Why I Am a Calvinist, Part 1
Code: A341

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. . and why every Christian is a Calvinist of sorts.

Part I: Is Arminianism damnable heresy?

I love the doctrines of grace and don't shy away from the label "Calvinist." I believe in the sovereignty of God. I'm convinced Scripture teaches that God is completely sovereign not only in salvation (effectually calling and granting faith to those whom He chooses); but also in every detail of the outworking of Providence. "Whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified" (Romans 8:30). And He makes "all things work together for good to those who love God, [i.e.,] to those who are the called according to His purpose" (Romans 8:28). Quite simply, He "works all things according to the counsel of His will" (Ephesians 1:11).

That's what people commonly mean when they speak of "Calvinism." When I accept that label, I am not pledging allegiance to the man John Calvin. I am not affirming everything he taught, and I'm not condoning everything he did. I'm convinced Calvin was a godly man and one of the finest biblical expositors and theological minds ever, but he wasn't *always* right. As a matter of fact, my own convictions are baptistic, so I am by no means one of Calvin's devoted followers. In other words, when I accept the label "Calvinist," it's only for convenience's sake. I'm not saying "I am of Calvin" in the Corinthian sense.

Furthermore, I'm not one of those who wears Calvinism like a big chip on his shoulder, daring people to fight with me about it. It's true that I can get feisty about certain points of doctrine—especially when someone attacks a principle that goes to the heart of the gospel, like substitutionary atonement, or original sin, or justification by faith and the principle of imputed righteousness. When one of those principles is challenged, I'm ready to fight. (And I also don't mind beating up on whatever happens to be the latest evangelical fad.)

But *Calvinism* isn't one of those issues I get worked up and angry about. I'll discuss it with you, but if you are spoiling for a fight about it, you are likely to find me hard to provoke. I spent too many years as an Arminian myself to pretend that the truth on these issues is easy and obvious.

Now, don't get the wrong idea. I *do* think the truth of God's sovereignty is clear and ultimately inescapable in Scripture. But it is a difficult truth to come to grips with, so I am sympathetic with those who struggle with it. I'm Calvinistic enough to believe that God has ordained (at least for the time being) that some of my brethren should hold Arminian opinions.

Over the years I have probably written at least twice as much material trying to tone down angry hyper Calvinists as I have arguing with Arminians. That's not because I think hyper Calvinism is a more serious error than Arminianism. As a matter of fact, I would say the two errors are strikingly similar. But I don't hear very many voices of caution being raised against the dangers of hyper Calvinism, and there are armies of Calvinists out there already challenging the Arminians, so I've tried to speak out as much as possible against the tendencies of the hypers.

That's why I'm probably a whole lot less militant than you might expect when it comes to attacking the errors of Arminianism. Besides, I have gotten much further answering Arminian objections with patient teaching and dispassionate, reasonable, biblical instruction—instead of angry arguments and instant anathemas.

Why not take a more passive, lenient, brotherly, approach to *all* theological disagreements? Because I firmly believe there are some theological errors that *do* deserve a firm and decisive anathema. That's Paul's point in Galatians 1:8-9; and it's the same point the apostle John makes in 2 John, verses 7-11. When someone is teaching an error that fatally corrupts the truth of the gospel, "let him be anathema."

But let me be plain here: *Simple Arminianism doesn't fall in that category. It's not fair to pin the label of rank heresy on Arminianism, the way some of my more zealous Calvinist brethren seem prone to do.* I'm talking about historic, evangelical Arminianism, of the classic and Wesleyan varieties — *Arminianism*, not Pelagianism, or open theism, or whatever heresy Clark Pinnock has invented this week — but true evangelical Arminianism. Arminianism is certainly wrong; and I would argue that it's inconsistent with itself. But in my judgment, standard, garden variety Arminianism is not so fatally wrong that we need to consign our Arminian brethren to the eternal flames or even automatically refuse them fellowship in our pastors' fraternals.

If you think I'm beginning to sound like an apologist for Arminianism, I'm definitely not that. I *do* think Arminianism is a profound error. Its tendencies *can* be truly sinister, and when it is allowed to go to seed, it *does* lead people into rank heresy. But what I'm saying here is that mere Arminianism *itself* isn't damnable heresy. It's just grossly inconsistent with the core gospel doctrines that Arminians

themselves believe and affirm.

But as long as I'm *sounding* like a defender of Arminianism, let me also say this: There are plenty of ignorant and inconsistent Calvinists out there, too. With the rise of the Internet it's easier than ever for self taught lay people to engage in theological dialogue and debate through internet forums. I think that's mostly good, and I encourage it. But the Internet makes it easy for like minded but ignorant people to clump together and endlessly reinforce one another's ignorance. And I fear that happens a lot.

Hyper Calvinists seem especially susceptible to that tendency, and there are nests of them here and there—especially on the Internet. And more and more frequently these days I encounter people, who have been influenced by extremism on the Internet, touting hyper Calvinist ideas and insisting that if someone is an Arminian, that person is not really a Christian at all. They equate Arminianism with sheer works salvation. They suggest that Arminianism implicitly denies the atonement. Or they insist that the God worshiped by Arminians is a totally different God from the God of Scripture.

That's really over-the-top rhetoric—totally unnecessary—and rooted in historical ignorance. A couple of years ago, when I started my weblog, I mentioned that tendency in the first entry I posted, which was titled "Quick and Dirty Calvinism." At the end of that post, I said this: My advice to young Calvinists is to learn theology from the historic mainstream Calvinist authors, not from blogs and discussion forums on the Internet. Some of the forums may be helpful because they direct you to more important resources. But if you think of the Internet as a surrogate for seminary, you run a very high risk of becoming unbalanced.

Read mainstream Calvinist authors, however, and you'll have trouble finding even one who regarded Arminianism per se as damnable heresy. There's a reason for that: It's because while Arminianism is bafflingly inconsistent, it is not necessarily damnably erroneous. Most Arminians themselves—and I'm still speaking here of the classic and Wesleyan varieties, not Pelagianism masquerading as Arminianism—most Arminians themselves emphatically affirm gospel truth that is actually rooted in Calvinistic presuppositions.

This post is adapted from a transcript of a seminar from the 2007 Shepherds' Conference, titled "Closet Calvinists."