

**Canada Christian College**

**ARMINIANISM VERSUS CALVINISM**  
**AND**  
**THE PARADIGM OF THE CROSS**

**Essay Assignment for Church History II**

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## **Arminianism Versus Calvinism and the Paradigm of the Cross**

Some of the most significant and violent conflicts within Christendom have been those related to the issues of predestination versus free will—often referred to as Calvinism versus Arminianism. After a summary of the history of this controversy and of its effect on recent church history, this essay will propose a solution to this problem by challenging those in both theological camps to commit themselves to seek to fulfill both of what can be accepted as the central objective of each of the two sides: (1) Arminianism—for all to passionately seek to live a life reflecting the nature of Jesus Christ and (2) Calvinism—to give God all the glory for His planning all things to change us into the nature of Christ and for the work of Jesus' Cross in making such a transformation possible.

Before discussing the history of the conflict between the Calvinists and Arminians, it would be helpful to look briefly at the controversies that helped shaped Calvin's thinking and shaped his doctrine of predestination. In his first edition of the *Christian Institutes*, Calvin gave no real discussion to predestination. Later, however, the teachings of Augustine, who wrote at length on predestination in order to counter the heresies of Pelagius, came under assault by Roman Catholic scholars. Calvin expanded his *Institutes* to include the doctrine because of these attacks.<sup>1</sup> It must be noted, as Gonzalez is careful to point out, that using predestination as a test of orthodoxy and divine favour would likely have been abhorrent to Calvin. For him, the doctrine of

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<sup>1</sup>Fred Butler, "The Arminian Controversy", <http://www.fredsibletalk.com/fb012.html>.

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predestination was a means of expressing “the liberating joy of justification by the unmerited grace of God.”<sup>2</sup>

The term Arminianism comes from Jacobus Arminius, who was a Divinity Professor at Leiden University in Holland in the early seventeenth century. By this time, the majority of the Protestants in the Netherlands were Calvinists. Personal views of Scripture were allowed, but there was little toleration for anything but Calvinist views to be publicly expressed. Nonetheless, this was also a land where humanistic traditions from the Renaissance period had never died out and where Anabaptism was widely spread.

The Anabaptists had departed from Luther and Zwingli in their assertion that faith is an act of human will. To them, faith is a conscious choice, a choice embodied in the sacrament of believers' baptism. They rejected infant baptism in “children who have not yet come to the discernment of the knowledge of good and evil” and denounced it as a “senseless, blasphemous abomination, contrary to all Scripture.”<sup>3</sup> During the life of Arminius in Holland, “some people felt there needed to be a greater emphasis on the practical aspects of religion, less emphasis on finely distinguished doctrine, and a more tolerant attitude towards groups such as the Anabaptists.”<sup>4</sup>

The training of Jacobus Arminius was strictly and thoroughly Calvinistic. He became well known for his preaching in Amsterdam and as a student of the Bible was asked to refute the opinions of Dirck Koornhert, a theologian who rejected some aspects of Calvin's doctrine, particularly in the matter of predestination. As Arminius studied Koonhert's opinions on

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<sup>2</sup>Justo L. Gonzales, *The Story of Christianity, Volume 2* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1985), 184.

<sup>3</sup>Tammy Graham, “Free Will from Luther to the Brethren”, [http://history.hanover.edu/hhr/95/hhr95\\_2.html](http://history.hanover.edu/hhr/95/hhr95_2.html).

<sup>4</sup>Lewis Loflin, “Arminianism, an Overview”, [http://www.sullivan-county.com/id2/cal\\_arm.htm](http://www.sullivan-county.com/id2/cal_arm.htm).

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predestination with a purpose to refute them, he compared them with the teachings of several of the major reformers and after a struggle of conscience, concluded that Koornhert was right.<sup>5</sup>

Arminius's theology from that time represented a retreat from Calvinism and got him in trouble with the intolerant position of the Reformed preachers. Being liberal enough to see the good as well as the evil in Catholicism made him suspect by the stern Dutch Calvinists as leaning toward the Roman church. By opposing Calvin's theology on predestination, he became very controversial and was hated among the Reformed churches.

