

Calvinism and Arminianism

Public Domain

Christianity

Mary Fairchild

Updated on August 31, 2024

One of the most potentially divisive debates in the history of the church centers around the opposing doctrines of salvation known as Calvinism and Arminianism. Calvinism is based on the theological beliefs and teachings of [John Calvin](#) (1509–1564), a leader of the Reformation, and Arminianism is based on the views of Dutch theologian Jacobus Arminius (1560–1609).

After studying under John Calvin's son-in-law in Geneva, Jacobus Arminius started out as a strict Calvinist. Later, as a pastor in Amsterdam and professor at the University of Leiden in the Netherlands, Arminius' studies in the [book of Romans](#) led to doubts and rejection of many Calvinistic doctrines.

What Is Calvinism?

[Calvinism](#) centers on the supreme [sovereignty of God](#), predestination, the total depravity of man, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and the perseverance of the saints.

What Is Arminianism?

Arminianism, as a doctrine of salvation, emphasizes conditional election based on God's foreknowledge, man's free will through prevenient grace to cooperate with God in salvation, Christ's universal atonement, resistible grace, and salvation that can potentially be lost.

Comparing the Beliefs of Calvinism vs. Arminianism

What exactly does all this mean? The easiest way to understand the differing doctrinal views is to compare them side by side.

God's Sovereignty

The sovereignty of God is the belief that God is in complete control over everything that happens in the universe. His rule is supreme, and his will is the final cause of all things.

Calvinism: In Calvinist thinking, God's sovereignty is unconditional, unlimited, and absolute. All things are predetermined by the good pleasure of God's will. God foreknew because of his own planning.

Arminianism: To the Arminian, God is sovereign, but has limited his control in correspondence with man's freedom and response. God's decrees are associated with his foreknowledge of man's response.

Man's Depravity

Calvinists believe in the total depravity of man while Arminians hold to an idea dubbed "partial depravity."

Calvinism: Because of the Fall, man is totally depraved and dead in his [sin](#). Man is unable to save himself and, therefore, God must initiate [salvation](#).

Arminianism: Because of the Fall, man has inherited a corrupted, depraved nature. Through "prevenient grace," God removed the [guilt](#) of [Adam](#)'s sin. Prevenient grace is defined as the preparatory work of the Holy Spirit, given to all, enabling a person to respond to God's call to salvation.

Election

Election refers to the concept of how people are chosen for salvation. Calvinists believe election is unconditional, while Arminians believe it is conditional.

Calvinism: Before the foundation of the world, God unconditionally chose (or "elected") some to be saved. Election has nothing to do with man's future response. The elect are chosen by God.

Arminianism: Election is based on God's foreknowledge of those who would believe in him through faith. In other words, God elected those who would choose him of their own free will. Conditional election is based on man's response to God's offer of salvation.

Christ's Atonement

Atonement is the most controversial aspect of the Calvinism vs. Arminianism debate. It refers to Christ's sacrifice for sinners. To the Calvinist, Christ's atonement is limited to the elect. In Arminian thinking, atonement is unlimited. Jesus died for all people.

Calvinism: [Jesus Christ](#) died to save only those who were given to him (elected) by the Father in eternity past. Since Christ did not die for everyone, but only for the elect, his atonement is wholly successful.

Arminianism: Christ died for everyone. The Savior's atoning death provided the means of salvation for the entire human race. Christ's atonement, however, is effective only for those who believe.

Grace

God's grace has to do with his call to salvation. Calvinism says God's grace is irresistible, while Arminianism argues that it can be resisted.

Calvinism: While God extends his common grace to all humankind, it is not sufficient to save anyone. Only God's irresistible grace can draw the elect to

salvation and make a person willing to respond. This grace cannot be obstructed or resisted.

Arminianism: Through the preparatory (prevenient) grace given to all by the [Holy Spirit](#), man is able to cooperate with God and respond in faith to salvation. Through prevenient grace, God removed the effects of Adam's sin. Because of "free will" men are also able to resist God's grace.

