

Calvinism, Arminianism & The Word of God

An analysis of the doctrinal paper titled; “Calvinism, Arminianism & The Word of God:
A Calvary Chapel Perspective by Chuck Smith ”

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INTRODUCTION:

The doctrinal paper that I would like to analyze and respond to was recently handed to a friend of mine who attends a Calvary Chapel church. There are several statements that Chuck Smith makes in his Introduction regarding Calvinism that I want to address in this paper as well as to take a look at the Calvary Chapel “Perspective” concerning the doctrine of Salvation. I will place all of his statements in italics to set them apart from my own comments. Also, any underlining in this paper is added by me for emphasis in my discussion. Any quotes from Scripture will also be in italics.

He begins by referencing what he calls the “*long simmering debate*” between Calvinists and Arminians. He considers both positions to be extreme, whereas his own position is able to “*strike a balance between extremes.*” He further points out that theological extremists who are engaged in a “*heated argument*” might “*ignore or neglect the plain statements of the Bible,*” and he adds, “*how tragic it is when we become more concerned about being ‘right’ than being loving.*”

As a Calvinist, I don’t want to find myself engaged in heated arguments with Arminians, while ignoring or neglecting plain statements in the Bible. Nor should I be more concerned about being right than being loving. These are of course, good admonitions made by Chuck. But I will add that one may be both right as well as loving.

First of all, regarding Arminianism, Chuck points out in the Introduction of his paper that Arminianism and its five points were declared to be heretical in 1618 by the National Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church of Holland, in the city of Dordrecht. It was in fact, an international Synod. He says that the committee met over 7 months and conducted 154 sessions on this matter. The response to the five points of Arminianism made by the committee is now well known as the five points of Calvinism (TULIP), but it should be noted that the Canons of Dort which were the result of these sessions contain much more information than what is summarized in TULIP. I’m glad that he mentioned this

important synod, because most Christians are unaware of this history or disregard it, and Arminianism is alive and well in many churches, even in the Calvary Chapel churches although Chuck states that *“Calvary Chapel has been known for striking a balance between extremes on controversial theological issues.”*

Before leaving this introduction, I want to consider the opening lines of Section 3 of his paper, where he begins by stating that all this doctrinal fighting taking place between the Calvinists and the Arminians is serving *“to divide the body of Jesus Christ over human interpretations of these Biblical truths concerning our salvation.”*

It seems that he wants to give the impression that he and his fellow Calvary Chapel pastors are above the fray of arguing over these *“human interpretations”* of Biblical truths as the Calvinists and Arminians are doing. He says, *“We simply desire to state how we in the Calvary Chapel fellowships understand the Bible’s teaching regarding these matters.”*

I assume that when he and his fellow pastors in the Calvary Chapel Fellowships present their *“perspective”* on the Bible’s teaching on these matters, that their perspective is kept free of any *“human interpretation”* or if it does involve some human interpretation, then I must further assume, that their human interpretation which he presents in Section 3 of his paper is the better one, having more Scriptural balance and certainly promoting love rather than division in the church.

A DISCUSSION OF CALVARY CHAPEL’S PERSPECTIVE ON THE DOCTRINE OF SALVATION

Now we will give some analysis of *“Section 3 Calvary Chapel’s Perspective.”*

Chuck has stated the Calvary Chapel doctrines of Salvation in five distinct headings, Depravity, Election, Atonement, Grace, and Perseverance. I will only focus on several of his key statements in each heading. For the one who would like to do some further investigation of these matters you will need to obtain Chuck Smith’s paper from your nearest Calvary Chapel church.

1. DEPRAVITY

No Calvinist would disagree with what Chuck says under this heading because he offers so little information about what is Man’s depravity. He makes a few simple statements from the several Bible verses that he cites, however, he avoids providing any

explanation or definition of several of his statements, evidently to stay clear of any semblance of Reformed Calvinism.

For example, he says, *“apart from God’s grace, no one can be saved (Ephesians 2:8-9).”* But there is no explanation given of how God’s “grace” effects our salvation in Christ and why it is necessary for our salvation. The Calvinist can explain why grace is necessary in our salvation.

