

Some Assumptions in Arminian Doctrine

A paper related to Sunday School lectures on Romans 8

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This paper was for the final Romans class for 2013. We find in chapter 8 a convergence of material where Reformed doctrine and Arminian teaching differ. When one young servant of the Lord asked for material on "Arminian assumptions" – thus the title of this paper – I decided to write this and make it generally available. Romans 8:31-39 deals with the *perseverance* of the saints from a reverse angle, namely God's *preservation* of the saints. Then further, an oft-overlooked surprise lingers for many Christians in 8:32. There benefits only the elect enjoy are inextricably tied to all those for whom the Lord Jesus died.

Arminian Objection 1: If it is certain that the elect are going to be saved, there is no need for evangelism. All the elect will be saved no matter what we do. Your Calvinist doctrine makes for dangerous passivity in reaching the lost.

Response to Objection 1: We are glad that the command of evangelism is recognized.

In the evangelism of Jesus in John 6:35, He invited sinners to come to Him. He spoke so that sinners might be saved (John 5:34). At the same time, the Lord affirmed that there was a number given to Him by the Father, and that these would come and the others would not (John 6:36,37,44). Jesus appealed to unbelievers to believe, even while He explained that the reason those specific ones did not do so was that they were not His sheep given to Him by His Father (John 10:25-29). The public ministry of Jesus is a model of evangelism: telling sinners they needed Him; urging them to come to Him, mixed with affirmations that the ones who would hear are those who were His sheep (John 10:9). They were His by the gift of the Father even before they believed. Believing in election did not hamper Jesus' evangelism.

There is another feature of evangelism that needs much more attention. For us, the Great Commission is the command of the Lord to us (Matthew 28:18-20), but for Christ it was and is the command of the Father to Him. This lies behind John 20:21. In Isaiah 49 the Servant of the Lord received a commission from the Father assigning Him certain tasks which are underlined below:

And now the LORD says, he who formed me [Christ] from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him; and that Israel might be gathered to him – for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD, and my God has become my strength – he says: "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." Thus says the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nation, the servant of rulers: "Kings shall see and arise; princes, and they shall prostrate themselves; because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you." Thus says the LORD: "In a time of favor I have answered

you; in a day of salvation I have helped you; I will keep you and give you as a covenant to the people, to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages ..." (Isaiah 48:5-8).

Christ was assigned to be a light not only to Israel but to the nations. Since this responsibility has been given to Christ, there can be no failure. Into this certainty of success in evangelism Christ has called us in what we call the Great Commission. The apostles quoted these words to Christ in Isaiah 49 as applying to them (Acts 13:46-48). In the time of Isaiah the "Great Commission" was an unseen element in God's commission to Christ. This truth stimulates in us confidence in serving. Because our service is a result of His obedience, it is not in vain (1 Corinthians 15:58). Gentile believers were elated that such words as Isaiah 49 were being fulfilled in their salvation. Luke added, that *as many as were appointed to eternal life believed*. (Acts 13:48). The evangelistic efforts of the apostles were not weakened by their belief in election. They viewed their ministry as *working together* with God (2 Corinthians 6:1), and after saying that, Paul in the next verse quotes the Father's commission to Christ in Isaiah 49 again. In Paul's mind his evangelistic ministry was tied to the continuing activity of Jesus ("with you till the end of the age"). He obeys His Father by bringing God's salvation to the nations. The greatest encouragement to evangelism is the doctrine of election, a doctrine of certainty.

Arminian Objection 2: If God has decided (or decreed, or determined or predestined) anything that a man will do, that man's freedom is limited. If the sovereign rights of God are applied to how we respond to the gospel, this limits the free actions of men to believe or not believe. In order for man to be genuinely free, it is necessary that the sovereign actions of God are not brought to bear in areas of man's responsibility. If man's decisions are not free, man is not what God created him or her to be. Thus in respect to man's response, God limits His sovereign rule. He wants our choice of Christ to be a real choice which *we* make.

