

Why Do We Believe *That?*

Class 13 – TULIP

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Roger E. Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities*

(Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006)

p. 16-17

When *Arminianism* is used, it will connote that form of Protestant theology that rejects unconditional election (and especially unconditional reprobation), limited atonement, and irresistible grace because it affirms the character of God as compassionate, having universal love for the whole world and everyone in it, and extending grace-restored free will to accept or resist the grace of God, which leads to either eternal life or spiritual destruction. The Arminianism under consideration is an Arminianism of the heart as opposed to Arminianism of the head—a distinction introduced by Reformed theologian Alan Sell in *The Great Debate: Calvinism, Arminianism, and Salvation*. Arminianism of the head is an Enlightenment-based emphasis on free will that it is most often found in liberal Protestant circles (even among liberalized Reformed people).¹ Its hallmark is an optimistic anthropology that denies total depravity and the absolute necessity of supernatural grace for salvation. It is optimistic about the ability of autonomous human beings to exercise a good will toward God and their fellow creatures without supernatural prevenient (enabling, assisting) grace; that is it is Pelagian or at least semi-Pelagian (16-17).

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One of the most prevalent myths spread by some Calvinists about Arminianism is that it is the most popular type of theology in evangelical pulpits and pews. My experience contradicts this belief. Much depends on how we regard Arminian theology. The Calvinist critics would be correct if Arminianism were semi-Pelagianism. But it is not, as I hope to show. The gospel preached and the doctrine of salvation taught in most evangelical pulpits and lecterns, and believed in most evangelical pews, is not classical Arminianism but semi-Pelagianism if not outright Pelagianism. (30)

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Only those will be saved, however, who are predestined by God to eternal salvation. They are the elect. Who is included in the elect? All who God fore- sees will accept his offer of salvation through Christ by not resisting the grace that extends to them through the cross and the gospel. Thus, predestination is conditional rather than unconditional; God's electing foreknowledge is caused by the faith of the elect.

In opposition to this [Calvinist scheme] Arminianism holds that predestination is the gracious purpose of God to save mankind from utter ruin. It is not an arbitrary, indiscriminate act of God intended to secure the salvation of SO many and no more. It includes provisionally, all men in its scope, and is conditioned solely on faith in Jesus Christ (Wiley, *Christian Theology*, 2.98)

The Holy Spirit works on the hearts and minds of all people to some extent, gives them some awareness of God's expectations and provision. and calls them to repentance and faith. Thus, "God's Word is in some sense universally uttered, even when not recorded in a written language." "Those who hear the proclamation and accept the call are known in the Scriptures as the elect." The reprobate are those who resist the call of God. A crucial Arminian doctrine is prevenient grace, which Calvinists also believe, but Arminians interpret it differently. Prevenient grace is simply the convicting, calling, enlightening and enabling grace of God that goes before conversion and makes repentance and faith possible. Calvinists interpret it as irresistible and effectual; the person in whom it works will repent and believe unto salvation. Arminians interpret it as resistible; people are always able to resist the grace of God, as Scripture warns (Acts 7:51). But without prevenient grace, they will inevitably and inexorably resist God's will because of their slavery to sin.

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The key distinctive doctrine of Arminianism is prevenient grace. It may not be a biblical term, but it is a biblical concept assumed everywhere in Scripture. It is the powerful but resistible drawing of God that Jesus spoke about in John 6. Contrary to what some Calvinist commentators argue, the Greek word *elkô* (e.g., John 6:44) does not have to mean "drag" or "compel" (as claimed, for example, by Calvinist theologian R. C. Sproul in *Chosen by God*). According to various Greek lexicons it can mean draw or attract. Arminians believe that if a person is saved, it is because God initiated the relationship and enabled the person to respond freely with repentance and faith. This prevenient grace includes at least four aspects or elements: calling convicting illuminating and enabling. No person can repent, believe and be saved without the Holy Spirit's supernatural support from beginning to end. All the person does is cooperate by not resisting.

Roger E. Olson, *Against Calvinism*
(*Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011*)

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By "Calvinism" as that which I am against I am referring to the "high Calvinism" of TULIP, whether infralapsarian or supralapsarian. It really does not matter much which type one examines closely: both will be found to make God morally ambiguous at best and a moral monster at worst (in spite of Calvinists claims to the contrary). Once again I wish to emphasize *it is not free will about which I am concerned*, except as free will is necessary to protect God's character from being impugned. What concerns me, as I will make abundantly clear, is the biblical teaching that "God is love" (1 John 4:16).

Please don't dismiss this as too facile; I am going to unpack my claim that high Calvinism, the Calvinism that affirms most or all of TULIP, directly contradicts that God is love. I am well aware of Calvinist objections that God's love is different from our kind

of love. I've heard that many times. While there is some truth to that, it is overstated by most Calvinists. If God's love is absolutely different from the highest and best notions of love as we derive them from Scripture itself especially from Jesus Christ), then the term is simply meaningless when attached to God (emphasis original).

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Classical Arminian theology, such as that of John Wesley (1703- 1791), affirms the total depravity of human beings and their utter helplessness even to exercise a good will toward God apart from God's supernatural, assisting grace. It attributes the sinner's ability to respond to the gospel with repentance and faith to (prevenient grace)—the illuminating, convicting, calling, and enabling power of the Holy Spirit working on the sinner's soul and making them free to choose saving grace (or reject it). This is the Arminian interpretation of the “drawings” of God mentioned by Jesus in the gospel of John. God does not draw irresistibly but persuasively, leaving human persons able to say no.

Arminian theology does affirm divine election, but it interprets it as corporate rather than individual. Romans 9, the bedrock Scripture passage of high Calvinism, is interpreted as the early church fathers did—as referring to the service of Israel and Gentile believers in God's plan, not to the eternal destinies of individuals. Arminians affirm predestination interpreting it with Romans 8 as God's foreknowledge of faith. They reject reprobation except insofar as it is freely chosen by people who live against the will of God revealed in nature and the law written on their hearts (Romans 1-2).

Above all Arminians insist that God is a good and loving God, who truly desires the salvation of all people.