

What is Biblical Calvinism?

By **Malcolm H. Watts**

At the time of the Reformation, biblical truth was rediscovered. It was not long, however, before error began to challenge Reformed theology. James Arminius (1560-1609), who had studied at Geneva under Theodore Beza, became Professor of Theology at the University of Leyden, and began to disseminate views which were at variance with the teaching of the Reformed Churches and their Confessions. He succeeded in influencing many; and in 1610, one year after his death, his followers met in the city of Gouda, in the West Netherlands, to draw up a document called 'The Remonstrance' (i.e. The Protest). It set forth their views under five points - 'The Five Arminian Articles'.

This was recognized at once to be a serious departure; and in 1618 a Synod was convened in Dordrecht, a city in the south of the Netherlands, not far from Rotterdam. There were 84 delegates at this Synod: 58 from the Netherlands and 26 from other countries, including Great Britain, Germany, and Switzerland. It began on November 13, 1618, and on April 23, 1619, the Synod approved the famous Canons of Dort which restated the five essential points of Calvinism. These are commonly referred to by the mnemonic TULIP: Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace, and Perseverance of the Saints.

1. Total Depravity

ARMINIANISM: Everyone who hears the

gospel receives grace sufficient for regeneration. If, therefore, a person is not regenerated, it is because, by an act of his own free-will, he refuses to co-operate with God.

DORT: 'All men are conceived in sin and are born as children of wrath, incapable of any saving good, inclined to evil, dead in sins, and slaves of sin. Apart from the regenerating grace of the Holy Spirit, moreover, they are neither willing nor able to return to God, to reform their depraved nature, or to prepare themselves for its reformation.'

SCRIPTURE: 'As many as received him, to them gave he the power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God' (Jn 1:13); 'He saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy...So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy' (Rom 9:15,16) 'Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first-fruits of his creatures' (James 1:18; See also: Ephesians 2:1-3; 1 Corinthians 2:14).

2. Unconditional Election

ARMINIANISM: Divine election is prompted by God foreseeing that certain persons will believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

DORT: 'The election has taken place, not on the basis of foreseen faith,...but to faith...Election therefore is the fountain of every saving good, from which flow faith, holiness, and other saving gifts, and finally eternal life itself, as its fruits and effects...The cause of this gracious election is only the good pleasure of God.'

SCRIPTURE: 'As many as were ordained to eternal life believed' (Acts 13:48); 'The children being not yet born, neither having done good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of him that calleth; it was said unto her (Rebecca), the elder shall serve the younger. As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated' (Rom 9:11-13); 'He hath chosen us in him (in Christ) before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will' (Eph 1:4,5; See also: 1 Corinthians 1:26-31; 1 Timothy 1:9).

3. Limited Atonement

ARMINIANISM: Christ died for everyone, making it possible for all to be saved; but his redemption only becomes effective if men believe.

DORT: 'God willed that Christ through the blood of his cross (by which he confirmed the new covenant) should effectually re-

deem out of every people, tribe nation, and tongue all those and only those who were from eternity chosen to salvation, and were given to him by the Father.'

SCRIPTURE: 'I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep' (Jn 10:11); 'Feed the church of God which he hath purchased with his own blood' (Acts 20:28); 'And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy...for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation' (Rev 5:9; See also: Matthew 20:28; Ephesians 5:25-27).

4. Irresistible Grace

ARMINIANISM: Men have the power to resist grace and successfully to resist it.

DORT: 'Regeneration is by no means brought about by outward teaching or preaching, by moral persuasion, or by such a method of working that after God has done his work, it remains in the power of man to be regenerated or not regenerated, converted or not converted. It is, however, clearly a supernatural, most powerful, and at the same time most delightful, marvellous, secret, and inexpressible work, which, according to the Scriptures inspired by the author of regeneration, is not inferior in power to creation or the resurrection of the dead. Hence, all those in whose hearts Gods works in this amazing way are certainly,

unfailingly, and effectually regenerated and do actually believe.'

SCRIPTURE: 'All that the Father giveth me shall come to me' (Jn 6:37) 'Whom he did foreknew (foreloved, as in Jer 1:5; Amos 3:2 etc), he also did predestinate...Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called; and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified' (Rom 8:30); 'God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he love us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ' (Eph 2:4,5; See also: John 6:44,45,65; Titus 3:5).

5. Perseverance of the Saints

ARMINIANISM: It is possible to relapse from a state of grace and actually to become devoid of grace, so that salvation is lost.

DORT: 'Because of (the) remains of indwelling sin, and also because of the temptations of the world and of Satan, those who have been converted would not be able to remain stedfast in that grace if they were left to their own resources. But God is faithful, who mercifully confirms them in the grace once conferred upon them, and powerfully keeps them in that grace to the end'.

SCRIPTURE: 'My sheep hear my voice,

and I know them, and they follow me: and I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish' (Jn 10:27-28); 'Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him. For if when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life' (Rom 5:9,10); 'Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ' (Phil 1:6; See also: Jn 4:14; 1 Thessalonians 5:23,24; 1 Peter 1:5).

Spurgeon declared Calvinism to be 'the revealed truth of God' and 'the religion of God's own church'. In 1860, preaching at Exeter Hall, the Strand, he boldly said,

'This may seem to you to be of little consequence, but it really is a matter of life and death. I would plead with every Christian - think it over, my dear brother. When some of us preach Calvinism, and some Arminianism, we cannot both be right; it is no use trying to think we can be - "Yes", and "No", cannot both be true...Truth does not vacillate like a pendulum which shakes backwards and forwards. It is not like the comet, which is here, there, and everywhere. One must be right; the other wrong'.

The Bible must determine it, and it does: Calvinism is right and Arminianism is wrong - totally wrong. The Lord grant to each of us a true, heart-felt conviction about it and may we ever glory in the truth of God's sovereign and free grace!