

# CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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## EXCURSUS: CALVINISM VS. ARMINIANISM

Most of you, no doubt, have heard about the 5-points of Calvinism under the acronym T.U.L.I.P. But what is often not known is that these were formulated in response to the five points put forth by the followers of James Arminius at the famous Synod of Dort in 1618. Arminius had died in 1612 and his cause was taken up by Johannes Uitenbogaard, the court preacher, and by Simon Episcopius, a student of Arminius and later professor of theology at Leiden. In 1610, under Uitenbogaard's leadership, the Arminians met in Gouda and prepared a Remonstrance (hence their name, Remonstrants). They first rejected certain Calvinist positions and then stated their own views in the Five Arminian Articles:

1. election conditioned on foreseen faith;
2. universal atonement (that Christ died for all men and for every man, so that He merited reconciliation and forgiveness of sins for all through the death of the cross; yet so that no one actually enjoys this forgiveness of sins except the believer);
3. the need for regeneration if man is to be saved (here they seemed to be orthodox enough, but, as it later appeared, this was understood in such a way as seriously to underestimate the depravity of human nature);
4. the resistibility of grace ('but with respect to the mode of this grace, it is not irresistible'); and
5. the uncertainty of the perseverance of believers (in respect of this article the Arminians shortly came openly to deny such final perseverance)<sup>1</sup>

J. I. Packer, in his famous introductory essay to John Owen's class work, The Death of Death in the Death of Christ concisely summed it up, "First, it should be observed that the 'five points of Calvinism,' so-called, are simply the Calvinistic answer to a five-point manifesto (the Remonstrance) put out by certain 'Belgic semi-Pelagians' in the early seventeenth century. The theology which it contained (known to history as Arminianism) stemmed from two philosophical principles: first, that divine sovereignty is not compatible with human freedom, nor therefore with human responsibility; second, that ability limits obligation. (The charge of semi-Pelagianism was thus fully justified.) From these principles, the Arminians drew two deductions: first, that since the Bible regards faith as a free and responsible human act, it cannot be caused by God, but is exercised independently of Him; second, that since the Bible regards faith as obligatory on the part of all who hear the gospel, ability to believe must be universal. Hence, they maintained, Scripture must be interpreted as teaching the following positions: (1) Man is never so completely corrupted by sin that he cannot savingly believe the gospel when it is put before him, nor (2.) is he ever so completely controlled by God that he cannot reject it. (3.) God's election of those who shall be saved is prompted by His foreseeing that they will of their own accord believe. (4.) Christ's death did not ensure the salvation of anyone, for it did not secure the gift of faith to anyone (there is no such gift); what it did was rather to create a possibility of salvation for everyone if they believe. (5.) It rests with believers to keep themselves in a state of grace by keeping up their faith; those who fail here fall away and are lost. Thus, Arminianism made man's salvation depend ultimately on man himself, saving faith being viewed throughout as man's own work and, because his own, not God's in him.

The Synod of Dort was convened in 1618 to pronounce on this theology, and the 'five points of Calvinism' represent its counter-affirmations. They stem from a very different principle—the biblical

principle that ‘salvation is of the Lord;’ and they may be summarized thus: (1.) Fallen man in his natural state lacks all power to believe the gospel, just as he lacks all power to believe the law, despite all external inducements that may be extended to him. (2.) God’s election is a free, sovereign, unconditional choice of sinners, as sinners, to be redeemed by Christ, given faith and brought to glory. (3.) The redeeming work of Christ had as its end and goal the salvation of the elect. (4.) The work of the Holy Spirit in bringing men to faith never fails to achieve its object. (5.) Believers are kept in faith and grace by the unconquerable power of God till they come to glory. These five points are conveniently denoted by the mnemonic TULIP: Total Depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, Preservation of the saints.

Now, here are two coherent interpretations of the biblical gospel, which stand in evident opposition to each other. The difference between them is not primarily one of emphasis, but of content. One proclaims a God who saves; the other speaks of a God Who enables man to save himself. One view presents the three great acts of the Holy Trinity for the recovering of lost mankind—election by the Father, redemption by the Son, calling by the Spirit—as directed towards the same persons, and as securing their salvation infallibly. The other view gives each act a different reference (the objects of redemption being all mankind, of calling, those who hear the gospel, and of election, those hearers who respond), and denies that any man’s salvation is secured by any of them. The two theologies thus conceive the plan of salvation in quite different terms. One makes salvation depend on the work of God, the other on a work of man; one regards faith as part of God’s gift of salvation, the other as man’s own contribution to salvation; one gives all the glory of saving believers to God, the other divides the praise between God, Who, so to speak, built the machinery of salvation, and man, who by believing operated it.”<sup>2</sup>

## **I. THE CALVINISTIC CONCEPT OF DIVINE ELECTION.**

My longtime friend Sam Storms has one of the very best books on this subject and I will avail myself to his treatment.