Response to Objection 2 Arminian Christians are much more likely to emphasize a limitation on the free actions (or free will) of man. One does not hear the converse very much – that man's free actions limit the freedom of God. They sense that there is really something wrong with that idea. Regrettably, a few Arminian zealots have gone that far lately (in the Openness of God theology), causing a strong reaction. Nevertheless, it is still widely held by Arminians that "you cannot have it both ways; it is one or the other; God's sovereign choice and man's free choice do not co-exist in a man's decision to be saved."

You will notice that the Arminian argument is quite abstract. I daresay that many Arminian believers feel squeamish when they assert that God cannot determine something. Yet the instinctive reaction is to think that man is not truly free, if God has determined anything that a man will surely do. This may be one of the greatest emotional stumbling blocks among Arminians, one that militates against accepting the unrestricted right of God as God to do whatever He pleases (Psalm 115:3).

This is a very sad development among our fellow Christians, because holding to a reduced role for God, even one God has self-imposed, contributes to uncertainty. If everything done by comets, cooks, communists, congressmen, and cousins is within the prior ordination of God, then chance is removed. It is replaced by God's all-wise, holy and powerful providence. And for us, since God is our Father Who loves us, there is no terror. I will give Biblical evidence now, but I hope the emotional impact that comes from missing a wonderful truth will be considered.

To show that God has decreed the free actions of men, all one needs to do is to pick from a multitude of Biblical examples which show the overlap in God's sovereign decisions executed through the un-coerced "free will" of His creatures. Here are two examples.

1. **Judas** acted according to his free will in betraying Christ. He was fully responsible and God did not force him to do it. He played with sin, and Satan entered into him (John 13:27). Jesus said to His disciples, "... The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born" (Mark 14:21). Luke 22:22 adds that the Lord would be betrayed "as it has been determined". Judas acted as he chose, and God Who determined all the events of Jesus' betrayal used Judas' sin to accomplish His holy purpose.

2. **Assyria** In Isaiah 10:5-34 Assyria is a tool of God (v.5) sent by Him to punish His wayward people (v.6). The Assyrian had no intention to serve the God of Israel (v.7), but he was! From *his* perspective he was simply pursuing his agenda of conquest (vv. 7-11). Jerusalem would be for him just one more conquest (v.11). Yet all along it was God using His Assyrian tool to finish His work of chastening Jerusalem (v.12). When the Assyrian made a long boast of his accomplishments (vv.13,14), God corrects him, because unknown to him it was God wielding Assyria as His rod. Assyria cannot boast of the victories given because it was God using that army for His purpose (v.15). All that Assyria did was wicked, and done of its own will, but those warriors will be punished (vv.16-19). Whatever God has decreed will be done (vv. 22,23). What His people should understand is that the visible onslaught of Assyria (v.24) was the *fury of the Lord (my fury v.25)* upon them, and Assyria was simply His instrument. For their sin, all of which was their own idea, they would be cut down (vv. 26-34).

In both cases (and many more could be provided!) Judas and the Assyrians acted as they wished, in pursuit of sinful choices fully consistent with their natures. Yet in these cases they were doing precisely what God had decreed in the pursuit of His holy ends (Ephesians 1:11). God does decree all the free actions of all His creatures without ever making them robots, or forcing them to do what they really do not want to do. Reading Isaiah 10 repeatedly will relieve anyone discouraged by what objection 2 asserts.

Arminian Objection 3: In election, God simply ratifies the free decision of man whether to accept or reject Christ. God is fair, treating all of mankind in the same way. Based on His *foreknowledge* of what we would do, He elects to salvation the sinner who will accept the Lord. It is not God Who chooses for one person to go to heaven and another to go to hell. (That is a horrible view of God!) Imagine a teaching that someone will go to hell and cannot be saved, even if he wants to be – all because God made his bad choice for him, and the poor soul is stuck with disaster.

