

God's sovereignty in the teachings of Calvin and Arminius: implications for the doctrine of judgment - Part II

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In the first part of this study, we presented a historical review of Calvin's idea of sovereignty and how Arminius and his followers opposed that idea of predestination. This second part attempts to explain Arminius's concept of sovereignty in comparison with Calvin's, and how these ideas can shed light on how the doctrine of the last judgment is understood.

Sovereignty in Arminius' Theology in Comparison with Calvin

Arminius was not against all of Calvin's theology, but rather only on a few points. Both theologians share a common background and both are part of the Reformed tradition.¹ Therefore, it is possible to compare them on this similar basis. González explains this relation:

Although eventually 'Arminian' came to be a synonym of anti-Calvinist, the reason for this is not that Arminius was opposed to Calvin's teachings in general, but that both he and orthodox Calvinism so centered their attention on the issues of predestination, limited atonement, and the like, that they lost sight of the fact that the controversy, rather than being a debate between Calvinists and anti-Calvinists, was a disagreement

¹ Olson points out that if "Reformed" is limited to those who adhere to the three traditional symbols of unity (Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of the Synod of Dort), that would exclude the Presbyterian Church and many Congregationalists and Baptists. The broadest definition of reformed "includes everyone who claims to be Reformed and can demonstrate some historical connection with the Swiss and French wing of the Protestant Reformation-even if his or her theology is a radical revision of Calvin's, Zwingli's, and Bucer's theology". Roger E. Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 44. See also Roger E. Olson, *Against Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 26-37. For a historical study of the place of Arminius in the Reformed tradition, see Richard A. Muller, "Arminius and the Reformed Tradition," *Westminster Theological Journal* 70, no. 1 (2008): 19-48.

between two different groups both of which were deeply influenced by Calvin.²

Both theologians have several ideas and concepts in common, either in their methodology or their theological content. Indeed, Arminius, like Calvin, can be defined both as a scholastic and biblical theologian.³ Both of them wanted to base their ideas on the Bible and express them with logical coherence.

With this in mind, it is to say that, contrary to what some Calvinists thought,⁴ Arminius did believe in God's sovereignty because he has "freedom from the control of one who commands," and "freedom from the government of a superior".⁵ For Arminius, nature was in God's control, because "through creation, dominion over all things which have been created by himself, belongs to God".⁶ This is the "right of the Creator".⁷ This is seen especially so regarding God's Providence, because "all things, according to their essences, quantities, qualities, relations, actions, passions, places, times, stations and habits, are subject to its governance, conservation, and direction".⁸ This idea seems to provide a common ground for the theology of Calvin and Arminius.

However, it is undeniable that there are some differences between them, and even the same words can have different meanings when they are used by one or the other. Regarding the concept of sovereignty, this is certainly true, and this is the reason for Calvinists' accusation that Arminius didn't believe in God's sovereignty, as Olson remarks: "when Calvinists say that Arminians do not believe in God's sovereignty, they undoubtedly are working with an a priori notion of sovereignty such that no concept but their own can possibly pass muster".⁹ Both believed in the

² González, *History of Christian Thought*, vol. 3, 255.

³ Keith D. Stanglin and Thomas H. McCall, *Jacob Arminius: Theologian of Grace* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012), 47.

⁴ Olson, after mentioning some writers that have affirmed that Arminians don't believe in God's sovereignty, states that "simply denying that Arminians believe in God's sovereignty... is so blatantly false that it boggles Arminians' minds". Olson, *Arminian Theology*, 115-116.

⁵ Bangs, *Arminius*, 340.

⁶ James Arminius, *The Works of James Arminius*, trans., James Nichols and William Nichols, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1986; reprint, 1996), Disputation XXVII, 2:365.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, A Letter to Hippolytus a Collibus, 2:696.

⁹ Olson, *Arminian Theology*, 116.

same idea, but with a different meaning. In this sense, “the disagreement is not over its *significance*, but over its *definition*”.¹⁰

When this particular Arminian definition of God's sovereignty is analyzed, it is possible to see some ideas in which there is a certain degree of disagreement with Calvin. These ideas, following the logical order in Arminius' thought, are God's foreknowledge, his Providence, and his nature or character. This section analyzes them and establishes how they contrast with the teachings of Calvin.