“The Calvinistic concept of divine election proceeds on the assumption that God saves men and women in accordance with a plan formulated in eternity past. The events we see unfolding in time and history are not haphazard or chaotic, appearances notwithstanding. They are the divinely ordained means by which God is bringing this universe to its proper consummation in Jesus Christ. We would not think very highly of God if we knew him to have created all things without a clue as to what he intended to do with them. We marvel at God’s wisdom and find him worthy of praise precisely because we know that all things have been created not only by Jesus Christ but also for him (Col. 1:16).

This world and all that is in it exist principally as means to the fulfillment of a divine purpose, ‘to unite [or, consummate] all things in him [Christ]’ (Eph. 1:9-10). Jesus himself declared that he came to this earth in order to accomplish the Father’s will (John 6:38). That is why our Lord’s redemptive sufferings occurred as a result of the ‘definite plan and foreknowledge of God’ (Acts 2:23; cf. Acts 4:27-28; I Pet. 1:20). In sum, God ‘works all things according to the counsel of his will’ (Eph. 1:11).

No less a part of this divine plan is the salvation of fallen sinners. However else one wishes to conceive it, God’s election of individuals to eternal life antedates creation. It is a pre-temporal act which the biblical authors describe as having transpired ‘before the foundation of the world’ (Eph. 1:4; Rev. 13:8; 17:8) or ‘from the beginning’ (2 Thess. 2:13, NASB). Election is a result of God’s gracious purpose to save sinners, according to which we have been ‘predestined’ to obtain an inheritance (Eph. 1:11). All of which, Paul tells us, he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began’ (2 Tim. 1:9). One may wish to argue about the basis upon which God made his choice, but that it was a choice made in eternity past seems beyond dispute.

## **II. THE DIVINE INITIATIVE**

The Calvinist view of election highlights, as does Paul in Ephesians 1, the divine initiative in the work of salvation. Paul is deafening in his redundancy to make the point that the distinction in humanity between those who believe and those who don’t (as, for

example, in the case of Jerry and Ed), is ultimately God's doing. Note the repeated emphasis on the divine initiative in salvation as seen in the vocabulary related to God's will or purpose or plan: 'according to the purpose of his *will*' (v. 5), 'the mystery of his *will*' (v. 9), 'according to his *purpose*' (vv. 9, 11), 'the *counsel* of his *will*' (v. 11). Indeed, no fewer than eleven times in these verses do we find vocabulary reflective of divine sovereignty: he *chose* us (v. 4), he *predestined* us (v. 5), his *good pleasure* (v. 5, KJV), God's *will* (v. 5), God's *will* (v. 9), his *good pleasure* (v. 9, KJV), his *purpose* (v. 9), he *foreordained* us (v. 11, author's translation), his *purpose* (v. 11), his *counsel* (v. 11), his *will* (v. 11).

Let's be certain we understand the nature of this sovereign selection. To 'elect' is to choose out from among others. God's electing love was neither random nor haphazard, as if his decision were governed by nothing at all. There was deliberate, calculated, reasoned intent on God's part. He knew what he was doing when he chose one but not another. He said: 'I want this person, but not that person.'

