

A Discussion on Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom

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I have been asked to teach this evening on six questions presented to me. Apparently these questions came out of your discussion on the Westminster Catechism. I would love to be able to tell you that I am prepared to answer your questions definitively so that you may leave here tonight without any further questions. Unfortunately (or providentially, depending in how you view God's Sovereignty), I will not say enough that will bring your minds to rest on this subject.

The questions presented to me are as follows:

1. When it says Jesus died for all, what does "all" represent?
2. What happens in the heart of man when he becomes saved?
3. Is it true that the Holy Spirit knocks at the heart and we decide whether or not to accept?
4. Can we resist, or say no to the Holy Spirit?
5. Who controls the born-again process? man? God?
6. If God didn't give us a choice to choose him, wouldn't we all be robots?

As I perused the questions, I realized that questions 3-6 are really nuances of one question regarding the relationship of God's Sovereignty and Human Responsibility (Free will). The other two questions can stand alone, but they also are related to the discussion of God's Sovereignty and Human Responsibility.

I will briefly answer the first two questions then deal more extensively with Questions #3-6.

Question #1 - When it says Jesus died for all, what does "all" represent?

Many of those who hold strongly to God's Sovereignty (Calvinism) answer Question #1 by saying that "all" means "all the elect, i.e. those whom God chose before the foundation of the world."

Those who hold most strongly to 'Human Responsibility' (Arminianism) answer Question #1 saying that "all" means "all human beings in every time and place."

In between these views are various nuances of what "all" means.

Admittedly, there are verses in Scripture where "all" is defined by the immediate context and does not necessarily mean "everyone in the world." For instance listen to Romans 8:32,

He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?

Here the "all" for whom Christ was given and who receive "all things" are certainly not every individual in the world who receive everything that is in the world. The context text tells us here that Christ gave himself for those to whom Paul is writing (but not only those) and will give them all things that are purchased and promised in the death of Christ.

There are other times where 'all' means "all the world," such as in 2 Corinthians 5:14-15,

¹⁴ For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; ¹⁵ and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

In this text Christ death is for all because all are dead in trespasses and sin (Eph 2:1). Those who do come to life benefit in a particular way from the death and resurrection of Christ and have a redefined purpose for their lives – "to live for him.'

When we talk about the extent of the atonement (i.e. for whom did Christ die?), we need to consider the issues of sufficiency (value) and efficacy (accomplishment)? Verses such as John 3:16 and I John 2:2 speak of sufficiency; verses such as Eph 5:25; Matt 1:21; Mark 10:45, speak of efficacy.

At the end of any discussion on the extent of the atonement, all evangelicals believe that the atonement is limited in some sense. Unless you are a Universalist, you do not believe that the death of Christ effects the redemption of all men in every place.

I prefer the formulation "sufficient for all; efficient for the elect (or those who believe)."

Question #2 - What happens in the heart of man when he becomes saved?

A new life is planted within by the presence of the Holy Spirit so that now one's disposition (nature) is toward God (2 Cor 5:17; 2 Peter 1:3-4) instead of in rebellion against God (Rom 3:10-12), though the vestiges (traces) of sin yet remain in his being. Some would say that this takes place prior to faith, some say after faith, and others coordinate regeneration with faith? Whatever we call the work of the Spirit prior to faith (conviction, prevenient grace, regeneration), all evangelicals believe that there is a necessary work of the Spirit to enable faith to occur? The more difficult question is 'do all men equally experience this work of the Spirit that brings them to salvation?' The obvious answer is no. Calvinists, noting this reality, distinguish between a general call and an efficacious call. Arminians believe that there is a 'prevenient grace' for all men which some resist. The answer to why some receive an efficacious call (Calvinism) and some resist or respond to prevenient grace (Arminianism) is an answer that includes both God's Sovereignty and Human Responsibility leaving us with what J. I. Packer calls an 'antinomy.'¹

Questions #3-6

¹ in philosophy, contradiction, real or apparent, between two principles or conclusions, both of which seem equally justified - <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9007849/antinomy>.

