

The Will of God or the Will of Man?

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I received most of my education at Arminian, free-will schools. I am grateful for the impact they had on me, and for the genuine, loving Christian spirit of those under whom I sat. While I now (as then) disagree strongly with their theology, I do not thereby question their sincerity and devotion. Few men are entirely consistent in their thinking. Fewer still are able to see the implication of that thinking. Someday, at the foot of the throne, we shall all be consistent and comprehending. Until then, we must challenge one another, especially those we think are persuaded by great error.

One area in which the modern church needs to be challenged is in the area of its soteriology (doctrine of salvation). Liberalism or modernism can be easily recognized because it denies the supernatural origins of the Faith. It is a naturalistic philosophy that rejects the transcendence of God and Jesus Christ and places confidence in human goodness and its progressive movements. It is a humanistic faith which sees the individual and society as the foci of organized religion. "The liberal view of God and man depends upon the liberal view of authority in religion" (Cornelius Van Til, *The Case for Calvinism*, 1968, xii). This "liberal point of view of authority in religion" is centered on a very human Jesus Christ, Who is stripped of the miraculous and, at the whim of non-believing "scholars," even of His own words in the gospels. The "historical Christ" is custom-fabricated into a mouthpiece of the naturalistic faith of modernism. He becomes the symbol of their ideology, rather than the Savior of their souls.

The twentieth-century church was powerless to stop the growth of modernism because of its previous adoption of Arminianism, which elevates the will and reason of man to "call the justice of God to the bar of reason; they dare confidently wade in the deep ocean of divine mysteries..." (Christopher Ness, *An Antidote Against Arminianism* (1700), Still Waters Revival Books, 1988, 1). If the will and reason of man can decide the merits of the Word of God (which is all a redemptive history) and freely choose between Christ and rebellion based on the workings of that will and reasoning, then what can preclude man's will and reason from deciding the merits and freely choosing the validity of the Scriptures or their present applicability? Arminians did not necessarily go this far, though many of their churches took the ball of free will and ran with it headlong toward modernism. Hence the fundamentalists found it necessary to appropriately emphasize the cardinal doctrines of the Faith. They thus avoided naturalism and its implicit humanism in favor of Christ's deity, emphasis on Christ's redemptive work, and the infallibility of Scripture. But the stand of the fundamentalists was a finger in the dike they had helped breach by their incorrect adherence to free will as a Scriptural doctrine. The modernists extended free will and reason while the fundamentalists restricted it to human redemption. Strangely enough, in taking their stand against liberalism, the fundamentalists stood for God's sovereignty in the revelation and preservation of His Word but not in man's salvation.

History of the Conflict

Arminianism and Calvinism began long before their namesakes in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The issues were even old when Pelagius and Augustine clashed in the fifth century. Pelagius, borrowing from paganism, claimed man had no sin nature and hence had a will that was perfectly free to obey God's law and believe. Augustine answered that original sin had so corrupted man's nature that he is unable to respond to God's law or gospel. Grace is necessary to those predestined by God's election in order for man to exercise faith, which, said Augustine, comes from God's grace, not man's will. (This is a crucial point. The most transparently inaccurate criticism of Calvinism is the charge that it denies the role of man's will in faith. It does not deny man's will any more than Arminianism denies God's will. The question that each system answers in a different way is, "Whose will is determinative in salvation – God's or man's?") Pelagianism was thoroughly discredited as pagan heresy by Augustine's influence.

A new teaching soon tried to take the middle ground between Pelagius and Augustine. Cassian promoted a system that has come to be called Semi-Pelagianism. It conceded that original sin corrupted man but claimed that a universal grace was available to all which made their exercise of free will possible. Even in this, they gave primacy to the will rather than to grace. They asserted that "it is mine to be willing to believe, and it is the part of God's grace to assist" (Steele and Thomas, *The Five Points of Calvinism*, 1976, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 20).

The Reformation rejected both Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism. God's sovereignty, man's total depravity and inability, and unconditional election were held to not only by Calvin, but also by Luther, Zwingli, Bullinger, and Bucer, though Melancthon later adopted Semi-Pelagianism. The Reformation's soteriology was not just about justification by faith without works; it shared the Biblical view of Augustine regarding man's inability and God's grace. Hence Calvinism is often accurately called Reformed theology.