A bitter controversy sprang up between Jacobus Arminius and Franz Gomarus, his colleague at the University of Leyden who later was the leading spokesman for the Calvinists at the Synod of Dort. This conflict between them provoked a schism affecting the whole church of Holland. Many still come against Arminianism now as they did then calling it a "damnable heresy, a plague and leprosy, exhorting others to help stop the spread of what they call a devilish delusion from the mouth of the serpent."<sup>6</sup>

Following is a brief discussion on the situation in the Netherlands at the time of Arminius from an obvious Arminian position:

The fire of liberal Christian humanistic traditions (not secular humanist) from the Renaissance was still wide-spread in Europe although the intolerant spirit of the Calvinists had threatened to put the fire out. There was precious little toleration for anything except Calvinist views to be taught in the churches and by this time, most Protestants in the Netherlands were Calvinist. There was a spiritual feeling however that wanted a

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<sup>5</sup>Gonzales, 179.

<sup>6</sup>Jay Atkins, "Arminianism", <http://latter-rain.com/theology/armen.htm>.

greater emphasis on tolerance and the practical aspects of religion and less emphasis on legalistic doctrine and codified traditions. Many felt that it was necessary that the state should tolerate only one religion, but to others, like Arminius, that the state should tolerate all religions so that the true would always be free.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast to the above, here is an excerpt from a Calvinistic point of view:

Koornhert was influenced by the great Dutch Rationalist and humanist Desiderius Erasmus, who argued for and defended the Rationalistic idea of free will against the great Martin Luther just as Pelagius did against St. Augustine. Thus this ancient and condemned heresy was revived, and once again was infecting Christ's Church. Upon giving up on Reformed Christianity, Arminius and his followers developed the implications of their theology. Thus they taught that God's election of sinners was not grounded in His will and love alone but was conditioned by, and based upon, the foreseen faith of sinful men. They taught that Christ died "universally," that is, for the sins of every man without limit. They taught that man was only partially depraved, partially sinful. They taught that man, by the act of his free will, could resist the grace of the Holy Spirit. And they taught that no man in this life could have the assurance that he was a child of God, because there was always the possibility of losing one's salvation.

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<sup>7</sup>Jay Atkins.

<sup>8</sup>Rev. Daniel R. Hyde, "A Brief Introduction on the Nature of History of the Canons of Dort", <http://www.oceansideurc.org/sections/creeds/cannons.html>.

Arminius himself wrote:

There does not appear any greater evil in the disputes concerning matters of religion, than the persuading ourselves that our salvation or God's glory are lost by every little difference. As for me, I exhort my scholars, not only to distinguish between the true and the false according to Scripture, but also between the essential articles of faith, and the less essential articles, by the same Scripture.<sup>9</sup>

In actuality, it was not predestination about which they debated, but rather the basis on which it takes place. For Arminius, predestination was based on God's foreknowledge of those who would later have faith in Jesus Christ. Gomarus believed that faith itself is the result of predestination, so that at creation God decided who would have faith and who would not. Arminius believed that God did not will who would be saved and who would not, but rather had foreknowledge of who would choose salvation through faith. In all other aspects he was a strict Calvinist.

Jacobus Arminius died at 49, almost ten years before the controversy over his teachings came to a head. He was a worn out man assailed by the controversy and ecclesiastical persecution of the Calvinists. The political climate turned against the Arminian party and the Spanish-leaning merchants. The Dutch Estates Assembly convened the Synod of Dort (1618-19), in which they condemned Arminianism and approved five doctrines that have become the hallmark of orthodox Calvinism: This is known as the "TULIP" doctrine:<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>God Rules.Net (Author unknown) "Arminius vs. Calvin - The War Goes On", <http://www.godrules.net/ArminiusVSCalvin.htm>.

