

CALVINISM AND ARMINIANISM

A. BACKGROUND AND PRECURSORS

1. PELAGIUS (IN ROME CA. 383-410)

Pelagius put a strong emphasis on the human will and the will's ability to decide the course of action that a person would take. Upon hearing the Gospel, the human will can respond in obedience to Christ. Upon hearing moral imperatives, what we should do and what we ought to do, the human will is able to make these choices as whether to obey or not. How unjust it would be if God commanded us to something that we just could not do?

Chips on the Fridge

2. AUGUSTINE (354-430)

Augustine disputed this view that Pelagius was proposing. One of the areas that he is most famous for interacting with is this question of the nature of sin and grace. So what did Augustine Propose?

1. God is righteous and his law is righteous.

There is nothing wrong with the law. Romans 7 teaches the law is holy, righteous and good. The law coming from God must be of the character of God. God is righteous his law is righteous.

2. Humanity was created good, and before sin, could obey God's commands. So if you are looking for an answer to the question of what went wrong with people, don't look at creation to find that. God didn't create evil people. God did not create people disobedient to him. He created people who were good, so in the garden, and presumably until Genesis 3, there were, no doubt, many occasions where Adam and his wife obeyed God and followed his commands while resisting any temptation there might have been to eat of the forbidden tree. They did what they were supposed to and pleased God. They were able to do that in their unfallen state. But then, Augustine held, sin resulted in human beings being unable to obey God. Sin so affected the very nature of Adam, his wife and all of their progeny (all those who are in Adam), that they are born into this world with that sin-infested nature, rendering them unable to carry out the moral commands of God. More than just hindered by it, humanity is hampered by it, sort of like trying to run a race with a 15-pound weight attached to your waist. Adam's progeny is absolutely unable to carry out the command of God.

So when asked the question, how can God be just in holding people accountable, Augustine's answer is that what the law shows what sinful humans cannot do, grace enables them to obey. The law, according to Augustine, is given by God precisely to show us what we cannot do on our own. The purpose of the law is to make it clear to human hearts that we can't keep it, so that we fall upon God, humbly recognizing our own inability and accept grace, by which we are now enabled to do what God calls us to do.

So you can see these perspectives are very different. For Pelagius, when asked what it means when God gives a moral command; what does that entail or imply about human nature; his answer is that if God gives a command, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ," it implies that we can keep it. How could God be just and how could we rightly be held accountable if we couldn't keep it? How could God hold us accountable for failing to do what we cannot do?

Augustine's view is that the law is given by God for really a gracious purpose ultimately. The law condemns, but the reason for the law coming to us is to expose our own inherent inability to live a righteous life, so that we recognize our need for grace.

This debate has often been framed as the "nature/grace" debate. Can we obey by nature? Pelagius said yes. Augustine said no, by nature (sinful nature), we cannot please God. We must have grace in order to obey.

3. COUNCIL OF CARTHAGE (418)

The church met in regard to this whole question and decided that the Pelagian view was considered unorthodox, heretical. They judged that Augustine's view was fundamentally correct and Pelagius' view was incorrect. From that point on in the history of the church, since the Council of Carthage in 418, the church has rejected the Pelagian view as a viable legitimate biblical view

4. SEMI-PELAGIAN ALTERNATIVE

There were many people in the church who were not entirely happy with Augustine's view. One of the implications of Augustine's view, is that if no one by nature can believe in Christ and be saved, if no one by nature can be pleasing to God, then it requires grace in order to be saved. Are all people saved? No. Then, might it be the case that grace is only given to some and not all. If that is the case, then who decides who gets the grace? We don't merit grace. So, God decides to whom he gives grace and from whom he withholds grace. Then this seems to lead to some notion of God's election of people apart from anything they have done. This was for many people, then and now, a very troubling notion.

There arose in the church at this time a modified position that has been called Semi-Pelagianism after the Council of Carthage made their decision. The Semi-Pelagian alternative tried to agree with Augustine and Pelagius simultaneously. How do you do that when they have really opposite views?

Essentially what they argued was, yes, Augustine is right that all people in Adam are affected by Adam's sin. Pelagius got this wrong in thinking that people are born into this world morally neutral and can go either way. They stood in agreement with Augustine that in Adam we incur sin; by the one act of Adam's sin, we are sinners. But, they argued, it is not the case that sin results in our being totally unable to do anything that is right, anything that pleases God. What sin does is hampers or weakens our will. It makes it harder to obey; we are less inclined to do what God wants us to. So apart from grace, we are disinclined to obey God. We can obey him, but it is hard to do so. Grace comes along as an assistant, a helper, a prod to do what we can do by nature. This is the Semi-Pelagian alternative that really became dominate through much of the church.