Sovereignty and Foreknowledge in Predestination

The most evident difference between Arminius and Calvin seems to be the role of God's foreknowledge in predestination. As mentioned, for Calvin God has complete foreknowledge of the future but does not use this attribute in his decision regarding the salvation of people. He wanted to preserve God's grace and sovereignty in salvation operated free of any human participation. In contrast, according to Arminius, the decree of predestination –although still determined and eternal– includes the will of man and God uses his attribute of foreknowledge in this decision.¹¹ For him, this is part of God's grace, because human will needs the special intervention of the divine “preventive grace,” enabling it to choose.¹² Both believed in God's foreknowledge, “their only quarrel was over its place in the scheme”.¹³

Thus, for Arminius “predestination of individuals is conditional and based on God's foreknowledge of what they will freely do with the liberty God gives them”.¹⁴ Although this kind of knowledge is “eternal,

¹⁰ Cottrell, “Nature of Divine Sovereignty,” 97.

¹¹ Rice highlights the fact that Arminius was reluctant to offer a coherent explanation of how God's foreknowledge works, which he declared not to understand at all. See Arminius, *Works*, Conference with Junius, 3:64-65; Rice, “Divine Foreknowledge,” 122.

¹² Bangs states that “there is nothing here of grace as an *assistance* given to a man who is only weakened by sin,” in the sense that without this preventive grace man cannot be able to make the right choices, because he has not only a weakened will but one of total depravity. Bangs, *Arminius*, 341.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 353.

¹⁴ Olson, *Story of Christian Theology*, 467. Some theologians argue that for Arminius, God's predestination “is based on the divine *scientia media*, that is, that God knows what a person would do in any given set of circumstances, even if that set is never actualized,” Keith D. Stanglin, *Arminius on the Assurance of Salvation: The Context, Roots, and Shape of the Leiden Debate, 1603-1609* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2007), 86. The idea of *scientia media* or “middle foreknowledge” is associated with the catholic Spanish theologian Luis de Molina. However, some Arminians reject this connection and establish some

unchangeable and infinite”¹⁵ for God, he doesn’t know all things equally, because the knowledge of future things is in nature “posterior to any act of God’s will concerning those things”.¹⁶ This means that “both God’s knowledge and his will are responsive to creaturely actions”.¹⁷

For this reason, Arminius proposed a new order of four decrees, with which the intention “to give due attention to reconciling divine omniscience, grace, and human freedom”.¹⁸ He established the person of Christ as the center of the election and placed God’s foreknowledge as the basis of salvation. This last is explained in the context of the fourth decree, by which God decreed to save or reject certain particular persons. Arminius explains:

This decree has its foundation in the foreknowledge of God, by which he knew from all eternity those individuals who would, through his preventing grace, believe, and, through his subsequent grace would persevere, according to the before described administration of those means which are suitable and proper for conversion and faith; and, by which foreknowledge, he likewise knew those who would not believe and persevere.¹⁹

Arminius seeks to avoid the deterministic view of God in which predestination supposes the will of creatures as already determined by God. For him, when “determined” means that freedom disappears, it is a false and absurd idea, “and preparing the way for many blasphemies”.²⁰ This point is also “related to his concern for the justice of God,”²¹ which is the topic of the next section.

God's character and sovereignty

differences between Molinism and Arminianism. See William den Boer, *God's Twofold Love: The Theology of Jacob Arminius (1559-1609)* (KG, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010), 144; William L. Craig, “Middle Knowledge, a Calvinist-Arminian Rapprochement?,” in *The Grace of God, the Will of Man: A Case for Arminianism*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1989), 141-164; Olson, *Arminian Theology*, 195-197.

¹⁵ Arminius, *Works*, Conference with Junius, 3:64.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3:65.

¹⁷ Rice, “Divine Foreknowledge,” 122.

¹⁸ Stanglin, *Arminius on the Assurance of Salvation*, 87.

¹⁹ Arminius, *Works*, Declaration of Sentiments, 1:653-654.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, Apology against Thirty-one Defamatory Articles, 1:761.

²¹ Boer, *God's Twofold Love*, 146.

