

INTRODUCTION

We are beginning to hear names and titles used in religious circles which have rarely been heard in years. "Calvinism", "Arminianism", "Reformed Theology", "Hyper-Calvinism" etc., these terms are cropping up in most unexpected places.

There are many reasons to be thankful that interest is being shown by Christian people in these terms, but it is very important that the man in the pew know what they stand for, and how and why they have arisen.

Discerning Christians realise that preachers are sometimes very different in the message they preach and in the methods they use. They hear one man referred to as a "Calvinist", and another man referred to as an "Arminian", and many people in our day are beginning to ask, "Pastor, what is the difference?"

The purpose of this booklet is to answer that question in some degree. Obviously this is not an exhaustive investigation; it is anything but that. While it will be very apparent which position I accept as one reads through the booklet, yet it is not an attempt to present biblical evidence of that position; I endeavour to do that in preaching and teaching, and perhaps in other articles (see [Doctrines of Grace](#) article). It is simply an attempt to explain, in a way that the average Christian can understand, the origin and significance of some of these terms.

I - THE REFORMATION

In order to have a proper perspective and understanding of these terms which have been mentioned we should go back to the time of the Reformation.

The 16th century witnessed the greatest upheaval in the religious world since the time of Pentecost. What is now usually referred to as the Protestant Reformation took place at that time, and it was an event of tremendous significance. Most evangelical Christians regard the Reformation as a glorious movement brought about by the Spirit of God, and give heartfelt thanks for it. The time of the Reformation was indeed a time of great spiritual blessing, and while it was a time of upheaval and debate, and sometimes even of violence, yet it was a time when multitudes were converted to Jesus Christ and brought into the light of the Gospel.

The Reformation is most closely identified with such great men of God as Martin Luther (1483-1546), John Calvin (1509-1564). Huldreich Zwingli (1484-1531), John Knox (1505-1572) etc. The basic desire of these men, and of the Reformation, was to bring the churches back to Apostolic Christianity, from the corruption of Romanism.

One of the "watchwords" of the Reformation was "scripture alone"; the Reformers called the people away from Roman tradition and superstition, and back to the Bible, the Word of God as the only infallible authority for the Christian faith. The Reformation, then, was an attempt to return to Apostolic Christianity, to Apostolic doctrine, to Apostolic preaching, and as such it was greatly blessed of God.

As multitudes were converted through the labours of the Reformers and their helpers, they were established into churches throughout Europe. The need was felt to give expression to the doctrines which the "reformed churches" (as they were often called) believed and taught, and

so the great creeds of the Protestant churches began to appear. The Reformers themselves wrote much concerning the Christian Faith for the instruction and edification of their converts.

Probably the greatest theologian of the Reformation was John Calvin. This man was greatly used of God and his labours were prodigious. He wrote excellent commentaries on almost every book in the Bible, and early in his career wrote the "Institutes of the Christian Religion", which had a great influence in establishing the young churches of the Reformation. In the "Institutes" Calvin expounded the major doctrines of the Christian faith, and this great work still remains today as one of the finest expositions of Christian truth.

The Reformation movement was so successful under God's blessing that "reformed churches" were soon established in most European countries including England, and though there were many difficulties and upheavals the churches flourished. While there were differences of opinion on matters such as the Lord's Supper, and aspects of church government, the churches of the Reformation were one with respect to the great fundamental truths of the Bible, and especially in those truths relating to God's work in the salvation of men.

The Reformation churches preached a God Who was sovereign, a humanity that was in every part corrupted by sin, and a salvation that was altogether of grace.

II - THE REACTION OF ARMINIUS AND THE SYNOD OF DORT

In the latter part of the 16th. century, however, a minister in Amsterdam, Holland, by the name of Jacob Arminius, began preaching certain things that were contrary to the confession of the Reformed churches of his country (the Belgic Confession of faith). Inasmuch as Arminius, like all the other ministers, had pledged to uphold and preach the doctrines set forth in the Confession, this was a serious offence, and he was challenged concerning it.