Now let us consider questions 3-6. I empathize with the consternation evidenced by these questions because over the 36 years of my being in Christ, I have wrestled time and again with the relationship of God's Sovereignty and Human Responsibility. When I reflect on this relationship I do so from various perspectives. I consider myself to be a Christian, a pastor, a biblical theologian, and an evangelist. In each of those roles I find that the answer to the question reflects a similar balance, or someone might say, imbalance. Both Arminians and Calvinists have their systems and their exegesis of texts that support their systems. We could go over the myriad of texts that are debated on this subject, but the truth is that our predisposition to a doctrinal system or way of thinking theologically bears great influence on how we understand those texts. Therefore what I choose to do tonight is to talk a little about how I think about these issues from the perspectives of a Christian, a pastor, a biblical theologian, and an evangelist.

As a Christian, I marvel at why I become a recipient of God's grace. Even though I know that my repentance and faith were genuinely my choice, I wonder why I made that choice, and others who had equal opportunity did not make that choice, and why some died without ever having an opportunity. I can only conclude that my salvation has more to do with God's sovereignty and less with my own power of choice and certainly not the goodness of my heart. I also find great assurance in knowing that I am kept by the power of a Sovereign God and am not dependent on my freedom of will to remain in Christ forever. Though my will is active both in salvation and sanctification, I depend on the "God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil 2:13).

As a Pastor, I have found that at some point everyone wants to and needs to believe in God's Sovereignty. What Christian doesn't want a sovereign and powerful God to bring loved ones and friends to himself? Who doesn't want to believe that "God is working all things for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purpose?" Who doesn't want a God who sovereignly brings to pass all that he has purposed for us in Jesus Christ? Yet, I also call people to accept responsibility for their choices and the consequences of their decisions for right and wrong. I believe in both God's Sovereignty and Human responsibility, but in those intensely critical moments of life, I find more comfort in the sovereignty of God than in the freedom of human choice.

As a biblical theologian, I have wrestled with the problem/challenge of making the exegesis of biblical texts conform consistently to theological systems. As a young Christian, when I was unaware of Calvinism/Arminianism, I was quite comfortable living with the seeming contradictions, mysteries, and ambiguities of Scripture, taking Scripture as I found it. Marriage to a theological system as well as the influence of Western thought processes (i.e. the rationalism of the modern age) cause one to work for logical consistency in exegesis. Often this leads to a 'stretched' interpretation of texts that don't neatly fit the system. Perhaps, an example of this is that Calvin was seemed to be more of a Calvinist in his Institutes and less of one in his biblical commentaries. I personally find that Calvinists (Reformed theologians) do better with biblical exegesis and theological formations than others do. This isn't to say that there aren't good Arminian theologians, such as I. Howard Marshall and Roger E. Olson . There just are not that many of them. I find Reformed theologians more coherent, even though at times I believe they are bending a text to fit their system. Though I personally do not like the labels (Calvinist or Arminian), if I had to choose one I would *quietly* choose Calvinism, even though some

Calvinists might think I'm more Arminian. Either way, I have no desire to be a flag-waving, card-carrying Calvinist. My Calvinistic leanings are just that 'leanings.' They are not solid, bedrock convictions, but leanings and tendencies that gravitate more toward God's Sovereignty.

When it comes to the doctrine of predestination, though Calvinists and Arminians differ in the logical order of God's decrees, they both end up with a God who creates a world in which he knows from the beginning that some will come to Christ and others will go to hell. Whether this occurs because He sovereignly ordained this outcome on the basis of his good pleasure or he ordained this outcome on basis of knowing beforehand who would believe, the outcome remains the same, i.e. God created a world in which he knew what the outcome would be.