<sup>10</sup>Gonzales, 182.

1. Total depravity of humanity.
2. Unconditional election: The election of the predestined is not based on foreknowledge of each individual response to the offer of grace, but is due to the inscrutable will of God.
3. Limited atonement: Jesus died only for the elect.
4. Irresistible grace.
5. Perseverance of the saints: the elect will persevere in grace, and cannot fall from it.

A group of Arminius' followers, known as Remonstrants (reproof, to correct) issued a protest called the Five Articles to the Reformed Church of Holland. Basically, the articles were as follows:<sup>11</sup>

1. An ambiguous definition of predestination. Not clear whether God knows who will be saved in advance, or God determines that whoever believes would be saved.
2. Jesus died for all, but only those who believe will receive the reward of that death.
3. They were not Pelagianists (believed that humans were capable of doing good on their own). The grace of God is necessary to do good.
4. Rejects doctrine that grace is irresistible.
5. Is it possible to fall from grace once one has truly believed in Christ? The Gomarists argue that it is not possible. The Arminians are not as sure.

Immediately following the issue of these articles, severe restrictions were placed on the Remonstrants. Arminian ministers were forced to leave the

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<sup>11</sup>Gonzales, 180, 181.

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country or face prison for life. One leader was condemned to death. Laity of these churches were fined heavily. The Arminian Articles of Remonstrance were condemned by the Synod of Dort and the reply was popularly called “the five points of Calvinism,” in response to the Arminian Articles. The Remonstrants were expelled from the Reformed Church, hundreds of Arminians were removed from their pulpits, and Arminianism was dubbed as a deviant doctrine. The doctrine spread, however, as an underground movement in many forms. By 1631, tolerance was exercised to the point that the Arminians were granted official tolerance.

The Wesleyan, Nazarene, Pietists, Pentecostal groups, free-will Baptists, holiness churches, the Oxford movement, and the social gospel have all been influenced by Arminianism. When God sent John Wesley to preach in the eighteenth century, the free-will Arminian doctrine was refined with a strong evangelical emphasis on justification by faith. “As an ‘Evangelical Arminian’, he believed grace extends equally to all men and its acceptance or rejection must therefore depend ultimately on human decision.”<sup>12</sup> Note that he parted company from the famous preacher George Whitefield because Wesley “preferred the Arminian position”;<sup>13</sup> Whitefield helped organize the Calvinist Methodist Church, whose main strength was in Wales. Wesley brought his Arminian beliefs to America in the 1700’s. Those men who followed in his evangelistic efforts spread those beliefs all over the new continent.

It is clear that the Bible preaches human responsibility and Divine sovereignty side by side throughout the Bible. These two concepts are always difficult to reconcile and understand. I am convinced that we should cease from

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<sup>12</sup>Fred Butler, "The Arminian Controversy" <http://www.fredsibletalk.com/fb012.html>.

<sup>13</sup>Gonzales, 213.

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trying to rationally reconcile the two and accept the main message of each one as valid without lessening the significance of the other.

The Calvinistic approach seeks to emphasize God's purpose and plans, whereas the Arminian position tends to result often in a man-centred gospel. Calvinists have often minimized the importance of man's responsibility in sanctification, whereas Arminians have tended to over-emphasize man's free will. Believers should attempt to have "the best of both worlds": a God-centred theology plus a life committed to be changed to accomplish the Father's will.

Calvinists apparently have focused mostly on the issue of predestination as it applies to the choosing of who would be Christians and who would not be. Arminians have applied their concept of free will in the manner they have preached the gospel and also in their great emphasis on the sanctification process. Calvinists had a trust in their "eternal security" because it was all God's predetermination. Arminians have tended to trust in man's free will to determine if they will "fall from grace or not".

As we examine what God has predestined us to be, I conclude it is vital that our wills should be employed in every way possible that God might accomplish in us to the greatest degree possible what He has predestined for us. However, after He has worked changes in us, we must give Him all the glory for having planned all circumstances to lead us into such changes and for the Cross, on which the work was accomplished for our sanctification.