Although he again pledged to uphold the Reformed doctrine it was not long before his preaching again revealed that he had departed from the position of the Reformation, especially in the area of God's work in salvation. Great controversy ensued, and although Arminius died in the middle of the conflict his followers continued to promote his teachings in opposition to the confessions of the Reformed churches. The proponents of these anti-Reformation teachings became known as Arminians, the name being taken of course from Jacob Arminius, and in 1610 they drew up a document in which they set forth five doctrinal "articles" in the area of soteriology (the doctrine of salvation) exactly opposite to the teaching of the Reformers. These articles were known as the "5 remonstrants".

The Arminians stated:

1. that God's election was based upon the fact that God "foresaw" that a man would repent and believe of his own "free will"
2. that Christ's death did not actually secure the salvation of any man in particular, but simply made it possible for all men to be saved
3. the need for regeneration (however further explanation of this revealed that even here they did not agree with the Reformers as to the nature of regeneration, or the depravity of human nature)
4. that God's grace could be resisted totally; that is, that God might "try" to convert a man but might fail
5. that a Christian might after all be lost again after being once saved.

In 1618 a great council was called in the Dutch town of Dort in order to examine the teachings of the Arminians in the light of the Word of God. Representatives from all the "reformed" churches of Europe were present, including a number from England. After more than six months of careful deliberation the "synod" issued its decisions and findings. The teachings of Arminius were shown to be without true biblical foundation, and the "5 remonstrants" were answered by five articles of scriptural truth set out by the synod. It should be kept in mind that the synod was composed of the finest preachers and theologians of the Protestant world of that day.

The churches of the Reformation declared:

1. that Man's nature was totally effected by sin, which meant that his will was affected by sin, and was in bondage to his sinful nature, and therefore his salvation did not arise out of his "free-will"
2. that God's election was not conditioned by foreseen faith in man, but was "according to the good pleasure of His will"
3. that Christ's death secured, and made certain the salvation of the elect, purchasing for them all the gifts (including repentance and faith) that were necessary to it, and that it was restricted in its intent to them only
4. that God's grace always secured its designed end
5. that God's elect would persevere in faith and holiness unto the end, they being kept by the power of God.

It is important to notice that these were not new teachings, but these were the doctrines upon which the Reformation had been built. Just as the teaching of Arminius became known as Arminianism, so the position of the reformed churches and the synod of Dort became known as "Calvinism", and the five articles that were presented in opposition to the new teaching of Arminius became known as the "five points of Calvinism".

Calvin's name was linked with these doctrines simply because he was the foremost theologian of the Reformation movement and had most ably and systematically set forth the Biblical doctrines preached by the Reformers. These doctrines did not originate with him; they come directly from the Word of God itself, and they had been ably expounded centuries before by the great Augustine.

III - CALVINISM

The five points of Calvinism simply set forth the work of the Triune God in the salvation of sinners - election by the Father, redemption by the Son, regeneration by the Spirit. These great truths are flanked by the need of salvation, the total depravity and inability of man, and the result of God's work in the soul of man i.e., perseverance in the faith. Thus they deal with the very heart of the gospel and the Christian faith. Calvinism sets forth the sovereignty of God in man's salvation, without detracting from man's responsibility. Arminianism presents man's will as sovereign, and divides the credit for salvation between God and man.

Dr. J.I. Packer states:

"The difference between them (Calvinism and Arminianism) is not primarily one of emphasis, but of content. One proclaims a God who saves: the other speaks of a God who enables man to save himself. One view (Calvinism) presents the three great acts of the Holy Trinity for the recovering of lost mankind - election by the Father, redemption by the Son, calling by the Spirit - as directed towards the same persons, and as

securing their salvation infallibly. The other view (Arminianism) gives each act a different reference (the objects of redemption being all mankind, of calling those who hear the gospel, and of electing those hearers who respond), and denies that any man's salvation is secured by any of them. The two theologies thus conceive the plan of salvation in quite different terms. One makes salvation depend on the work of God, the other on a work of man; one regards faith as part of God's gift of salvation, the other as man's own contribution to salvation; one gives all the glory for saving believers to God, the other divides the praise between God, who, so to speak, built the machinery of salvation, and man, who by believing, operated it." (Introductory essay to "The Death of Death" by J. Owen)

It is not the purpose of this booklet to attempt to prove the scripturalness and the truth of Calvinism. This has been done ably by preachers and scholars down through the years.

