

Balance Arminianism Calvinism?

by Colin Anderson

The sermon explores the biblical balance between Arminianism and Calvinism, emphasizing the importance of understanding the scriptures in resolving the apparent contradictions between the two systems.

Duration: 43:21

Scripture: John 6:37, Romans 9:22

Topics: "Calvinism"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker begins by using a metaphor of a mountain range to illustrate the journey of life and the challenges we face in understanding divine election and predestination. He acknowledges that there are aspects of these concepts that may be beyond our intellectual grasp, but emphasizes the importance of seeking and understanding what the Word of God teaches on the subject. The speaker then shares a personal anecdote about running with his son and feeling a sense of urgency to convey a message, similar to his urgency in discussing the biblical balance between minimalism and maximalism. He concludes by urging the audience to turn to the Word of God and reads a portion from Psalm 139 as a theme for the sermon.

Transcript

And our family was quite young. In fact, we only had half our family, two sons. Our third son was on the way at the time, and my wife was first sick at that time, carrying our third son.

And at the same time, our second son was very, had a sort of hypo-tense condition, and I was speaking with a mare for my first time. So, my evenings and nights were spent trying to keep my second son settled down in bed, and at the same time being fresh and alert for the students in the morning. And we were showing at the missionary guest home on Laramie at that time.

Some of you may remember, he used to be there. And I remember that I often had to get up in the night, because my second son was crying, upset, pains in his stomach, and so on. Give him a little medicine, and then I'd run, turn him over, and rub him on the back, and I would sing a chorus.

And I just got into the habit of singing for him each night, the same chorus. Jesus is the one, he's the only one. And I would sing this away, and he would moan, call birds, until he got so tired of hearing it he couldn't sleep.

Then I'd go to sleep, and that went on night after night after night, and that seemed to his nervous condition. I remember one day we had to go and visit some friends. It was a beautiful sunny day when we left, and we got onto the loop, and away we went.

And when we came back, we were just lightly clad, the children, and my wife, and myself, and it was snowing. It had turned very cold all of a sudden. And so when we got off the train at the loop, I grabbed hold of my second son.

My wife grabbed hold of the older boy, Peter, and she ran with him, because she didn't want him to catch a cold, you know. We had to run from the station along to Laramie, and then down. We were cold, and they were cold, and I was grabbing Stephen, and pulling him along the road, and he didn't know why I was acting like this.

I was like acting like a madman, he thought, I guess. And he wondered what had happened to his dad, and as we were running along the road, he said breathlessly, dad, dad, dad, thanks, Jesus is the one. Well, as I have to talk to you about the biblical balance between Arminianism and Calvinism, I feel I'm saying, will somebody please say, Jesus is the one.

Seriously, let's turn to the word of God, shall we? And we'll just read, as a sort of theme before we start. From Psalm 139, I'm not going to give any exposition of these verses, I just want to just read this part of the word of God, and I can make reference to a number of scriptures. And I would suggest to you, if you're interested in this topic at all, and want to get any value out of what I have to say, you'll probably have to use pencil and paper to make a few notes after your own sanction, according to your own style.

Psalm 139, I shall not read all the psalms, but let's pause at the wonder of it, as we've listened to this testimony tonight from our brother Ray, which has really touched our hearts. And it applies to each one of us who knows the Lord Jesus, our Savior. O Lord, thou hast searched me and known me.

Thou knowest my down-sitting and mine up-rising. Thou understandest my thoughts afar off. Thou compassed my path and my lying down, and art acquainted with all my ways.

For there is not a word in my tongue but, lo, O Lord, thou knowest it altogether. Thou hast beset me behind and before, and laid thine hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me.

It is hard. I cannot attain unto it. So is God.

Our Father, as we read these words, we are amazed at the grace of God in our lives, and what you have done for us through the Lord Jesus. And we remember that this is not only peace and joy for this life, but an eternity with our Lord Jesus Christ. And as we think of the wonder of that, we say this is hard.

I cannot attain unto it. And we give thanks in your presence tonight. And as we talk together about your words, we pray for grace to be discerning, to prove all things, to hold fast that which is good.

