

“Scholarly in its technical foundations of theology and history, but written in language accessible to lay reader and scholar alike, this book is the best resource in print that provides trustworthy insight into a comparison of Arminianism and Calvinism. Scholars will admire the full footnoting of all sources, and lay readers will appreciate that technical language is avoided but explicated when needed. Pinson knows full well that there is no such thing as a single homogenous phenomenon of either Arminianism or Calvinism. This is where Pinson shines the brightest. He carefully guides the reader through nuanced differences and emphases, but he also honestly sets forth his own position on challenging differences. The careful reader will discern that Pinson is consequential in his pursuit, which means that no detail of difference is too small to set out. Simply put: this is the most comprehensive book available on the essentials of Arminian theology. The beauty of the book is that Pinson fulfills the ideal dialectic that he set out in his Introduction. He has produced an irenic apologetic for which Arminius himself would issue high praise. The spirit of Arminius shines through.”

—W. Stephen Gunter,
Research Professor Emeritus, Duke Divinity School
and author of *Arminius and His “Declaration of Sentiments”*

“Matthew Pinson displays a broad and deep understanding of Arminius’s theology, classical ‘Reformed Arminianism,’ and varieties of Calvinism. Here he ably answers questions about classical ‘Reformed Arminianism’ and demonstrates how it differs from both Calvinism and Wesleyan Arminianism. At the same time, in very irenic tones, Pinson acknowledges and celebrates areas of agreement between these lines of Protestant Christian theology. The novel contribution of this book is the author’s insightful discussion of how Arminianism can be ‘Reformed.’ According to him, and I agree, classical Arminianism is a branch of the broad Reformed tradition even though Wesleyans are also Arminians. Although he does not mention this ‘fun fact,’ the original Arminian denomination, the Remonstrant Brotherhood of the Netherlands, is a charter member of the World Communion of Reformed Churches. That fact supports his theological argument for Reformed Arminianism. Anyone who wants to be thoroughly informed about Arminianism and also entertained in the process must read *40 Questions About Arminianism*.”

—Roger E. Olson, Professor of Christian Theology
and Holder of the Foy Valentine Chair in Christian Ethics,
George W. Truett Theological Seminary, Baylor University

“Matthew Pinson has surely produced what may well rank as the best available exposition of evangelical Arminianism. I found the book enormously helpful in tracing the Arminian vision from the vantage point of Scripture, theology, and history. And while I remain unconvinced by his argument in a number of places, his book is a gracious and profoundly learned response to the biblical Calvinism that I embrace. In fact, reading it was not only a learning experience—it was a joyful exercise!”

—Michael A. G. Haykin, FRHistS,
Chair and Professor of Church History, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Matthew Pinson in *40 Questions About Arminianism* has beautifully recaptured the classic question-answer format which framed the great historic theologies of the past in order to present the distinctives of Arminian theology and thought to a new generation. Rather than dividing Christians into theological camps, Pinson conveys a beautiful irenic tone, helping inform fellow brothers and sisters in Christ about many of the frequently misunderstood features of the great tapestry which makes up Christian theology.”

—Timothy Tennent,
President and Professor of World Christianity,
Asbury Theological Seminary

“This work provides readers the perfect opportunity to get acquainted with a vibrant, evangelical Arminianism that is rooted and grounded in Reformation theology. This theology draws directly from Arminius himself. Through the centuries, the very best Arminianism—whether that of the early English General Baptists and their progeny in America or of Wesley and those who have followed his lead—has preserved the solas and the most important elements of that understanding of biblical truth. Pinson takes on all the questions involved, the hard ones included, and gives thorough, biblically based answers. You may be surprised!”

—Robert E. Picirilli, Professor Emeritus of New Testament and Greek
and Former Academic Dean, Welch College

“I’m not an Arminian. However, I am deeply appreciative of the Arminian theological tradition and its contributions to the church catholic. As such, I’m thankful that Matt Pinson has written this important volume. The book is well written, the questions are well chosen, and the content is presented in an informative and winsome manner. Readers will benefit from learning more about the variations within Arminianism and the key differences between Arminianism and various forms of Calvinism. Perhaps more important, this book makes clear that orthodox Arminianism in its reformational and Wesleyan forms is distinct from the errors of semi-Pelagianism, the latter of which have been condemned by Arminians just as much as Calvinists. This book is a fine addition to a great series.”

—Nathan Finn, Provost and Professor of Theological Studies and History,
North Greenville University

“Arminius in particular and Arminians in general are often misrepresented or inaccurately defined by their detractors. Some people who write or speak about Arminianism evidently have never read Arminius himself. The great value of this work is that Matthew Pinson cogently articulates what Arminius and Arminians *actually believe*, and why they believe it.”

—Steve W. Lemke, Vice President for Institutional Assessment
and Professor of Philosophy and Ethics,
New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary

“By reading Arminius myself, I discovered how surprisingly Reformed Arminius himself really was. Through Matthew Pinson, I discovered to my surprise that this ‘Reformed Arminius’ has faithful followers through the seventeenth-century English General Baptists up to the present day. At the same time, the early ‘Arminians’ (Remonstrants), as well as those who pass for Arminians today, deviate more from Arminius than Arminius did from Calvin in many respects. It is easy to contrast this mainstream Arminianism with ultra-Calvinism by making the differences as great as possible. Yet it is much more exciting to confront Reformed Arminianism in the line of Arminius with ‘mainstream’ Calvinism. Pinson does the latter. Reformed Arminians profess the five solas of the Reformation in their emphasis on Christ, on grace and imputed righteousness by faith. Many Calvinists do not believe their eyes when they read an Arminian who writes about ‘the rich Reformation portrait of our enslavement to sin and God’s redemptive remedy for it’ and about, for example, the need for penal substitutionary atonement. However, it is entirely in the spirit of Arminius. Calvinists can learn much from the clear, scriptural way Pinson sets forth questions regarding salvation, speaking warmly of the richness and necessity of God’s grace in Christ. Pinson is very well versed in both Arminianism and Calvinism. In an honest and clear way, he lays out the differences without turning his theological ‘opponents’ into straw men with whom it is easy to ‘win.’ This book challenges both Arminians and Calvinists to rediscover their shared Reformed roots, to get a clear picture of the real differences, and to engage once again in the real conversation about them.”

—William den Boer, postdoctoral researcher, Theological University Kampen, the Netherlands,
and author of *God’s Twofold Love: The Theology of Jacob Arminius (1559–1609)*

40 QUESTIONS ABOUT
Arminianism

J. Matthew Pinson

Benjamin L. Merkle, Series Editor



40 Questions About Arminianism

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Introduction

I will never forget the crisp November day in Providence, Rhode Island, when my friend Michael Haykin and I were walking back to a meeting from lunch with a motley crew of Baptists from all over the soteriological map. Michael said, “I like my Calvinism like I think Matt likes his Arminianism.” Then he paraphrased John Newton, who, after stirring some sugar into his tea, said: “I am more of a Calvinist than anything else; but I use my Calvinism in my writing and preaching as I use this sugar. I do not give it alone, and whole; but mixed, and diluted.”¹

I do not like what is normally called “polemics,” defined as “an aggressive attack on or refutation of the opinions or principles of another. . . . From Greek *polemikos*, warlike, hostile.”² However, I think Thomas Oden was right when he said that “irenics” and “polemics” are “sister disciplines” and thus polemics should always be irenic—characterized by a spirit that wants to foster peace and unity.³ This is especially true when the differences are between brothers and sisters in Christ who have serious disagreements that might hinder ecclesiastical union but who agree on the gospel and the truths of Christian orthodoxy.

A little more from Newton is helpful in this context:

I am an avowed Calvinist: the points which are usually comprised in that term, seem to me so consonant to scripture, reason, (when enlightened,) and experience, that I have not the shadow of doubt about them. But I cannot dispute, I dare not speculate. What is by some called high Calvinism, I dread. I feel much more in union of spirit with some Arminians, than I could with some Calvinists. . . . Not

1. Quoted in D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the English Evangelical Tradition: Between the Conversions of Wesley and Wilberforce*, Oxford Theological Monographs (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 168. In this book “Calvinism” will primarily refer to the doctrine of salvation that goes by that name. For more on this, see Question 2.
2. Merriam-Webster online dictionary, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/polemic>. Accessed August 3, 2020.
3. Thomas C. Oden, *The Rebirth of Orthodoxy: Signs of New Life in Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 128.

because I think [their views] mere opinions, or of little importance to a believer,—I think the contrary; but because I believe these doctrines will do no one any good till he is taught them of God. I believe a too hasty assent to Calvinistic principles, before a person is duly acquainted with the plague of his own heart, is one principal cause of that lightness of profession which so lamentably abounds in this day, a chief reason why many professors are rash, heady, high-minded, contentious about words, and sadly remiss as to the means of divine appointment.⁴

The spirit Newton described toward the end of that passage is too common in twenty-first century evangelicalism. Calvinists and Arminians are more insular and less cooperative with each other than ever before. It is sad when my hosting in the Welch College chapel pulpit, within a short timeframe, Albert Mohler, president of the world's largest Calvinist seminary, and Timothy Tennent, president of the world's largest Wesleyan Arminian seminary, caused friends on both sides to raise their eyebrows, scratch their heads in disbelief, and wonder why I would do such a thing.