"Calvinism", then, is simply a "nickname" for the Biblical teaching of the Reformation, and especially the "five points" already referred to. Because it is simply a setting forth of the teaching of the Reformers, Calvinism is also known as "Reformed Theology". Arminianism, however, is a reaction against that teaching, and a denial of the five points."

It is simply a fact of history that "Calvinism" has been the heart and marrow of the teaching of the great Protestant denominations in Christendom, with the exception of the Wesleyan Methodists. The Lutheran denomination might also prefer to be included in the exception, but it should be realized that in following Melancthon in his "synergistic" theology they departed from Luther's conviction, as his writing and their earliest creed reveal. The great historic doctrinal confessions of the churches, such as the Presbyterian Westminster Confession, and the Baptist Second London Confession give clear testimony to the truths of "Calvinism". Even the 39 articles of the Anglican church have a definite "Calvinistic" emphasis. The majority of the greatest evangelists, preachers, and theologians who have graced the Christian church have all rejoiced in a clearly preached Calvinism.

Apart from the Reformers already mentioned, we think of such men as Hugh Latimer, John Owen, Joseph Alleine, John Bunyan, Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, David Brainerd, William Carey, Charles Spurgeon, Horatius Bonar, Robert Murray McCheyne, and a host of others. These men, on fire for God, and mightily used of God had grasped the glorious Biblical truths nicknamed Calvinism.

We are reminded of a statement by Spurgeon, when he once said:

"It is no novelty, then, that I am preaching; no new doctrine. I love to proclaim these strong old doctrines, that are called by nickname Calvinism; but which are surely and verily the revealed truth of God as it is in Christ Jesus. By this truth I make a pilgrimage into the past, and as I go, I see father after father, confessor after confessor, martyr after martyr, standing up to shake hands with me. Were I a Pelagian, or a believer in the doctrine of free-will. I should have to walk for centuries all alone. Here and there a heretic, of no very honorable character, might rise up and call me brother. But taking these things to be the standard of my faith, I see the land of the ancients peopled with my brethren, I behold multitudes who confess the same as I do, and acknowledge that this is the religion of God's own church". (Sermon on Election from the text 2 Thessalonians 2:13, 14)

The only group of any consequence who historically were not Calvinists were the Wesleyan Methodists, and they adopted a modified form of Arminianism.

Sad to say, however, it has often been the case that men have let slip their grasp on truth with the passing of generations. This is true as we consider the last few centuries. Arminianism is much more palatable to the natural mind; it is not as crushing to human pride; it is much nicer and easier medicine to take from man's viewpoint!

In the 18th and 19th century the Christian church received great onslaughts from rationalism and humanism and in grappling with the new challenges from these foes, foolishly let slip the strong old doctrines of the church. Arminianism gained the ascendancy in many of the great denominations, and the old faith was well nigh abandoned except for a "remnant". For the past 100 years the great truths of "Calvinism" have been virtually forgotten by the evangelical world, though with some notable exceptions, but there are hopeful signs that God is reviving His truth again, and bringing many to realize that the man-centred teachings of Arminius are no substitute for the truth which our forefathers so gloriously declared.

As we have already stated, because Calvinism was the teaching of the Reformation it is often called "Reformed Theology", and because of its emphasis on the grace of God it is often called the Doctrines of Grace. Calvinism, Reformed Theology, and the Doctrines of Grace, are all the same thing, and present the truth of God's sovereignty in every sphere, and particularly in the sphere of salvation.

