

Q. You sometimes use the words "Arminian" and "Arminianism" in a negative way. What do Arminian and Arminianism mean?

A. The words Arminian and Arminianism come from Jacobus (or James) Arminius (also known as Jacob Harmensen or Hermansz), a Dutch theologian who lived from 1560 to 1609. Arminius studied at the University of Leiden and in Geneva under Theodore Beza (or Bèze), John Calvin's successor.

Arminius was at first an advocate of Calvinism. He returned to Holland, and was ordained in 1588. That same year, he became pastor of the Reformed Church at Amsterdam. In 1591, he was appointed to a commission that drew up a church order giving the church a position subordinate to and dependent upon the state. This position, called Erastianism, was contrary to Calvin's belief that the church should have a measure of independence from the state. This order was unpopular with most ministers, especially as it disagreed with the Belgic Confession (1561) that stated that one of the marks of a true church is that it exercise church discipline in punishing sin. Under the order, the Netherlands government occasionally protected people from church discipline.

Arminius's real break with his Calvinist colleagues was over the beliefs he developed concerning God's sovereignty and sinful man's ability to have a part in his own salvation. For example, Calvinists teach that in Romans 7:14ff, Paul is writing of his struggle with sin as a born-again Christian. That this understanding is correct should be obvious from the fact that throughout this passage, Paul depicts himself as someone who wants to do good and, in verse 22, he says he delights in the law of God after (or according to) the inward man. Someone who is not born again does not truly desire to do good and cannot "delight in the law of God after the inward man." But Arminius said that Paul was writing of himself before his conversion. This would mean that the carnal, unconverted man can delight in the law of God according to the inward man. This leads to the belief that unconverted people have some goodness, are not totally depraved, and can therefore contribute something to their salvation.

In 1593, Arminius said that Romans 9 teaches that God elects people based upon certain conditions. That is, Arminius taught *conditional* election. In reality, Romans 9 clearly depicts God as electing and reprobating people solely on the basis of His sovereignty (unconditional election).

Despite suspicions that were arising about Arminius's teachings, he was appointed to the faculty of the University of Leiden in 1603. But in 1608, a government investigation into these teachings was begun. In that same year, Arminius wrote *Declaration of Sentiments*. In *Declaration of Sentiments*, he argued against the Calvinist teaching concerning predestination. Arminius also defended his own idea that God predestinates people to salvation based on God's foreknowledge of whether the person will exercise faith.

Arminius died in 1609, before the matter was resolved. But Arminius's doctrines (called Arminianism) were clearly the reverse of the Bible's teaching on election. The Arminian position makes human faith the cause of election; it makes man's response to God's grace the decisive factor in salvation; and it makes man himself—not Jesus Christ—the one who ultimately makes his own salvation possible.

Arminius's teachings were not really new. In the fourth century, Pelagius taught something very similar (although Arminius denied the relationship between his teachings and those of Pelagius). According to Pelagius: man's will is totally free; he can choose whatever he wants, good or bad; God offers grace equally to all; men advance in holiness by merit alone; and God predestinates according to His foreseeing whether someone will do good or not. But while Arminius believed in original sin, Pelagius did not. Nevertheless, the modern descendants of Arminius's teachings are sometimes called neo-Pelagians.

After Arminius's death, his followers presented to the government in 1610 a remonstrance (a document formally stating certain grievances) detailing their arguments. From this, Arminius's followers came to be called Remonstrants. In summary, the arguments they presented are: 1) Election is conditioned on foreseen faith. 2) Christ's death is for all, but only those who believe on Him are forgiven. 3) Fallen man is unable to do good or exercise saving faith without first being regenerated. 4) Grace is resistible. 5) Grace is able to preserve one through temptation, but man may still fall from grace and lose his salvation. Notice that point 3, as stated, is not wrong. But it contradicts point 4: If man can resist grace (as stated in point 4), then

the choice to exercise saving faith or not is up to unregenerate man (which is the opposite of point 3).

Further, the Remonstrants questioned original sin, justification by faith, the atonement, and even the deity of Jesus Christ. Conrad Vorstius, the Remonstrant who succeeded Arminius to the chair of theology at Leiden, was suspected of leaning toward Socinianism, a form of Unitarianism (a disbelief in the Trinity), something he eventually admitted in 1622. Another Remonstrant, Arminius's student Hugo Grotius, taught that Christ did not pay the penalty for our sins, but that He suffered for everyone so that all will see the high cost of forgiveness.

In 1618-1619, the Synod of Dort (or Dordrecht) was held to settle the controversy created by the Remonstrants. It drew up the Canons of Dort, a document divided into five heads or chapters, to directly refute the five points of the remonstrance. It is from the Canons of Dort that Calvinists have derived what have come to be known as the five points of Calvinism, or the doctrines of grace.