Chuck also states, that *“apart from the conviction and regeneration of the Holy Spirit, none can be saved (John 1:12-13; 16: 8-11; 1Peter 1:23-25)”* Again, who would disagree with this statement. He cites some Bible verses but offers no explanation or interpretation of what is involved in *“the conviction and regeneration of the Holy Spirit.”* Chuck concludes his discussion of Man’s Depravity by saying, *“Mankind is clearly fallen and lost in sin,”* but offers no thoughts on what Mankind’s lost condition really entails and why he chooses to use the word “depravity” to head up this section.

2. ELECTION

In this section, one soon realizes that Chuck does not intend to explain what “election” actually means for the saving of lost sinners. He does correctly acknowledge in his opening sentence that *“God chose the believer before the foundation of the world,”* referencing Ephesians 1:4-6 and he uses the word “*elect*” where he quotes from Scripture, but he makes no attempt to actually explain from the Scriptures how God’s unchangeable purpose in election, relates to His foreknowledge and His predestination of those who are being saved, other than to reference several Bible verses where these words occur. When we read how Chuck explains God’s “call” to the sinner we realize that his position is that of an Arminian, in that he shows himself to be aligned with the Arminian doctrine of “Free-will.” You can see in Section 1 of Chuck’s paper on Arminianism, that FREE WILL is the first point of the five points of Arminianism, and he gives a brief description of what it means. As my discussion of the Calvary Chapel Perspective continues, I will be making a number of comments regarding the doctrine of free-will in order to show that it is a man-made doctrine that fails the test of good and proper interpretation of the Scriptures in accordance with the **analogy of faith** and the careful exegesis of Scripture. Regarding this matter, I would recommend to the reader

to obtain a copy of the **Cannons of Dort** and you will understand why the doctrines of Arminianism were deemed to be a heretical by the Synod of Dort in 1619.

Again, in response to Chuck's discussion of the "calling" of the sinner, no one would disagree with him that there is an offer of salvation given in the preaching of the gospel; an invitation, a call, that is given by God to the sinner. He also points out from Scripture that although God's call goes out to all, *"only a few will accept it."* What Chuck then attempts to show, is that even though God chooses (elects), calls and invites sinners to call on His name and be saved, it is entirely up to the sinner to choose whether or not to accept God's call and few do so. He says, *"We see this balance throughout scripture."* What he means by *"balance"* is that when it comes to salvation, it would be one-sided, unbalanced and unfair if God saves a lost sinner because He has chosen in Himself to save certain sinners according to His own sovereign purpose and will.

The Arminian view concerning salvation is that God may desire to save someone lost in sin, but He must submit Himself to the "free-will" of that person and allow that person to decide for himself whether or not to heed God's gracious call. Arminians believe that the sinner can hear God's call and make an inward decision about that call that is free of any inward affect from his own sin nature, and this supposed free will elevates a man to the position of human sovereignty when it comes to his salvation. For Chuck, this brings "balance" to what God seeks to do. In other words, the all-powerful God, Whom Paul describes in the book of Romans, as the Potter, must give heed to what the piece of clay on his table decides as to what the Potter will make from it. (Romans 9:20)

With this Arminian teaching, Chuck renders God's purpose in election, foreknowledge and predestination to be meaningless and utterly unnecessary in regards to Man's salvation. For Chuck, all that is necessary is for God to make the offer of salvation, the invitation, and man will do the rest. Man will make the decision solely from himself. God makes the offer, but He then must step back and allow for Man's sovereign free will to take it from there. As an Arminian, he assumes that unregenerate, arrogant, sinful man, whose will is in bondage to sin (Eph.2:3), whose mind is hostile to God (Rom.8:7), a hater of the Light (John 3:20), blinded by Satan (2Cor.4:4), spiritually dead (Eph.2:1), and who is actively "in the flesh," suppressing the truth of God in unrighteousness (Rom.1:18), will actually make the good and noble decision to humbly call upon God in

repentance and faith unto salvation. And of course, a good and noble decision made by that man would surely please God, however, “...*those who are in the flesh, cannot please God.*” -Romans 8:8. And again, “*How can you, being evil, speak good things?*” – Matthew 12:34