IV - COMPARING CALVINISM AND ARMINIANISM

Steels and Thomas present a very helpful table to enable us to compare the two systems:

The Five Points of Arminianism	The Five Points of Calvinism
<p>1. Free Will or Human Ability</p> <p>Although human nature was seriously affected by the Fall, man has not been left in a state of total spiritual helplessness. God graciously enables every sinner to repent and believe, but he does so in such a manner as not to interfere with man's freedom. Each sinner possesses a free will, and his eternal destiny depends on how he uses it. Man's freedom consists in his ability to choose good over evil in spiritual matters; his will is not enslaved to his sinful nature. The sinner has the power to either cooperate with God's Spirit and be regenerated or resist God's grace and perish. The lost sinner needs the Spirit's assistance but he does not have to be regenerated by the Spirit before he can believe, for faith is man's act and precedes the new birth. Faith is the sinner's gift to God; it is man's contribution to salvation.</p>	<p>1. Total Depravity or Total Inability</p> <p>Because of the Fall, man is unable of himself to savingly believe the gospel. The sinner is dead, blind, and deaf to the things of God; his heart is deceitful and desperately corrupt. His will is not free, it is in bondage to his sinful nature, therefore he will not - indeed he cannot - choose good over evil in the spiritual realm. Consequently it takes much more than the Spirit's assistance to bring a sinner to Christ - it takes regeneration by which the Spirit makes the sinner alive and gives him a new nature. Faith is not something that man contributes to salvation, but is itself a part of God's gift of salvation - it is God's gift to the sinner, not the sinner's gift to God.</p>
<p>2. Conditional Election</p> <p>God's choice of certain individuals to salvation before the foundation of the world was based upon his foreseeing that they would respond to His call. He selected only those whom He</p>	<p>2. Unconditional Election</p> <p>God's choice of certain individuals unto salvation before the foundation of the world rested solely in His own sovereign will. His choice of particular sinners was not based on</p>

<p>knew would of themselves freely believe the gospel. Election therefore was determined by or conditioned upon what man would do. The faith which God foresaw and upon which He based His choice was not given to the sinner by God (it was not created by the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit), but resulted solely from man's free will. It was left entirely up to man as to who would be elected unto salvation. God chose those, whom He knew would, of their own free will choose Christ. Thus the sinner's choice of Christ, not God's choice of the sinner, is the ultimate cause of salvation.</p>	<p>any foreseen response or obedience on their part, such as faith, repentance, etc. On the contrary God gives faith and repentance to each individual whom He selected. These acts are the result not the cause of God's choice. Election therefore was not conditioned upon any virtuous quality or act foreseen in man. Those whom God sovereignly elected He brings through the power of the Spirit to a willing acceptance of Christ. Thus God's choice of the sinner, not the sinner's choice of Christ, is the ultimate cause of salvation.</p>
<p>3. Universal Redemption or General Atonement</p>	<p>3. Particular Redemption or Limited Atonement</p>
<p>Christ's redeeming work made it possible for everyone to be saved but did not actually secure the salvation of anyone. Although Christ died for all men, only those who believe in Him are saved. His death enabled God to pardon sinners on the condition that they believe but it did not actually put away anyone's sins. Christ's redemption becomes effective only if man chooses to accept it.</p>	<p>Christ's redeeming work was intended to save the elect only, and actually secured salvation for them. His death was a substitutionary endurance of the penalty of sin in the place of certain specified sinners. In addition to putting away the sins of His people, Christ's redemption secured everything necessary for their salvation including faith which unites them to Him. The gift of faith is infallibly applied by the Spirit to all for whom Christ died, thereby guaranteeing their salvation.</p>
<p>4. The Holy Spirit can be Effectually Resisted</p>	<p>4. Irresistible Grace or the Efficacious Call of the Spirit</p>
<p>The Spirit calls inwardly all those who are outwardly called by the Gospel invitation. He does all that He can to bring every sinner to salvation. But inasmuch as man is free, he can successfully resist the Spirit's call. The Spirit cannot regenerate the sinner until he believes. Faith (which is man's contribution) precedes and makes possible the new birth. Thus man's free will limits the Spirit in the application of Christ's saving work. The Holy Spirit can only draw to Christ those who allow Him to have His way with them. Until the sinner responds the spirit cannot give life. God's grace therefore, is not invincible; it can be, and often is, resisted and thwarted by man.</p>	<p>In addition to the outward general call which is made to everyone who hears the Gospel, the Holy Spirit extends to the elect a special inward call that inevitably brings them to salvation. The external call (which is made to all without distinction) can be, and often is rejected; whereas the internal call (which is made only to the elect) cannot be rejected; it always results in conversion. By means of this special call the Spirit irresistibly draws sinners to Christ. He is not limited in His work of applying salvation by man's will, nor is He dependent on man's co-operation for success. The Spirit graciously causes the elect sinner to cooperate, to believe, to repent, to come freely and willingly to Christ. God's grace therefore is invincible; it never fails to result therefore in the salvation of those to whom it is extended.</p>
<p>5. Falling From Grace</p>	<p>5. Perseverance of the Saints</p>
<p>Those who believe and are truly saved can lose their salvation by failing to keep up their</p>	<p>All who were chosen by God, redeemed by Christ, and given faith by the Spirit are</p>

