**Systematic Biblical Truth
Two Predominant Views of Theology
*Calvinism and Arminianism***

I. Questions:

 A. Why does this matter?

It is a fact that MOST Christians never dive into theological systems such as Calvinism and Arminianism… most Christians cannot tell you the difference between the two views are even one view. The study of these can however increase your knowledge of God and the more knowledge of Him, the greater your spiritual life will be….

But theological systems should not be the end in themselves…. The bottom line is the gospel of Jesus Christ…. And nowhere in that gospel is John Calvin or Jacobus Arminius mentioned!

 B. Is this a salvation issue?

It is not! There are Arminians in heaven as well as some Calvinist…. There are people in heaven who’ve never heard of John or Jacobus!.... You can get much of theology wrong and still be saved.

Romans 10:9 that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved;

 C. Can I be a Christian without entering into the theology debate?

II. Limitations and Strengths of theological views.

 A. Ultimately all views fall short of complete understanding of God’s
 sovereignty and all its implications.

Ultimately there is mandatory mystery in the understanding of God and how His sovereignty plays out.

Romans 11:33-36 New American Standard Bible (NASB)

**33**Oh, the depth of the riches [[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Romans+11%3A33-36&version=NASB#fen-NASB-28243a)]both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! **34**For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? **35**Or who has first given to Him [[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Romans+11%3A33-36&version=NASB#fen-NASB-28245b)]that it might be paid back to him again? **36**For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him *be* the glory [[c](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Romans+11%3A33-36&version=NASB#fen-NASB-28246c)]forever. Amen.

 B. One’s theological view will affect one’s Christian walk.

If you believe that you do not have “free will” that will affect how you rest at night… same with security in your salvation…

 C. There is not a perfect view on theology.

All theologies fall short of the glory of God!... they are all human efforts in understanding what can’t be completely understood.

1. God has not revealed to us everything.
2. We are not capable of understanding all things.

 D. No one theology is “pure”.

There are different levels and depths of every theology system. Calvinism has extremes as well as Arminianism does… there are blends of both.

 E. There is not just two views (Calvinism and Arminianism).

**Universalism**—All will eventually be saved;
**Open theology**-- human beings are truly free; if God absolutely knew the future, human beings could not truly be free. Therefore, God does not know absolutely everything about the future. Open theism holds that the future is not knowable. Therefore, God knows everything that can be known, but He does not know the future.

**Molinism**—Middle knowledge-- **Molinism is a system of thought that seeks to reconcile the sovereignty of God and the free will of man**. The heart of Molinism is the principle that God is completely sovereign and man is also free in a libertarian sense.

III. The major tension.

 A. How much is God and man involved in the entirety of the Christian
 life?

 1. Monergism

God is the all determining factor in salvation: no free human participation.

 2. Synergism

Belief in divine-human cooperation in salvation.

 3. Pelagianism

Pelagianism is a belief in Christianity, also called Pelagian heresy, that original sin did not taint human nature and mortal will is still capable of choosing good or evil without special divine aid / assistance

 4. Semi-Pelagianism

Semipelagian thought teaches that the latter half – growing in faith – is the work of God, while the beginning of faith is an act of free will, with grace supervening only later. It too was labeled heresy by the Western Church at the Second Council of Orange in 529.

IV. Biographies: Jacobus Arminius; John Calvin.

**Jacobus Arminius** (1560–1609) was a Dutch pastor and theologian. His theology is best known for its counter-arguments against the theology of John Calvin. The two theologies were at the heart of the Dutch **Remonstrant** movement and opposition. The famous Synod of Dort (1618) and subsequent Canons of Dort were motivated by Arminians (followers of Jacobus Arminius) and Calvinists (the followers of John Calvin) attempting to come to a conclusion about which theology was more biblically correct. Since there was no separation between church and state at that time in Holland, this theological crisis had severe repercussions nationally as well as for the church. The Synod of Dort came down decisively on the side of Calvinism. Ever since that time, the theology of Jacobus Arminius has been polarized against Calvinist theology.

Jacobus Arminius was a pastor in Amsterdam and had a good reputation among his parishioners as a compassionate man and a gifted preacher. But his teachings sparked a controversy, and some began to accuse him of being a Pelagian, a charge he denied. **Pelagianism is the belief that man in his natural state is able to freely choose good over evil and live a sinless life, without help from God.** It denies the work of Jesus Christ on the cross, and it denies original sin. Arminius’s teachings were compared to Pelagianism because of his emphasis on man’s free will: **Arminius said that a man could struggle against sin before being regenerated by the Holy Spirit and had the power of free will to either refuse or accept regeneration. Calvinists disagree with this notion, reasoning from the Bible’s teaching that the natural man is “dead in trespasses and sins” that we can do nothing to be saved without the supernatural intervention of God (Ephesians 2:1–3).** The main issue is man’s free will versus God’s sovereignty in salvation. Jacobus Arminius and his adherents would say man has the ability to make choices that advance him toward his eventual regeneration. Calvinists disagree on this and other points, saying that Arminianism amounts to a denial of the biblical doctrine of God’s election and places salvation ultimately in the hands of the individual rather than in the hands of God.