Bless us now, we pray, in our Saviour's name. Amen. First, I want to say a few words of introduction to clear the ground, so to speak, and then I want to look at the problem of the difference between Arminianism and Calvinism in four different ways.

After my introduction, I want to deal with the problem very deeply, historically, and then contemporarily, and then emotionally, and finally what I want to get to is how to deal with it biblically. Now, by way of

introduction, let's just imagine that you are traveling across a reasonably level terrain on the journey of life, and as you progress towards your goal, you are confronted with a huge mountain range. The best trail takes you right over the peak, and you're told that there's a tremendous view from that elevation.

But the problem is, you're not sure from your point where you are now, you're not sure which is the real peak in the range, and then again you think as you approach nearer to the mountains, there must be some hazards to avoid. Now, in our climb of the cruise of divine election and predestination, we may get to the point where, for the time, we can go no further. We must catch our breath and view the sceneries.

There are things in the scriptures that are beyond the grasp of mere intellect. Remember, the scripture says all the depths of the riches, both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God, how untouchable are his judgments and his ways past finding out. But yet, we are responsible to discover what the word of God does say.

That is, if God has spoken on these lofty subjects and given us guidance, then we have to be responsive to what the scripture does teach, and not simply bury the subject. The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us. So, we want to be concerned, finally, in our chat with you tonight, with the things that are revealed.

If salvation can be described, as it has been by someone poetically, as darkness to my intellect but sunshine in my heart, so the truths we shall consider may sometimes defy our complete understanding, and yet they may produce a spirit of worship. I think of how the poet has said, when all thy mercies, O my God, my rising soul surveyed, transported with the view I'm lost in wonder, love, and praise. I'm not sure where I stand in relation to the mountain peaks.

How far I have to go before I reach the top of our subject, and I'm able to look down with authority on what is beneath, and say that I have arrived. But, I think it's important to realize that I've come a certain way up the mountain, in my understanding, and I would like to call back to those who are starting the climb to warn them of some hazards that they may run into in the process of climbing. Now, if you want to do a little independent study on your own, on the subjects of Calvinism and Arminianism, I would like to suggest two books that have been helped to me, not because I agree with them in everything that they say, but books that have stimulated me to come to perhaps a little new understanding, and perhaps to confirm me in some ideas which were even in opposition to what these books presented.

The first one is God's Strategy in Human History, an interesting book written by two authors, Forster and Marston. It's published by Kindale, B-Y-N-D-A-O-E, and it's around six or seven dollars, I imagine, here in the United States. Then there's another book, not perhaps quite the same at all, but nevertheless having some value, Grace Unlimited, by Charles H. Pinnock, and published by Bethany Fellowship in Minneapolis, and I think you'll get it for around five or six dollars.

Now, when I first began to take these proofs, or to use the analogy that I've been using, the illustration that I've been giving, as I began to climb the peak of the young man, I became fascinated with certain doctrines, and certain ideas, and when I first began to attempt an ascent of our mountain, I was attracted to a path lined with tulips. Could we have this on please? How do we go here? Good. Now, you may wonder why I mentioned tulips, but the word tulip is an acronym for the five points of Calvinism.

I didn't realize at first just what these points were. As a matter of fact, it was many years later that I learned that there was such a thing as a tulip, and that this means was used to express the five points of

Calvinism, which are total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and the perseverance of the saints. Now, I don't know where you stand in relation to those five points of Calvinism.

I'm not too sure that I'm exactly interested in that, whether where you stand in relation to those things. I am interested in where you stand in relation to what the scripture has to say about election and predestination, but it is if we're doing a study of this subject, and we're reading what writers say, sooner or later we're going to run into this acronym tulip, and all that it suggests. Now, where do you stand in relation to Calvinism and Arminianism? As you see here, just not on the screen, thank you.

Where do you stand in relation to Calvinism and Arminianism? Well, I think I'm somewhere here, but I'm not sure. This is where the needle may change, as far as I'm concerned. If I was to talk to you about some subjects that are found in the scriptures, maybe the needle would swing over here, and when we're dealing with whether a person is a Calvinist or an Arminian, it's very hard to just discover what is meant by those terms.