faith etc. All Arminians have not been agreed on this point, some have held that believers are eternally secure in Christ - that once a sinner is regenerated he can never be lost.	eternally saved. They are kept in faith by the power of Almighty God and thus persevere to the end.
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A Calvinist, then, is one who accepts and preaches these "5 points" as setting forth Biblical truth in those areas dealt with. However it is a sad fact, that in our day (when, it must be acknowledged a great deal of ignorance abounds in the area of theology and church history) that people who teach these "5 points" are often branded as "Hyper-Calvinists" and this term is used as a strong reproach.

V - HYPER-CALVINISM

Therefore we need to ask, what is a "Hyper-Calvinist"?

The word "Hyper" indicates a "going beyond", "further than the proper bounds"; it indicates an extreme, beyond the norm; and indeed there is such a thing as Hyper-Calvinism, but this can hardly be an acceptance and preaching of the "5 points", for looking historically and accurately at Calvinism the "5 points" are the norm.

In a very real sense Arminianism and Hyper-Calvinism share a basic factor in common. They both try to apply human logic to the divine revelation. The Arminian reasons this way - "because men are commanded to repent and believe the gospel, they must therefore have the ability within themselves to do so" (they fail to apply the same logic to God's command to men to keep His law). From this bad logic they derive their doctrine of free will. The Hyper-Calvinist reasons this way - "because men do not have the ability within themselves to repent and believe the gospel, therefore there is no point in commanding them to do so". Both these groups are correct until they get to their "therefore", and then human logic and deduction takes over; but unfortunately they go beyond what is revealed in the Scriptures.

The Calvinistic, Biblical position takes the truth from both these statements and holds them both without trying to make them "logical". Men are commanded to repent and believe the gospel, and they are responsible to God to do so; men are unable in and of themselves to repent and believe because of their sinful nature. This is the dilemma into which the grace of God enters, according to His purpose of election, and by the mighty power of the Spirit, those for whom Christ died are made alive, and brought by the gospel to repentance and faith in the Saviour. This is the miracle of God's salvation!

The Hyper-Calvinist grasps the truth of man's inability, and the truth that God will certainly save His elect, but he wrongly deducts from that there is no necessity therefore to preach the gospel to every creature, and to engage in efforts to reach the lost.

His "logic" in going beyond the Scriptures brings him into an unbiblical position where he ceases to see the necessity of using God-ordained "means" to produce the God-ordained goals. This sad fact often produces a lack of evangelistic zeal and missionary activity among Hyper-Calvinists, and a lack of compassion for the lost.

Coupled with this fact we may say that the Hyper-Calvinist not only does not see the necessity for preaching the gospel to every creature, but considers it wrong to urge repentance and faith

upon sinners indiscriminately. It is sometimes expressed this way, that the Hyper-Calvinist does not believe in "duty faith" and "duty repentance"; he does not believe that all men should be invited to come to Christ. In contrast to this, the historic Calvinist does most certainly believe that it is the duty and responsibility of all men to repent and believe even though they have, through sin, lost the ability to do so; and the Calvinist does not hesitate to bid all men everywhere to repent, and to invite every man to trust the Saviour.

