

Arminians vs. Calvinists: Where's the Common Ground?

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When Arminians say "Jesus died for all", the Calvinists say they are suggesting universalism (all people are saved). When Arminians use the term "free will", Calvinists hear that they don't believe in God's sovereignty, and they don't believe in original sin or total depravity. I am NOT a spokesman for Arminians, but I have read everything I could find on Jacob Arminius, and I have seen a copy of the original remonstrances in 1610 that provoked the Five Points of Calvinism. I am convinced that Arminius himself, and his followers, did not believe in universalism, and they did believe in original sin and total depravity.

On the other hand, when Calvinists talk about election, Arminians hear what they call "double predestination" (that God actually prevents people from believing). When Calvinists talk about total depravity, Arminians hear them saying that there is absolutely no good or potential for good in any people. This makes no sense to them because there is such a big difference in individual people. Some are clearly bad, and some are clearly good. When Calvinists talk about "irresistible grace", Arminians hear them saying that God drags reluctant people into a forced relationship against their will. Yet, I have been reading articles and books by several well known Calvinist spokesmen like R.C. Sproul, and I don't think traditional Calvinists are saying these things at all.

For the last four weeks, I have been reviewing the history of the church's doctrine on salvation, and particularly history through the great debates of Augustine vs. Pelagius, Calvin vs. Arminius, and Wesley vs. Whitefield. I think we have successfully uncovered that there has been much miscommunication and misconception in the Calvin vs. Arminius conflict which was continued by Wesley and Whitefield 150 years later.

For two thousand years Christians have struggled to understand the effect of Jesus' death on the human race. What is the scope of the atoning work of Christ on the cross? For whom did Jesus die? When John said "God so loved the world", did he mean the elect or all people in the world? How do we define the preposition "for" when the Bible says Jesus died "for all" (1 Tim.2:3-6)? If Christ died for the whole world and most people have rejected Him, does that somehow mean His death was ineffective? My favorite question that relates to all these issues is, "If there is no free will of any kind, and no participation of any kind on our part in the salvation process, then how do you preserve the responsibility of man which is a very clear biblical position (mankind is held responsible by God)?"

I feel certain that neither side has 100% of the truth in these differences, and frankly, I don't think God has even revealed 100% of all that Jesus accomplished for sinners. No human analysis or logical argument can possibly contain all that our omniscient and all powerful creator has done and will do. In our limited thinking we must leave room for what God will reveal more fully at the second coming and the resurrection. In fact, I think it is good that we don't have all the answers because if it was something we could conceive of, it would be too simple and too limited. If it was done the way we would do it, it would be all messed up like everything else in the world we have bungled.

Common Ground

After attempting to study the history of the conflict, and the statements and writings of Calvin, Arminius, and their followers, I think I may have a few important points that we can all agree on. First of all, every accountable person deserves to be lost. I have been teaching numerous Bible studies for years to very diverse audiences, and not one person yet has believed they were perfect. Everybody believes Romans 3:23, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God". By everybody, I mean Bible believing professing Christians. In fact, a good definition of being a sinner is simply falling short of the glory of God. The Greek word most commonly used in the New Testament for sin means to "miss the mark". We have missed the mark or standard set by God. After teaching Jesus' interpretation of the 10 Commandments in Matthew 5 in which He includes thoughts and intentions, my students all said that He had indicted all of us. Every Calvinist that I have talked to believes that God deserves no blame for the lost (preserving the responsibility of man); and every Arminian agrees that God deserves all the glory for the salvation of believers. Therefore, the basis of condemnation is the lost person's own sin, and the basis of salvation is the atoning work of Christ.

Concerning evangelism and those who have never heard the gospel, no person is better for not hearing the gospel, and no person is harmed by hearing the gospel. If you think that those who have never heard are innocent and God will not hold them accountable, then you have not read Romans 1:18-25. This is why it is so important to understand the sovereignty of God in evangelism. Paul wrote that God put the inherent knowledge of Himself in the soul of each created person with the desire to seek Him. They are also accountable because they can look around at the complexity, enormity, and design of the

creation, and know there is a creator. God promised in many passages that if anyone seeks after God, he will find Him. In story after story in the Bible, God revealed Himself to everyone seeking God. If prophets wouldn't speak, then donkeys would. If the disciples hadn't told about Jesus, then "the rocks would have cried out". If the church doesn't send missionaries, then God will raise them up. Whether a person is on a deserted isle, a rain forest, or a mountain, God will send someone with the gospel, or perhaps even reach them directly. Don't forget, people are not condemned because they have never heard, they are condemned because they are sinners.

Antinomy

I told a guy years ago that I believed in four of the five points of Calvinism---limited atonement is the one point I don't agree with---and he said I believed in an antinomy. That didn't sound good so I looked it up in the dictionary. It means a contradiction between two apparently equally valid principles, or a conflict not solvable in light of the limited information available. The more I thought about it, the more the whole issue of the sovereignty of God and the free will of man is an antinomy. Until we can claim to know everything about God and His creation there is room for paradoxes and antinomy. Excuse me for including you, but we don't know squat. For instance, I was talking to a neurologist who is supposed to be an expert on the brain. He told me that even with all they have learned in the last twenty years, they still only understand about 10% of how the brain works. Paul said it well in 1 Corinthians 13:9-12 concerning knowledge, "we know partially...for now we see in a mirror dimly, but then (at the resurrection) face to face; now I know in part, but then I shall know fully". Biblically it is true that God is sovereign and man is held responsible for his choices. If we cannot perfectly explain how both can be true, then perhaps it is because we have limited minds and limited information.

Conclusion

I have never met an Arminian who did not believe that God is sovereign, and I have never met a Calvinist who did not think man was responsible. Even Calvinists believe in free will to a certain extent. Therefore I believe the real issue has to do with emphasis---which of these do you emphasize, or to what degree do you emphasize each?

My personal favorite illustration is about the drowning man (the human race). A good Samaritan (God) drives his boat up and throws him a line. The drowning man must decide whether to grab the line or reject it. When he grabs the line, the Samaritan pulls him into the boat. It is possible to say that the man exercised his free will and saved himself. Nevertheless, the best way to look at it would be that the Samaritan did everything to save him (as Jesus did everything on the cross). I know this illustration has several weaknesses, but my main point is that God should and does get all the glory for our salvation. We should never lose sight of Paul's repetitive phrase in Ephesians 1, "to the praise of His glory", because that is what it is all about.

CHARLIE TAYLOR