Let me go on a little bit more with what I've got down here to share with you. After I had begun to accept this idea of tulip, without knowing what it was, I came to accept some of the things that authors who accepted that view presented, I began to see that I had taken an extreme line. One that needed to be modified, because there were certain that seemed to contradict what I found under this tulip teaching.

For example, John 3.16 is rather difficult to fit in there for me, that God so loved the world. I had to reconcile this with the fact that under the tulip idea, under extreme Calvinism, you get the view that God really, finally, only loves a certain class of persons, a certain group of people, and he really doesn't love all the world. That's in the scripture, but that's not really what God does, according to this thinking.

And then I read passages in First Timothy chapter two, verses four through six, and I understood that God will have all men to be saved, and I had to kind of twist that a little bit, and say to myself, well now if I accept the tulip idea, God really doesn't will that all men shall be saved. The only will is that some men should be saved, and I began to see that I was having difficulty with the position that I had espoused. And let me just ask for a moment, what is Calvinism? And what is Arminianism? And why do these two views exist? And this will bring us to the problem historically.

Calvin and Arminius both belong to the 1500s, but the problem of God's sovereignty, and the problem of reconciling that with human freedom, baffled Plato 400 years before the Christian era. Now, the way he resolved that was to come up with a creator limited by the obstinate and stubborn creation that he had made. That was hardly an answer that would be acceptable to us.

Muslim theologians wrestle with this problem, and they arrive at a fatalistic position. It's natural that thinking Christians should wrestle with this problem also. Augustine was the patriarch of what we now know as Calvinism, for what we call Calvinism really didn't begin with Calvin.

It is more hoary and more ancient than that. Calvin simply defined it more clearly, and made it more popular in his time, but it really springs from Augustine at least. And then, as far as Arminianism is concerned, the patriarch of Arminianism is not really Arminius, but Erasmus.

Now, to put the record straight, we should understand what Arminius believed. You know, it's interesting when you hear what people are supposed to believe if they're Calvinist, and what they're supposed to believe if they are Arminian, and when you get talking to them you find that they believe something quite

different. For example, is this a Calvinistic statement, or is this an Arminian statement? Fallen man is in a condition in which his will is not only wounded, maimed, infirm, bent, and weakened, but it is also imprisoned, destroyed, and lost.

Its powers are not only debilitated and useless unless they be assisted by grace, but it has no powers whatever except such as are excited by divine grace. It follows that our will is not free to do good unless it is made free by the sun through the spirit. Now, that sounds so Calvinistic to me, but it was actually Arminius who said those words.

Now, let's come down to the contemporary problem. Both Calvin and Arminius have been so liberally interpreted by their followers that it's about as definitive to say that a man is an Arminian, or a man is a Calvinist, as it is to say a man is a Protestant. What brand? A Protestant can mean anything.

Probably all of us tend to a Calvinistic view in some things, and an Arminian view in others. Today, and this is perhaps an oversimplification, but for the purpose of our little study tonight, today it would seem that a man is a Calvinist if he emphasizes the role of God in salvation, and an Arminian if he emphasizes the role of man in salvation. Now, J. Kenneth Ryder of the Nazarene Theological Seminary says, it may be that in the future there will be still more a conversion of the Arminian and Calvinistic theologies as the vain philosophies of men wane in their influence, and as evangelicals are taught more and more by holy scripture.

That, to my mind, is a very optimistic view. It would seem that the doctrine of human free will, the teaching that man is responsible for his actions, that he can either accept or reject what is presented to him, and what grace makes available to him, that he can respond to that positively or negatively, that he can actually say yes or no to God, that concept is pastured, preached, perhaps to extremes today, are practiced in the sense that in some evangelical circles, and even in some assemblies, there is such a great emphasis placed upon the necessity for a person to make a response to God that God and will are virtually left out of the picture altogether. I am ashamed, brethren, at some of the things that pass for evangelism in the assemblies today.

