatics – along with General Baptists usually subscribe to Arminianism, while Presbyterians, Reformed churches, Primitive Baptists, Particular Baptists, and others subscribe to Calvinism. Lutheranism was uninvolved in the dispute and official Lutheran doctrine does not fully support either group but teaches a view in between.

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