True Calvinism therefore is not opposed to evangelism and missionary activity for it recognizes that the elect must be saved through the gospel, and like Paul the Calvinist puts the question "how shall they hear without a preacher"? Again, if it is the duty of all men to repent and believe, then all men must be told of this responsibility. The fact that true Calvinism is not opposed to evangelism and missionary work is attested to by the great names of history who have gone to the ends of the earth to proclaim the gospel and who were Calvinistic in their theology. The names of John Eliot, David Brainerd, John Paton, William Carey and George Whitefield suffice to make the point.

Hyper-Calvinism is also characterised by the view that God's decree of election is viewed without reference to the Fall of man, that is, the Hyper-Calvinist believes that God created some men with the express purpose of damning them simply as creatures, not as sinful, fallen creatures.

Historic Calvinism, on the other hand, has always presented God's decree of election as a most gracious decree against the background of the Fall of man. Out of a race already on the way to hell because of its own sin. God graciously wills to choose a great multitude out of sheer mercy and grace. God does not damn men for nothing says Calvinism. He damns them because of their sin.

Another characteristic that has been seen in some (though not all) Hyper-Calvinists is "Antinomianism". The word means "against or opposed to the law". It represents the idea that the moral law is not binding on the Christian, and some have indeed claimed to be God's elect, and on the basis of his claim have then proceeded to live as they pleased, disregarding the Word of God and bringing great reproach on the cause of Truth.

Historic Calvinism, following the Bible as its guide, has also insisted that the fact of election is always revealed in holiness of life, and has strongly condemned the Antinomianism of some Hyper-Calvinists.

Other factors might be added, but enough has been said to show that Hyper-Calvinism is as distinct from Historic Calvinism as is Arminianism. They are both extreme positions, though of course opposite extremes; they are both departures from the Biblical position, and both suffer from the insistence of applying human logic where human logic has no right to be!

VI - WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?

The question, of course, often asked is, what difference does it make? While I would certainly not advocate Christians breaking off fellowship over these matters, we must recognize that it does make a difference which view one takes; it does matter.

We may say immediately that it matters simply from the viewpoint that God's people should be concerned to know the true doctrine of the Word of God. Every true Christian should want to know what the Bible really teaches, and should approach the Scriptures in a submissive spirit,

ready to accept all that is plainly revealed. Our problem is that often we are prepared to believe only what we want to believe. We ought not to approach the Bible with the attitude "what do I like best, what appeals to me", but "what saith the scriptures". It is our duty as Christian to study the scriptures and to receive all its teaching.

However, it matters further, in that our doctrinal viewpoint will generally affect our attitude to God. A grasp of Reformed Theology will give a person a proper sense of the majesty of God. It has been said that a Calvinist is one who has "seen God". The one who said that was not inferring a physical sight or vision, but meant that with the "eyes of the understanding", he had perceived the greatness of God. His soul had been overwhelmed with the consciousness of God's glory. Reformed teaching presents God as being truly "high and lifted up", and the one who has grasped these great Biblical truths stands in awe of a sovereign God, a God of awesome holiness, of infinite power, of solemn majesty, before whom he and all of creation must bow in deep reverence and humble adoration.

The truth of sovereign grace produces a spirit of reverence in the soul; it instills a right fear of God; not a fear in the sense of terror which would drive us away from God's presence, but fear in the sense of sonlike reverence and respect. This is the kind of fear what produces good behaviour in the house of God, and which causes a person to hate the idea of sinning against such a God. I suggest that this right attitude towards God is sadly lacking in many churches today, and I suggest that this is related to the fact that the old doctrines calculated to produce it have been forsaken or neglected.

Furthermore, an understanding of the doctrines of grace will produce a profound thankfulness for our salvation that nothing else can.

This is not to say that an Arminian is not thankful for his salvation, God forbid. But one who sees these things from an Arminian standpoint must always be conscious (if he is a thinking person) that some of the credit can rightly go to him. While God provided salvation, it was his (the sinner's) decision that really clinched the deal; it was his right exercise of his independent will which ultimately saved him. The difference between him and those who are lost is not something which God did, but something he did.