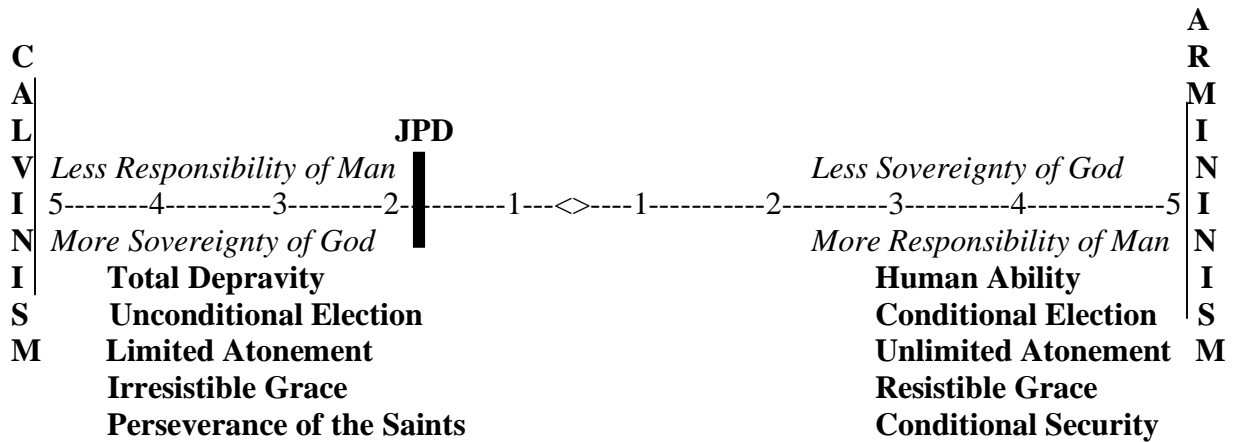
I've often mentally wrestle with the relationship of God's omniscience to his decrees. Does he know things because they will happen or do things happen because his knowing is equal to ordaining? I understand that all events are *certain* from God's perspective. Certainty has to do with the "factness of the event." I deduce from the Bible that some certain events are *necessary*, i.e. God has declared and caused the event to be (Isa 42:9), and some certain events are *contingent*, involving the free acts of moral agents where the event could go more than one way (i.e. should I choose life or death) (Deut 30:19), but which way it will go God knows. Also, some certain events include elements of both necessity and contingency (Acts 2:23). When it comes to the sinner's choice to repent and believe, does true contingency exist? Since one's will is bound and determined by his nature, and a sinner's nature is in rebellion and rejection of God, does true contingency exist in one's choice for salvation? If left to contingency alone, would a free moral agent would ever come to Christ on his own? I think not – 'no one seeks after God.'

As an evangelist, I am much more of a Calvinist, when praying for the lost. My confidence in the success of the gospel is in the power of the Spirit to bring unwilling sinners to a willingness to come to Christ. I do want a sovereign God to open eyes blinded by Satan and to bring dead men to life. I have no hope in the freedom of the human will to heal one's own blindness or to resurrect oneself. I do not need a strong view of particular redemption in order to hold this view of God's Sovereign power. I.e. my belief that God can and does powerfully bring people to himself is not necessitated by the belief that Jesus died only for those people. On the other hand, in the practice of evangelism, I make strong appeal to everyone's responsibility to hear, repent, and believe. I do believe in the 'possibility' that anyone can be saved, though I know the 'actuality' is that 'the gate is straight and narrow and there are few who find it.' Why do some enter that gate? Yes, some find it and choose to enter. But why does one choose and another remains on the broad way to destruction? Is there something better or nobler in one sinner than in another that enables him to choose? Or, is there something within the eternal plan of God that enables one to choose while not enabling another? Herein, I live with a conundrum. I would like to believe that the answer lies somewhere in between, unrecognizable by my finite mind. But, if I had to choose, I would choose God's sovereignty. Why? Because what I know from the Bible of both God's Sovereignty and human depravity, I know that God sovereignly chooses in many instances, while I also know that "there is no one who seeks after God." Hence, I believe in resistible and irresistible grace. There are instances where people resist the Spirit's call and there are instances where others are overwhelmed by the Spirit's call. What makes the difference? Again, that is the conundrum, the mystery I live with. I agree with Albert Mohler when he says

I mentioned there are two impossible persons. First is the person that does not desire Christ who is irresistibly drawn to Him. And the second person that does not exist is the person who wishes to respond to faith in Christ but is denied his faith - in other words, those who would call upon the name of the Lord and be denied (Albert Mohler - http://www.albertmohler.com/documents/Mohler_opening_comments_for_election_discussion_2006_Pastors_Conference.pdf).

I believe this is God's world with His plan and purpose. We may wrestle and differ with how human responsibility fits into that world, nevertheless, "the earth is the Lord's and the fullness of it, the world, and they who dwell in it." If you are in a chess game in which your opponent is a master of strategy who knows all your options and choices and has such a thorough plan that influences and counteracts your every move, insuring the outcome – you may enjoy the game, your moves will be based on your real choices, but you will not win unless he lets you win.

In the following diagram, I would place myself a little left of center, though a hyper-Calvinist might say I am far right of center and an Arminian might say I'm far left of center.



Conclusions

1. The Bible teaches both the Sovereignty of God and the Responsibility of man.

Ephesians 1:11 In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will,
Romans 10:13 For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

2. The two major theological systems mainly differ on how they understand the relationship between the Sovereignty of God and the Responsibility of man.

Calvinism: Q. 13. What hath God especially decreed concerning angels and men?