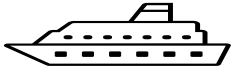
In reading his presentation, you discover why it was unnecessary for Chuck to spend any time explaining election and foreknowledge and predestination in the saving of the lost soul, because they are unnecessary to the Arminian. To him, the sinner doesn't actually need these special works of God's grace in order to be saved because man is able in himself to free himself from the sinful, unbelieving, depraved bondage of his mind and from the power of the devil (1 John 5:19), in order to make the good and noble decision to believe.

♪ To Man be the glory? Great things Man has done?

3. ATONEMENT

In this section, he makes a few basic comments regarding Christ's sacrifice of atonement for sinners, and he references several Bible verses regarding Man's salvation. His purpose in this section is to maintain his Arminian position that every man is given the opportunity to save himself by exercising his free will to believe the gospel. That God has done His part, by making the offer of salvation to all, and by making Christ's atoning sacrifice available for all, for every man's salvation, meaning every single person born into the world. As Chuck points out at the end of this section, that Christ's death on the cross “*was clearly sufficient to save the entire human race.*”

We certainly agree that Christ's death on the cross is of infinite worth as an all-sufficient atoning sacrifice for sin, even the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2). That the cross of Christ is the only place for any sinner to find mercy and forgiveness for his or her sins. But this is not the main point that Chuck is trying to make concerning the atonement. As an Armenian, the atonement must be made to accommodate his doctrine of Man's Free-will. He must maintain the idea that God in all fairness, did His best to have everything in place to save anyone who might choose to believe. That if every single person chose to believe, then it must be so that Christ's death on the cross must suffice for all. It must satisfy “*the righteousness wrath of God against sin,*” for every sinner.

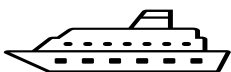


Like a great ship, there must be a room on board for every single member of the entire human race just in case they all choose to come aboard. This way of looking at salvation certainly seems fair and accommodating to the Arminian and for him, he need not think any further about it.

But, in seeking to accommodate his doctrine of Man's "Free-will," he generalizes the atonement, like some kind of government program, as being made available for all, like the great ship as described above, sitting there ready to receive any and all passengers, but he neglects to show that the atonement itself is God's special and specific act of love toward every individual soul that He has loved in Christ from before the foundation of the world. (Ephesians 1: 3-14). Chuck's view of the atonement doesn't provide the opportunity to move the believer who follows his teaching to contemplate and marvel at the depths of the love of God especially for his own individual soul; the love that brought the Lord Jesus Christ from heaven to the cross. *"I am the good shepherd, and I know My sheep, and am known by My own. As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father and I lay down My life for the sheep."* – John 10:14,15

♪ "Jesus, Lover of my soul, let me to Thy bosom fly."

♪ " He hideth my soul in the cleft of the Rock."



Let's look again at the illustration of the great ship, which has a room on board for every single person of the human race and so, is approved by the Arminian. We understand that the ship is the gospel ship of salvation, that it carries all those who are redeemed in Christ. As a Calvinist, I see the great ship pulling up to heaven's harbor, at the end of this age. The rooms occupied by the saints will be a witness and testimony of God's grace, of their faith in God and His sacrificial atoning love for them in Christ. The empty rooms will be a witness and testimony against the lost, who in unbelief and the free exercise of their own will, rejected Christ's atoning sacrifice as it was proclaimed to them by the messengers of the gospel. God will be vindicated in His righteous judgment of them and His condemnation of the world. (John 5:40)

Let's allow one more journey to the great ship by allowing it to provide a comparison of our two doctrines of Salvation; that of the Arminian and that of the Calvinist.