Yet Newton's irenic mentality, the "catholicity of spirit" of which the Anglican Calvinist Bishop J. C. Ryle spoke, was not always so unusual in the evangelical Protestant tradition. Once a follower of George Whitefield asked him, "Will we see Wesley in heaven?" to which Whitefield replied, "I fear not. He will be so near the throne, and we shall be at such a distance, that we shall hardly get a sight of him."⁵

Four of my favorite "running buddies" at Yale Divinity School were a staunch Calvinist from the Presbyterian Church in America, a mildly Arminian Anglican who was a postulant for the Episcopal priesthood, a "once-saved, always-saved" Southern Baptist, and a conservative United Methodist. We were all strongly committed to our respective confessional systems and argued them vociferously among ourselves.

Yet we were thrown together by providence, in that pluralistic, Protestant-liberal environment. We had far more conversations about our united witness for Christian orthodoxy in its confessional Protestant form—and what that witness could do to enliven not only gospel mission but also the public conversation in the West in the twenty-first century—than about our confessional differences. We always agreed, however, that our full-throated confessional commitments, about things like Arminianism versus Calvinism or paedobaptism versus anti-paedobaptism, made us much better cross-denominational

4. *The Works of the Rev. John Newton* (New Haven: Nathan Whiting, 1826), 4:369.

5. J. C. Ryle, *Christian Leaders of the Last Century, Or, England a Hundred Years Ago* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1869), 59–60.

dialogue partners. What was ironic was that our strong doctrinal commitments on matters like these made both our commitment to orthodoxy and our “catholicity of spirit” stronger.

This is the spirit in which I write this book. The reason I go into such great depth on this is that I want my Calvinist and Wesleyan brothers and sisters and dear friends in Christ to know where my heart is, even when my mind disagrees with them. In that vein, I have written this survey of Arminianism that is more didactic than polemical, but which every reader will see engages at times in hard-edged debate with scholars who are both on my Calvinist and Wesleyan sides.

That brings up the context from which I write. This volume will resonate with all Arminians because it explains the broad Arminian tradition to Calvinists and those from other traditions. Yet I am writing from a particular “social location” in the evangelical landscape. My perspective has been shaped more by a minority stream in the Arminian community that has come to be known as Reformed Arminianism. This tributary to the larger Arminian river has been more identified with Baptists. In our day it has been given the fullest expression by Free Will Baptist theologians such as Leroy Forlines and Robert Picirilli, heirs of the seventeenth-century English General Baptist tradition embodied by Thomas Helwys and Thomas Grantham. However, many Arminians who are part of the pan-Wesleyan movement—as well as non-Calvinists among Baptists and Bible churches who agree with Arminians on everything except the possibility of apostasy—concur with the broad outlines of Reformed Arminianism.

These and other in-house debates among Arminians are not the focus of this book, which intends to introduce Arminianism as a whole. Yet it will still be helpful to discuss the Reformed Arminian distinctives briefly here, since this less-well-known minority movement will come up at various places throughout the book. In short, Reformed Arminians are so named because Jacobus Arminius was a confessionally Reformed minister to his dying day who publicly affirmed the Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechism and drank as deeply as anyone from the rich fountain of Reformed theology.

Like all Arminians, Reformed Arminians diverge from Calvinism on *how one comes to be* in a state of grace (e.g., unconditional election, irresistible grace). Yet, unlike many other Arminians, they agree with Calvinists on *what it means to be* in a state of grace (e.g., penal substitution, imputation of the active and passive obedience of Christ; progressive as opposed to entire sanctification). This latter emphasis produces what they think of as a more *sola fide* emphasis with regard to falling from grace—so that a believer can apostatize, but only through a final, irremediable turning from Christ, not post-conversion sins and impenitence.

These differences transcend denominational and confessional boundaries: many Wesleyan Arminians, non-Calvinist Baptists, Anabaptists, adherents of

the Stone-Campbell movement, and others have much in common with this perspective. There is also cross-pollination with some in the Lutheran Church who hold to a more conditional-election posture similar to older Lutheran scholastics such as Johann Gerhard. This is unsurprising, since Arminius found so much in common with the Lutheran soteriology of his day.

Still, most of this book will be about what brings all Arminians together and will serve as a primer to Arminians and Calvinists and others outside the Arminian community about the basics of this constellation of ideas. Yet I send it forth in the “spirit of catholicity” and irenic dialogue characteristic of the best of the evangelical Protestant tradition.

PART 1

Introductory and Historical Questions

SECTION A

Introducing Arminianism and Calvinism

QUESTION 1

Who Was Jacobus Arminius, and Who Were the Remonstrants?

Jacobus Arminius was born in 1559 in the city of Oudewater in the Netherlands and was named Jacob Harmenszoon, a Dutch name of which Jacobus Arminius is a latinized version.¹ His father died before he was born, and he and his brothers and sisters were raised by their mother. In 1575, Arminius went to study with Rudolphus Snellius, a professor at the University of Marburg. While Arminius was there, his family was killed in the Spanish massacre of Oudewater. The next year he enrolled in the new university at Leiden. It was there that he began his academic and ministerial career in earnest, as well as his serious interaction with the confessional theology of the Reformed Church in the Netherlands. After graduation from Leiden in 1581, he went to Geneva to study under Theodore Beza, Calvin's successor. He left there to study at Basel for a year but returned and studied at Geneva until 1586.

In 1587 Arminius began a pastorate in Amsterdam and was ordained the next year. Before assuming his pastorate, he traveled with his friend Adrian Junius to Italy and studied philosophy for seven months at the University of Padua. He said that the experience made the Roman Church appear to

1. Much of the brief summary information in this chapter relies on Carl Bangs, *Arminius: A Study in the Dutch Reformation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971); Bangs, "Arminius and the Reformation," *Church History* 30 (1961): 155–60; and Robert E. Picirilli, *Grace, Faith, Free Will: Contrasting Views of Salvation: Calvinism and Arminianism* (Nashville: Randall House, 2002), 3–17. For a valuable shorter introduction to Arminius's life, but longer than this sketch, see Stephen M. Ashby, "Introduction," *The Works of James Arminius*, 3 vols., trans. James Nichols and William Nichols (Nashville: Randall House, 2007). Some of the material in this chapter is adapted from J. Matthew Pinson, "Will the Real Arminius Please Stand Up? A Study of the Theology of Jacobus Arminius in Light of His Interpreters," *Integrity: A Journal of Christian Thought* 2 (2003): 121–39, reprinted in Pinson, *Arminian and Baptist: Explorations in a Theological Tradition* (Nashville: Randall House, 2015), chapter 1.

him “more foul, ugly, and detestable” than he could have imagined.² However, some of his later detractors used the trip to suggest that he had sympathies with Rome, “that he had kissed the pope’s shoe, become acquainted with the Jesuits, and cherished a familiar intimacy with Cardinal Bellarmine.”³

In 1590 Arminius married Lijbset Reael, a daughter of a member of the city council. About this time he became involved in theological controversy. He was asked to refute the teachings of Dirck Coornhert, a humanist who had criticized Calvinism, and two ministers at Delft who had written an anti-Calvinist pamphlet. The traditional view was that Arminius, in his attempt to refute these anti-Calvinist teachings, converted from Calvinism to anti-Calvinism. Yet Carl Bangs has shown that there is no evidence that he ever held strict Calvinist views. At any rate, he became involved in controversy over the doctrines of the strong Calvinists. In 1591 he preached on Romans 7, arguing (against many Calvinists’ view) that the person described in verses 14–24 was regenerate.

A minister named Petrus Plancius led the charge against Arminius. Plancius labeled Arminius a Pelagian, alleging that he had moved away from the Belgic Confession of Faith and the Heidelberg Catechism, advocating anti-Reformed views on predestination and perfectionism. Arminius insisted that his theology was in line with that of the Reformed Church and its confessional standards, the Belgic Confession of Faith and Heidelberg Catechism, and the Amsterdam burgomasters sided with him. About a year later, after Arminius preached a series of sermons on Romans 9, Plancius again leveled accusations against him. The latter insisted that his teachings were in line with Article 16 of the Belgic Confession, and the consistory accepted his explanation, urging peace until the matter could be decided by a general synod.

