

Calvinism vs. Arminianism: The Unnecessary War

Why Ancient Hebrews Didn't Fight About Sovereignty and Choice

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There's an uncommon, entirely Biblical approach to the Calvinism vs. Arminianism conflict (and other historical church controversies) that places the whole argument for both sides in a radically different light. It also explains the rise of Gnosticism, denominationalism and just about every modern non-essential doctrinal dispute in the church.

Unlike modern church scholarship and hermeneutics, which places the Bible under a microscope to meticulously dissect it, I begin with the pre-70 AD (date of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple) Hebrew understanding of Biblical content. I'm not referring to ancient rabbinical spiritualizations of Scriptural minutia that gave us, among other things, the legalistic Pharisees, the naturalistic Sadducees and the aloof Essenes. I'm referring to a peasant's understanding—what the average sodbusters and goat herders grasped when Scriptures was read to them—when Jesus spoke to them about what was in the Bible. This view is everything.

There were three main lenses through which the people of the Bible—those who wrote and read the Book—saw the world:

1. The *Greek* mind: Analytical, rational, able to abstract and intensely curious—they had to analyze and deduce how everything worked—philosophically, mechanically, artistically and scientifically (think of Sherlock Holmes, detectives and scientists). This is the mindset of the Western world to this day—the way we in the West are educated and reason. I was the ingrained mindset of John Calvin, Arminius, Augustin, the bishops of all the great church councils and virtually every scholar who dissected the teachings of Scripture since the Gospel went to the Gentiles. Blended into the mix were the philosophical presumptions of people like Philo (20 BC-40AD), who taught that every Biblical account was an allegory for some hidden spiritual message. In other words, he opened the door to interpret Hebrew and New Testament Scripture through Hellenistic—*Aristotelian*—logic and philosophy. It contributed to a movement that started when evangelized Gentiles set aside the Hebrew mindset of the Scriptures—the very umbrella under which it was written and understood—and began to interpret the Scriptures through Greek logic. This became the foundation of the philosophical evolution of Christianity in the West. This is us today.
2. The *Hellenized* Hebrew mind: Jews who knew and embraced the Scriptures, but because of the influence of Greek thinking (Hellenization), they weren't kosher and tended to look at the Scriptures like Philo. With few exceptions, this has been the mindset of Judaism since the fall of the temple, after which the Jews became absorbed into the Greco-Roman world and began to think like them in earnest. Since then rabbinical teachings in the Talmud and most everywhere else have reflected this mindset. This divided logic was first recorded in Acts 6, noting a conflict in the treatment of Hebrew vs. Grecian Jewish widows that threatened to split the early

church and brought about the first deacons—all of whom were selected precisely because they were Hellenized Jews.

3. The *non-Hellenized Hebrew* mind: Concrete, poor at abstracting (except in mathematics), concerned with the *function* of a thing (what a thing told you about itself by what it did or what it was for; “God is as God does”, et al) as opposed to the *form* of a thing (what a thing told you about itself by what it looked like—think Hellenistic sculptures of gods and heroes). To the Hebrew mind, God revealed Himself in what He did and said—the Scriptures, the Messiah and through the Holy Spirit. In other words, God hid very little and revealed much, but—and *this is vital*—what He revealed about Himself is precisely what He intended to reveal and nothing more. In other words, in Hebrew thinking what God revealed about Himself is what He *revealed* about Himself—just believe it and don’t try to fill in what he left blank—if He didn’t tell us, then He didn’t intend for us to know it or figure it out. Now—don’t lose me here...

Until Peter took the Gospel to the Gentiles ten years after Pentecost, the church consisted largely of non-analytical, concrete-thinking people. In fact, the whole of Hebrew history was made up of people who thought this way, including Jesus. Suddenly the Gospel, which was Hebraic in its logic, was embraced by people generationally embedded in the analytical, rational, abstract thinking of the Greco-Roman world. Now imagine how this Western logic affected their ability to understand and interpret the Eastern-thinking Scriptures.

At first the Greco-Romans had no idea what a messiah was, much less a sabbath or ten commandments; they were stunned by the idea of God becoming a man (“How did that happen?”), being crucified for mankind’s sins (“Crucified—a God?”), rising from the dead (“You’re joking, right?”), ascending to His Father (“Who?”) and returning someday to set the world to rights (“Huh?”). They had to figure all this out—so from the middle of the first-century onward they set their rational, analytical minds to work on Jesus, the Hebrew Scriptures, the Apostle’s teachings—and, lo and behold, Gnosticism was born. And it was downhill from there.

Most of the New Testament was written to counter the proto-Gnostic teachings because Jesus, the Gospel and the Scriptures were being examined through a Greek lens by Hellenized people who made it their duty to fill in the blanks. *HOW did God become a man? HOW could God die on a cross?* and so forth. Later Gnostic teachings led to even greater heresies like the second-century Gnostic gospels. The early church, however, held tightly to the apostle’s teachings and, though most believers in the Roman world were Hellenized thinkers, the non-Hellenized Hebraic disciples guarded the basic truths of what became the accepted New Testament.

Here’s where the Calvinist-Arminist argument comes into the picture. John Calvin was one of the smartest people who ever lived, and his eponymous doctrine was developed by his students years after his death. But Calvinism grew out of the same Greek mindset that had been around since the Gospel first went to the Gentiles—and that mindset became (and still is) the default lens through which the Western world thought and did things.

