

Arminianism vs Calvinism in a Nutshell

John Piper: I might say it like this: you can tell if someone is an Arminian or a Calvinist by how they answer the question “What was the decisive cause of your faith in Christ?” So, you go up to somebody, and you ask, “What was the decisive cause of your faith in Christ? Was it God, or was it yourself?” The Calvinist says, “The decisive cause of my faith was God,” and the Arminian says, “The decisive cause of my faith in Christ was myself.”

Theology

- Calvin’s theological magnum opus: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*
 - Intended to explain biblical doctrine in a systematic way:
 - “Seeing, then, how necessary it was in this manner to aid those who desire to be instructed in the doctrine of salvation, I have endeavoured, according to the ability which God has given me, to employ myself in so doing, and with this view have composed the present book” (preface, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1545 French edition).
 - The final product is a brilliant presentation of biblical Christianity and a recognized classic of world literature.
 - The four books comprising the *Institutes* cover the four main subjects of the Apostles’ Creed: God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, and the Church.
 - Calvin wrote his *Institutes* in Latin and revised the book several times, but he also translated it into French: “First I wrote it in Latin, that it might be serviceable to all studious persons, of what nation soever they might be; afterwards, desiring to communicate any fruit which might be in it to

my French countrymen, I translated it into our own tongue.”

- The work has since been translated into many more languages.

Book First: Of the Knowledge of God the Creator

- The first eighteen chapters of Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* cover how mankind can know God the Father.
 - Although we have within us “eternity in our hearts” (Ecclesiastes 3:11), our judgment is corrupted. And, although we can see aspects of God in the nature and order of creation, it is only the Scriptures that we can fully rely on.
 - “New revelation” is a subversion of piety by fanatics, and the worship of idols is ridiculous, not least because God has no physical form.
 - As for mankind, we were the pinnacle of God’s creation, made in His image in a spiritual sense, but we have lost that splendor and, therefore, the ability to truly know God. The existence of God’s providence is proof that He maintains the world and has active sovereignty over what happens in it.
 - We have free will, but His ultimate will prevails. Even the wicked are directed by God to use their evil for His purposes. Our inability to reconcile the responsibility of the sinner while acting on God’s direction is a result of our own inability to understand God’s nature.

Book Second: Of the Knowledge of God the Redeemer, in Christ, as First Manifested to the Fathers Under the Law, and Thereafter to Us Under the Gospel.

- The next seventeen chapters of Calvin’s *Institutes* explain Christ’s role in history in the context of the fall of Adam and Eve and the resulting enslavement of the human race to sin. Our free will and reason are corrupted, and our spiritual discernment is lost until we are regenerated.

- God's providence provides restraining grace and uses agents such as shame, fear of the law, and societal pressures to moderate men's actions; men do not choose to do good—only God's grace incites good in men. No matter what we can learn about God from His creation, it is useless without the faith that comes only through Christ, our mediator.
- The Mosaic Law shows us the righteousness of God and our own unrighteousness, and it is a tool of God's restraining grace. The gospel did not replace the Law but completed it and allowed us to be forgiven of our transgressions.
- Although the Old and New Testaments ultimately have the same message, there are differences. One is that the temporal, earthly blessings to the Jews became spiritual blessings to the church, and another is that the Jews relied on images and ceremonies whereas we have Christ, the substance of that imagery.
- Jesus as Mediator had to be fully God and fully man. Jesus is prophet, priest, and king: as King, His kingdom is spiritual and gives us hope of eternal preservation; as Priest, He is our reconciliation and intercession.

Book Third: The Mode of Obtaining the Grace of Christ. The Benefits It Confers, and the Effects Resulting from It.

- These twenty-five chapters of Calvin's *Institutes* delve into the Holy Spirit's work in our lives. It is the Holy Spirit who unites us to Christ and causes us to receive God's benefits.
 - Our faith is in God the Son (not the church) and rests on the Word of God. Repentance is a result of faith, which is a result of recognition of God's grace, and repentance continues throughout the believer's life in conjunction with sanctification.
 - Confession is a biblical practice, but not to a priest and not for absolution; only Christ's sacrifice forgives.

- Indulgences deny the gospel of Christ, and purgatory is a “deadly fiction of Satan.”
- The purpose of regeneration is a changed heart that leads to denial of ourselves and a love of righteousness that leads to righteous action.
- When faced with trials and chastisement, we are not to necessarily expect deliverance, but call out to God for deliverance and remember there is a better world to come.
- A correct understanding of our place before God will educate our ideas of material blessings and how unrighteous we are on our own.
 - Justification does not mean we are righteous in and of ourselves and, therefore, do good works through our own effort. Neither does it mean that, if a man realizes he is justified by faith, he will neglect good works and live in sin.
- The freedom we have from the Law is not carnal but spiritual, as we are released from the effects of our sin.
 - In fact, good works can only be credited to us when our sins have been pardoned; it is only with freedom from the Law that we can obey it with our hearts.
 - Prayer is our submission to God and should be done with all humility.
- God’s predestination is sovereign and independent of foreknowledge, and His election is eternal.
 - Men’s claim that predestination is unfair merely exposes their inability to understand God.
- All those who are predestined will be called by God and will have faith.
 - The final resurrection will be physical for both the elect and the reprobate.
 - Hell is real and eternal.

Book Fourth: Of the Eternal Means or Helps by Which God Allures Us into Fellowship with Christ, and Keeps Us in It.

- The final twenty chapters of Calvin's *Institutes* mainly deal with the true nature of the Church and how the Roman Catholic Church is a corruption.
 - The church has a physical aspect, but it is also comprised of the invisible fellowship of all believers. Membership in this spiritual church (the invisible Body of Christ) is necessary for forgiveness and salvation.
 - The church is not perfect, and minor impurities should not discourage attendance, although serious doctrinal departures would justify leaving; i.e., Christians should break with the Roman Church as the false teaching of Catholicism proves it is not a true church.
 - The highest role in a church is the role of teacher of the Word.
 - The government of the Roman Church is corrupt.
 - Jesus did not place Peter in charge of the church, and the "keys of the gospel" are a metaphor for teaching the gospel.
 - There are distinct similarities between the history of the power-grabbing popes and Paul's description of the Antichrist.
 - God's revelation was given to multiple men who all had the same message; it was never given only to the leader or council of the Roman Church.
 - All prophets, teachers, leaders, and councils are under the primacy of Scripture.
 - God gave the church authority to discipline and, if necessary, excommunicate members; the church has no other authority to make laws or govern kingdoms.
 - Monastic vows are unbiblical and should be broken.

- Sacraments (baptism and the Lord's Supper) are outward signs of God's covenants; they confirm Christ's covenants to our feeble sense, but they do not make us worthy of them.
 - Baptism is a sign of our burial and resurrection with Christ and does not impart righteousness.
 - Infant baptism is the Christian's circumcision and is an outward sign that infants are joined to the faith they will grow to understand.
 - In communion, Jesus is spiritually present in the elements and passes life into us, but Jesus is not sacrificed again for every communion.
 - Any sacrament besides baptism and the Lord's Supper is an unbiblical law written by man. Christians are to respect civil government as society's and the church's protector, and we should obey civil authorities even when they are unjust.

One of history's great thinkers and teachers, John Calvin was hugely influential in his lifetime, and his writings continue to impact our world five hundred years later. We are indebted to Calvin for his clarity of thought, his biblical approach to issues, and his faithfulness to promote the glory of God over all that would glorify man.

Information derived and adjusted from GotQuestions.com:

<https://www.gotquestions.org/John-Calvin.html>