Many suffer from a serious misconception of unconditional divine election. They envision the names of all humans, as it were, written on individual slips of paper and put in a huge hat. God then closed his eyes and indiscriminately grabbed a handful, without regard for whom, leaving others in the hat (or in hell, as the case may be). No! God selected this one by name and that one by name, and consciously passed over this one by name and that one by name. *God didn't flip a coin*: 'head' = Jerry and 'tails' = Ed, as if ultimately it mattered not to him which of the two, if either at all, was chosen for life."<sup>3</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** There are really only *two* religions in the world. One is God-centered and the other is man-centered (and, of course, this has developed into what we know today as the various world religions). The two contradictory propositions *you will surely die* and *You will not surely die* (Gen. 3:3, 4) imply two entirely different and incompatible ways of looking at reality. The God-centered perspective implies God's sovereign control while the man-centered perspective implies that human beings determine reality and control their own destiny. Spurgeon, with his knack for capturing the essence of the matter, summed up the difference with this expression. *God saves sinners*. "You will perceive, I think, in these words, that the divine plan of salvation is very clearly laid down. It begins, you see, in the will and pleasure of God: *When it pleased God*. The foundation of salvation is not laid in the will of man. It does not begin with man's obedience, and then proceed onward to the purpose of God; but here is its commencement, here the fountain-head from which the living waters flow: *It pleased God*"<sup>4</sup> God, sovereign in eternity, wills or decrees (that is, he plans, intends, decides and foreordains) to save some of those who are to be enslaved by sin through the fall of Adam. This means that it is God who initiates the program and the process of salvation, rather than the sinner. Salvation is therefore by grace alone, since the sinner, being finite, does not have the ontological standpoint in eternity even to plan saving acts, let alone the sovereign power to effect them. On his own divine initiative from eternity, God interferes in history to initiate and consummate all that is necessary to save rebel souls. Salvation is a gift, and the sinner contributes nothing but the empty hand that reaches out to receive it. Even this simple act of faith itself is by divine initiation, not by autonomous self-generation. Saving faith is itself a gift, not a natural capacity by which we simply decide to focus on Christ as an object of trust like we do with other objects (e.g., a chair, our parents, the telephone). From the first feeble stirrings of a desire to know God in some vague sense, through all the steps necessary to link a soul savingly to God through Christ, and all the way to our final glorification in the presence of the Father, "all is of grace." "Salvation is *of the Lord!*" (Jonah 2:9). *God saves*. God does not merely do enough to make salvation possible, leaving it to us to work our way up, to "merit the merits of Christ," to do our part to make the merely possible become the actual. Every link in the chain of redemption is forged on God's anvil from start to finish. Even God cannot achieve an end without a means. In order to secure the predestined end, he foreordains each step and casual link, sovereignly acting to see that each cause and effect occurs.<sup>5</sup> The biblical concept of the sovereignty of God is not simply a theological issue that is subject to debate among well-meaning Christians who happen to be Arminians or Calvinists. The doctrine of God's sovereignty is absolutely crucial to everything Christians believe about God. Jonathan Edwards (1705-1758), who Perry Miller, professor of American Literature at Harvard, called "The greatest

philosopher-theologian yet to grace the American scene,”<sup>6</sup> when he was in his late twenties looked back to the time when he came to embrace the doctrine of God’s sovereignty and wrote, “From my childhood up, my mind had been full of objection against the doctrine of God’s sovereignty, in choosing whom he would to eternal life, and rejecting whom he pleased; leaving them eternally to perish, and be everlastingly tormented in hell. It used to appear like a horrible doctrine to me. But I remember the time very well, when I seemed to be convinced, and fully satisfied, as to this sovereignty of God, and his justice in thus eternally disposing of men, according to his sovereign pleasure. But never could give an account, how, or by what means, I was thus convinced, not in the least imagining at the time, nor a long time after, that there was any extraordinary influence of God’s Spirit in it; but only that now I saw further, and my reason apprehended the justice and reasonableness of it. However, my mind rested in it; and it put an end to all those cavils and objections. And there has been a wonderful alteration in my mind, in respect to the doctrine of God’s sovereignty, from that day to this; so that I scarce ever have found so much as the rising of an objection against it, in the most absolute sense, in God’s shewing mercy to whom he will shew mercy, and hardening whom he will. God’s absolute sovereignty and justice, with respect to salvation and damnation, is what my mind seems to rest assured of, as much as of any thing that I see with my eyes; at least it is so at times. But I have often, since that first conviction, had quite another kind of sense of God’s sovereignty that I had then. I have often since had not only a conviction, but a delightful conviction. The doctrine has very often appeared exceeding pleasant, bright, and sweet. Absolute sovereignty is what I love to ascribe to God. But my first conviction was not so.”<sup>7</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> For a good background and summarily of the events that culminated in the findings of the Synod of Dort cf. S. Vandergugten “The Arminian Controversy and the Synod of Dort” in *Clarion* (Sept. 16-30, vol. 37, No. 19, 20, 1989) available at [http://www.spindleworks.com/library/vandergugten/arminian\\_c.htm](http://www.spindleworks.com/library/vandergugten/arminian_c.htm).

<sup>2</sup> In John Owen, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1963), p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> S. Storms, *Chosen for Life: The Case For Divine Election* (Crossway, 2007), p. 39.

<sup>4</sup> As cited in I. Murray *The Forgotten Spurgeon* (Banner of Truth, 1966), p. 71.

<sup>5</sup> As discussed in R. K. McGregor, *No Place For Sovereignty: What’s Wrong With Freewill Theism* (IVP, 1996), p. 94.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will* ed. P. Ramsey (Yale Univ. Press, 1957), p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> J. Gerstner, *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards I* (Ligonier Ministries, 1991), p. 521.