
FAQ

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Calvinist-Arminian Controversy

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Does your ministry have a position on Calvinism or Arminianism?

Hebrews 6:4-6, perhaps more than any other set of verses in this epistle, may be said to have had the most overall impact on theological discussions and debates outside this text. What does it mean concerning “those who have once been enlightened” who “have tasted the good word of God”? As many of you are probably aware, this is a strongly debated Scripture passage among Calvinists and Arminians in Protestant theology pertaining to concepts such as predestination, the free will of human beings, and God’s elect. I would like to briefly explore whether or not it is possible for today’s Messianic movement, to at all have its “own” position on the Calvinist-Arminian controversy.

The major issue of human beings’ responsibility and God’s redemptive power in the salvation experience, actually goes back to the Fifth Century with the Pelagian Controversy. The British monk Pelagius (354-415) advocated that human beings were embodied with a complete free will, and he completely denied the sovereignty of God in worldly affairs. Salvation in the Pelagian schema was solely a human work, and something that was not largely accomplished by God. Augustine (354-430), bishop of Hippo, refuted Pelagius’ heresies, but in so doing focused almost extensively on God’s sovereignty and His work in salvation. Augustine was right to emphasize that salvation was a work of God, largely focusing on John 15:5, “apart from Me you can do nothing” (NASU). As Alister E. McGrath summarizes, “Augustine understood grace as the real and redeeming presence of God in Christ within us, transforming us; something that was internal and active.”¹ Augustine rightly rejected Pelagius’ view that grace was something outside of us that was passive.²

Moving forward to the Protestant Reformation, the French Reformer John Calvin (1509-1564) was largely influenced by Augustine’s view of Divine grace, with his followers often emphasizing it as “irresistible grace,” something that one could not refuse. Calvin was certainly a brilliant scholar and able exegete of the early Reformation, and much is to be gained by examining his works. Calvin’s theology is noted by his emphasis on the sovereignty of God and His predestination of all human events. Followers of Calvinistic theology believe that salvation is entirely a work of God. However, the Calvinistic theology of election emphasizes that God has chosen only some to be redeemed, and others He has selected to be eternally condemned. In the schema of God having predestined all events in human history is the debate over whether God is the author of the Fall and thus the author of sin (*supralapsarianism*), or God’s predestined choices come after the Fall (*infralapsarianism*). Calvin’s system of theology is generally known as Reformed, and in America is largely adhered to in the Presbyterian Church and many sectors of the Baptist Church.

A major issue arose in the Reformation when challenges to Calvin’s theology of specific foreknowledge arose in Holland. Dutch pastor Jacob Arminius (1560-1609), who had been trained as a strict Calvinist, was asked to refute Dirck Koorenhert, who did not believe in specific foreknowledge. Arminius examined his beliefs and became convinced that

¹ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 447.

² *Ibid.*, pp 443-448 for a summarization of the Pelagian controversy and Augustine’s basic theology.

Yeshua the Messiah did not just die for the elect, but for all the world. Justo González summarizes Arminius' principal view that "the final destiny of each individual was based, not on the sovereign will of God, but rather on divine foreknowledge, by which God knew what each person's response would be to the offer of salvation."³ Arminius argued for a general foreknowledge in that God has certainly predestined particular events to take place in human history, but has left individuals to decide for themselves whether or not they want to receive His salvation or reject it. The Remonstrance movement in the Netherlands issued what would become known as "the open decree of predestination." While often confused with Pelagianism, the Remonstrance movement emphasized "that humans can do nothing good on their own account, and that the grace of God is necessary in order to do good."⁴ In America today, forms of Arminian theology are largely present in the Methodist Church, and in various Wesleyan offshoots.⁵

The major difference between Calvinists and Arminians today pertains to the issue of salvation. Did Yeshua die only for the elect? Or, did He die for all the world? Both views rightly emphasize that salvation is to be a work of God via His Holy Spirit. But Calvinists largely emphasize that salvation is something that remains permanent and cannot be lost, often referred to in the vernacular as "once saved, always saved." They frequently base this on John 10:27-29: "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given *them* to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch *them* out of the Father's hand" (NASU). Calvinists argue that God knows who His chosen ones are, and no one is capable of removing them from Him—even the people themselves.

Arminians, in stark contrast to this, will argue on the basis of Hebrews 6:4-6 that an individual can be enlightened and spiritually regenerated, having received salvation, but can then reach a point where this salvation is lost. Arminians argue that salvation is a work of God, but that the free will of humans can interrupt that salvation. Case studies such as Ancient Israel in the wilderness, Judas Iscariot, Simon Magus, and perhaps even King Solomon can be offered as examples of those who experienced God's salvation, but then at a later point rejected it because of sin. Arminians are generally in agreement with Calvinists over the fact that God has certainly decreed particular events to occur through the prophecies of His Word, but would not make the argument that God has decreed that every event of every single second has been decreed from eternity.