Let's modify the ship a bit, so that it contains two decks. An upper deck, and a lower deck. The rooms on the lower deck are waiting for all those who hear the gospel call, and out of their own free-will, as it is in their natural state of being, if they make the decision to receive Christ, they will come aboard. The rooms of the upper deck are waiting for all those who hear the gospel call, and the grace of God has **renewed their minds and wills through the Holy Spirit**, so that they then most freely of their own renewed will, make the decision to receive Christ and come aboard.

TO ROOMS ON
LOWER DECK
(BY FREE – WILL)

TO ROOMS ON
UPPER DECK
(BY GRACE)

The great salvation ship makes its journey to the port of Heaven and docks there at Heaven's shore. The heavenly officers call for those on the upper deck to disembark into the joy of their inheritance in Christ. As they leave the boat, they are all discussing this amazing fact, as each person reports that when they first boarded the great ship and found their room, they noticed that their own name was already beautifully engraved over the door of their room. And that the captain told them that their names were placed there at the time of the ship's construction, and they all marveled and wondered, how that could be. After this, the heavenly officers call for those on the lower deck to disembark the great ship of salvation, but no one emerges from the lower deck. They call a second time, then an officer runs down to the lower deck, and returns, calling out, "The lower deck is completely empty! There is no one there!"

"How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!" -Matthew 23:37

4. GRACE

In his discussion in this section his Arminianism is once more confirmed. He is teaching here that God's grace is His response to lost sinners who believe in His Son. In Chuck's words, God's grace "is the response of God's mercy and love to those who will believe in His Son." If grace is God's response to one's faith, then is His love also a response to the one who loves Him first?

Not according to John- *“We love Him because He first loved us.” – 1 John 4:19*
 For Chuck, God’s grace must wait on the sidelines of salvation until man acts first, though depraved man is incapable of doing what Chuck and all Arminians say man does. Chuck begins this section by correctly saying, *“ We believe that God’s grace is not the result of human effort or worthiness,”* but then he contradicts what he just said he believes about grace by making grace God’s response to man’s human effort to believe. Do you see the logical contradiction here? If, as he says, God’s grace is not the result of *human effort*, then why does God then respond with His Grace toward the one who does exercise his own human effort to believe the gospel? Do you see the contradiction? How can we clear this up? Simply;

The Calvinist understands that God’s grace is not His response to a man’s faith, but it is the source of his faith. (Heb.12:2)

Later in this section he tries to show from Scripture the validity of his perspective by his closing statement, *“ Clearly God’s grace can either be resisted or received by the exercise of human free will.”* If it were indeed possible for sinful man to resist God’s grace, not one person in the whole human race would ever be saved. But thankfully, as Paul declared in the book of Romans, *“But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more.”* -Romans 5:20, and the power of God’s grace to save the sinner is that same power by which God created and upholds the entire universe (Rev.4:10,11), and by which He raised Jesus from the dead. This is why we must give Him all the honor and all the glory for our salvation (Rev.7:10). Clearly, Arminianism, whose heretical doctrine of Man’s “Free-will” denies the true depraved condition of the human heart and mind, being dead and bound up in trespasses and sins, and utterly incapable of exercising “free will” to the saving of one’s soul.

“There is none who understands; There is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside; They have together become unprofitable. There is none who does good, no, not one.” – Romans 3:11,12

It is only because of God’s grace that any sinner comes to faith in Christ. Let me repeat what I said earlier,

The Calvinist understands that God’s grace is not His response to a man’s faith, but it is the source of his faith. 🎵 *“Amazing Grace!- how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me!”*

5. PERSEVERANCE

In this section Chuck has a good presentation about the assurance that true believers have in Jesus. He cites verses from Romans chapter 8 as well as promises of assurance that Jesus made in John chapter 6 and chapter 10. But, how is it that Jesus can speak with such certainty concerning the believer, *“And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand.”* -John 10:28. How can Jesus be so certain and assuring concerning this matter if as Chuck teaches, God can’t save someone, but only offer them salvation. That He must step back and let them decide in themselves? Since Chuck believes this is the case, how can Jesus provide any assurance to the believer about his or her salvation, because though they may believe at the present time, perhaps something in their life will occur and they will choose of themselves to no longer believe in Jesus, and decide to become an atheist? After all, according to the Arminian, it was all up to that person from the beginning whether or not to believe the gospel.