Jacob Arminius’s teaching was summarized in the Five Articles of Remonstrance, which caused a rift in the Dutch Reformed Church in the early seventeenth century and led to the formation of the Synod of Dort. The five points of Arminius are as follows: 1) Partial Depravity – humanity is sinful but, with the help of universal prevenient grace from God, still able to seek God. Human will is free, and all men have the power to respond to the influence of the Spirit. 2) Conditional Election – God only “chooses” those whom He knows will one day choose to believe. No one is predetermined for heaven or set on a path to inevitable salvation. 3) Unlimited Atonement – Jesus died for everyone, even those who are not “chosen” and who will not believe. 4) Resistible Grace – God’s call to be saved can be and often is rejected. 5) Conditional Salvation – Christians can actively reject the Holy Spirit’s leading in their lives and thus voluntarily give up their salvation. Salvation must be maintained to be retained. In unanimously rejecting the Five Articles of Remonstrance, the Synod of Dort drafted five counterpoints, today often called the five points of Calvinism or the doctrines of grace.

A good reference point is Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus the Pharisee, who came to Jesus by night, ostensibly hiding from the other Pharisees, who did not approve of Jesus. Jesus tells him, “No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again” (John 3:3) and clarifies by saying, “Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit” (verse 5). According to Jesus, regeneration (the rebirth) must occur before a person can attain the kingdom. This seems to support the Calvinist argument: we must experience a new birth—and a birth is not something a child chooses. At the same time, however, Nicodemus (who as yet did not believe) chose to go to Jesus to be taught. This seems to support the Arminian argument: we can seek God before salvation. It is likely that certain aspects of both Calvinism and Arminianism are correct, from a certain point of view. Yes, regeneration must occur first. But we cannot always tell when that regeneration has begun. We tend to think it happens at one point in time because there is always a moment when we confess with our mouth that Jesus is Lord (Romans 10:9). But it is likely that regeneration (God’s first move) begins, for many people, long before that confession occurs.

Jacobus Arminius and John Calvin would likely be very surprised if they could see how their teachings have reverberated down through the ages. What is important to remember is that Scripture is always true, even when our frail human minds have trouble understanding how the assorted truths it presents fit together. The parts of Scripture that seem to support the Calvinist view of God’s sovereignty are true; the parts that seem to support the Arminian view of man’s free will are true. And it is also true that we are to strive for unity with one another as believers: “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:2–5).

ohn Calvin (1509–1564) was a French theologian who was instrumental in the Protestant Reformation and who continues to hold wide influence today in theology, education, and even politics. Anglican author J. I. Packer wrote about Calvin, “It is doubtful whether any other theologian has ever played so significant a part in world history” (“Calvin the Theologian,” *Churchman* 073/3, 1959). Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon said, “The longer I live the clearer does it appear that John Calvin’s system [of theology] is the nearest to perfection” (cited in *Christian History*, Vol. 5, No. 4). American historian John Fiske wrote, “It would be hard to overrate the debt which mankind owes to Calvin. The spiritual father of Coligny, of William the Silent, and of Cromwell, must occupy a foremost rank among the champions of modern democracy. . . . The promulgation of this theology was one of the longest steps that mankind has ever taken toward personal freedom” (*Beginnings of New England*, p. 58).

John Calvin was a pastor in the last half of the Renaissance. Political and church intrigues were coming to a head. Wealthy tradesmen, tired of financial exploitation, were shifting the political power away from both the feudal lords and the Roman Catholic Church, and the result was a growing nationalism. Economically, socially, and numerically, Europe was still recovering from the Black Death 150 years earlier. The authority of the papacy had been split between as many as three different popes the century before, and the popes since then had been amazingly corrupt and publicly hypocritical.

Most concerning to the general populace was the Roman Church’s tendency to fund wars, works of art and architecture, and lavish lifestyles by convincing congregants of their need to buy indulgences. If you want your loved ones to get out of purgatory, said the pope, it will cost you. Or, what might be more appealing, you can get away with some sins yourself, *if you buy an indulgence*. Such ecclesiastical abuses led to the outcry of the Reformers—Luther in Germany, Zwingli in Switzerland, and Calvin in France (and later in Switzerland).

Forefathers of the Protestant Reformation such as Wyclif, Hus, and Tyndale focused more on having a Bible in the vernacular and combatting ecclesiastical abuse than theological matters such as *Sola Scriptura* (needed because the papal infallibility proved to be very fallible) or the nature of the Eucharist. But in a theocratic world based on the total authority of the popes and church councils, dissention from the Catholic interpretation of Scripture was tantamount to treason. The climate was somewhat chaotic with Rome trying to wrest control back from various factions who championed autonomy of rule and religion, promoted adherence to the Scriptures, and tried to prevent the church from taking their money. John Calvin’s contribution was to organize and consolidate the theological and biblical reasons for rejecting the Roman Church, and he brilliantly developed his concepts into a complete theological viewpoint.