5. THE SENATE OF ORANGE (529)

Semi-Pelagianism was debated for a full century after the Council of Carthage in 418 and its main tenets were rejected formally by the church. Yet they were picked up on a popular level by a vast majority of the church. The Senate of Orange met in 529 and rejected the Semi-Pelagian Alternative. Even though it was rejected as well, it was still accepted informally in the church and became the predominate Roman Catholic view. Most Roman Catholic theology is founded upon a Semi-Pelagian understanding of the relationship between grace and nature. Grace comes along to assist and strengthen a weakened will in doing what we are called to do.

B. LUTHER, CALVIN, ARMINIUS AND THE SYNOD OF DORT (1618 19)

1. MARTIN LUTHER (1483-1546)

Martin Luther was the first to champion the Reformation doctrine that became called “the doctrine of total depravity” in a book he wrote in response to Erasmus of Rotterdam, the humanist literary expert. Erasmus was a brilliant man, and was highly educated. He had written a book entitled *The Freedom of The Will*, in which he argued what was, fundamentally, a Semi-Pelagian position. He acknowledged that sin had some impact on the will but that we were free; we could choose. That was the dominate note in Erasmus’ *The Freedom of The Will*. Luther wrote a tract in response, it is one of his most famous writings entitled “*The Bondage of The Will*.” Luther wrote in “*The Bondage of The Will*,” that sin has so bound us that we are not free. Luther didn’t have any conception of an unregenerate person, a fallen person being free. To be free is to be as God is. God who can only do what is good, God cannot sin, God cannot lie, God cannot go back on his word, but God is free. Just the opposite of that is the sinner, the unsaved sinner, the fallen person, who cannot do good, cannot please God, cannot obey the Gospel on his or her own. That person has no freedom according to Luther. This view, where there is no freedom of the will, is not a typically Reformed view. This is Luther’s view that there is no freedom at all, so he calls it the bondage of the will.

What is needed then? Grace is needed to free the will to do what is good. So when grace comes, God enables, frees up, enlivens the will of the human being to do now what it previously could not do; and that is obey God, trust Christ, and believe the Gospel. An implication of this for Luther was, because all are not saved, God gives this freeing grace, which enables the will to do what it could not do before, to the elect; he gives that to some. The doctrine of unconditional election was, for Luther, a logical deduction of his view of total depravity and the necessity of grace in order for any to believe. For Luther, it was so clear that if you hold to total depravity and the necessity of grace, and yet all are not saved, then that implies that God chooses to give his grace some and chooses not to give to others; hence unconditional election is an entailment of those two doctrines: total depravity and the necessity of grace. The Arminian position disagreed with that notion.

2. JOHN CALVIN (1509-1564)

On this issue John Calvin held to Luther’s view, but was not as firm on the notion that unbelievers or fallen people have no freedom. He rather spoke in terms of God’s control over all that happened, though people did precisely what they chose to do and wanted to do, they did so in a way that fulfilled God’s will, and yet they were morally responsible for it. He did not follow Luther in denying any sense of freedom whatsoever of unsaved fallen humans.

Where Calvin agreed with Luther was on total depravity; people could not do anything that pleased God on their own, in Adam, in their sins. Secondly, grace was necessary for anyone to believe in Christ, obey the Gospel, and follow the moral commands of God to live in a way that pleased God. It followed, according to Calvin, that unconditional election must be the case. God chose those to whom he would give grace; by which, they would certainly come; and he chose not to give grace to others.

The following are key passages that Luther, Calvin and for that matter even Augustine refer to in reference to total depravity. You can have in mind that that these ideas were not just lifted out of the air; they were attempting to be faithful to Scripture’s teaching.

Romans 8 was referred to on a number of occasions by these theologians. Verses 5-9 (Rom 8:5-8).

Rom 8:5 For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. Rom 8:6 For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, Rom 8:7 because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, Ro 8:8 and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

They looked at this and said, people who are in the flesh, unsaved people, dominated by the flesh, by this sinful inclination of heart, are so affected by sin that they are hostile to the things of God. It is not even that they are indifferent, it is much more like what Jesus says in John 3 about how they see the light and hate the light; they do not come to the light because the light exposes their evil deeds; they turn from it; they love the darkness; they love their evil ways. So fallen sinners apart from grace would never obey God, follow God, or believe in Christ.

Hebrews 11:6 is another passage that has been cited. *“And without faith it is impossible to please God, for he who comes to him must believe that he is and that he is a rewarder of those who seek him”* (Heb 11:6).

Without faith it is impossible to please God. Do unbelievers have faith? No. Can they please God? No. So it is impossible for them to live a life that is honoring and pleasing to God. John 15:5 says, *“Apart from Me you can do nothing.”* Obviously, Jesus doesn’t mean apart from Christ you are frozen like an iceberg, and you can literally do nothing. You can’t put on socks; you can’t take a step. He doesn’t mean that. Nor does he mean that you can’t do things that appear good. Remember Jesus talked about sinners who able to give good gifts to their children (Mt 7:11 *“If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children). What is the context of John 15: Bearing fruit. There can be nothing from your life that bears fruit for the kingdom, nothing of eternal value, nothing that God would say, this is good, this is lasting.*

The following are key passages related to the necessity of grace.