Arminius has been pointed out as the “theologian of the justice of God or... theologian of the twofold love of God”.²² In his *Declaration of Sentiments*, Arminius established that one of the reasons for rejecting unconditional election in the doctrine of predestination as taught by his opponents –and perhaps his strongest objection–,²³ was the fact that it was “repugnant to the nature of God, but particularly to those attributes of his nature by which he performs and manages all things, –his wisdom, justice, and goodness”.²⁴ In his conference with Junius, Arminius called “blasphemers against the goodness and justice of God”²⁵ those who consider sin as necessary to have been committed, because “God can indeed do what He wills with His own, but he cannot will to do with His own what He cannot rightfully to do. For His will is circumscribed within the bounds of justice”.²⁶

This implies a rupture from Calvinism because he had set God's will as the highest norm of justice, where God is law unto himself. Arminius shifted this emphasis setting God's will under his nature of justice, because “the relationship between God's will, his freedom, and his justice is such that justice precedes the will”.²⁷ For both Calvin and Arminius everything God does is just and good, and he is who determines the norm of what is right and wrong. The difference for Calvin is that whatever God does performs good and right because his will is the moral norm and law; while for Arminius, his will must submit to what he has established as good and right. This doesn't mean that God is limited by human justice, but rather that he is consequent with the same terms that he set up. Therefore, “although God has the right and the power to do whatever he wishes with any creature, God's character as supreme love and justice makes certain acts of God inconceivable”.²⁸

Moreover, the order of decrees that Arminius proposed related to his concept of God and intended to be “more consistent with resolving the problem or evil”.²⁹ His concern was that man retained his moral

²² William den Boer, “Jacobus Arminius: Theologian of God's Twofold Love,” in *Arminius, Arminianism, and Europe: Jacobus Arminius (1559/60-1609)*, ed. Th. Marius van Leeuwen, Keith D. Stanglin, and Marijke Tolsma (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2009), 25.

²³ Olson, *Story of Christian Theology*, 467.

²⁴ Arminius, *Works*, 1:623.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, Conference with Junius, 3:208.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 3:44.

²⁷ Boer, “Jacobus Arminius,” 35.

²⁸ Olson, *Arminian Theology*, 120.

²⁹ Stanglin, *Arminius on the Assurance of Salvation*, 87.

responsibility, and God was not designated as the originator of sin”.³⁰ This aspect of “the safeguarding of God’s justice even forms the most important theme and context from which his entire theology must be understood”.³¹ One of his ideas for highlighting God’s justice is that Arminius called “God’s twofold love:”

Arminius identifies the twofold love of God as the foundation of religion in general, and the Christian religion in particular. The first and most important love is for justice, and the second and subordinate love is for humankind. The latter is subordinate because there is one thing that limits it: God’s love for justice. In other words, God can love a person only when his justice has been satisfied concerning that person. And when that is indeed the case, God will also certainly love that man or woman. Arminius goes so far as to argue that any and every form of religion is impossible if it does not maintain God’s twofold love, in that order, and with that mutual relationship.³²

The difference with Calvin is notorious. While “for Reformed theology, God’s sovereignty means he has a right to do with creation whatever he wills, and he is righteous in so doing,”³³ for Arminius God cannot do something contrary to his character. This is probably the main difference between him and Calvin. While the former tried to preserve both God’s sovereignty and character, the latter highlighted only his sovereignty, which implies a tendency to determinism. In fact, “the true heart of Arminian theology is God’s loving and just character; the formal principle of Arminianism is the universal will of God for salvation”.³⁴

God’s sovereignty and his providence

Regarding providence, while Arminius “affirmed a typical Calvinist doctrine of providence,” he “broke ranks with Reformed theology ... in his rejection of divine predetermination”.³⁵ In fact, Arminius granted that God is in control of everything, but with some observations about determinism concerning evil. While “God both wills and performs good acts... He only permits those which are evil”.³⁶ His

³⁰ Eric H. Cosee, “Arminius and Rome,” in *Arminius, Arminianism, and Europe: Jacobus Arminius (1559/60-1609)*, ed. Th. Marius van Leeuwen, Keith D. Stanglin, and Marijke Tolsma, Brill’s Series in Church History (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2009), 84.

³¹ Boer, “Jacobus Arminius,” 31.