Response to Objection 3: I have replied to some of this objection in #2 above. Note that I have stated the Arminian objection in strong terms to demonstrate the sense of repugnance that some feel for our view of election. We *seem* to diminish the cross of Christ. Nevertheless on the other side, the awkwardness Arminians feel is aggravated by so much reference in the Bible to election, and predestination, and God choosing, even saying in John 15:16, “You did not chose Me, but I have chosen you ...” They need some way to show that predestination is not really dreadful fatalistic predestination. Foreknowledge is, they believe, merely a “pre-knowing” by God of what people would do, so that God does not really predestine anyone, but rather He chooses them based on the free choice they will eventually make. Naturally, this strips the impact in God’s choice of all initiative, because His choice does not determine anything and ours does! Predestination becomes after-destination. But they find a way to do this, and this way seems to fit Scripture. Their chief argument for turning predestination from real causation to simple reaction is connected to a couple of Biblical statements about the foreknowledge of God.

This objection is closely tied to Romans 8, “Those whom He *foreknew* [verb] he also predestined...” (8:29). Their case seems even more solid in 1 Peter 1:1,2: “ ... Peter ... to those who are elect exiles *according to the foreknowledge* [noun] of God the Father ...” That seems to settle the matter: God knew what we would do and responded accordingly. The Arminian objection, however, suffers first from the fact that the New Testament never says concerning His election of us that He foreknew our *decision*. Rather, He foreknew the *persons* He would predestine to holiness (Ephesians 1:3,4).

The second is a greater difficulty for them, because the Arminian argument about foreknowledge is corrected by the **meaning of the word** *foreknow* when it is used of the Lord *knowing* His people. Both Paul (Romans) and Peter (1 Peter) were Jews who knew the intimate flavor of the Hebrew word *know* in personal relationships. Note that Adam *knew* his wife and she conceived. That is not cognitive knowledge. It does not mean Adam knew Eve’s name and how to spell it. It means Adam took, loved and embraced his wife (you get the idea) and thus she conceived. We understand a similar thing in Romans 8:29 so that Paul is saying in effect: “Those God loved and embraced in advance are the ones He predestined, and those He called ...” etc.

This kind of knowing comes up in Amos 3:1,2: “O people of Israel ... *You only have I known* of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.” The NIV reads, “You only have I *chosen*...” Amos 3 captures the meaning of what *know*

means in Romans 8. God was not saying in Amos that He did not know something about the other nations, or what they would do. But He did not know those nations in the sense that He did not embrace them and take them as His people ¹.

Arminian Objection 4: If God has commanded any action, it is clear that man must be able to do the thing commanded, or else the command of God for man to do something he cannot do is irrational and oppressive. Surely this cannot be.

Response to Objection 4: This is answered in my recent paper for the Romans class, “Coming in the Back Door”. Man does not have the ability even to believe in Christ for the salvation of his soul. His native hostility to God is such that repentance and faith are of no interest to him. For him to be saved, God must change his heart, and this is what God does in our effectual calling and new birth. That paper is available to all, already posted on my website under Election – www.grebeweb.com/linden

In dealing with us, God does not issue ridiculous commands such as ordering us to join the cow in jumping over the moon. He says instead, such things as, “Be holy, for I am holy.” He cannot do otherwise and be true to Himself, and we cannot comply because we are ourselves. His commands do not imply that we are able; His Word tells us we are not, yet He does not lower the standard of righteousness for those who bear His image. In other words, He does not accommodate our sin, but ever insists on holiness in us. Thankfully, in a totally new covenant He changes our hearts and enables us to obey. Such ability does not spring from commandments but from God’s enabling intervention.

Arminian Objection 5: The death of Christ is a sacrifice for all, meaning each and every person without exception and without distinction. The Bible is most clear about this, often stating “*all*” related to the death of Christ, and also saying explicitly that His death was for *the whole world* (1 John 2:2).

Response to Objection 5: The death of Christ is for all peoples. The word *all* has the sense that it is not confined to one group. It is for men and women, for young and old, for people of every culture in all parts of the earth. Note this song to Christ: “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation ...”

¹ The Greek **verb** for foreknow is used five times in the NT. Twice it is used of people knowing something in advance (cognitive foreknowledge): Acts 26:5 and 2 Peter 3:17. Once it is used of Christ being foreknown (1 Peter 1:20). Then it is used of persons being foreknown by God in Romans 8:29 and 11:2. The use in 11:2 is of Israel as a corporate body; in 8:29 it is of individuals. The Greek **noun** foreknowledge appears twice in the NT (Acts 2:23 and 1 Peter 1:2). In 1 Peter 1:2 it makes sense to interpret this as God electing because of His love in advance for them. We love Him because He loved us first (1 John 4:19), and we choose because He foreknew us, not the reverse.