Eph 2:8-9 For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Grace is necessary then for people to be saved.

Luther and Calvin both championed these notions of total depravity, and the necessity of grace. And when grace comes, people believe.

Another passage that shows when grace comes, people believe is John 6:37 where Jesus said, *“All that the Father gives me will come to me, and the one who comes to me I will certainly not cast out.”* (John 6:37)

He said in verse 44, *“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day.”* (John 6:44)

Luther and Calvin were in agreement on that and it became the uniform Reformation position of the sixteenth century.

3. JACOB ARMINIUS (1560-1609)

Arminius grew up in Amsterdam, Holland and was a very bright young man who grew up in a fairly wealthy home. When he was in his late teen years, his father wanted him to be educated in the best way possible, and by that time Amsterdam was very Reformed in its understanding, so his parents sent him to Geneva, Switzerland to receive his major theological training. He studied under Calvin's successor in Geneva, Theodore Beza. Essentially, Beza inherited the job of passing on to the church this Calvinist understanding, this understanding of Reformed theology. Arminius was a student of Beza and learned it very well. After he was done at Geneva, Arminius went back to Amsterdam, and he was appointed as pastor of one of the most prominent Reformed churches in Amsterdam. As he was pastoring there, a dispute occurred at the University of Amsterdam. There was a teacher at Amsterdam, Koornhert, who proposed that some of Calvin's teachings, as they relate to election and irresistible grace, were incorrect. A lot of students began wondering about this, and the question became so large that he actually asked Arminius, as a pastor of this prominent church, to adjudicate the dispute. Arminius took some time off from his pulpit ministry and studied for a period of time to look at the issues, look at what Koornhert was arguing, look at Calvin's Institutes and study these issues. He came to the conclusion that Koornhert was essentially correct about what he had been arguing.

Many people assume that Arminians are either Pelagians or Semi-Pelagians. The fact of the matter is that Arminius was not either of those, nor was John Wesley a Pelagian or a Semi-Pelagian. Most of the theological tradition in Arminianism has avoided Pelagianism or Semi-Pelagianism.

Arminius held that Calvin was right in his doctrine of total depravity. People, because of the sin of Adam, are born into this world unable to please God, unable to believe the Gospel, unable to obey anything that God asks them to do to his honor and glory

Arminius proposed a brilliant theological proposal; Arminius believed that grace is necessary, but the grace that comes is resistible grace. No one can come to Christ apart from grace. God has to work upon the hardened heart of an individual in order for that individual to believe. The grace he gives is a grace that enables a will to believe, but does not necessarily lead that will to believe. So grace is not as Calvin proposed; namely irresistible. Grace, rather, is resistible. A person upon hearing the Gospel can be affected by the Grace of God coming to him or her, and at that moment then grace has freed up the will enabling it to believe. So that person can believe in Christ if he or she chooses to do so, but that person can also resist the grace and say, no I don't want to follow Christ; I don't want to acknowledge my sin, my impending destruction; I believe that I can on my own be reconciled to God or be acceptable to God, so I reject Christ. What grace does is make it possible for a person to believe or not, to go either way according to this view. So grace is resistible.

Hence, what happens to the doctrine of election for Arminius? This is another interesting move that takes place. Election according to Arminius is conditional. It is not that God chooses whom he will save and whom he won't on his own. It is not that he is the one who ultimately makes that decision. It is rather that God knows as he looks down the corridors of time, he foresees, what people will do when this grace is given to them. If a person is given this grace, and they believe in Christ, it is conditioned upon God's knowing that they will believe, so he elects them to be saved. But if he sees another person, who when given this grace rejects Christ, conditioned upon that, he does not choose them to be saved. His election is conditioned upon foreseen faith. He sees ahead of time whether people will believe in Christ or not: foreseen faith. So you can see that this view is not Pelagian nor is it Semi-Pelagian because it holds that no one can come to Christ; no one can obey God; no one can please God apart from grace.

4. REMONSTRANCE AND THE SYNOD OF DORT (1618-19)

Arminius died in 1609. He had written quite a bit and had preached all of these sermons and he had become a strong advocate of this view which became known after him as Arminianism. After his death, his followers wanted to crystallize and put straight-forward, clear understanding even in tract form, if possible so that they could distribute them and make widely known their key points. These people are called the Remonstrance- the followers of Arminius after his death in 1609. They put together the five points of Arminianism. They distributed these and made them known through Eastern Europe and particularly in the Netherlands.

In response to them, the Synod of Dort met in 1618-1619 to, among other reasons, give a theological response to the five points of Arminianism. The five points of Calvinism were not developed on their own as a crystallization of the Calvinist view. These five points of Calvinism were actually the responses to the five crystallized central points of Arminianism that the Remonstrance put forward.