A. God, by an eternal and immutable decree, out of his mere love, for the praise of his glorious grace, to be manifested in due time, hath elected some angels to glory; and in Christ hath chosen some men to eternal life, and the means thereof: and also, according to his sovereign power, and the unsearchable counsel of his own will, (whereby he extendeth or withholdeth favor as he pleaseth,) hath passed by and foreordained the rest to dishonor and wrath, to be for their sin inflicted, to the praise of the glory of his justice.

Arminianism:

Election Based on (fore) knowledge- God elected those whom He knew would of their own free will believe in Christ and persevere in the faith.

3. Any theological system that denies either the Sovereignty of God or the Responsibility of man is an errant system. (hyper-Calvinism and Pelagianism)²

4. Any theological system that assumes they have resolved the philosophical, theological, and exegetical issues in reconciling the Sovereignty of God and the Responsibility of man is an arrogant system.

5. Every theological system is man-made and, though some may be more adequate and coherent than others, no system perfectly harmonizes the full content of Scripture.

6. The essentials of Christianity are not defined by a system; neither is the unity of believers based on agreement on how the issues of Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility are worked out. Both Calvinists and Arminians agree on the *Five solas* of the Reformation - *the Bible alone, by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, to the glory of God alone*. Let us love one another on the basis of these.

7. Though looking for greater precision in theology is important, our priority interest should always be obedience to the clear commands to preach the gospel and make disciples of all nations.

² "Pelagius taught that a person is born with the same purity and moral abilities as Adam was when he was first made by God. He taught that people can choose God by the exercise of their free will and rational thought. God's grace, then, is merely an aid to help individuals come to Him". <http://www.carm.org/heresy/pelagianism.htm>

Appendix One

A Brief Comparative Study of: Arminianism and Calvinism

Arminianism	Calvinism
<p style="text-align: center; color: green;"><u>Free-Will or Human Ability</u></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 not 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 of 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 style="text-align: center; color: red;"><u>Total Inability or Total Depravity</u></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 evil 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 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 style="text-align: center; color: green;"><u>Conditional Election</u></p> <p>God's choice of certain individuals unto 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 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</p>	<p style="text-align: center; color: red;"><u>Unconditional Election</u></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 any foreseen response of 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 determined by or conditioned upon any</p>

from man's will. It was left entirely up to man as to who would believe and therefore 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.

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.

Universal Redemption or General Atonement

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 and for every man, only those who believe on 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.

Particular Redemption or Limited Atonement

Christ's redeeming work was intended to save the elect only and actually secured salvation for them. His death was 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, therefore guaranteeing their salvation.

The Holy Spirit Can Be Effectually Resisted

The Spirit calls inwardly all those who are called outwardly 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) proceeds 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,

The Efficacious Call of the Spirit or Irresistible Grace

In addition to the outward general call to salvation 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 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 upon man's cooperation for success. The Spirit graciously causes the elect sinner to cooperate, to believe, to repent, to come

<p>therefore, is not invincible; it can be, and often is, resisted and thwarted by man.</p>	<p>freely and willingly to Christ. God's grace, therefore, is invincible; it never fails to result in the salvation of those to whom it is extended.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Falling from Grace</u></p> <p>Those who believe and are truly saved can lose their salvation by failing to keep up their 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.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Perseverance of the Saints</u></p> <p>All who are chosen by God, redeemed by Christ, and given faith by the Spirit are eternally saved. They are kept in faith by the power of Almighty God and thus persevere to the end.</p>

According to Arminianism:

Salvation is accomplished through the combined efforts of God (who takes the initiative) and man (who must respond) - man's response being the determining factor. God has provided salvation for everyone, but His provision becomes effective only for those who, of their own free will, "choose" to cooperate with Him and accept His offer of grace. At the crucial point, man's will plays a decisive role; thus man, not God, determines who will be recipients of the gift of salvation.

According to Calvinism:

Salvation is accomplished by the almighty power of the Triune God. The Father chose a people, the Son died for them, the Holy Spirit makes Christ's death effective by bringing the elect to faith and repentance, thereby causing them to willingly obey the gospel. The entire process (election, redemption, regeneration) is the work of God and is by grace alone. Thus God, not man, determines who will be the recipients of the gift of salvation.

The following material was taken from *The Five Points of CALVINISM - Defined, Defended, Documented*. David N. Steele and Curtis Thomas, published by the Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., Phillipsburg, N.J.