The Calvinist cannot agree to such assertions; he sees his salvation as "all of grace". It was God who saved him from first to last - God the Father by choosing him, God the Son by redeeming him, God the Spirit by quickening him. While recognising the necessity to believe, and knowing that we are justified by faith, the Calvinist realises that even that faith was the very gift of God to him. He sees the blood of Christ as not just making salvation possible, but as actually securing his salvation - bearing all his sins, standing in his room and stead, and fully satisfying God's righteous claims against him. He is overwhelmed by the glory of the cross and like Toplady he cries:

From whence this fear and unbelief? Hast thou O Father put to grief Thy spotless Son for me? And will the righteous judge of men condemn me for that debt of sin which Lord was laid on Thee? If Thou hast my discharge procured, and freely in my room endured the whole of wrath divine, payment God cannot twice demand, first at my bleeding Surety's hand and then again at mine. Complete atonement Thou hast made, and to the utmost farthing paid what'er Thy people owed; how then on me can wrath take place, if sheltered in Thy righteousness and sprinkled with Thy blood? Turn then my soul unto Thy rest; the merits of Thy great high priest speak peace and liberty; Trust in His efficacious blood, nor fear Thy banishment from God, since Jesus died for Thee.

The Calvinist recognises that God could have justly left him in his sins; he could have passed him by and left him to suffer the just rewards of his sins; but instead, in saving mercy He "commanded the light to shine in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ". Thus a grasp of these truths prostrates the soul before God "lost in wonder love and praise", that such a God should sovereignly save such a sinner!

It makes a difference also in that a grasp of the doctrines of grace causes the believer to give equal glory to each of the persons of the Trinity for their working in the plan of salvation.

The dominance of Arminian theology in our generation has produced great emphasis on the work of the Son (which in itself is a good thing, of course), but it has almost totally overlooked the work of the Father and the Holy Spirit, and this is not good. Our God is the Triune God, and we must honour the Father and the Spirit, just as we honour the Son, or else we grieve the Lord God.

Because the Father's prerogative in election has been denied, and the Spirit's work in regeneration has been greatly perverted, the honour and glory due these divine persons is not given. Biblical Calvinism, presenting the harmonious working of the Trinity in salvation gives due emphasis to the Father's work of election, the Son's work in redemption, and the Spirit's work in regeneration. Thus we are caused to admire the wisdom and the greatness of the Triune God, and His marvellous salvation.

VII - EVANGELISM

It matters what position we take on this issue when it comes to the work of evangelism.

Arminianism has a tendency to drive men to methods, while Calvinism drives men to God. If it is God who sovereignly saves people through the use of His truth, then the need is for us to make known the truth, and get it out to everyone we can, and fervently to seek God's face for the supernatural power of His Spirit to apply His truth to the hearts of sinners.

However, if we are persuaded that "God has done all He can", that "God can do no more", and that "it is now all up to you", then we are going to take up our time thinking more about men than God. Our thoughts will centre on how we can persuade that sinner to take the necessary independent step that he must take before God can help him. The sinner must be persuaded to "allow God" the chance to come in and do something. So the average modern evangelical, motivated (perhaps unknowingly) by Arminianism is constantly looking for "new soul winning methods" and techniques by which the sinner may be persuaded. Obviously if God can do no more, and the sinner must be persuaded to "allow God", then why waste time praying to God to do something which we've already concluded He cannot do! And so our attention instead of being taken up with God, is taken up with men and methods.

There will be a great difference in the preaching of one who believes as we have just described, and the one who preaches in the assurance that the Spirit of God will do His own work of applying Christ's redemption to God's elect in His own time and way; and that the Spirit and only the Spirit, by means of the truth, can open blind eyes, unstop deaf ears, and cause men to repent and believe the gospel.

Still thinking in the field of evangelism, an understanding of the truth of Calvinism will keep a person from superficial views of conversion, and from this angle the position we take will make a difference.

Arminianism, with its emphasis on the ability of the human will, and man-devised methods has come to view salvation solely in terms of a "decision". This "decision" is usually registered by responding to an "altar call", or going through a given procedure in a counselling room, and once this decision is registered it is confidently asserted that another soul has been born again. But the appalling "drop out" rate in modern evangelicalism; the omission of vital aspects of truth (e.g. depravity, repentance); the evident lack of conviction of sin, and many other things cause one to wonder, is this truly Biblical conversion? Or have we, because of our desire to appear successful, deceived ourselves into accepting a sub-standard "Christianity" which will not stand up under the searching eye of the Word of God, and which will avail nothing in the day of judgment?

