

AN ASSEMBLIES OF GOD RESPONSE TO REFORMED THEOLOGY

POSITION PAPER

(ADOPTED BY THE GENERAL PRESBYTERY IN SESSION AUGUST 1 & 3, 2015)

The growing popularity of Reformed theology among younger ministers and ministerial students has caught the attention of the contemporary evangelical movement in the Americas and elsewhere. On the one hand, the love for Scripture and theology and an accompanying passion for Christ and His work is a source of great encouragement. On the other, there is some concern that in hastily embracing Reformed theology, some from more Wesleyan-Arminian backgrounds may not carefully have considered the essential differences between these respective traditions.

There is in fact an enduring philosophical debate over the balance between divine sovereignty and human responsibility that bears on this discussion. At one extreme, God, fate, or some other force is asserted to be the only active agent in the universe, with humans as powerless subjects being acted upon. At the other extreme, it is argued that humanity can do as it wills and does not answer to any higher power, for indeed, there may be none. Christianity rightly rejects both extremes as unbiblical. At the same time, sincere Christians assert differing balances between God's divine control and man's responsibility. Currently, the two main positions in Protestant Christianity are generally labeled Reformed theology and Arminian theology.

The diversity of various Reformed and Arminian groups must also be noted. Both groups encompass charismatics as well as cessationists, and many other expressions of theological difference. For many, the most noticeable and influential expression of Reformed theology is through those often called "Neo-Reformed."

This paper intends to identify in a respectful and irenic spirit the areas of agreement and difference, offering a basis for increased conversation, understanding, and also reasoned disagreement. Many among us have learned much in study and dialogue with esteemed Reformed teachers and friends whom we appreciate and admire, though we have come to different conclusions on certain aspects of personal salvation.

How It All Started

Reformed theology is often called Calvinism, after John Calvin (1509–1564). This designation is not entirely accurate. Many ideas associated with Reformed thinking find expression in the writings of Augustine more than a thousand years earlier. Calvin was succeeded by Theodore Beza (1519–1605), who significantly restructured Calvin's ideas. After Beza's death, the Synod of Dort (1618–1619) gave Reformed theology its essential and current form. Thus, much of what is called Calvinism, or Reformed theology, actually developed after Calvin died. Furthermore, Calvin's central concept was God's grace. For him, God's sovereignty was primarily expressed in grace rather than in election to salvation and/or damnation. Many historians and theologians, including a number that identify themselves as Reformed, agree that Calvin would not necessarily be a "Calvinist" in full agreement with mainline Reformed theology.

The position most typically held in the Assemblies of God is called Arminianism, after Jacobus Arminius (1560–1609). Arminianism would receive further development by John Wesley, and some may be more familiar with and accepting of the Wesleyan rather than the Arminian label. Arminius had been a student of Beza and was commended by him. In the process of defending Reformed concepts, he ended up disagreeing with Calvin and Beza on the topics of irresistible grace, predestination, and free will. After his death, Arminius’s followers further developed his thinking in the *Five Articles of the Remonstrants* (also called *Five Articles of Remonstrance*) in 1610.

Reformed theologians responded at length at the Synod of Dort about nine years later with a document called *Canons of Dort*. This response contained many “articles” and “rejections of errors” for each of the *Five Articles of the Remonstrants*. A more succinct summary came into use in the early 1900s, often referred to by the TULIP acronym and also labeled the Five Points of Calvinism. Not all Reformed scholars agree that these Five Points precisely convey the *Canons*, but they are a useful framework to express the essential differences between the classic Arminian and Reformed positions.

The first Baptists, in seventeenth-century England, were labeled as “General” for their teaching of “general” or unlimited atonement and were broadly speaking Arminian. The “Particular Baptists,” who adhered more to Reformed thought, came into existence somewhat later. John and Charles Wesley became prominent supporters of Arminian theology, bringing it into a dominant position in American theology. By contrast, George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards held to Reformed thinking. Even so, Wesley and Whitefield were friends and coworkers, their theological differences notwithstanding.

In the American denominational landscape, Presbyterian churches are almost exclusively Reformed, as are denominations with the word “Reformed” in their name. The United Church of Christ is another prominent American denomination that is Reformed in heritage. Methodists, most Baptists (other than “Particular” or “Reformed” Baptists), and charismatic and Pentecostal denominations tend to be Arminian. Many denominations, including Anglicans/Episcopalians, include a range of perspectives. Most Southern Baptists are Arminian, with some holding to the perseverance of the saints (“eternal security”). Others are more Reformed, an increasingly accepted position for many younger Southern Baptist pastors.