And that is one of the dilemmas for the Arminian, because Chuck is aware that there are those who fall away, which he speaks about next in this section.

His presentation of those who claim to be believers but are not, and also those who fall away from the faith, citing a number of verses from the New Testament is also adequately done. He raises the question, *“Can true believers (“brethren”) depart from the living God?”* but he does not answer it. In the end he holds to the position of the Calvinist when he says, *“We do believe in the perseverance of the saints (true believers), but are deeply concerned about sinful lifestyles and rebellious hearts among those who call themselves “Christians.””*

Toward the middle of this section he says *“If we find ourselves basing our view of salvation on the performance and attitudes of people we become discouraged and concerned.”*

Chuck should be very concerned about this because in his view, a person’s salvation is based upon that person’s greatest performance, the feat by which they, being “in the flesh,” are able in their own strength and ability to extricate their mind from its bondage to sin, and the power of the devil, and by their own inherent good and noble reasoning, choose to make the good and noble decision to receive the Lord Jesus Christ in

repentance and faith. An amazing feat indeed!

And yet, *“those who are in the flesh cannot please God. But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His.”* -Romans 8:8,9

Do you see the dilemma for the Arminian in this? For Chuck, in the interest of Man’s “free-will,” the Spirit of Christ is not permitted to be involved in any way in the heart of a person, until that person, having heard the gospel, exercises his “free-will” to receive or not to receive the Lord Jesus. Only if that person makes that good and noble decision that pleases God, is the Spirit of Christ permitted to enter their heart. The Arminian is not able or is unwilling to humbly acknowledge from Scripture that the choosing of Jesus by the unregenerate heart of man is impossible apart from the gift of God’s saving grace by which the Holy Spirit regenerates the sinner’s heart and sets them apart in Christ Jesus.(Titus 3:3-7) Because, unless this grace comes first into the sinner’s heart, that sinner, will always reject Jesus Christ, because every sinner being under the hold of the devil, is deceived by his lie, and thinks he is a god unto himself.

Toward the end of this Section he says; *“It seems that the sovereignty of God and human responsibility are like two parallel lines that do not seem to intersect within our finite minds.”*

I have heard this illustration before, even back in my younger days as a believer. It is meant to help the Christian uphold the fact that God is sovereign, but at the same time, God’s sovereignty doesn’t give a man an excuse for his sin. Man is still held responsible for his sin and rejection of the Truth and will one day face God’s judgment. A good example is seen in the life of Judas Iscariot. Concerning Judas Iscariot, Jesus said during His High Priestly prayer in John chapter 17:12, *“While I was with them in the world, I kept them in Your Name. Those whom You gave Me I have kept, and none of them is lost except the son of perdition, that the Scripture might be fulfilled.”* This verse speaks of God’s Sovereignty over Judas’ betrayal of Jesus. But Jesus also speaks of the responsibility that has fallen upon Judas for his betrayal of Jesus. In Luke chapter 22:22, Jesus says, *“And truly the Son of Man goes as it has been determined, but woe to that man by whom He is betrayed.”* Having said this, I suspect that this is not the reason Chuck has brought up the illustration of the two parallel lines. Since he is giving his

perspective concerning Man's salvation, and since he is an Arminian, I would say that, for him, the two parallel lines represent God's sovereignty and Man's sovereignty. In order to maintain the man-made doctrine of "free-will", he must show by the two parallel lines that God's sovereignty in our salvation is kept at bay, kept on its track, so that it can never move to touch the man in order to affect that man's own sovereign "free-will" decision to either receive Christ or to reject Him.

