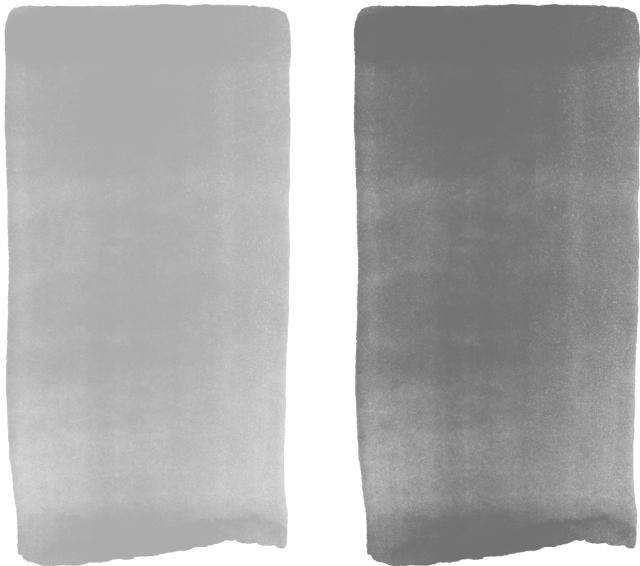


QUICK THEOLOGY

Calvinism and Arminianism



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First paperback edition June 2022

Book design by Eric Novak

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Introduction

If there was ever a topic I have been asked about more than any other, it is probably Calvinism and Arminianism. There is no way I can cover every single angle in one short booklet, but I do hope this will provide a bit of an overview and a starting point for your own study. I have been studying this topic for over 10 years, and I have been at least engaging with it for more than that. I love to read both Calvinist authors and Arminian authors. I think that is important regardless of where you land when it comes to your salvation theology. But before we break down these theological viewpoints, I want to share a bit of church history and do some defining of terms so you will have a better idea of where you land.

It is important to understand that both Calvinism and Arminianism fall within the Orthodox Christian community. That means that the Calvinist brother is

your brother in Christ. The Arminian brother is your brother in Christ. There may be people in either of these camps who are not walking as if they are a Christian, or maybe those who do not fully understand their theology. There are also some who are just plain rude about their theology, or maybe those who do not know exactly what they believe and just assume it. There is a spectrum of behavior. But as an actual theology, both Calvinism and Arminianism can be biblically supported and do fall within Orthodox Christianity.

These are not denominations. That is important to understand as well. A denomination is a specific church that has a structure, an elder board, and an oversight committee, and in order to be within that denomination you have to align with specific doctrines, usually on secondary and third tier issues. We are not talking about Methodism or Presbyterianism. Calvinism and Arminianism are theological frameworks. They are ways of understanding the Bible, and certain denominations fall within those frameworks. By and large, Arminianism is the dominant view because Charismatics, Wesleyans, Nazarenes, Methodists, and many Baptists fall under the Arminian viewpoint, whether they know it or not. Reformed Baptists, Presbyterians, Presbyterian Church of America, and 1618 Baptists are under the Reformed or

Calvinist umbrella.

As you read, I want you to keep in mind that we are not talking about a church. You are going to see denominations that reflect either Calvinistic or Arminian ways of understanding salvation. Both of these camps affirm that Christ is the only way to God. They both affirm original sin, the atonement, the resurrection, the virgin birth, and all of the orthodox necessities. That is important because we should all be affirming those orthodox necessities.



The History

We are going to look at history and where we saw these theologies first emerging. This actually goes way back, even beyond the Reformation. The Reformation happened in the 1500s; it is when the Protestant church broke from the Catholic church. Originally they—Luther specifically—wanted to reform it from the inside. When that could not happen, they broke from the Catholic church. After that is where we see a boom of different denominations that developed from the 1500s to today. The Reformation is where we usually hear people talking about Calvinism and the rise of Reformed theology. Reformed theology is linked to the Reformation.

But it goes further back than that; it actually goes back to the 400s. In the first three centuries of the church there was a lot of hammering out of the Trinity, the nature of God, and the nature of Christ. They were seeking to narrow down what some of the fundamental doctrines were that needed to be in writing. That is

where we got the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and eventually the Athanasian Creed. In the next few centuries—the fourth through the eighth—the question then began to be, “What is our anthropology? What is our theology of man? What is our belief of original sin, how grace works, and what happens in salvation?” In the 400s, we saw theologians hammering out these topics. Two of the key players at this point were a monk named Pelagius and another named Augustine.

You are probably familiar with Augustine. He was a prolific writer who wrote *Confessions*, which is one of the greatest works of Christian history. But much of what Augustine was writing arose directly in response to some controversies with Pelagius. Pelagius was a pastor. One of the big problems he ran into was Christians—or so-called Christians—in his churches or in churches around him who were not living as genuine believers. They were living in sinful, sexually-immoral lifestyles, and they did not seem to care about the fact that their lives did not reflect holiness. Pelagius began to draw the conclusion that the doctrine of original sin was actually making Christians apathetic about holiness. His desire was to preserve the need for a holy lifestyle. So he began to present the idea that Christians are fully responsible for their behavior and that God gives them the ability to

choose right or wrong.

Pelagius leaned so far into a doctrine of works that his conclusion was that it is all up to man. This led him to actually downplay and even ignore the doctrine of grace. What is interesting here is that when people talk about Pelagius they usually talk about him as if he thought humans were so good that they could reach God on their own. But that is not actually what he believed. He believed that teaching original sin was giving the idea that Christians could tolerate their own sins, that they could just live with them, and that there was no real hope of getting rid of them, so why really even try? He believed that Christians should take responsibility for their sin and that God expected them to do so. But there were consequences to what he did with his theology because of that concern.

On the other end of things was Augustine. Justin Holcomb said, “Augustine really firmly believed in original sin. In his view, humans begin life in the grip of a power they cannot shake, and which will draw them deeper and deeper into destruction unless God Himself rescues them.” Here is something important about both Augustine and Pelagius. Just as Pelagius’ dogmas reflected his own life of self-discipline and hard work, Augustine too was influenced by a youth that was wasted in