Reformed thinkers have produced a greater volume of writing, particularly in theology. This results from what might be called the Reformed “construct.” Arminian, or Wesleyan theology, does not demand a complex philosophical argument, as it seems to more naturally fit a straightforward reading of the Bible and real life. That is, human experience and our understanding of God and Scripture agree to the point that the Arminian stance does not require the creation of a complex theological system to justify an evangelistic appeal to all persons. Reformed thinking, by contrast, starts with a theological approach to what God is like (particularly His sovereignty contrasted with man’s inability) and then constructs a system around that idea.

The “Standard” Theological Distinctives

Arminianism (as derived from the *Five Articles of Remonstrance*, 1610):

1. The salvation or ultimate condemnation of a person is “conditioned” by or is the result of the God-given faith or unbelief of that person;

2. The divinely provided atonement is sufficient for all persons but is applied only to those who trust in Christ. Thus it is limited to believers, not by God but by the person who trusts or fails to trust;
3. No person can save himself or herself. Without the help of the Holy Spirit, no one can respond to God's will that all be saved;
4. God's grace, applied by the Holy Spirit, is the sole source of good and of human salvation, yet this grace may be resisted; and
5. God's grace in the life of the believer enables resistance of sin and Christ will keep them from falling. Whether one who has experienced this grace can ultimately forsake God "must be more particularly determined."

Reformed Theology (with commentary):

The most recognizable form of mainline Reformed theology is expressed in the TULIP acronym, as given below:

- T Total Depravity:** every person is enslaved by sin and unable to choose God. This does not mean that every person is as evil as they could be or that there is an absolute absence of anything one might call "good," but that every part of human life has been degraded by sin.
- Both Arminian and Reformed thinkers agree on this issue of human inability to save oneself. No mainline system of Arminian or Wesleyan theology believes that persons are of themselves able to enter into right relationship with Him.
- U Unconditional Election:** God has chosen from eternity those He will save. This choice is based solely in His mercy rather than any foreseen merit or faith in those chosen. By not choosing the others, God thus also chooses to withhold mercy from some, effectively condemning them by this choice.
- Reformed theologians argue that all humans have earned God's wrath (see "Total Depravity") and that the salvation of any person is thus purely a demonstration of God's grace. Arminian theologians believe that God's grace is granted to all persons to enable them to respond in faith. All humans will ultimately bear responsibility not only for their condition prior to this response but also for their acceptance or rejection of this enabling grace.
- L Limited Atonement:** the death of Christ paid the price only for the sins of the elect. This limitation does not mean that the atonement of Christ is not sufficient to save all, but it is intended only for the elect.
- This is one of the areas of greatest divergence among modern Reformed thinkers. Some assert that the Atonement benefited all but does not provide eternal salvation for all. Others, sometimes labeled "Four Point Calvinists," do not subscribe to this limiting of atonement at all. At Dort, the consensus seems to have been that Christ's death was sufficient for all but only efficacious for some. Arminians argued that the atonement is potentially effective for all with its actual effectiveness based on the individual's choice which is enabled by the Spirit ("prevenient grace"), and

God's foreknowledge of this choice. The Synod of Dort drafters argued that the atonement is effective based solely on God's election.

- It is important to note that both Arminians and mainline Reformed thinkers agree that the gospel should be preached or offered to all. In Arminian theology, this is because the presentation of the gospel is a crucial element in the working of God's enabling grace. Most Reformed thinkers (other than those designated as "hyper-Calvinist") believe that all should be offered the gospel, as only God knows who the elect are.

I Irresistible Grace: those whom God has determined to save will inevitably come to saving faith. The work of the Holy Spirit in this regard cannot ultimately be resisted, though there may be resistance by the elect prior to their ultimate response.

- This goes along with the belief in Unconditional Election, asserting that there is essentially no human agency in responding to God's call to salvation. The Arminian perspective here is clearly otherwise: grace can indeed be resisted.

P Perseverance of the Saints: all those who have been chosen by God (the "elect") will continue in faith. Any who "fall away" either were never among the elect or will repent and return to a life of faith.

- While the Remonstrants chose not to affirm or dismiss the possibility of ultimately forsaking God, most current Wesleyan or Arminian thinkers agree that just as God does not force persons into relationship with himself, so also He does not force those who change their mind to stay in that relationship.
- Arminian thinkers do not believe that the faith of the individual as such saves them. Rather Spirit-enabled faith accepts God's salvation. This is not a works-based salvation, either for entry into ("election") or for maintenance of ("perseverance") the Christian life.
- The Assemblies of God does not accept the doctrine of "Eternal Security" and in particular the "once saved, always saved" extension of that teaching. At the same time, "eternal insecurity" (any idea that one must be saved over and over again, or is always at risk of losing their salvation) does not accord with Scripture or with Assemblies of God belief. The believer's salvation is secure in Christ but can be abandoned by willful choice. (See the Assemblies of God position paper on this topic.)