Man's Will

The free will of man versus God's sovereign will is linked to many points in the Calvinism vs. Arminianism debate.

Calvinism: All men are totally depraved, and this depravity extends to the entire person, including the will. Except for God's irresistible grace, men are entirely incapable of responding to God on their own.

Arminianism: Because prevenient grace is given to all men by the Holy Spirit, and this grace extends to the entire person, all people have free will.

Perseverance

Perseverance of the saints is tied to the "once saved, always saved" debate and the question of [eternal security](#). The Calvinist says the elect will persevere in faith and will not permanently deny Christ or turn away from Him.

The Arminian may insist that a person can fall away and lose his or her salvation. However, some Arminians embrace eternal security.

Calvinism: Believers will persevere in salvation because God will see to it that none will be lost. Believers are secure in their faith because God will finish the work he began.

Arminianism: By the exercise of free will, believers can turn away or fall away from grace and lose their salvation

1. Human Condition

Calvinism (Total Depravity)	Arminianism (Prevenient Grace / Enabled Will)
Ephesians 2:1–3 — “dead in sin”	John 1:9 — light “enlightens everyone”
Romans 3:10–12 — none seek God	Titus 2:11 — grace “for all people”
John 6:44 — cannot come unless drawn	John 12:32 — Christ draws “all people”
1 Corinthians 2:14 — cannot understand Spirit Acts 17:30 — all commanded to repent	

Key difference:

- Calvinism: inability without special grace
 - Arminianism: inability overcome by grace given to all
-

2. Election

Calvinism (Unconditional Election)	Arminianism (Conditional Election)
Ephesians 1:4–5 — chosen before creation	Romans 8:29 — predestined based on foreknowledge
Romans 9:15–18 — mercy on whom He wills	1 Peter 1:1–2 — election according to foreknowledge
John 15:16 — “I chose you”	John 3:16 — “whoever believes”
Acts 13:48 — appointed to eternal life	1 Timothy 2:3–4 — God desires all saved

Key difference:

- Calvinism: God’s choice determines faith
 - Arminianism: foreseen faith conditions God’s choice
-

3. Atonement

Calvinism (Limited Atonement)	Arminianism (Unlimited Atonement)
John 10:11 — dies for “the sheep”	John 3:16 — loves “the world”
Matthew 1:21 — saves “his people”	1 John 2:2 — sins of “whole world”
Ephesians 5:25 — gave Himself for church	Hebrews 2:9 — death “for everyone”
John 17:9 — not praying for the world 2 Peter 3:9 — none should perish	

Key difference:

- Calvinism: atonement is particular and effective
 - Arminianism: atonement is universal and conditional
-

4. Grace

Calvinism (Irresistible Grace)	Arminianism (Resistible Grace)
John 6:37 — all given will come	Acts 7:51 — resist the Spirit
John 6:44–45 — drawn = comes	Matthew 23:37 — unwilling to come
Romans 8:30 — called → justified	2 Corinthians 6:1 — grace received in vain
Ezekiel 36:26–27 — God causes obedience Hebrews 10:29 — insult the Spirit	

Key difference:

- Calvinism: grace effectively saves
 - Arminianism: grace enables but can be rejected
-

5. Security

Calvinism (Perseverance of the Saints)	Arminianism (Conditional Security)
John 10:28–29 — none snatch them away	Hebrews 6:4–6 — fall away
Philippians 1:6 — God completes the work	2 Peter 2:20–22 — return to corruption
Romans 8:38–39 — nothing separates	Galatians 5:4 — fallen from grace
1 Peter 1:5 — kept by God's power	John 15:6 — branches burned if not abiding

Key difference:

- Calvinism: true believers will persevere
- Arminianism: believers must continue in faith

Final Perspective

What's striking is that both systems:

- Draw directly from Scripture
- Often use **different sets of verses**
- And sometimes interpret the **same themes in opposite directions**

At the heart of the debate is how to reconcile:

- God's sovereignty
- Human responsibility
- The scope and application of grace