One activity that we should set our will to do is to focus on "HIM who is worthy of all honor, glory and satisfaction. Once we see Him and His purpose, we shall see all other things in their true light and perspective."<sup>14</sup> Included in focusing on the Lord and His purpose is to study and apply scriptures that explain what His purpose is for us, such as the following:

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<sup>14</sup>DeVern F. Fromke, *The Ultimate Intention* (Indianapolis, IN: Sure Foundation, 1990), 10.

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For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of His Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. (Rom. 8:29)

The previous verse (28) declares that “God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose”. It seems clear that to the measure we love him, we allow all things to work towards His goal of conforming us to the nature of Jesus Christ. The measure that we love God is determined by the depth of the commitment of our wills to allow God’s Spirit to change us and develop such a love in us. It is obvious that God would not have commanded us to love Him with our whole hearts, mind, soul, body, if we could not disobey and we had no responsibility and power to decide to increase steadily our love for Him. It is obvious that we cannot accomplish this degree of love ourselves. To set our wills in this direction is necessary; however, we need to depend on God by His spirit to work that love in us:

. . . continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose. (Phil. 2:12b, 13) <sup>15</sup>

Following is another passage that sets forth God’s wonderful purposes for us:

For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace. . . . In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the

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<sup>15</sup>All scripture quotations are from the NIV, unless otherwise noted.

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plan of him who works out everything in conformity of his will . . . (Eph. 1:4-11)

As we contemplate what it means to be His sons, surely this includes us be changed into the likeness of the “Pattern Son”. To learn to experience such a transformation, we first must focus worshipfully on Jesus. As we do, we cannot help to see that much changing needs to be done to make us like Him; and thus we cry out, “Lord, change me!” To recognize our need of change and to seek help to change, we are thus exercising our wills in expressing a necessary humility.

As we study the references in the New Testament about being like Jesus, we see a great majority of these numerous references refer to our reflecting the inward nature of Jesus shown in His suffering and death—called by some the “paradigm of the Cross”.<sup>16</sup> The following list shows some of the aspects of Jesus’ nature that were expressed vividly during His passion and that we are called upon to imitate by yielding to the work of the Holy Spirit in us:

- He was totally unselfish.
- He poured forth perfect sacrificial love.
- He forgave all His tormentors.
- He did not defend Himself from accusations, ridicule, physical torture.
- He showed ultimate courage to defeat all the powers of evil.
- He was thoughtful and caring to His mother during His horrible agony.

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<sup>16</sup>For an extensive treatment of this subject, read *Conformed to His Death=LIFE!* by the author. To purchase a copy, phone (905) 939-9635 or email [crossourparadigm@yahoo.ca](mailto:crossourparadigm@yahoo.ca).

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- He took no offense.
  - He perfectly obeyed the Father as a servant to the point of death.
  - He totally ignored man's rejection and sought only to please the Father.
  - He gave up any desire to look successful, important, or attractive in the eyes of men.<sup>17</sup>

Because of the extensive scriptural emphasis on truly following Jesus in becoming like Him in these attitudes and actions, a fervent commitment to be conformed to this “paradigm of the Cross” is a thoroughly scriptural response to our contemplation of the nature of Jesus in His passion:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer you bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. (Rom. 12:1,2)

A further declaration of God's purpose for the church is found in Ephesians:

His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to the his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Eph. 3: 10,11)

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<sup>17</sup>Ron Wilson, *Conformed to His Death=LIFE!*

God's purpose then is that we are to display collectively "the manifold wisdom of God". How can we display the wisdom of God at work in our church groups if we are quarreling about predestination and free will? We have been predestined to love our brothers with the same love as Jesus expressed, even if they do not agree with us as to the interpretation of Scripture. If I surrender myself to be conformed to the paradigm of the Cross, I will be willing to lay down my life for all members of the body of Christ and not to have any desire to harm them in any way—physically, spiritually, or emotionally. We are called to remove the "plank" in our eyes, before we remove "splinters" in others; but remember that, when we do remove our own faults, then we can see clearly to help others see better. In loving others, we want God's best for them, and that certainly includes we deeply desire that they fulfill God's purpose; i.e., that they are conformed to the nature of Christ—the paradigm of the Cross.