For the next ten years, Arminius enjoyed a relatively peaceful pastorate and avoided theological controversy. During this decade, he wrote a great deal on theology (many things that were never published in his lifetime), including extensive works on Romans 7 and 9 as well as a long correspondence with the Leiden Calvinist Francis Junius. In 1602, there was an effort to get Arminius named to a post at the University of Leiden, but Leiden professor Franciscus Gomarus led an opposition to Arminius’s appointment. Still, the Leiden burgomasters appointed Arminius as professor of theology in May 1603. Soon he was awarded a doctorate in theology.

Arminius would spend the last six years of his life at Leiden, struggling with tuberculosis but always in a firestorm of theological controversy. The primary source of the controversy was predestination. Another issue of dispute

2. Arminius, *Works*, 1:26. This quotation is from Peter Bertius, “An Oration on the Life and Death of That Reverend and Very Famous Man James Arminius, D.D.,” reprinted in the London edition of Arminius’s *Works*.

3. Caspar Brandt, *The Life of James Arminius, D.D.*, trans. John Guthrie (London: Ward and Company, 1854), 28.

was the convening of a national synod. Arminius's side wanted a national synod convened with power to make revisions to the Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechism, while the strict Calvinists relied more on local synods. In 1607 the States General brought together a conference to prepare for a national synod. Arminius recommended the revision of the confessional documents but was voted down. He continued to be accused of false teaching, which resulted in his petitioning the States General to inquire into his case.

Eventually, Arminius and Gomarus appeared before the High Court in 1608 to make their respective cases. This was the occasion for Arminius's famous *Declaration of Sentiments*.⁴ In that work, Arminius forthrightly argued against unconditional election. He concluded by asking again for a national synod with hopes for a revision of the Confession. Gomarus appeared before the States General and accused Arminius of errors on not only original sin, divine foreknowledge, predestination, regeneration, good works, and the possibility of apostasy, but also the Trinity and biblical authority. While the States General did not support Gomarus, the controversy became more heated.

In August of 1609, the States General invited Arminius and Gomarus back for a conference. They were each to bring four other colleagues. Yet Arminius's illness, which had been worsening, made it impossible for him to continue the conference, which was dismissed. The States General asked the two men to submit their views in writing within two weeks. Arminius never completed his, owing to his illness, and he died on October 19, 1609.

Arminius's Theological Context

To understand Arminius's life as a theologian, one must understand the historical background of confessional theology in the Reformed Church in the Netherlands during his lifetime. Most of the interpretations of Arminius's theology have been based on misconceptions about Arminius's life and context.⁵ Carl Bangs noted that interpreters of Arminius commonly misunderstand basic facts about him and his context.⁶ They mistakenly think that Arminius was reared and educated amidst Calvinism and accepted Genevan Calvinism. They also misunderstand that as a student of Theodore Beza he accepted supralapsarianism and that, while preparing to refute Dirck Coornhert, he changed his mind and went over to Coornhert's humanism and that thus his theology was a polemic against Reformed theology. None of these things, as Bangs has shown, are true.⁷

4. W. Stephen Gunter, *Arminius and His Declaration of Sentiments: An Annotated Translation with Introduction and Theological Commentary* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012).

5. The information in this section relies heavily on Bangs, "Arminius and the Reformation," 155–60.

6. These misconceptions arise from the Peter Bertius's funeral oration for Arminius and Caspar Brandt's *Life of James Arminius*.

7. See Bangs, *Arminius*, 139–42.

Arminius was not predisposed to a supralapsarian view of predestination. He rather shared the views of numerous Reformed theologians and pastors before him. The origins of the Reformed Church in the Netherlands were diverse, both historically and theologically. When Calvin published his views on predestination in the 1540s, many within the Reformed churches reacted negatively. When Sabastien Castellio disagreed with Calvin's view of predestination, he was banished from Geneva but was given asylum by the Reformed in Basel and soon offered a professorship there. It was said that, in Basel, "if one wishes to scold another, he calls him a Calvinist."⁸

Another Reformed theologian who reacted negatively to Calvin's doctrine of predestination was Jerome Bolsec, who settled in Geneva in 1550. When Calvin and Beza sent a list of Bolsec's errors to the Swiss churches, they were disappointed with the response. The church of Basel urged that Calvin and Bolsec try to emphasize their similarities. The ministers of Bern reminded Calvin of the many biblical texts that refer to God's universal grace. Even Heinrich Bullinger disagreed with Calvin's soteriology. Bangs notes that "the most consistent resistance to [Calvin's] predestination theory came from the German-speaking cantons." Even in Geneva there was a fair amount of resistance. This is evidenced by the presence of Charles Perrot, whose views diverged from Calvin's, on the faculty of the University of Geneva even during Beza's lifetime.⁹

"From the very beginnings of the introduction of Reformed religion in the Low Countries," says Bangs, "the milder views of the Swiss cantons were in evidence." Because of Roman Catholic persecution, the first Dutch Reformed synod was held at the Reformed church in Emden. The church's pastor, Albert Hardenberg, who was closer to Philip Melancthon than to Calvin on predestination, exerted great influence on the early leaders in the Dutch Reformed churches—most notably Clement Martenson and John Isbrandtson, who openly opposed the spread of Genevan Calvinism in the Low Countries. At the Synod of Emden in 1571, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession of Faith were adopted. Both these documents allowed room for disagreement on the doctrines of grace and predestination, but some Geneva-educated ministers began attempts to enforce a stricter interpretation of them.¹⁰

Thus two parties arose in the Dutch Reformed Church. Those who were less inclined to a Calvinistic view of predestination tended to prefer a form of Erastianism (in which the magistrates controlled discipline in the church) and toleration toward Lutherans and Anabaptists, while the Genevan elements wanted strict adherence to Calvinism and Presbyterian church government.

8. Bangs, "Arminius and the Reformation," 157.

9. Bangs, "Arminius and the Reformation," 158.

10. Bangs, "Arminius and the Reformation," 159.

The laity, including the magistrates, tended toward the former, while more clergy tended toward the latter. However, a significant number of clergy clung to non-Calvinistic views of predestination. As Johannes Trapman notes, the States General “never wished to define the Reformed Religion so strictly as to exclude those who accepted only conditional predestination, that is ‘some’ ministers, ‘many’ magistrates, and ‘countless’ church members.”¹¹

As late as 1586, Caspar Coolhaes, a Reformed pastor in Leiden, after being excommunicated by the national synod at the Hague, was supported by the magistrates at Leiden.¹² The provincial synod of Haarlem of 1582 deposed and excommunicated him, an action opposed by the magistrates and some ministers of Leiden, the Hague, Dort, and Gouda. The Synod also attempted to force the Dutch churches to accept a rigid doctrine of predestination but did not succeed. As Bangs says, Coohaes “continued to write, with the support of the States of Holland and the magistrates of Leiden. A compromise reconciliation between the two factions was attempted, but it was not successful. This indicates something of a mixed situation in the Reformed churches of Holland at the time that Arminius was emerging as a theologian.”¹³ Thus there was no clear consensus on the doctrines of grace and predestination in the Dutch Reformed churches of Arminius’s time.¹⁴

The Remonstrants and the Synod of Dort

While Arminius was still living, some of the local synods required their ministers to state their views on the Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechism.¹⁵ This move concerned the States General, which saw this as a challenge to its power. Thus it ordered that the ministers in question submit their views to the States General. In 1610, not long after Arminius’s death, some of his followers, led by men such as Johannes Uytenbogaert, Simon Episcopius, and Hugo Grotius, and supported by political leaders such as Johan van Oldenbarnevelt, issued an entreaty to the States General known as a Remonstrance. Thus they came to be known as “Remonstrants,” and the Calvinists were dubbed “Counter-Remonstrants.”

11. Johannes Trapman, “Grotius and Erasmus,” in *Hugo Grotius, Theologian: Essays in Honor of G. H. M. Posthumus Meyjes*, eds. Henk J. M. Nellen and Edwin Rabbie (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 86.

12. Linda Stuckrath Gottschalk, *Pleading for Diversity: The Church Caspar Coolhaes Wanted* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2017), 106–10; Bangs, *Arminius*, 54–55. Coolhaes taught at the University of Leiden while Arminius was a student there. The first rigid predestinarian did not teach at the University until the arrival of Lambert Daneau.