Appendix Two

*The Remonstrant Articles*³

Article 1

That God, by an eternal and unchangeable purpose in Jesus Christ his Son, before the foundation of the world, hath determined, out of the fallen, sinful race of men, to save in Christ, for Christ's sake, and through Christ, those who, through the grace of the Holy Ghost, shall believe on this his son Jesus, and shall persevere in this faith and obedience of faith, through this grace, even to the end; and, on the other hand, to leave the incorrigible and unbelieving in sin and under wrath, and to condemn them as alienate from Christ, according to the word of the Gospel in John 3:36: "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him," and according to other passages of Scripture also.

Article 2

That agreeably thereunto, Jesus Christ the Savior of the world, died for all men and for every man, so that he has obtained for them all, by his death on the cross, redemption and the forgiveness of sins; yet that no one actually enjoys this forgiveness of sins except the believer, according to the word of the Gospel of John 3:16, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." And in the First Epistle of John 2:2: "And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for *the sins of* the whole world."

Article 3

That man has not saving grace of himself, nor of the energy of his free will, inasmuch as he, in the state of apostasy and sin, can of an by himself neither think, will, nor do any thing that is truly good (such as saving Faith eminently is); but that it is needful that he be born again of God in Christ, through his Holy Spirit, and renewed in understanding, inclination, or will, and all his powers, in order that he may rightly understand, think, will, and effect what is truly good, according to the Word of Christ, John 15:5, "Without me ye can do nothing."

Article 4

That this grace of God is the beginning, continuance, and accomplishment of all good, even to this extent, that the regenerate man himself, without prevenient or assisting, awakening, following and cooperative grace, can neither think, will, nor do good, nor withstand any temptations to evil; so that all good deeds or movements, that can be conceived, must be ascribed to the grace of God in Christ. but respects the mode of the operation of this grace, it is not

³ These are the Arminian articles which the Dortian Five points of Calvinism answered.

irresistible; inasmuch as it is written concerning many, that they have resisted the Holy Ghost. Acts 7, and elsewhere in many places.

Article 5

That those who are incorporated into Christ by true faith, and have thereby become partakers of his life-giving Spirit, have thereby full power to strive against Satan, sin, the world, and their own flesh, and to win the victory; it being well understood that it is ever through the assisting grace of the Holy Ghost; and that Jesus Christ assists them through his Spirit in all temptations, extends to them his hand, and if only they are ready for the conflict, and desire his help, and are not inactive, keeps them from falling, so that they, by no craft or power of Satan, can be misled nor plucked out of Christ's hands, according to the Word of Christ, John 10:28: "Neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand." But whether they are capable, through negligence, of forsaking again the first beginning of their life in Christ, of again returning to this present evil world, of turning away from the holy doctrine which was delivered them, of losing a good conscience, of becoming devoid of grace, that must be more particularly determined out of the Holy Scripture, before we ourselves can teach it with the full persuasion of our mind.

These Articles, thus set forth and taught, *the Remonstrants deem agreeable to the Word of God*, tending to edification, and, as regards this argument, sufficient for salvation, so that it is not necessary or edifying to rise higher or to descend deeper.

<http://www.baptistlife.com/flick/remonstrance.htm>

Appendix Three

J. I. Packer summarizes the five points of Arminianism and the five points of Calvinism.

The Five Points of Arminianism

(1) Man is never so completely corrupted by sin that he cannot savingly believe the gospel when it is put before him, nor (2) is he ever so completely controlled by God that he cannot reject it. (3) God's election of those who shall be saved is prompted by his foreseeing that they will of their own accord believe. (4) Christ's death did not ensure the salvation of anyone, for it did not secure the gift of faith to anyone (there is no such gift): what it did was rather to create a possibility of salvation for everyone if they believe. (5) It rests with believers to keep themselves in a state of grace by keeping up their faith; those who fail here fall away and are lost.

The Five Points of Calvinism

(1) Fallen man in his natural state lacks all power to believe the gospel, just as he lacks all power to believe the law, despite all external inducements that may be extended to him. (2) God's election is a free, sovereign, unconditional choice of sinners, as sinners, to be redeemed by Christ, given faith, and brought to glory. (3) The redeeming work of Christ had as its end and goal the salvation of the elect. (4) The work of the Holy Spirit in bringing men to faith never fails to achieve its object. (5) Believers are kept in faith and grace by the unconquerable power of God till they come to glory.