As I have already stated, it is obvious that if commands are given to us by God, we are obligated to choose to obey them. If we had no choice, then the commands would not have been considered or given. Below are only a few of the multitude of commands in the New Testament that refer to our need to be obedient in becoming what we are predestined to be—conformed to the likeness of Jesus Christ:

Love one another as I have loved you. (John 15:12b)

If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and  
take up his cross and follow me. (Matt. 16:25)

Think this way—Jesus' way! (Phil 2:5 paraphrased)

Pursue (follow) the way of love . . . (1 Cor. 14:1)

Hate what is evil (Rom. 12:9)

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Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

(Matt. 5:44)

Be mature . . . as your heavenly Father is mature

(Matt. 5:48)

Count yourselves dead to sin, but alive to God. (Rom. 6:11)

Therefore, do not let sin reign in your mortal body.

(Rom. 6:12)

Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves

also with the same attitude, . . . (1 Pet. 4:1)

As has been already stated, we are totally unable to obey these commands by ourselves; we need the indwelling Spirit to work in us to “will and to and to act according to his good purpose.” (Phil. 2:13) Thus, we apply first the Calvinist emphasis of our total depravity by accepting our need to depend entirely on God to help us be obedient to His commands. We can claim no credit for the revelation of our depravity and for the revelation that we can depend on Him to enable us to fulfill His purposes; in all things, God gets all the glory.

As we ask God to free our wills, He enables us to turn from all other purposes and embrace His glorious intent for us—to be changed, to be conformed to the paradigm of the Cross. In respect to this realization of our responsibility to exercise our wills in full cooperation with the Divine will, we seem to be thoroughly Arminian; however, it is noteworthy that some of the main sources I have quoted in *Conformed to His Death=LIFE!* are written recently by those of the Reformed or Lutheran churches.

Why only some seem to find this revelation of God’s purpose and express such dependence on the Lord and others do not is still largely a

mystery. Why some respond to the Gospel call and many do not is also hard to understand. Arminians have believed much more than Calvinists that it is every believer's responsibility to spread the word to unbelievers to encourage them to believe in Christ and to accept His purposes. The "Great Commission" seems very clear that we have this responsibility:

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them . . . and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. (Matt. 28:19, 20)

Note that "a 'disciple' was not only a pupil, but . . . they [disciples] are spoken of as *imitators of their teacher*"<sup>18</sup> [emphasis mine]. Accordingly, the following verses show that Jesus commanded and exhorted His disciples to follow Him by being trained to become like Him.

A student (*mathetes-disciple*) is not above his teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be *like his teacher*. (Luke 6:40)

This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, *showing yourselves to be my disciples* . . . . love one another as I have loved you. (John 5:8,12)

Accordingly, by recognizing the true meaning of "disciple", Jesus commands us in the "Great Commission", to make *imitators of Jesus* of all nations (Matt. 28:19). Of course, we have to first become disciples ourselves in the full meaning of that word by submitting to His training to live out the paradigm of the Cross in all we do.

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<sup>18</sup>W.E.Vine, et al *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc.,1985),171.

In conclusion, by selecting the main theme and goal of each of the Calvinistic and Armenian positions and applying these to our response to the revealed purpose of God, we will be Arminian by eagerly accepting our need to be conformed to paradigm of the Cross and seeking to bring others to a decision to become true disciples of Christ. Further, we will be Calvinistic by seeking to give all the glory to God for His planning all things to bring us to such a commitment and for the Cross on which Jesus accomplished all that was necessary to enable us to be changed into the image of Christ.

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