13. Bangs, “Arminius and the Reformation,” 160. See also Gottschalk, *Pleading for Diversity*, 114–15.

14. Bangs, *Arminius*, 51–55.

15. Much of this material about the Remonstrants relies on Picirilli, *Grace, Faith, Free Will*, 3–17.

Tensions continued to heighten after the publication of the Remonstrance. The States General desired peace, and the Remonstrants were protected by many in positions of political power. The Remonstrants continued to call for a national synod, as Arminius had, that would rationally and peacefully resolve the issue. Maurice, Prince of Orange, who had been mentored by Oldenbarnevelt, came increasingly to see the Calvinists as his political allies. Maurice wanted to go to war with Roman Catholic Spain, and he began to convince people that the Arminians were Roman Catholic sympathizers. This stacked the deck of the national synod, called in 1618, against the Arminians.

The States General called together this synod to begin May 1, 1618. Soon Oldenbarnevelt and Grotius were arrested, thus further predisposing the synod to oppose the Arminian party. The synod finally convened in Dordrecht—thus the name “Synod of Dort”—in November of 1618 and lasted to May of 1619. Although most of the delegates were from the Low Countries, twenty-seven of them came from elsewhere on the European continent as well as from the British Isles. Though it was directed that Remonstrants not be selected as delegates, three were initially, though they were required to yield their places to Calvinists. Thus the Synod essentially treated the Remonstrants as defendants, charged them with heresy, and required them to appear before the Synod and respond to the charges.

Episcopius, speaking for the Remonstrant party, attempted to work their strategy of starting with a refutation of Calvinism, especially reprobation, hoping to gain support. Yet the Synod would not allow him to do so, instead ordering the Remonstrants to “justify themselves, by giving Scriptural proof in support of their opinions.” However, the Remonstrants would not give in to this method and were forced to withdraw from the proceedings of the Synod, which continued without them present.¹⁶

In January of 1619, the Synod dismissed the Remonstrants and denounced them as heretics.¹⁷ The Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechism were officially adopted. However, a third document, the Canons of Dort, was added, which crystallized what are often known as the “five points of Calvinism” as the official teaching of the Reformed churches. Thus these three documents, which came to be known as the “Three Forms of Unity,” formed the

16. Herman J. Selderhuis, “Introduction to the Synod of Dort (1618–1619),” in *Acta et Documenta Synodi Nationalis Dordrechtanae (1618–1619)*, vol. 1, *Acta of the Synod of Dort*, eds. Donald Sinnema, Christian Moser, and Herman J. Selderhuis (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2015), xvii–xviii; Thomas Scott, *The Articles of Synod of Dort* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1856), 5.

17. Th. Marius Van Leeuwen, “Introduction: Arminius, Arminianism, and Europe,” in *Arminius, Arminianism, and Europe*, ed. Th. Marius van Leeuwen, Keith D. Stanglin, and Marijke Tolsma (Leiden: Brill, 2009), xvii–xviii; see also R. Scott Clark’s insightful essay, “Are the Remonstrants Heretics?” at <https://heidelblog.net/2017/05/are-the-remonstrants-heretics-1>. Accessed February 27, 2020.

confessional basis of the Reformed Church from that point forward. As will be argued in Question 8, the Canons of Dort were needed because neither the Belgic Confession of Faith nor the Heidelberg Catechism clearly taught the five points of Calvinism.

The Remonstrants were punished mercilessly. Two hundred ministers were stripped of their livelihood as ministers, and many were exiled. Many of the Remonstrants were imprisoned, yet some escaped to other countries that extended them more tolerance. Hugo Grotius, for example, escaped to England. As Th. Marius van Leeuwen says, however, this hostility backfired, causing many to have sympathy for the Remonstrants. Many of the English delegates to the Synod came to it against Arminianism but left in favor of it. One English visitor, reflecting on when he heard Episcopius speak, said, “There I bid Calvin good-night.” The English “were shocked by the way in which the Remonstrants had been expelled from the church.” After Prince Maurice’s death in 1625, however, the Remonstrants were tolerated in the Netherlands. They started a school at which Episcopius and Grotius served as faculty members.¹⁸

Even at this early stage, Remonstrant theology had begun to move away from the more Reformed theology of Arminius.¹⁹ Grotius’s and Episcopius’s views represented departures from the more Reformed views on original sin, atonement, and justification Arminius had taught, and later thinkers such as Philipp van Limborch diverged even farther from Arminius.²⁰ However, an approach more like that of Arminius would continue. During the seventeenth century, General Baptists such as Thomas Helwys and Thomas Grantham

18. Van Leeuwen, “Introduction,” xviii–xx; G. J. Hoenderdaal, “The Debate about Arminius outside the Netherlands,” in *Leiden University in the Seventeenth Century: An Exchange of Learning*, ed. Th. H. Lunsingh Scheurleer and G. H. M. Posthumus Meyjes (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 153.

19. See, e.g., William den Boer, *God’s Twofold Love: The Theology of Jacob Arminius (1559–1609)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2010), who explains that there was a “significant theological shift from Arminius to Episcopius. This shift can be characterized as one from ‘faith and justification’ to ‘repentance, sanctification and good works’” (39).

20. In addition to den Boer, *God’s Twofold Love*, 38–39, see also, e.g., Mark A. Ellis, *Simon Episcopius’ Doctrine of Original Sin* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006); W. Stephen Gunter, “From Arminius (d. 1609) to the Synod of Dort (1618–1619),” in *Perfecting Perfection: Essays in Honour of Henry D. Rack*, ed. Robert Webster (Cambridge: James Clarke and Company, 2016), 8–28; John Mark Hicks, “The Theology of Grace in the Thought of Jacobus Arminius and Philip van Limborch: A Study in the Development of Seventeenth Century Dutch Arminianism” (Ph.D. diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1985); Sarah Mortimer, *Reason and Religion in the English Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 25–26, 119–25; Moses Stuart, “The Creed of Arminius,” *Biblical Repository* 1 (1831): 303–4. As Gunter argues, “it was an altered form of Arminius’s theology that we find on trial at Dort” (Gunter, “From Arminius (d. 1609) to the Synod of Dort (1618–1619),” 8n2).

were teaching views on the doctrine of salvation that were very close to those of Arminius.²¹

Summary

Arminius was a self-consciously Reformed pastor and professor who represented a broader approach to Reformed soteriology that was tolerated in his day but came under increasing scrutiny as Reformed theology began to be increasingly influenced by Genevan Calvinism. Arminius's theology must be pieced together from his scattered theological writings. He was not able to produce a fully formed theological system, which he could have perhaps produced had his poor health not cut his life short in 1609. Thus some of Arminius's theology is incomplete and ambiguous and does not answer all the questions that would be fleshed out in later Arminian theological systems. The Remonstrants soon began moving away from the Reformed caste of Arminius's theology.

One wonders, had Arminius lived another decade, if his conciliatory spirit and Reformed sensibilities might have brought about a different outcome in the theo-political situation of the Netherlands in the early seventeenth-century and thus the Synod of Dort. One wonders if Dort may have, in that case, allowed for more diversity in expressions of Reformed theology than it did.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What were Arminius's detractors' primary accusations regarding his theology?
2. Was Arminius reared and educated amidst Calvinism in a Calvinist country?
3. What does Arminius's being asked to refute Dirck Coornhert say about his alleged former commitment to Genevan Calvinism?
4. What became of Arminius's followers after his death?
5. Who in the seventeenth century were closer to Arminius's theology, the Remonstrants or the General Baptists?

21. For more on this stream of soteriology, see J. Matthew Pinson, *Arminian and Baptist: Explorations in a Theological Tradition* (Nashville: Randall House, 2015).

QUESTION 2

What Is Calvinism?

The words “Calvinism” and “Reformed” mean many different things. Calvinism is a subset of the Reformed movement, which started with Protestant Reformers (such as Huldrych Zwingli) on the European continent. In its early days, the use of “Reformed” came to be a demarcation from the Lutheran wing of the Reformation. However, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the use of “reformed” was not limited to Calvinists, because the term meant “reformed according to Scripture,” in comparison with the Roman Church, which was unreformed. Thus various non-Calvinists, Amyraldians, English Dissenters, and Anabaptists thought of themselves as “reformed,” as in “reformed according to Scripture.”