John Calvin’s father originally meant for him to be a priest, but when the elder’s fortunes changed, he decided his son would be more stable as a lawyer. The training John received both in law and the humanities served him well in theology. The invasion of Constantinople pushed Eastern scholars—and their literature—west; the printing press made those records available to Western scholars. When Western scholars realized how the originals differed from their copies, they developed the practice of textual criticism, which we still use to validate documents and determine when they were written and by whom. (And it’s the reason the Apocrypha was rejected by so many Protestants.)

The details of Calvin’s conversion from Catholicism to nascent Protestantism are a mystery. Calvin wrote of his spiritual conversion as taking place in 1532. In 1536, Calvin solidified what he had learned into the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*—a defense of the Reformers from a theological standpoint. As the Roman Catholic Church’s authority continued to be threatened, Catholic authorities struck back. Calvin fled France. On a detour through Geneva, a friend, William Farel, persuaded Calvin to stay and teach, although John was a lawyer, not a minister. The rich bourgeoisie of Geneva wanted to break with Rome for financial reasons and declared the city Protestant, but they had inadequate church leadership. They welcomed Calvin up to the point where he started actual reforms to match his theology. Calvin and Farel set out to rewrite church polity and policies and wound up causing a riot over the use of unleavened bread in communion. They were removed from Geneva, and Calvin went to pastor a French congregation in Strasbourg.

While pastoring, Calvin found time to write in Strasbourg. He rewrote his apologetics book in the format of a catechism and wrote most of a commentary series based on the Greek Septuagint instead of the Latin Vulgate. He eventually expanded his little treatise, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* from six short chapters to four books (see below).

The political scene in Geneva changed. Three years into Calvin’s exile, a popular Catholic cardinal wrote an open letter inviting Geneva to return to Catholicism and giving several arguments for why they should. The city council asked Calvin to respond, and he wrote a masterful letter in reply, answering the religious arguments and defending the Protestant leaders. Geneva stayed Protestant, and they brought Calvin back and agreed to his reforms.

The city council alternatingly supported Calvin and abandoned him depending on the political climate of the moment—until the unfortunate incident of Michael Servetus. Michael Servetus was a Spanish doctor and outspoken heretic who came to Basel and then Strasbourg to escape ecclesiastical authorities. He denounced the Trinity and denied the deity of Christ, putting him at odds with both Catholics and Protestants. The Inquisitions of both Spain and France condemned him to death. He was finally caught and held in Geneva. Calvin’s secretary provided a list of accusations of heresy, which were confirmed by several other theologians, both Protestant and Catholic. The consensus was strong on both sides: Servetus was a heretic and should be burned at the stake—the standard and widespread punishment for heresy—although Calvin requested a more humane beheading. Finally, the court had no choice but to convict and execute Servetus. The Calvinists and the Catholics both wanted him dead, but the Calvinists got to him first. Although the matter of Servetus—the sole execution of a heretic in Calvin’s lifetime—besmirched Calvin’s reputation, Calvin became the unchallenged defender of the faith, and his polity was soon after accepted in Geneva.

Both Calvin and Luther valued unity in the church, their main disagreement being over communion. Luther asserted that the body and blood of Christ dwells with the bread and wine without changing the physical properties of the elements; Zwingli believed that the Lord’s Supper is a symbolic memorial. Calvin took a middle-of-the-road approach, teaching that communion is indeed a memorial yet also a way to “feed” (spiritually) on Christ. Calvin wrote that communion is an “aid to our faith related to the preaching of the gospel . . . an outward sign by which the Lord seals on our consciences the promises of his goodwill toward us in order to sustain the weakness of our faith; and we in turn attest our piety towards him in the presence of the Lord and of his angels and before men” (*Institutes* IV.xiv.1). In other words, taking communion aids our faith, helps preach the gospel, seals God’s promises, bolsters our weaknesses, and allows us to attest to our fidelity to God.

Luther and Calvin actually agreed on predestination. It was their followers who widened the rift between their teachers, making more of a divide between Lutheranism and Reformed theology. Even Jacobus Arminius, after whom Arminianism, the anti-Calvinism sect, is named, praised Calvin’s commentaries and recommended them to his students, saying that Calvin was “incomparable in the interpretation of Scripture” (cited by Thomas Smyth in *Calvin and His Enemies: A Memoir of the Life, Character, and Principles of Calvin*, Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2009, p. 24–25). Calvin’s writings had a wide influence, as his system of theology was taken up by the Puritans in England, the Presbyterians in Scotland, the Dutch Reformed movement, the Huguenots in France, and the Pilgrims in America.

John Calvin is also remembered today for the school he established in Geneva and the advances in education he promoted. Calvin’s innovations in education include the formation of the first public school. During the Middle Ages, education was limited to the elite; only the aristocracy were schooled. Calvin changed that, ensuring that the general populace received a tuition-free, classical, liberal arts education. To that end, Calvin established an academy with seven grades and a seminary beyond that. Both schools became models for similar institutions across Europe and are now considered forerunners of the modern public school movement.

**John Calvin’s Theology**

Calvin’s theological magnum opus, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, was originally 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.