(Revelation 5:9). Surprisingly in Revelation, this same description of a vast array of persons speaks of those under the sway of the beast: “Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. And authority was given it over every tribe and people and language and nation ...” (Revelation 13:7). The *whole earth* worshipped the beast (Revelation 13:3,4). Revelation also speaks of those who are loyal to Christ (14:12). With such sweeping language, we must look to the context to show who is intended.

That also occurs in 1 John: Of Christ it says: “He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of *the whole world*.” (1 John 2:2). John is making very clear with such language that this sacrifice was not for Jews only but for the whole world. Then in the same letter John comments: “We know that we are from God, and *the whole world lies* in the power of the evil one” (1 John 5:19). The “whole world” in chapter 5 does not include believers, for we are the Lord’s children (3:2). In 4:5,6 we are from God, and thus the *world* does not include us. So who is in mind when this word is used must be settled by the context. It need not mean the entire population of earth. When the Jewish leaders complained about the interest so many had in Jesus, they spoke of it as the world going after Him (John 12:19). They certainly did not include themselves in that “world”, thus the word does not always mean every human soul.

The death of Christ in John 19 was a priestly offering. (Hebrews 7:26,27.) Intercession is also a priestly function in Hebrews 7:25 and Romans 8:34. If Jesus really offered Himself for the sin of each and every human being, we would expect Him as their priest in John 17 to pray for those for whom He would die the next day. But in John 17:9 Jesus said “... I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours.” The Arminian admits that Jesus did not pray for the world – that is so very plain – but how then would he die for those He declined to pray for?

If the atonement was for every soul in the population of the world, and then not all are saved, it must be limited in *power*. If it is for those God intended to save, and it does do so, it is not limited in power but in its *intention*. Some Arminian teachers are quite aware of this challenge to their doctrine, and so they say that the work of Christ on the cross does not save but makes all persons salvable. We say the death of Christ in the hands of God is effective to accomplish His will. We do not think that the sinner makes the cross effective by his believing, but that the cross is so effective it makes the elect believe. Jesus died for all our sins, thus He died to deliver us from our lack of repentance, from our unbelief, even from all the natural resistance we have to the gospel.

Because the Father gave His Son for us all, not sparing Him at the cross, He will most certainly and most graciously give with the gift of His Son “all things” (**Romans 8:32**). These additional things for “us all” include justification (8:33), Christ’s intercession (8:34), and the love of God from which we cannot be separated (8:35,37,39). We are delivered from His wrath (5:9), which simply means we are saved. And who will be saved? – all those for whom the Father gave His Son. If the results of the atonement are not universal, neither are the beneficiaries. Romans 8:32 deserves careful attention.

Arminian Objection 6: People can be saved, and then they may lose their salvation by turning away from the Lord. Thereby they lose Christ and eternal life.

Response to Objection 6 The Bible does speak of millions of covenant breakers. All of them had a precious spiritual heritage. Israel, when delivered from Egypt, had seen the power of God before their very eyes, yet they perished in their sin. This is addressed in Hebrews 3 & 4.

Centuries after the Exodus Psalm 95 warned Israel of the continuing danger of being lost. This shows that one can be part of the people of God and yet lose the salvation promised to them. Hebrews 3 & 4 draws heavily from this psalm. The bulk of the Israelites in the desert (1 Corinthians 10:5) chose to be hardhearted (3:7-11, 16). An unbelieving heart will cause one to fall away (3:12), while those who have truly come to share in Christ will hold their trust and confidence firm to the end (3:14). What is evident here for those who are not saved is not their loss of true faith but their persistent unbelief. The gospel message they heard did not benefit them, because they did not actually believe and thus they were not saved. Those with faith enter the rest of salvation (4:3). To enter God's rest means that such a person will not fall (4:10,11).