Even among those in denominations that later came to be known officially as “Reformed,” the word meant more than just holding to a Calvinist view of salvation. It often was ecclesiological, referring to a presbyterial form of church polity or a particular view of the sacraments. Thus, from this vantage point, the word “Reformed” describes something much broader than simply belief in the five points of Calvinism.¹

Likewise, “Calvinist” carries connotations other than someone who affirms the five points of Calvinism. Many people today, especially in the Kuyperian “Neo-Calvinist” movement, think more about an approach to the Christian worldview or to society and culture when they call themselves Calvinists than about a given theology of salvation. People like Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff come to mind. Plantinga, for example, says, “As for my view of

1. For two viewpoints that bear some similarities to this one, see Roger E. Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 44–60, and Oliver D. Crisp, *Saving Calvinism: Expanding the Reformed Tradition* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), 25–46. The five points of Calvinism have typically been designated by the acronym TULIP: total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints. More information on these five points will be provided later in this chapter.

the Synod of Dort, I think that the Arminians should also be thought of as Calvinists. They thought of themselves as Calvinists. The synod declared that they weren't, but this was probably a mistake."²

As Question 6 will show, it is possible to be Arminian, demurring from the doctrines of particular and irresistible grace, and still be Reformed. For example, Jacobus Arminius saw himself as fully Reformed and affirmed the Reformed doctrinal standards, the Belgic Confession of Faith and Heidelberg Catechism. It is also possible to be Calvinistic in one's view of salvation but not be Calvinistic or Reformed with regard to any number of traditionally Reformed affirmations—the church or culture or eschatology or the charismatic gifts or religious epistemology (the knowledge of God). This book, however, deals with the doctrine of salvation. So the word “Calvinism” here will refer primarily to the “five points of Calvinism,” or to less consistent permutations of Calvinism such as four-point Calvinism and the approach known as “once-saved, always-saved.”³

Calvin and the Calvinists

Probably the most influential figure in the diverse phenomenon known as Calvinism is the man who gave the movement its name, the French Protestant reformer John Calvin (1509–1564).⁴ Having studied classics at Paris and law at Orleans and Bourges, Calvin became a Protestant in 1533. Three years later, because of the mounting pressure against Protestants, he left Paris and moved to Basel, publishing his first edition of *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Soon the reformer Guillaume Farel in Geneva convinced Calvin to come and assist him in the Reformation there.

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2. Alvin Plantinga, “The Philosophy of Religion,” in *God's Advocates: Christian Thinkers in Conversation*, ed. Rupert Shortt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 53, quoted in Richard E. Clark, “The Calvinism of Arminius” (unpublished M.A. thesis, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 2018), 54.
 3. I understand that many adherents of “once-saved, always-saved” who do not affirm unconditional election and irresistible grace will not like their position being termed a “permutation of Calvinism,” but I am convinced that they never would have held that position had they not emerged from Calvinist confessional traditions. Thus I think it is accurate to refer to “once-saved, always-saved” as a “permutation” of Calvinism. I acknowledge my bias as one who is a member of a church body that has been confessionally Arminian on the “fifth point” for four centuries.
 4. While “Calvinism,” even in its soteriological form, received its character not just from Calvin but from diverse figures such as Huldrych Zwingli, Martin Bucer, Johannes Oecolampadius, Peter Martyr Vermigli, Heinrich Bullinger, William Perkins, and others, I will appeal primarily to the theology of Calvin as representative of this movement. For more on the fact that Calvinism is more than merely the theology of Calvin, see chapters 1 and 2 of Kenneth J. Stewart, *Ten Myths about Calvinism: Recovering the Breadth of the Reformed Tradition* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011) and Carl Trueman, “Calvin and Calvinism” in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

From his post in Geneva, Calvin exerted an inestimable influence on Reformation thought and practice. This influence was not limited to the continent. It was also felt in the developing Reformation churches in England and Scotland, where many from these churches were exiled by Queen “Bloody Mary” of England in the 1550s, later known as “Puritans.” Many of Calvin’s views on the five “solas”—*sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone), *sola gratia* (grace alone), *sola fide* (faith alone), *solus Christus* (Christ alone), and *solus Deo gloria* (to the glory of God alone)—and on reforming the church according to Scripture were mediated through the Puritan movement even to many who demurred from the five points of Calvinism, such as the General Baptists and Arminian Puritans like John Goodwin.

Calvinism as a soteriological system arose from Calvin’s views as expressed in subsequent editions of his *Institutes* and in his commentaries on the Bible. Yet followers of Calvin such as Theodore Beza and Jerome Zanchius almost immediately began to harden Calvin’s doctrines into what later came to be known as the five points of Calvinism. However, other scholars such as Arminius and Moise Amyraut reacted against this crystallization, moderating Calvin’s teaching in ways that they believed were consistent with the confessions and catechisms of the Reformed churches. This hardening of Calvinist theology can be seen most clearly in Calvinism’s battle with Jacobus Arminius and his followers, the Remonstrants, whose views were condemned at the Synod of Dort in 1619. Seventeenth-century Reformed scholastics such as Francis Turretin and John Owen were a part of this development of Calvin’s theology and that of other early Reformed thinkers like him.

There is a strong movement in modern scholarship that attempts to drive a wedge between Calvin and the Calvinists.⁵ These scholars argue, for example, that limited atonement and supralapsarianism were introduced by later Calvinists and were not characteristic of the theology of Calvin himself. Whether Calvinism hardened in the years leading up to and following the Synod of Dort is beyond the scope of this book.⁶ However, there is no

5. See, e.g., R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); Holmes Rolston, III, *Calvin versus the Westminster Confession* (Louisville: John Knox, 1972); Tony Lane, “The Quest for the Historical Calvin,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 55 (1983): 95–113 (which lists a number of other scholars of the “Calvin vs. the Calvinists” school); Basil Hall, “Calvin against the Calvinists,” in *John Calvin: A Collection of Essays*, ed. G. E. Duffield (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 19–37; Brian G. Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy: Protestant Scholasticism and Humanism in Seventeenth Century France* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969).

6. For an opposing view to the “Calvin vs. the Calvinists” perspective, see Richard A. Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012). Muller does not like to use the word “Calvinism” but instead prefers to use the word “Reformed” and, quite unlike the approach of this book, tightens the word to involve what most people mean by “soteriological Calvinism.” These internecine Calvinist disputes regarding how Calvinist Calvin was are of limited interest for this study.

question that *Reformed* theology, as redefined by the Synod of Dort, hardened into a strict Calvinist system (see Question 8).

The system of Calvinism as it developed at and after the Synod of Dort has popularly been divided into five points explained by the acronym TULIP: T for Total Depravity, U for Unconditional Election, L for Limited Atonement, I for Irresistible Grace, and P for Perseverance of the Saints. In some ways, TULIP is a misnomer, because the first “head of doctrine” in the Canons of Dort has to do with unconditional election, the second with atonement, the third and fourth with total depravity and irresistible grace or effectual calling, and the fifth with perseverance.⁷ This ordering at Dort is more coherent with the Calvinist system because it starts with unconditional election: The reason God chooses certain people unconditionally is because he directly foreordains every aspect of reality. Thus God’s determination of all things, not depravity, is the reason for unconditional election.

Because TULIP is such a commonly used and easily remembered acronym for the “five points of Calvinism,” this book will use it.⁸ The remainder of this chapter will take each “petal” of the TULIP one-by-one, discussing primarily Calvin’s *Institutes*, the Canons of Dort, and the Westminster Confession of Faith and Larger Catechism as representative Calvinist sources.⁹ This is necessary because the Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechism do not affirm soteriological Calvinism (see Question 8).

Total Depravity

Calvin and his followers have consistently taught that human beings are totally depraved and unable to be converted apart from a radical intervention of God’s grace, which they argue is irresistible.¹⁰ Calvin said that Paul’s intention in Romans 3 is to teach people that “they have all been overwhelmed by an

7. Herman J. Selderhuis, “Introduction to the Synod of Dort (1618–1619),” in *Acta et Documenta Synodi Nationalis Dordrechtanae*, ed. Donald Sinnema, Christian Moser, and Herman J. Selderhuis (1618–1619), vol. 1, *Acta of the Synod of Dort* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2015), xxxi.

8. Still, however, Richard Muller’s concerns about the popular acronym are valid. See chapter 2 of his excellent work *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition*. See also Selderhuis, xxx–xxxii and chapter 3 of Stewart, discussing one of his myths of Calvinism, that “TULIP is the Yardstick of the Truly Reformed.”

9. All quotations from the Canons of Dort and Westminster Larger Catechism come from the Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary website at <https://prts.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Canons-of-Dort-with-Intro.pdf> and https://prts.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Larger_Catechism.pdf. All quotations of the Westminster Confession of Faith come from the Westminster Theological Seminary website at: http://files1.wts.edu/uploads/pdf/about/WCF_30.pdf.