I've been asked on two or three occasions to counsel in evangelistic meetings. Now, thank God this is not true of all evangelists accepted among the assemblies, but it is true of one or two that I know of, and they should be nameless out of Christian love. But, I have been in those meetings seeking to listen very carefully to the message, so that when someone came up to inquire, I could sort of grab hold of the message and know what they've been listening to, so that I would have a handle by which to direct them to real decision or real understanding of the work in Christ.

And, I've been horrified with the lack of content in the message that is presented. I could give you the gist of one message I heard, and it is characteristic of this one man's ministry, I'm sorry to say. He preached quite well.

He began by saying, today we shall study the story of Zathias. That is point one. And, he told a few illustrations about his preaching, and his activities, and so on.

Then, he moved on and said, Zathias is not the priest. And, he said, so are some of you people who are not the priest. Now, Zathias needed to come down, and that's what you need to do, come down.

And, then he says, you know, you didn't come here with the idea to be saved, but that's what you're going to do tonight. You're going to make a decision for Jesus Christ. Now, how many more will come before us, before our closing prayer? There was practically no content, hardly any reference to the personal work of the Lord Jesus throughout the whole message.

Now, I don't say that to be unkind. God did deliver us from this kind of thing. All that man was doing, as it seemed to me, and God shall be his judge, was simply to get resolved.

And, people came forward because he was, he was an orator. He could tell stories of the lifetime, make you cry, make you laugh, make you come forward. If you want to read more about that, you need John White's Sacred Cow, published by the University Press.

It's a slaughter. Anyway, I found that those people who came forward never wanted to have anything more to do with the chapel again. They were thoroughly wrong.

They felt that they had been roped in and manipulated, and I felt ashamed, though I didn't like to tell them so. One fellow who professed to be saved in that campaign, we had to work with him for years, going back over the scriptures, back and forth, before we came to a clear understanding of what salvation was all about. Now, that kind of truth does not give credit to God's activity in saving men.

Now, in reaction to this type of evangelism, where the pressure is put upon people to make a decision, I said, that's all there is to salvation. You just have to do something to say yes to God. There's a reaction to that, and it's built up in certain seminaries and colleges, and it seems to me they're retreating into an ultra-Calvinistic pace in order to preserve and protect God's autonomy.

So, this brings us to the problem emotionally. Most, if not all, of the edicts and creeds of the church have been hammered out in the heat of controversy. Through the centuries, church councils have been characterized by disharmony and acrimony.

Frequently, political considerations entered into the statement of faith. Personality conflicts often influence church leaders to go beyond sober consideration of all that the scripture has to say on a subject. The great thing in those days, it seems, was to store points over your adversary, and to prove that he was an uncircumcised philistine.

We should remember that the passing of time has not changed human nature. Each of us would be wise to recognize, as Elijah did, that I'm no better than my father is. There's a tendency, when we get into debate over the subject, over a subject like this, to just simply want to store points and prove the opponent wrong.

Let's then try to dispense with these things, after such an introduction, and look for a few moments at the problem biblically, and not be concerned. This is important, the attitude with which we come to our subject. Let us not be concerned whether we're going to be dubbed as an Arminian or a Calvinist by our brethren.

That is irrelevant. What other people think of you, when you finish, is really not important. We want to know what the scriptures have to teach.

Now, in the scriptures we have antinomies. A theological antimony is an incomprehensible, apparent incompatibility between two lines of truth. Each of those lines of truth having undeniable scripture support.

That's our definition of an antimony. Two lines of truth, both of them taught in scripture, but apparently we cannot reconcile them. Now that's a little different than a mere paradox.

Sometimes we're told that Calvinism and Arminianism, or considering the fact of God's sovereignty in salvation, and man's free will in salvation, that this is a paradox. But a paradox, actually, is something that is rather cryptic, and yet it can be solved if we only know how. For example, Paul says things that are apparently paradoxical when he says, as deceivers, and yet true.

That's a paradox. As unknown, and yet well known. As trials, but behold we live.

Those are paradoxes, but you can reconcile them. A spiritual mind can come to those passages, read those things, say I know what Paul means. They make sense when you have your eyes opened by the spirit of God to understand what is being taught there.

So that's a paradox. But an antimony is something deeper than that. It's something that is incomprehensible, and apparently incompatible with the other line of truth.