I am infrequently asked if there is a distinct Messianic view of the Calvinist-Arminian debate. Based on my experience in the Messianic movement since 1995, I would have to observe that there *is no distinct view* at this point in time. Almost anyone taking a position as either a Calvinist or Arminian is taking that position because he or she was raised or trained in a denominational setting that adhered to a Calvinist theology or Arminian theology. Sometimes Calvinistic or Arminian theology is moderated by Messianics as "the nature of God's universe" is something that cannot be fully understood by us as limited mortals. However, as someone raised Methodist and being a student of the teachings of John Wesley (1703-1791), **I am no exception to being affected by this debate** as I was raised in an Arminian environment. I believe in the general foreknowledge of God, but also that people can lose their salvation. Wesleyan-Arminianism, however, does highly emphasize the personal holiness and sanctification of the individual—concepts that should be emphasized in today's Messianic movement through its Torah observance—as well as experiencing the power of the Holy Spirit. In stark contrast to many Calvinists, Wesleyan-Arminians believe in the continuance of the gifts of the Spirit, but may not emphasize it to the same degree of many within the Pentecostal or charismatic movement today.

While I respect some of the theological tenets of Calvinism and the benefits that it has brought to Western society—in particular its emphasis on hard work—I have two principal problems with Calvinism. My first problem with Calvinism is its doctrine of limited atonement. This is the belief that Yeshua the Messiah *only* died for the elect, and thus He did not die for all sinful humanity. (Surprisingly, this view is often based on the Apostle Paul's words in Romans chs. 9-11, where he writes that "those who were chosen obtained it, and the rest were hardened" [Romans 11:7, NASU].) Wesleyan-Arminianism does differ from other forms of Arminianism in that it does advocate that certain individuals may be chosen by God for damnation, such as Pharaoh, Judas Iscariot, or the coming antimesiah/antichrist, but this is few and far between. A question each of us has to ask is whether or not Yeshua the Messiah died for the whole world, or only a small sector of chosen. Some in the Messianic movement believe that Yeshua died *only to save Israel*, and not the whole world, and in their own way may find themselves actually supporting some form of Calvinist dogma.

³ Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity*, Vol. 2 (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1985), 180.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 181.

⁵ Consult McGrath, pp 467-470 for a summarization of the basic tenets of Calvinism and Arminianism. Also González, pp 61-69, pp 179-183 for summaries of Calvin, and Arminius and the Remonstrance movement.

My second major problem with Calvinism is its emphasis on eternal security, lived out in much of contemporary Christianity by people “making decisions for Christ” and then living ungodly lives inconsistent with that of our Lord. Many believe that salvation is not something that needs to be maintained by holy living and the sanctification process, much like a person would maintain a car, house, or yard. Where is the evidence of salvation? Faith is to be evidenced by works, and those works—most importantly love for God and one’s neighbor, emphasized by Yeshua (Matthew 22:36-40; Mark 12:28-31; Luke 10:25-28)—are to give people the assurance they need that they are in the Lord.

The argument over whether or not a person can lose his or her salvation, however, may ultimately be solved by personal experience. Many moderates on the issue believe that it is pointless trying to figure out whether or not someone falling away was once “saved,” or had a false conversion, because the point of Hebrews 6:4-6 is to never even be in the position of even thinking of leaving the faith. I generally agree with this, because most who deny Yeshua the Messiah (Jesus Christ) have never known Him as their personal Lord and Savior or have experienced the Holy Spirit. Still, does this mean that every single person who denies Him *never knew Him*? In the Messianic community today, we sadly encounter an increasing number of people who question and deny the Divinity of, and later the Messiahship of, the Lord Yeshua. Are they all “unsaved”? We must see to it that people in our Messianic faith community never question the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

It is notable that the debate over God’s foreknowledge and human beings’ free will is not at all given as much attention in Jewish theology as it is in Protestant theology. There are certain examples of these two facets of existence that are often given for discussion, such as Abraham’s binding of Isaac (Genesis 22) and the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart (Exodus 9). *The Jewish Philosophy Reader* notes, “In the volume of the Mishnah known as the *Pirke Avoth* (‘Sayings of the Fathers’) Rabbi Akiba proclaimed: ‘Everything is seen, yet freedom is given’ (3.19). It is clear from this brief statement that already in the 2nd century Jewish theology had at least recognized, if not solved, the apparent incompatibility between divine omniscience and human freedom.”⁶ When it comes to the issues as presented by both Calvin and Arminius, the Jewish position is much more **“let God be God.”**

Messianics who are either Calvinist or Arminian in their orientation are often so because of their upbringing or theological training. Certainly, we have the responsibility to foster a Messianic environment where people leaning toward Calvinism or Arminianism are both welcome, so a more distinct Messianic viewpoint can be developed over time. The debate over Calvinism or Arminianism is an old one, and *only time* will determine if developing a distinct Messianic position is possible. In the meantime, we need to make sure that people truly do have salvation in Messiah Yeshua, have experienced the regenerative power of the Holy Spirit, and are strong in their faith so that they do not even consider abandoning the Lord.⁷

⁶ Seymour Feldman, “The Binding of Isaac: A Test-Case for Divine Foreknowledge,” in Daniel H. Frank, Oliver Leaman, and Charles H. Manekin, eds., *The Jewish Philosophy Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 122.

⁷ For a further discussion on these issues, consult Body and Eddy’s comments in their book *Across the Spectrum*: Chapter 8 “The Salvation Debate” (pp 132-145) and Chapter 11 “The Eternal Security Debate” (pp 165-177).