10. Muller correctly observes, “Whereas Calvin himself used phrases like ‘totally depraved’ or ‘utterly perverse,’ . . . the language of the Canons of Dort is more measured than that of Calvin.” Muller is, rightly, attempting to avoid the “grizzly” concept of the “utter replacement” of the image of God in humanity (*Calvin and the Reformed Tradition*, 59–60). Total

unavoidable calamity from which only God’s mercy can deliver them.” People are sinful, Calvin argued, “not merely by the defect of depraved custom, but also by depravity of nature.” Outside of God’s mercy, “there is no salvation for man, for in himself he is lost and forsaken. . . . it is futile to seek anything good in our nature” (*Institutes*, 2.3.2).¹¹ Because the will is in “bondage to sin,” Calvin held, it “cannot move toward good, much less apply itself thereto; for a movement of this sort is the beginning of conversion to God, which in Scripture is ascribed entirely to God’s grace. . . . Therefore simply to will is of man; to will ill, of a corrupt nature; to will well, of grace” (2.3.5).

This doctrine is upheld by the Canons of Dort, which explain that, because “all men are conceived in sin, and by nature children of wrath,” they are “incapable of saving good, prone to evil, dead in sin, and in bondage thereto.” Unless God regenerates them, they are “neither able nor willing to return to God, to reform the depravity of their nature, or to dispose themselves to reformation” (heads 3–4, art. 3). These same doctrines are repeated in the Westminster Confession (9.3) and Larger Catechism (Q. 25).

Unconditional Election

To understand Calvin’s doctrine of unconditional election, we must understand his doctrine of the divine foreordination of all things. Election has to be unconditional because God, to be God, must be the sole determiner of all things. Human beings “are governed by God’s secret plan,” Calvin averred, “in such a way that nothing happens except what is knowingly and willingly decreed by him” (1.16.3).

From eternity, God “decreed what he was to do, and now by his power executes what he decreed. Hence we maintain, that by His providence, not heaven and earth and inanimate creatures only, but also the counsels and wills of men are so governed as to move exactly in the course which he has destined” (1.16.8).¹² This is not the same thing as saying that God’s providence upholds the universe and is guiding it to his divine ends, as Arminians and all orthodox Christians have always believed. Rather, it is the direct determination of every detail of reality to be exactly as God desires it to be. Calvin went on to say that “men can accomplish nothing except by God’s secret command,” that “they cannot by deliberating accomplish anything except what he has already decreed with himself and determines by his secret direction”

depravity does not entail that fallen people are as sinful as they can be, but simply that every aspect of a person is depraved.

11. Unless otherwise noted, Calvin quotations in this chapter come from John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006). It will be cited parenthetically in the text as *Institutes*.

12. This rendering is from the translation by Henry Beveridge, Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845), 1:242.

(1.18.1). In other words, every detail in God's universe will play out precisely as he wants it to.

Thus one can see why Calvin's view of predestination is unconditional: "We call predestination God's eternal decree, by which he compacted with himself what he willed to become of each man." For Calvin, "all are not created in equal condition; rather eternal life is foreordained for some, eternal damnation for others. Therefore, as any man has been created to one or the other of these ends, we speak of him as predestined to life or to death" (3.21.5). God "established by his eternal and unchangeable plan those whom he long before determined once for all to receive into salvation, and those whom, on the other hand, he would devote to destruction . . . he has barred the door of life to those whom he has given over to damnation" (3.21.7).

Why does God elect some people and reprobate others? Calvin answered that "we cannot determine a reason why he vouchsafes mercy to his own, except that it so pleases him, neither shall we have any reason for rejecting others, other than his will" (3.22.11). Despite assertions like these, there is debate among Calvinist scholars about whether Calvin believes that God directly reprobates people (double predestination) or simply passes over them (single predestination). However, one must bear in mind that, either way, God is directly foreordaining everything about them and arranging the world in such a way that they will be reprobate. "Therefore, those whom God passes over, he condemns; and this he does for no other reason than that he wills to exclude them from the inheritance which he predestines for his own children" (3.23.1). Thus the reprobate are "born destined for certain death from the womb, who glorify his name by their own destruction" (3.23.6).

The Canons of Dort concur with Calvin on unconditional election. In God's eternal decree, he "graciously softens" the hearts of the elect and "inclines them to believe." The Canons of Dort, however, are a bit softer than Calvin in avoiding double-predestinarian language, though, again, the difference does not really matter if God gets every detail of human choice exactly as he wants it. Still, the language of the Canons are softer in stating that God "leaves the non-elect in His just judgment to their own wickedness and obduracy" (head 1, art. 6).

Limited Atonement

Calvin did not unambiguously subscribe to a limited or definite atonement. David Allen's treatment of Calvin as believing that Christ died for all is more convincing than the views of those who agree with Roger Nicole that Calvin argued that Christ died only for the elect.¹³ However, notwithstanding

13. See David L. Allen, *The Extent of the Atonement: A Historical and Critical Review* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), 48–96; R. Nicole, "John Calvin's View of the Extent of the Atonement," *Westminster Theological Journal* 47 (1985): 197–225.

Calvin's views, the Synod of Dort certainly seems to have articulated limited atonement, and I think this is the most consistent Calvinist posture.

Still, there are differences of opinion on whether the Canons of Dort affirm limited atonement. The Canons state that the death of Christ provides redemption for "all those, and those only, who were from eternity chosen to salvation and given to Him by the Father" (head 2, art. 8). Furthermore, in its "rejections" under the second head of Doctrine, the Synod rejected as error the view that "God the Father has ordained His Son to the death of the cross without a certain and definite decree to save any, so that the necessity, profitableness, and worth of what Christ merited by His death might have existed, and might remain in all its parts complete, perfect, and intact, even if the merited redemption had never in fact been applied to any person" (head 2, rej. 1). These statements seem to affirm limited atonement. Yet even these sections, which are troubling to Arminians, have been interpreted by hypothetical universalist Calvinists such as John Davenant and Richard Baxter and their modern followers as allowing for unlimited atonement, strictly speaking (that the atonement is sufficient for the world but efficient only for the elect).¹⁴

Many Calvinists prefer to speak of definite atonement or particular redemption because, more than "limited atonement," these phrases highlight that the atonement is purchasing redemption expressly and only for the elect.¹⁵ This involves reinterpreting the universal atonement passages that the consensus of the church catholic has interpreted universally. The Calvinist has to say that "all" or "the world" means "all kinds of people." For most Christians, even many strong Calvinists, this stretches the bounds of credulity.¹⁶ Increasingly, limited atonement does not seem to be a viable option, even for those Calvinists who accept unconditional election and irresistible grace. However, Arminians believe that limited atonement is the only

14. See Lee Gatiss, "The Synod of Dort and Definite Atonement," in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her: Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspective*, eds. David Gibson and Jonathan Gibson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 162–63. Cf. Allen, *The Extent of the Atonement*, 177–84, 200–4; Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition*, 70–106; Michael J. Lynch, *John Davenant's Hypothetical Universalism: A Defense of Catholic and Reformed Orthodoxy*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

15. See, e.g., R. C. Sproul, "Tulip and Reformed Theology: Limited Atonement," <https://www.ligonier.org/blog/tulip-and-reformed-theology-limited-atonement>).

16. This is indicated by the confessional standards of most of the world's Christian denominations, such as Lutheran, Wesleyan, Arminian, Catholic, Orthodox, Anabaptist, and Stone-Campbell Restorationist. Most Presbyterian and Reformed denominations explicitly affirm limited atonement and irresistible grace, while the Anglican Communion and most Baptist denominations have advocates of both limited and unlimited atonement and both *gratia resistibilis* and *gratia irresistibilis* within their membership. See Roger E. Olson, Frank S. Mead, et al., *Handbook of Denominations in the United States*, 14th ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2018).

consistent position to take on the extent of the atonement if one believes in unconditional election and irresistible grace as Calvinists do.

Irresistible Grace

Calvin certainly taught the doctrine of *gratia irresistibilis* (irresistible grace) or effectual calling.¹⁷ Arminians believe that Calvin viewed divine grace in somewhat wooden terms, obscuring the biblical portrait of grace as a back-and-forth, relational dynamic between the divine person and the human persons he has created in his image as thinking, feeling, acting beings. For Calvin, the equation was clear-cut: Human beings are evil. Good cannot come from evil. So God, by simple fiat, has to change people's minds, hearts, and wills from evil to good. This, in short, was how Calvin portrayed irresistible grace. When human beings, "who are by nature inclined to evil" start to "will good," they do so "out of mere grace," because "nothing good can arise out of our will until it has been reformed" (2.3.8). Scripture does not teach "that the grace of a good will is bestowed upon us if we accept it and that He wills to work in us. This means nothing else than that the Lord by his Spirit directs, bends, and governs, our heart and reigns in it as in his own possession." Only those "on whom heavenly grace has breathed" seek after God. But this grace is only "the privilege of the elect, who through the Spirit's regeneration "are moved and governed by his leading" (2.3.10).