They had high exposure; they were part of the people of God who saw the Egyptian army drown. They were a holy nation, yet in spite of all this, with callous hearts they went astray, and so, rejected by God, they could not enter His rest. This is not an example of losing salvation once possessed, but of losing the salvation offered but never really received. When the Lord said, "They have not known my ways" (Psalm 95:10), it means they never ever believed. Later in Hebrews there is a strong emphasis on the promises of God. The simple response to them is faith, and faith when real believes before it sees. It also perseveres. (See 10:23, 36; 11:11,13,39.)

Those who belong to Christ are secure, kept by the power of God (1 Peter 1:3-5). Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:35-39). Judas was the son of destruction (John 17:12). Early in His ministry, Jesus said of him, "One of you is a devil" (John 6:70). He did not mean that one day Judas would become a devil, but that he was one already. Making a distinction between Judas and the other disciples, Jesus said, "... You [the others] are clean, but not every one of you" (John 13:10). Judas did not lose the salvation he never had. He was never converted; he failed to receive the salvation promised. With the other disciples he cast out demons, but the Lord warned:

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'" (Matthew 7:21-23)

Children, ... many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us. (1 John 2:18,19)

Arminian Objection 7: You say the saving call of God is irresistible. In other words, if God decides a person is going to be saved, she or he will be no matter what! However, if we cannot accept the gospel on our own, this means that people are saved or lost apart from their free will to decide the issue. If that is so, then man has been turned by God into a robot. God does not turn people into robots; Calvinists do.

Oh, no, no, no. Man does not gain slavery by God overpowering his rebellion! It is the opposite; man took on slavery when he sinned. He lost life and freedom. Death reigns in the lives of unsaved people (Romans 5:14, 17, 21). The sinner is hostile so that he cannot come, see, hear, or believe (John 3:3,5; 6:44; 8:43,47; 10:26,27; 12:39). Therefore, salvation can only come when God removes our blindness (2 Corinthians 4:3-6), and mercifully destroys our wilful resistance; only then we are free. Thanks be to the Lord.

God may grant repentance (Acts 11:18) leading to a knowledge of the truth, so that sinners may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, *after being captured by him to do his will* (2 Timothy 2:25,26). It is the devil who makes robots of human beings, not the Lord. God sets sinners free by making us His servants. When man's will is enslaved by a vicious foe, and God enters that heart and transforms his will, He gives the former "robot" freedom (Galatians 5:1). It is a deliverance. The Lord binds Satan (Matthew 12:28,29) and breaks into His kingdom, there to find His elect and set us free.

Our Arminian friends have not come to grips with how utterly crippling sin is to the human heart. The deadness of the sinner's heart can only be overcome by the life giving power of God.

Conclusion In Romans 8 a number of themes are closely related to Calvinist/Arminian differences: the love of Christ from which a believer cannot be separated, election, man's depraved hostility to God, and the specific benefits of the atoning work of Christ. Romans 8 gives assurance and the reason for it. This certainty is based in God's commitment to our salvation.

In our disagreements we must be careful to discover the real view of another Christian. But a misunderstanding might come because a fellow Christian wishes to defend the honor of God, as he sees the issues. I think Arminians may have good motives. To state it their way: Some think it is awful for anyone to present God as so contradictory that He violates the free will He gave to His creatures. Or, that a man does not believe for himself. After all, does not God call on all of us to repent and believe? And maybe worse, why even pursue evangelism when all the elect will be saved, no matter what we do? This shows, I think, that some fellow Christians are eager to preserve Biblical truth, yet they miss so much that Scripture clearly teaches. The Bible brings us to see these doctrines through God's eyes. What "makes sense" to our minds misses how sin has affected the sinner: he does not understand his plight! Arminians miss how wide is the range of God's saving grace both at the cross and in our hearts.

The solution is to accept all that the Lord has said in all of His Word. I think the conclusions reached in such a study will be: that from the outset God has initiated our salvation and executed His plan in detail – not just loving us in advance, but calling us, conquering our hearts, and forgiving our sins because Jesus died to redeem His people and bring us safely to live with Him forever. The gratitude is ours and the glory for all things is His.