Points of Agreement

As the primary general issue of difference between Reformed and Arminian believers has to do with God's and humans' roles in salvation, this is the focus of this discussion of points of agreement and disagreement. There are other issues that transcend soteriology and they will be explored under "More Recent Developments" below.

It is important to recognize that both Reformed and Arminian groups, especially in their moderate expressions, are fully Christian. Holding a high view of Scripture, both affirm that humankind is in need of salvation, that God alone can provide salvation, and that Christ is God's provision for our need. In fact, members of both groups are usually together in evangelism and discipleship, though differing on certain points of theology.

Points of Disagreement

The primary differences lie in what may easily be construed as the removal of human responsibility (particularly with regard to irresistible grace and election), the logical inference that missions work is not needed or desirable, the hopelessness of reprobation, and the haughtiness of perseverance.

Reformed thinking taken to the extreme has led some to conclude that evangelism may not be necessary since it is entirely a work of God in which humans do not participate. If election is indeed unconditional and grace irresistible, then missional efforts may seem irrelevant. This belief fails to reflect the life and activity of the Early Church as well as Christ's commands to go to the ends of the earth preaching the gospel and making disciples. In addition, if salvation and reprobation are entirely activities of God without human choice, God is dishonored and made to appear unjust, indeed cruel. Why seem to offer a gift that cannot be accepted? It is difficult to see as "good" a supposedly loving God who elects some and passes over, or even deliberately damns, others. Such a view damages the biblical presentation of God as loving, kind, and just.

If all is truly preordained and God's choice is the only active agent in salvation, it might be argued that the sinner should not be blamed for God's decision to reprobate him or her. Ultimate responsibility in such a case seems to lie with God and not the person, for the individual is helpless to choose and should therefore not suffer for what was imposed on them. Removal of ability carries with it removal of responsibility.

A further issue relates to perseverance taken to an extreme, which is sometimes identified as "once saved, always saved." The Assemblies of God position paper on Eternal Security offers further expansion of the issues and dangers of this extreme.

It must be noted that there are dangers to the extreme expressions of both groups. One extreme form of Arminianism can be labeled Pelagianism, where believers seem essentially to save themselves by the quality of their life and faith. An extreme form of Reformed theology is sometimes called Hyper-Calvinism, where the individual, as noted above, has no involvement in either salvation or reprobation. Neither of these is biblically supportable, or a satisfactory explanation for the realities of life.

It must also be noted that there is no single expression of either Arminian or Reformed theology that is definitive for all who identify as either group. Therefore, caution is to be urged against stereotyping and vilifying either group. As previously noted, there is much in common between believers who are identified as Reformed and those who are Arminian, and there is broad cooperation, particularly within the English-speaking Christian world. This was very evident already in the eighteenth century with the cooperation between the Wesleys (Arminian) and Whitefield (Reformed), and it continues today through such parachurch organizations as the National Association of Evangelicals. We also have broad agreement on the doctrine of Scripture, Trinity, Incarnation, the nature of the Atonement, and other points. We agree more than we disagree.

More Recent Developments (or Branches of the Tree)

While the core difference between Reformed and Arminian thinkers (including the Assemblies of God in the latter) has to do with soteriology, there are other points of divergence that often adhere to Reformed theology and in particular the Neo-Reformed movement. Many of these so-called “Young, Restless, and Reformed” thinkers do not tightly hold to all five aspects of TULIP, with Limited Atonement as the most commonly questioned tenet. Thus, some are identified as 4 or 3.5 point Calvinists. Others among the Neo-Reformed are more severe in their soteriology than many moderate Calvinists, again highlighting the danger of considering all those identified as Reformed as a homogenous group.

While the Reformed movements in general have been cessationist in pneumatology, rejecting present-day manifestations of the Holy Spirit, there are some in the Neo-Reformed ranks who are open to charismata or speak in tongues themselves.

A fairly consistent issue promoted by Neo-Calvinists is complementarianism, with its rejection in some cases of any ministerial role for women, and in other cases a sharply limited sphere of ministry for women. This is an issue on which the Assemblies of God disagrees, as expressed in our position paper on Women in Ministry.

Conclusion

While there are clear distinctions between those who self-identify as Arminian and as Reformed, there is indeed more that unites than divides us in theology. The extremes of both positions are to be rejected. While individual teaching and preaching of pastors in both camps may be controversial at times, we agree on the imperative of presenting the gospel to the lost. It is when Reformed thinking is extended and taken to the extreme of removing all human response that we must reject it and remain true to the call and example of Christ and His disciples, calling all to Him and genuinely offering salvation to all.