The Westminster Confession refers to this act as "effectual calling." Yet, while the language of "calling" bespeaks a wooing or persuading process, the Confession reiterates Calvin's cause-and-effect approach to grace. It says that God is pleased "in His appointed time, effectually to call, by His Word and Spirit, out of that state of sin and death . . . *determining them to that which is good*, and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ: yet so, as they come most freely, being made willing by His grace" (10.1, italics added). This same tension between biblical motifs such as "drawing" and "calling" and more wooden, mechanical language such as "*powerfully determining* their wills" is present in the Westminster Larger Catechism (Q. 67, italics added).

Perseverance of the Saints

Calvin believed that those whom God unconditionally chooses and regenerates, and who therefore are determined to have faith, will continue in that regenerative grace and saving faith to the end of life. For Calvin, perseverance is

17. Some scholars discourage the use of "irresistible grace," perhaps because of its tie to popular polemics and the "TULIP" acronym. The fact is, however, that if one asks any Calvinist, "Do you believe one can resist divine prevenient grace?" he or she will always reply, "No." Many Reformed scholars acknowledge this. See, e.g., J. V. Fesko, "Arminius on *Facientibus Quod in Se Est*," in *Church and School in Early Modern Protestantism: Studies in Honor of Richard A. Muller on the Maturation of a Theological Tradition*, eds. Jordan J. Ballor, David S. Sytsma, and Jason Zuidema (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 353.

based on regeneration, which is based on election. Commenting on Matthew 15:13, where Jesus said that “every tree that my Father has not planted will be uprooted,” Calvin said that “he conversely implies that those rooted in God can never be pulled up from salvation” (3.24.6). In his commentary on 1 John, Calvin stated that John “plainly declares that the Spirit continues his grace in us to the last, so that inflexible perseverance is added to newness of life. . . . the seed, communicated when God regenerates his elect, as it is incorruptible, retains its virtue perpetually.”¹⁸

In discussing perseverance in the *Institutes*, Calvin reminds readers that perseverance, like election, is based solely on what God wants to happen to individuals and thus determines will happen to them. Sometimes Calvin almost sounds like an Arminian who believes people can fall from saving grace, but that the fall is caused by God, so that “only those whom it pleases the Lord to touch with his healing hand will get well. The others, whom he, in his righteous judgment, passes over, waste away in their own rottenness until they are consumed.” This is the only reason why “some persevere to the end, while others fall at the beginning of their course. For perseverance itself is indeed also a gift from God, which he does not bestow on all indiscriminately, but imparts to whom he pleases” (2.5.3).

This perspective is more nuanced than the portrait most people have of Calvinist perseverance. It appears almost as though Calvin is saying that God causes certain regenerate people to fall away and others to persevere. Yet for Calvin, those who fall from grace have a temporary faith which is only a seeming faith. They were not truly regenerated by the Holy Spirit. As John Jefferson Davis remarks, for Calvin, the reprobate “may experience feelings of remorse for sin, make a public profession of faith, and yet not be truly regenerate.” However, “such temporary faith is not to be confused with the genuine saving faith that endures to eternal life.”¹⁹

While Calvin technically affirmed “once-saved, always-saved,” he, unlike many modern-day advocates of that doctrine, insists on the perseverance of the *saints*. The Christian will necessarily persevere in faith *and holiness* until the end of life. Calvin averred that believers’ hearts are “so effectually governed by the Spirit of God, that through an inflexible disposition they follow his guidance,” and that the Spirit’s power is “so effectual, that it necessarily retains us in continual obedience to righteousness.”²⁰

The Canons of Dort and Westminster Confession also bear out Calvin’s doctrine of necessary perseverance. Once God has “conferred grace” on the

18. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 214. See John Jefferson Davis, “The Perseverance of the Saints: A History of the Doctrine,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34 (1991): 213–28.

19. Davis, “The Perseverance of the Saints,” 218.

20. John Calvin, *1, 2, & 3 John*, Crossway Classic Commentaries (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1998), 59.

saints, the Canons state, he “mercifully confirms and powerfully preserves them therein, even to the end” (head 5, art. 3). The Westminster Confession emphasizes the rootedness of perseverance in election and effectual calling: “They, whom God has accepted in His Beloved, effectually called, and sanctified by His Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end. . . . This perseverance of the saints depends not upon their own free will, but upon the immutability of the decree of election” (3.17).

Summary

Though some people use “Reformed theology” as a synonym for “the five points of Calvinism,” these terms mean different things to different people. While there is debate about how much later Calvinists hardened Calvin’s doctrines into the five points of Calvinism, there is no doubt that they developed his doctrines with greater precision and imposed them with greater rigor on the Reformed Church.

Strong Calvinists hold that human beings are totally depraved and unable to be saved apart from a radical intervention of God’s grace, which Calvinists usually say must be regeneration wrought by irresistible grace, not a resistible drawing grace. God chooses and predestines certain people for himself unconditionally and either directly reprobates the rest of humanity or leaves them in their sins. The most consistent Calvinists argue that Christ died only for the elect. Thus, if Christ purchased redemption only for them, and if this process is unconditional, then it follows that God will irresistibly draw them (or call them effectually) to himself and that this irresistible grace will of certainty continue to the end of life. These are the five points of Calvinism which offer an alternative to the Arminian theology that will be discussed in this book.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Are “Calvinism” and “Reformed theology” identical?
2. What are some of the ways in which later Calvinists differed from Calvin?
3. What is the relationship between God’s direct foreordination of all things and the doctrine of unconditional election?
4. Why do many Calvinists believe that it is inconsistent to be a Calvinist yet believe that Christ died for everyone?
5. Is there a difference between Calvin’s view that the elect will persevere in holiness and the modern view of once-saved, always-saved?

QUESTION 3

How Do Arminianism’s Basic Doctrines Compare with Those of Calvinism?

Arminius was a Reformed theologian. Thus he agreed with the vast majority of what Calvin and his followers had taught. However, Arminius represented a strain of thinking in the Reformed churches prior to the Synod of Dort (1618–1619) that had always been broader than Calvinist predestinarianism (see Questions 7–8). In short, he agreed with Calvin and his followers on *what it means to be* in a state of grace, but he differed from them on *how one comes to be* in a state of grace. Thus, he agreed with Calvin on the depth of human sin and depravity and on *what it means to be* redeemed from sin: what Christ did to atone for sin, how that is applied in justification, and how Christians live it out in sanctification and spirituality. Yet he disagreed with Calvin on the details of *how one comes to be* in a state of grace: the doctrines of particular and resistible grace, and unconditional election.¹

In reality, one could say that full-fledged Arminians are “one-point Calvinists.” Recall the helpful way introduced in the last two chapters to remember the five points of Calvinism articulated at the Synod of Dort: TULIP—“T” for total depravity, “U” for unconditional election, “L” for limited atonement, “I” for irresistible grace, and “P” for perseverance of the saints. Most Calvinist authors have tended to see Arminians as denying all five of these points. However, Arminius strenuously argued for total depravity (see Question 15). Arminians who follow Arminius are fully Augustinian on what it means to be a sinful human being and what it means to be in a state of grace.

1. This broad approach is often referred to as “Reformed Arminianism,” which, because of its agreement with Calvinism on the nature of atonement, justification, and sanctification, differs from classic Wesleyanism. For more detail on this, see the Introduction and the answers to Questions 3, 5, 9–11, 21, and 40.

In agreement with the Augustinian tradition, they affirm the Reformation doctrines of *sola gratia* and *sola fide*, wishing, as Arminius averred, to “maintain the greatest possible distance from Pelagianism.”² Thus the notion that being an Arminian means being a semi-Pelagian, though often repeated in Calvinist circles, is a myth.³

Arminians, however, differ from Calvin on the other four points of Calvinism.⁴ Instead of unconditional election, they believe that God sovereignly decreed that election be conditional; that is, God's election or predestination of a believer to eternal salvation is conditioned on God's foreknowledge of the believer in union with Christ. Instead of limited atonement, Arminians believe that Christ died for everyone and genuinely desires everyone's salvation. Instead of irresistible grace, Arminians believe that God, in his own mysterious manner and time, influences everyone with his enabling, calling, and drawing grace, without taking away their ability to resist it. Instead of the certain perseverance of the saints, Arminians believe that, just as divine grace is resistible prior to conversion, it continues to be resistible after conversion, thus making turning away from Christ a possibility.

This chapter and the next one will engage in a simple comparison and contrast of Calvinism and Arminianism. The next chapter will consider the differences between the two systems, while this one will discuss the things they have in common.