For example, let's take an example. Prayer to the God who knows the end from the beginning, and orders everything after the counsel of his own will. Prayer to such a God represents an antimony.

Why would you pray to God who already orders everything after the counsel of his own will? The person of our Lord Jesus is improvable, in whom we behold two uniquely contrasting natures, yet his person is indivisible. It's up to the apostle Paul, for example, to say Jesus should exist as God. He did that as man.

He is divided, yet he exists as man. They existed in that one person of our Lord Jesus Christ. But his being God, and being man, presents an antimony.

It's something that we cannot really reconcile in our minds. How can he be both at the same time? The word of God itself, the very scriptures that we read, that we love, presents an antimony when we realize that the authors of scripture express themselves in this. For example, when we read the Gospel of Luke, we can detect that we're reading what Luke, the beloved physician, wrote.

And after you have grown a little bit in the Lord, you've read his scriptures a little bit, you come to recognize, even if you can't tell, the chapter and verse. Or it must have been Luke that said that, because that's the way he writes. Or it must have been Matthew, or that's the quotation from Paul, because that's the way Paul writes.

That's the way he expresses himself. And then on the other hand, whilst you can recognize that the personality of the writer comes through in the writing, yet the scripture teaches that all scripture is given by inspiration of God. And we believe that the very words of scripture are given to us from the Lord.

Now that presents an antimony. How do we deal with that? Here are three things that I have presented to you that are irreconcilable from our present vantage point. We cannot bring those things together.

We can accept them, and we believe them, I trust, but they still present a problem to your intellect. Let's look at some of the difficulties that we get into when we try to reconcile the sovereignty of God with human free will. Breeding into scripture because of one's bias is a real danger.

That is, you take a scripture and your mind is already made up as an Calvinist, or as an Arminian, or whatever view in between, whatever you happen to stand, and you lead into that scripture what isn't there.

Sometimes you can even read words that aren't there. I was listening to a radio preach for just a few months, I think after I had been asked to come and present this paper, and I was listening very interestedly because he was obviously a very strong Calvinist, so I was listening to him preaching.

He said, that God might make known, quoting from scripture, the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy in which he had aforeprepared unto glory. That was great. Then he went on to refer to the previous verse, and he said this, or at least he said this, what is God willing to show his wrath and to make his power known, endured with much strong suffering the vessels of wrath he fitted to destruction.

There's no who there, I heard somebody object. You're right brother, I ran to my bible, I thought my word, now I never saw that before. I'll have to see what I'll have to do with that scripture, and then I looked at my bible, I saw there was no he there.

Now if there was a he in his mind, I don't think he intended to deceive, but he wrote what was in his own mind into the scripture. At least that's the best complexion I can give to it. I hope he wasn't trying to deceive us by inserting the he into that verse.

The speaker could support an ultra-Calvinistic view of divine sovereignty, namely that God not only elects the redeemed to eternal glory, but he also elects the lost for eternal damnation. Now that is not taught in the word of God, thank you both. Don't brand him as an Arminian because he said amen.

Whitewashing things is another danger that go against our own views. Now because foreknowledge presents the difficulty for the Arminians, that is the one who believes that man is responsible to make his own decisions and he's accountable for those decisions. Because foreknowledge presents the difficulty to a man who holds that view, it may be tempting to come up with a statement like this.

God foreknew who would be tried for Christ, and so he chose this. Now that, to my mind, makes divine election to do nothing. At least that's the way I see it.

I call that whitewashing, or it's cutting them up instead of untying them. Now sometimes you can get hope as we look at some of these difficult verses which exist on both sides of this controversy. We can gain hope by getting fresh light on a passage.

Let me confess to you very briefly that my position, not my preaching by the grace of God, but my position that I've held namefully, has had to change these years. Now when I say my preaching hasn't changed, I have tried to stick to what the word of God says when I preach, and not go beyond that. But my mind may speculate and wonder about things which I don't preach.

If I preach what I'm speculating about, I'm only going to confuse my audience. But when I have a grasp at the Lord, then I can preach that. And we need to remember that.