On the other hand, the Calvinist upholds both God's sovereignty and Man's responsibility, but he never demeans God's sovereignty in order to prop up Man in an ability that he in his fallen sinful condition does not possess. That is the ability to save himself by his own thought and reasoning. For the Calvinist, God's sovereign grace and mercy must and does prevail in the salvation of God's elect. And God's sovereignty must prevail again on the Day of Judgment where God's Justice will prevail in holding sinners responsible for their rejection of the truth and their works of unrighteousness. And it must also be said, that God's sovereignty prevails over the lives of every single person of Adam's race. And it must be humbly acknowledged that God's sovereign grace prevails throughout the life of the believer, for as Paul writes, "*For it is God Who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.*" – Philippians 2:13

♪ "To God be the glory, great things He has done!"

And finally, one interaction with something Chuck says at the very end of his presentation. "*I would rather have the wrong facts and a right attitude than right facts and a wrong attitude.*" I cannot say that this is a sound idea. I would not want to find myself worshiping and serving Jesus based on "wrong facts," about Him, even if I could make the claim that those wrong facts make me love Him more and help me express a better attitude toward others as I serve Him. In that case, what is my understanding of who Jesus is? Are my facts about Him right or wrong? Is my theology concerning Him right or wrong?

Many people who are in church on Sunday mornings, have ideas in their minds of what God is like and what Jesus is like, ideas that appeal to them, but they are in fact wrong ideas, that do not come from the Bible but from the teachings of men.

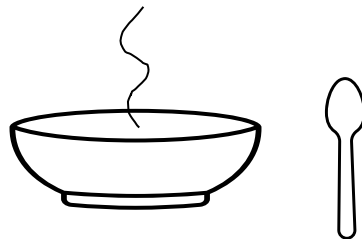
According to 1 Corinthians 13:6, love rejoices in the truth. The ministry of God's word is given to the church, and it must be a ministry that labors to rightly divide the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15).

The ministry of the word is given as Paul says, "*till we all come to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.*" – Ephesians 4:13

CONCLUSION

As I said at the beginning of my discussion. I decided to interact with Chuck's paper because of his statements concerning Calvinism which were not said in a mean manner, but they put Calvinism in a negative light, as being extremist, unbalanced, argumentative and unloving. I'm merely responding and showing why I am a Calvinist and why there is a need to respond to a paper such as this one, because although Chuck says that he is balanced in his perspective on Man's salvation, in actuality he sways back and forth from Arminianism to Calvinism, with a much greater sway toward Arminianism which is both extreme as well as heretical.

How should I illustrate the Calvary Church Perspective on the doctrine of salvation?



Chuck's teaching concerning our great salvation, is offered to his congregation as a bowl of warm soup. A broth flavored with Arminianism, and very little meat to chew on, sprinkled slightly with the salt of Calvinism but providing no true distinct taste of anything substantial to inspire and challenge believers to think deeply in the Scriptures about these matters. And yet, isn't it our humble and earnest thought interaction with

Scripture by which our growth and maturity comes, our Sanctification, as the Holy Spirit takes from the things of Christ and makes them known to the mind of the believer?

“Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth.” – John 17:17

FINAL THOUGHTS

If there is someone reading this paper who has the desire to investigate these matters further I recommend getting a copy of Martin Luther’s classic book, *“The Bondage of the Will.”* It is not a quick read, but any amount of work and effort going through Luther’s discussion in this book will not fail to prove useful to the reader. I would also recommend getting a copy of *The Canons of Dort*, as well as a copy of *The Westminster Confession of Faith*. Reading through these great Reformed systematic presentations of the Scriptures will also be of benefit to the student of Scripture.

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A word of thanks to my Bible research colleague, Isaiah Skolnick, for reviewing this paper and for his comments, suggestions, corrections, and encouragement!

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“To the elect lady and her children, whom I love in truth, and not only I, but also all those who have known the truth, because of the truth which abides in us and will be with us forever.” – 2 John 1,2

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To all those who love the Truth and who lift high the cross of Jesus Christ in this world of sin and misery, and who choose to glorify God above all else, God’s grace be with you all!

Michael J. Galus January 11, 2024