Total Depravity and Inability

Calvinism holds that humanity is radically depraved and thus has no natural ability to seek after God. This is why Calvinists say they believe that irresistible grace is necessary: God must, in their view, irresistibly draw to himself those he has unconditionally chosen and regenerate them. Then they will irresistibly be granted faith. Arminians also believe that humanity by nature is totally depraved and hence spiritually unable to desire the things of God without a supernatural, gracious intervention of the Holy Spirit. Thus, the difference between Arminians and Calvinists is not what they believe about humanity's total depravity and spiritual inability. Rather, it is about whom

2. Jacobus Arminius, “Apology against Thirty-One Defamatory Articles,” in *The Works of James Arminius*, 3 vols., trans. James Nichols and William Nichols (Nashville: Randall House, 2007), 1:764.

3. That Arminians are not semi-Pelagians is affirmed not only by Arminians such as Roger E. Olson, but also by many Calvinists, e.g., Robert A. Peterson and Michael D. Williams. See Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 18, 30–31; Peterson and Williams, *Why I Am Not an Arminian* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), 39.

4. Some advocates of eternal security who agree with Arminians on the other points of Calvinism have come to identify themselves as Arminians.

God graciously draws and influences and enables with his grace and whether they are able to resist that gracious drawing.

Still, Calvinists have for centuries characterized Arminius and his followers as semi-Pelagians who deny that humanity is totally depraved and thus wholly unable to be saved naturally without the intervention of the supernatural grace of the Holy Spirit. J. I. Packer is an example of this mischaracterization.⁵ Quoting John Owen, he states that the earliest Remonstrants were “Belgic semi-Pelagians” who disagreed with the Calvinistic doctrine of human inability in salvation.⁶

This is a gross misrepresentation.⁷ The earliest Remonstrants, following Arminius, said plainly that “man does not possess saving grace of himself, nor of the energy of his free will, inasmuch as in his state of apostasy and sin he can of and by himself neither think, will, nor do any thing that is truly good.” Thus, without divine grace, humanity is characterized by utter depravity and inability in spiritual things. They went on to say that the “grace of God is the beginning, continuance, and accomplishment of all good, even to the 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.”⁸ In this sentiment, these earliest Remonstrants followed Arminius.

Wesleyanism also affirms this approach to depravity and inability. Richard Watson, the most influential early Methodist systematic theologian, stated that “the true Arminian, as fully as the Calvinist, admits the doctrine of the total depravity of human nature in consequence of the fall of our first parents.” Watson said that, in this doctrine, Arminians and Calvinists “so well agree, that it is an entire delusion to represent this doctrine, as it is often done, as exclusively Calvinistic.”⁹ Thus, to argue that Arminianism is semi-Pelagian is to misrepresent Arminians, who clearly avoid the heresy of semi-Pelagianism

5. I hesitate to criticize Dr. Packer who, despite our differences on Arminianism, Calvinism, and other issues, had a tremendous impact on me when I took one of his courses—and took up too many of his office hours with questions and discussion!—at Regent College one summer nearly thirty years ago.

6. See Packer’s otherwise superb book, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 127.

7. An exception to the rule of Calvinists characterizing Arminians as semi-Pelagians is Peterson and Williams. They say that Arminians are “Semi-Augustinians” (40). I would say that, in the doctrines of the nature of sin and salvation, Reformed Arminians are fully Augustinian but that they are semi-Augustinian regarding questions of determinism, unconditional predestination, and irresistible grace. However, we must be careful with the term “semi-Augustinian” because of its synergistic undertones.

8. Five Articles of Remonstrance, in Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1877), 1:518.

9. Richard Watson, *Theological Institutes* (London: John Mason, 1829), 2:215. Not all those who call themselves Arminians affirm total depravity. For more information, see Question 15.

condemned at the Second Council of Orange (A.D. 529). On the doctrine of depravity and inability, most Arminians fall squarely in the Augustinian camp. Semi-Pelagianism is inconsistent with traditional Arminian theology of all varieties.¹⁰

The Nature of Atonement and Justification

Arminius and the Arminians who follow him have held strongly to a doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ in justification. While atonement theories seem arcane to many people, it is at this point that one finds the most difference between Reformed theology and that of many Arminians. Some Arminians reject a penal satisfaction view of atonement, whereby Christ satisfies the justice of God by fulfilling the law in our stead and paying sin's penalty in our place. Their view issues forth in a more moralistic account of justification in which Christ's atoning work is not imputed to the believer; rather, the impartation of righteousness is the dominant theme. This doctrine of justification, unhinged from a thoroughgoing penal satisfaction understanding of atonement, results in legalistic and moralistic construals of sanctification, sin in the life of the believer, assurance, and perseverance.¹¹

This is one reason Reformed Arminians place so much emphasis on a penal satisfaction approach to atonement. It brings the biblical themes of the Reformers back into the center of one's understanding of the priestly office of Christ: that he pays the penalty for sin and fulfills the law on one's behalf, and that perfect lawkeeping and penalty-payment is imputed to the believer through faith in him. That, and not believers' own righteousness, is what from start to finish makes them just and holy before God. Thus they can sing with the hymn writer, "Dressed in his righteousness alone/Faultless to stand before the throne."¹² There is no need for Arminians to jettison these beautiful biblical doctrines, throwing out the Reformed baby with the Calvinist bathwater.

Thomas Oden provides an example of a Wesleyan Methodist who retains the motifs of penal substitutionary and propitiatory atonement and the full imputation of the righteousness of Christ to the believing sinner. Oden argues

10. However, some who have *claimed* the Arminian label have said things that sound semi-Pelagian.

11. For more on the term "penal satisfaction," see footnote 25 in Question 10.

12. Edward Mote, "My Hope is Built on Nothing Less," *Rejoice: The Free Will Baptist Hymn Book* (Nashville: Executive Office, National Association of Free Will Baptists, 1988), no. 419. On the inextricable connection between penal substitutionary atonement and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ, see Forlines, *Classical Arminianism: A Theology of Salvation* (Nashville: Randall House, 2011), 211–21, and Stephen J. Wellum's important essay "Behold, the Lamb of God: Theology Proper and the Inseparability of Penal Substitutionary Atonement from Forensic Justification and Imputation, in *The Doctrine on Which the Church Stands or Falls: Justification in Biblical, Theological, Historical, and Pastoral Perspective*, ed. Matthew Barrett (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 351–86.

for “penal substitution as sufficient vicarious satisfaction” and states, “The benefits of Christ’s obedience (active and passive) are accounted or reckoned to the believer.”¹³

Sanctification

This Reformed approach to atonement and justification coheres with a Reformed approach to sanctification. Just because one is an Arminian on how people come to be in a state of grace, he or she does not have to disagree with the rich Reformed understanding of sanctification. The traditional doctrine of sanctification in Calvin and the larger Reformed tradition maintains a beautiful balance between antinomianism and legalism. It confesses a *sola gratia, sola fide* approach to sin in the believer’s life that does not cause believers to despair of their justification in the ebb and flow of their growth in holiness, thus conflating justification and sanctification as many Arminian construals do.

F. Leroy Forlines’s chapter on “Sanctification” in his *Classical Arminianism* is the best account of how one can achieve a biblical balance, benefitting from the Reformed doctrine of progressive sanctification propounded by Calvin as well as authors like John Owen and Sinclair Ferguson, yet still being Arminian.¹⁴ This doctrine of sanctification also results in a more ordinary-means-of-grace approach to spirituality similar to that found in Puritan piety, as opposed to the mystical, crisis experience-oriented, higher life, and second-work-of-grace emphases of some Arminians.

Summary

Arminius, and many Arminians who followed him, agreed with Calvin and Calvinism on the basic teachings of the Reformed tradition. This included the theology of *what it means to be* in a state of grace. Yet, like others in the Reformed Church prior to the Synod of Dort who affirmed the classic Reformed confessional standards, the Belgic Confession of Faith and the Heidelberg Catechism, these Arminians have differed from Calvin and Calvinism on *how one comes to be* in a state of grace. Thus they have diverged from Calvinism on the last four points of the “TULIP,” which the next chapter will consider.

13. Thomas C. Oden, *Classic Christianity: A Systematic Theology* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 409–10, 422.

14. F. Leroy Forlines, *Classical Arminianism: A Theology of Salvation* (Nashville: Randall House, 1999), 277–306. Cf. Sinclair Ferguson, *The Whole Christ: Legalism, Antinomianism, and Gospel Assurance—Why the Marrow Controversy Still Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016); John Owen, *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers*, reprinted unabridged with some of Owen’s other works in John Owen, *Overcoming Sin and Temptation*, eds. Kelly M. Kopic and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 41–140.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What is semi-Pelagianism and why are Arminians opposed to it?
2. What is meant by the terms “total depravity” and “inability”?
3. What did Arminius teach regarding penal substitutionary atonement?
4. What did Arminius teach regarding justification and the imputation of Christ's righteousness?
5. Can one be both Arminian and Reformed on sanctification and spirituality?