And we can gain fresh light on a passage. I've benefited from reading the two books that I've mentioned. I haven't actually finished them all yet, and I have really thanked God for what some of the authors pointed out in those books.

Now, all that the father giveth me shall come to me, and him that cometh to me I will in no wise pass out, is a difficult scripture for an Arminian. Again, lower down in that chapter it says, it is written in the prophets and they shall all be taught of God. Every man therefore that hath heard and hath learned of the father come to me.

Now that seems to support a very strong Calvinistic position in that God himself must draw the person to Christ before he can be saved. But wait a moment. Let's remember when we read those verses, and this may not be a total answer, but think about this.

That our Lord was ministering on earth between the two testaments. Between the old testament and what we now have as the new testament. There were at that time among the Jews those who had been taught of God before they met Christ.

Is that clear? That is the spirit of God, or if you will, the father had been working in their hearts. You remember the Lord Jesus said on one occasion, the father worketh his sheep and I am working. So between the two testaments the Lord was standing at a point where he could look back and see the father working in old testament times in the hearts and lives of men.

Now because these men were already the subject of divine working, they would be drawn to the Lord Jesus. For what the Lord Jesus was teaching was perfect, in perfect harmony with what they had already been taught by the father. They had been drawn, they had been attracted to the things of God, they were believers in that sense.

But when Christ came, all those that were so taught of God would be drawn to him. The truth that God had been teaching you prior to that time would be evident in that you would come to Christ. If God had merely opened your mind to his truth, and you were not merely a hypocrite, such as some of the Pharisees were, not all thank God, but if you were a Pharisee in the bad sense of the word, you would not be drawn to Christ because you had not really been taught of God.

You had been searching the scriptures, for in them you thought that you had eternal life, but you will not come to me that you might have life. So that in the light of that, perhaps the verses in John 6 may be softened a little bit, and may not just be teaching what we think on the side of Calvinism. Let's make a careful note of the context of the verses that seem to support one verse, you or the other.

For example, John 15 verse 16 says, you have not chosen me, but I have chosen you. Now that's a very Calvinistic statement it would seem, but it's followed by the words, and I have ordained you that you should go and bring forth fruit. In other words, the Lord is not there talking about his choice unto eternal life, but he is talking about the election of the disciples that they should go and bring forth fruit.

Not quite the same thing. Again, let's note Romans 9 17 which causes a lot of argumentation. For the scripture says unto Pharaoh, even for this same purpose have I raised thee up, that I might show my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth.

Now is it an ultra-Calvinist or a Calvinist, whichever you want to name such a person? You would take the view that God had caused Pharaoh to come onto the scene of his death, to be born into this world, to grow up into this world, simply to be a display for God's law, God's power in him. But what we have to realize is that God raised up Pharaoh within a lifetime, strong among his people, as a sample of stubbornness and rebellion. It does not say that God forced him to be stubborn or rebellious.

In fact, a close reading of Exodus shows us that Pharaoh first hardened his own heart, and later God caused him to persist in his obstinacy in order that he might show his power in him. This verse then is not saying, for this reason I caused you to be born. God did not cause Pharaoh to be born simply in order to display his law.

We should recognize that election, divine election, is sometimes corporate. That is, it has to deal with people rather than individuals. Let's notice the often quoted Romans 9 13.

Jacob have I loved, but his Pharaoh have I hated. That's spoken of the nation that descended from these two persons, not of the individual. We should also note in passing that it is not speaking of salvation or damnation of those people, but of God's purpose for them in time.

The elder would serve the younger. That did not come about in Pharaoh's lifetime. The elder serving the younger came about in the history of the nations that descended from Jacob and Esau.

So when it says Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated, it has no real reference to the persons of Jacob and Esau, but rather to God's purpose for the nations, and in time only, for those nations that descended from those two men. However, we may be able to answer certain scriptures, and we may be able to accommodate them to our particular understanding, but I suggest one basic problem is always going to remain. No matter how much we may be able to understand and overcome certain passages that frustrate us, we will still have a problem less.

I suggest probably to the end of our days. How do we reconcile? Not verses now, but here's a problem for you that I have been facing in this area that I had never really stopped to consider before. How do we reconcile those passages which teach that God takes the

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