Semi-Pelagianism was revived by James Arminius. In 1610, one year after his death, his followers published a remonstrance (protest) to the State of Holland. It contained five points and demanded that the Belgic Confession of Faith and the Heidelberg Catechism be changed to conform to this "Arminian" thinking. The Synod of Dort of 1618 rejected the Arminian theology and demand. It decided to respond to each of the five tenets of Arminianism with five corresponding points, which are known to us as the "five points of Calvinism." They are 1) total depravity, 2) unconditional election, 3) particular or limited atonement, 4) irresistible grace, and 5) perseverance or eternal security of the saints.

The Great Contrast

The differences between Calvinism and Arminianism are fundamental because they differ on the nature of God and man. Calvinism preaches a God Who Himself saves sinners while they are dead in their sins; Arminianism preaches a God Who makes salvation possible. Calvinism teaches that God's election, redemption, and calling are all to the same persons; Arminianism must distinguish God's election as referring to those who respond, His redemption as referring to all mankind, and His calling as referring to all who hear the gospel. Calvinism teaches that God's election, redemption, and calling save men who

are given the gift of faith to express the determinative regeneration of the Holy Spirit. Arminianism teaches that God's work prepares the path for the determinative will of the individual. Calvinism sees faith as a gift; Arminianism sees it as an aspect of man's free and conscious will. Calvinism holds that God's grace alone saves man; Arminianism holds that God's grace puts the mechanism (Christ's atonement) in place for salvation. To the Arminian, God in eternity awaits the outcome of the sovereign will of the sinner. To the Calvinist, God decrees, redeems, proclaims, calls, justifies, sanctifies, preserves, and defends His own; man is passive except when God stirs him to respond by His Spirit.

Arminian faith is centered on man; hence, Arminian religion is centered on man. The gospel is then the sum of the church's work. It is no accident that dispensationalism and its effective dismissal of the bulk of Scripture gained rapid acceptance in Arminian churches. If man's decision was paramount, there had to be an endless obsession with preaching to the "will" rather than preaching of the Word. Christian action was reduced to preaching the gospel of free will. Holiness and righteousness were reduced to the subjectivity of pietism, whereby, once again, the will and reason of man (though ostensibly led by the Holy Spirit) chose its own path of duty to God. Will and reason, first enthroned on the Arminian path to justification, still ruled the Arminian's sanctification. Subjective piety tends to rule in Arminian churches unless a charismatic or dictatorial leader supplies artificial authority.

Because man's will is elevated by Arminianism, Scripture (what remains after the ravages of dispensationalism) is depreciated. "Thus saith the Lord" is arrogantly answered with "But I think..." The "fundamentals" of the Faith are in constant retreat before the onslaught of man's demand for increased autonomy for his will and reason. The naturalism of modernism keeps rearing its head and sincere Arminians do not understand why. The church's battles become defensive even within its own doors. Outside it is seen as irrelevant. It produces no great social manifestations of Christian thought or activity. Without a theocentric perspective, progress and victory seem hopeless. It sees itself reduced to social irrelevancy and tends to choose defeatist eschatology to justify this. The soteriology that begins with man's free will becomes bogged down in endless appeals to man's free will. It sees no place for other Christian activity and awaits its rescue and reward in eternity. A Reformed soteriology that begins with the sovereign decree of God gives the redeemed man perspective, purpose, direction, and an authority under which he can work for his God and Savior. The preaching of the gospel (of grace, not free will, as they are different gospels) is an integral part of his work, but not its sum total.

Fortunately, not all Arminians are entirely consistent, though the effects of their theology are plainly evident in modern Christianity, and their outworkings that I have touched on are apparent. The abandonment of the Reformation's full soteriology has crippled the modern Arminian church and left it vulnerable to modernism, subjective pietism, and defeatist eschatology. Even its admirable stand for justification by faith has been compromised by its equating faith with free will. The majority of Western churches and individuals that sincerely profess faith in Christ's atonement are Arminian. This, by God's grace, must change if they, too, are to avoid a slide into modernism and subjectivism.

Rev. Mark R. Rushdoony is President of Chalcedon and Ross House Books, and the son of Rev. R.J. Rushdoony.