On the next page is a table comparing the Arminian and Calvinist points:

Calvinist	Arminian
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>T</u>otal Depravity</p> <p>Because of sin, humanity is spiritually dead. Man's will is in bondage to sin. No one can do anything good—including come to Christ for salvation. No one has saving faith unless God graciously gives it to him. Sinful man can contribute nothing to his salvation. Even believing is a gift from God; therefore, no man can boast.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>C</u>ondignity and/or Congruity</p> <p>God looks ahead, sees who will believe, elects those whom He sees will believe, and bestows grace on them. Therefore, man, while he may be sick in sin, is not dead in sin because he can do the good work of believing. In this way, man's election is either condigned (or deserved by justice) or congruent (deserved because God, in His goodness, determined that He should reward belief with election and grace).</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>U</u>nconditional Election</p> <p>God has, before the foundation of the world, elected some to salvation. These are His people whom He has given to Jesus Christ. This election is not based on the works of these people or God's foreknowing that these people would believe. It is based solely upon God's sovereign, electing grace, Jesus Christ's works having completely met the requirements of the law for the elect.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>H</u>uman-driven Election</p> <p>God elects those whom He foresees will believe. Therefore, election is not based on God's sovereignty, but upon man's free will to do the good work of believing. Election is conditional, man must meet that condition; therefore, the good work of believing is something that man contributes to his own salvation and something of which he can boast.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>L</u>imited Atonement</p> <p>Jesus Christ's atoning death is for His people, the elect, only. It is completely efficient (no one whom God intends to save is lost).</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>A</u>ll-encompassing Atonement</p> <p>Jesus Christ suffered for everyone, but only those who believe are saved. His death is not efficient (many for whom he suffered are not saved).</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>I</u>rresistible Grace</p> <p>Those to whom God gives grace (the elect) cannot thwart God's will and resist it. Man is not the final arbiter in accepting or rejecting his salvation.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>F</u>ree to Resist Grace</p> <p>Man's free will is the final arbiter in his salvation. He is free to accept or reject God's "offer."</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>P</u>erseverance of the Saints</p> <p>God makes sure that those to whom He gives grace (the elect) will be saved. Although God's people can and do fall into sin, none do so permanently so as to lose their salvation. God will make them stand.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>F</u>ree to Permanently Fall</p> <p>Even after accepting salvation, man is free to lose it by turning back to a life of sin. God does not make him stand, and he can have no assurance of his salvation.</p>

Unlike Calvinism, Arminianism is inconsistent within itself. It is sometimes vague and contradictory. The Arminian points in the chart above represent the implications of their stated beliefs. The words "condignity" and "congruity" used in the first point are words used by medieval scholastic theologians. While it might be difficult to determine which of these two words best describes Arminian beliefs, the Arminian teaching (that God rewards those whom He has foreseen will believe) can certainly be described by either condignity (if justice demands the reward) or congruity (if the reward is fitting due to God's goodness). Either way, this contradicts the Bible's teaching that man of himself cannot believe because belief is a good work and sinful man can do no good. The Bible also says that all that man is deserving of is punishment, and that belief is God's gracious gift to undeserving men. (For more details, please see our TULIP series of books.)

As can be seen, Arminianism denies God His sovereignty and puts man in control of his own salvation. Thus, as the acronym I created from the first letters in each point on the Arminian side of the chart suggests, Arminianism is CHAFF. I developed this acronym to emphasize that any belief that places man's so-called free will above God's sovereignty is as valueless as chaff. In 1 Corinthians 3:11–15, Paul is teaching that elect persons who teach or believe or do what is not in accord with the foundation of Christ will be saved, but their works will be burned. For some, perhaps their Arminian belief is simply a work of man that will be burned; they will suffer loss, but they will be saved. But other Arminians, the reprobate, glorying in their free will, will no doubt believe it until they are condemned in the judgment.

Until about three hundred years ago, Calvinism was by far the dominant Protestant belief. Arminianism's popularity today can largely be traced to John Wesley (1703–1791), founder of Methodism. Wesley's Arminianism did not stay confined to Methodist societies. It slowly began to spread to other churches. This is likely because its free-willism—giving humans a part in their own salvation—is more appealing to human nature than submitting to and recognizing God's total sovereignty over salvation. Today, Arminianism pervades the teaching of most Protestant and Baptist churches. That is why this website tries to reach both the unchurched and the churched with the glorious Good News that God is saving His people, that He will not fail, and that any attempts by men to work for their salvation are at best no better than filthy rags and excess baggage—or chaff.

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