Calvinism will deliver one from such superficial views of conversion, for it sees conversion not simply in terms of a "decision", but as the work of the Spirit of God, first of all convincing of sin, then enlightening the mind in the knowledge of Christ, and then renewing the will so that the sinner receives the whole Christ as Saviour and Lord. Furthermore, Calvinism insists on evidence in the life as the great test of the reality of the profession; it is by our fruits, not by our decisions that we must be known. Historic Biblical Calvinism has always strongly emphasised human responsibility, the responsibility of a sinner to repent and believe the gospel, but it also emphasises the necessity of a divine work within the soul, and the absolute necessity of the evidence of this being seen in the life.

In modern evangelicalism, when a "firm decision" is recorded, and yet the subsequent life reveals nothing of the "new creature in Christ", it is regarded as almost a heresy to suggest that regeneration has not taken place. Rather a manner of theories are invented to explain this unfortunate state, but to firmly insist that the person is a Christian! This sad situation simply confirms the deluded souls in their unrenewed state, assuring them that heaven is theirs, while they are on the broad road that leads to destruction.

One of the crying needs of the hour is for evangelicals to return to a Biblical view of conversion. It will be a humbling procedure, for we will have to acknowledge that we are not enjoying the great blessing that we have perhaps been claiming, and that our churches are not experiencing the mighty ministry of the Spirit as we would like to think.

Finally, let me say that our viewpoint in this matter will make a difference with respect to our perseverance in the Lord's service. All evangelical Christians admit that the service of Christ though glorious is not easy. There are disappointments and discouragements. Many a Christian worker has given up because of these things, and in these circumstances Arminianism has no comfort to offer for nothing is assured, success hangs in the balance, the stubborn human will may frustrate our every effort!

But the truths of sovereign grace are a great comfort to the Christian worker. He knows that "no man can come unto me except the Father which hath sent me draw him"; but he also knows that "all that the Father hath given me shall come unto me". It was the truth of sovereign grace, for instance, that enabled Paul to persevere in the difficult work in Corinth, for God had told him, "be not afraid but speak; and hold not thy peace; for I am with thee, and no man shall set on thee to hurt thee for I have much people to this city" (Acts 18:9f). We labour knowing that the Father has given a people to His Son, and that through the witness and labours of God's people, under the blessing of God's Spirit, Christ "shall see of the travail of His soul and be satisfied". Victory is assured because the outcome depends not on man's will but on God's will. As Martin Luther wrote:

*And though this world with devils filled,
Should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear for God hath willed
His truth to triumph through us.*

We live in a world that has been conditioned to want the spectacular and the dramatic. This, we are told, is the "now generation". They want instant results!

We openly confess that the Calvinistic viewpoint seems to be in contrast to this. The patient exposition of scriptural truth is far less dramatic than great campaigns and "scintillating evangelists". Leaving the Spirit of God to fulfil His ministry is far less spectacular than being able to publish lists of decisions! Yet it is the conviction of this writer that in the long run, the well being and spiritual health of the Church of Christ at large depends on a return to the doctrines of grace, and the proclamation of them in the power of the Spirit throughout the world.

Like the reformers we need to come back to the Bible, and all the Bible, and the Bible alone. We need a return to Biblical theology and Biblical preaching. May God revive His truth in these days, and may He be pleased to revive His work.

The author is informed that the name "Reformed Baptists" is used by a group in the Maritimes whose theology is decidedly Arminian. He wishes to point out, therefore, that the word "reformed" as used in the present article is used in the historical sense, as explained in the article; that is, as flowing from the Reformation.

It should also be pointed out that the author, being a Baptist, does not endorse the infant baptism aspects of covenant theology, as espoused by reformed churches (i.e. Presbyterian, various Dutch Reformed Churches etc.). See the "Abrahamic Covenant and Baptism" article.