Their problem was this:

- The Bible teaches that God is absolutely sovereign (which is clearly does). He predestines, chooses and elects, just as Scripture teaches.
- The Bible also teaches that God allows people to choose their destiny, saying things like, “if any man will, let him come...” or “God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance,” and so forth. In other words, man must choose his destiny, and by man’s choices, God’s will can be defeated.
- These two revelations are clearly polar opposite ideas, so in the rational of Calvin’s students, the lesser idea (that man can choose his own destiny) must be subject to and submitted to the greater: God’s absolute sovereignty.
- Therefore, if God is absolutely sovereign, then He does not and cannot allow any choices (or randomness, for that matter), because, rationally and logically, if He’s sovereign, then there are no choices allowed in His universe except that which He has predetermined. Therefore, man’s apparent ability to choose his own destiny is essentially an illusion, and his choices, his conversations, even his own thoughts are in fact not his own, but God working sovereignly. This means that, contrary to Scripture, Jesus didn’t die for the sins of the whole world but only for those God predestined to go to heaven. In other words, Christ’s atonement is limited only to those God intended to save. Since Jesus died only for the salvation of those sovereignly predestined for salvation, the rest of mankind was predestined by God for hell. This is Calvinism at its most rational.

This is an oversimplification of Calvinist logic, but it’s close enough. It’s also excellent Greek thinking—filling in the blanks that God left in the Scripture, using the intellect to figure out things that God did not reveal. Even Calvinists admit that many in their camp can be arrogant and even hostile about their brainy position. They often overwhelm non-Calvinists with their intellectual prowess concerning their tremendously rational position as if our salvation depended upon one’s agreement with it (even though, according to the same logic, it wouldn’t matter because God has already made His immutable determination concerning our salvation and spiritual situation). They have God all figured out. This is also the same mode of thinking that has split up the church into denominations: “We have [this or that] non-essential doctrine [the rapture, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, church leadership structure, modes of music, etc.] figured out better than you do. We’re right and you’re wrong, so we’ll go over here, and you stay over there, ‘cause we’re smarter!” Unfortunately, it’s just pride—not truth-based.

But here’s the rub. The Hebrews, who wrote, taught and preserved the Bible, didn’t think like that at all. In fact, they would say to people who sought to analyze God in such a way, “You’re blaspheming! You’re trying to figure out the God of the universe—you are trying to quantify what He didn’t reveal!” This is easily verified by looking at the Bible as a whole—not through the microscope of analytical thought, but through the wide-angle lens of the Hebrew mind: though *both* God’s sovereignty and man’s choice are clearly taught in the Bible, never was one idea submitted to the other. In fact, in the whole of Scripture, no one at any time ever argued or even discussed the relationship or apparent contradiction of the two. God was sovereign, and man had a choice. As a Hebrew might say, “What’s your problem? These things are a revelation of God—if He said it was so, then it is! If God didn’t explain it, how can a man? If we could understand it, we would be God! The Bible is a

revelation, not necessarily an explanation—just believe Him and obey.”

Let me put it another way: Western-Greek logic is non-contradictory. In other words, one thing cannot be another—or simpler still, since the Bible is God’s Word and perfect, it must contain no contradictions.—therefore, any apparent contradiction is treated like a mystery that must be solved or a physics problem requiring an equation to explain some subatomic dilemma. So, when an apparent contradiction (sovereignty vs. human responsibility, et al) arises in the Bible, Western thinkers feel compelled to quantify the dilemma by cleverly fusing the two conflicting points into one.

But the Bible was originally written and read by people who didn’t think that way. Yes, they believed in exclusivity, i.e., “Jesus in THE way, THE truth and THE life.” That declaration is absolutely exclusive and non-contradictory. If someone said, “There is an additional way to the Father,” it would be rejected out of hand. But their overall thought process was markedly non-Greek—they didn’t hold to a mandate of non-contradiction, especially when it involved revelations from God. Their manner of logic has been labeled ancient dialectical thought.

But conflicting issues like sovereignty vs. choice make Greek-thinkers say, “you can’t have both—and since there are no contradictions in the Bible, it must be one way or the other.” But the Hebrews thought differently, in an Eastern manner, where two apparent contradictory revelations from God could coexist peacefully on the same page. Both would be true because they were revealed by God (so they *must* be true) and therefore cannot contradict at all. The connection between the two is not missing, but *unseen*—it’s *there*, existing in God, but He hasn’t *revealed* it.

Western intellectual high-mindedness typically rejects this sort of simplistic thinking—it’s just how we are. But the Hebrew mind never concerned itself about such things—if God said things were a certain way, then they just were—God hasn’t tasked us or given us permission to tie up loose ends. His Word is a revelation, not necessarily an explanation, and certainly not a puzzle book to hide His mind.

Remember—the Bible was written simply for simple people to understand, not for the intellectual elite. Jewish peasants understood it, as did children, slaves and the illiterate—it was the theologians who expressed the greatest confusion about His message and the Scriptures.

Western analytical thinking about the Scriptures hasn’t deepened our understanding as much as it has complicated it. Submitting God to our logic makes Him the object of our investigations, but like the Hebrews, submitting our understanding to His revelation of Himself makes Him the subject of the whole universe. And that is tremendous.

One more thing.

Another excellent example of Greek thinking is the word “Trinity”. I wholeheartedly believe in and agree with the doctrine of the Trinity. It’s easy to observe in Bible that there is one God, yet there is a person called the Father who is God, a person called the Son who is God and a person called the Holy Spirit who is called God; that they are identified separately in person and function and at the same time are inseparably One. The Bible clearly reveals this to us. But in AD 325 at the Council of Nicaea the bishops decided to sort it out and give it a name, “Trinity”. This is very convenient indeed—but why did they feel

the need to do this at all? They were all good, westernized Greek-thinkers—like us and Calvinists and pastors who spiritualize Biblical accounts and churches who divide up over their own high-minded analyses.

And we've been in trouble ever since.

Enjoy the discussion, and don't forget to duck.

—Pastor Jay