³² *Ibid.*, 40.

³³ Stanglin, *Arminius on the Assurance of Salvation*, 218.

³⁴ Olson, *Arminian Theology*, 97.

³⁵ Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 291.

³⁶ Arminius, *Works*, 1:658.

concern in this aspect is manifested: “not to conclude from this concession that God is the cause of sin”.³⁷

In this sense, “classical Arminianism goes far beyond belief in general providence to include affirmation of God's intimate and direct involvement in every event of nature and history,” and again, “the only thing the Arminian view of God’s sovereignty necessarily excludes is God’s authorship of sin and evil”.³⁸ This rejection of divine determinism relates to human freedom regarding one’s own decisions. God can *direct* human choices and actions through the power of persuasion, but not *control* them.³⁹ Contrary to Calvin, for Arminius man can resist God’s grace and makes his own choices.

Arminius explains the divine participation in human choices and even bad things through his teaching of divine concurrence, in which “the creature cannot act without God’s permission and aid”.⁴⁰ God is not simply a spectator, because for him God is always the first cause of, whatever happens, even sin.⁴¹ He declares that

Divine Concurrence is necessary to produce every act; because nothing can have any entity except the First and Chief Being, who immediately produces that entity. The Concurrence of God is not his immediate influx into a second or inferior cause, but it is an action of God immediately [*influens*] flowing into the effect of the creature, so that the same effect in the same entire action may be produced [*simul*] simultaneously by God and the creature.⁴²

This maintains intact human freedom and God as the cause of everything but discards the “hard” version of determinism in which men cannot act freely. Man can act by himself, but always under divine guidance. Besides, there is a “soft” version of determinism that is implied in Arminius’ theology:

He also rejected determinism in its “soft” form: an act can be free yet determined so long as the causal conditions do not constrain the will; rather, human beings act under their own will and nature and thus possess

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Olson, *Arminian Theology*, 116.

³⁹ For Arminius this is done through the presence of the Holy Spirit, who bestows preventive grace which enables man to believe, as well as salvific grace for complete salvation. In this sense, human will is disabled for accepting God’s grace without this special intervention of the Holy Spirit. In any case, God’s grace is always resistible. See *ibid.*, 158-166.

⁴⁰ Roger E. Olson, “Arminianism is God-centered Theology” <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2010/11/arminianism-is-god-centered-theology/> (accessed February 6 2014).

⁴¹ Olson, *Arminian Theology*, 121-122.

⁴² Arminius, *Works*, Disputation X, 2:183.

significant freedom. Arminius believed there is a contradiction between human freedom and causation of any kind. No causal conditions exist that can decisively incline human beings to will one thing rather than another.⁴³

This implies a difference in how God governs his creation. For Arminius, God's control is not always *de facto* –as for Calvin–, but always *de jure*, that is, “by right and power if not already completely exercised,” because “God can and does exercise control, but not to the exclusion of human liberty and not in such a way as to make him the author of sin and evil”.⁴⁴ According to Olson, this is not a lessening of God's power and sovereignty, because for Arminius and the Remonstrants the sovereignty is “over his creation including specific providence and all underscore God's power limited only by his goodness,” and “that God limits himself by no means implies that he is *essentially* limited”.⁴⁵ He expresses it in this way: “God is in charge but not in control”.⁴⁶

The summary of this section about Arminius' concept of sovereignty in contrast to Calvin', is that they have similarities and dissimilarities. Both accept God's sovereignty, that his foreknowledge is eternal and infinite, that what he does is right and just, that he is in control of all things of the creation, and that men's necessity of grace to be saved. Nevertheless, what these things mean and how they operate are very different in the thought of both theologians. For Calvin, God's foreknowledge is caused by his decree; for Arminius, his decree is caused by his foreknowledge. In Calvin, God's character is linked and defined by his will; in Arminius, his will cannot be contrary to his character. For the French reformer, God's will controls everything, even human choices; for the Dutch, God is self-limited regarding men's freedom, but always present in his actions and choices.

Overall, it is to say that “the debate surrounding Arminius, John Wesley, and their Calvinistic counterparts was not primarily about salvation but about the nature of God”.⁴⁷ Arminius view of God's sovereignty is not deterministic. His decisions about predestination and providence are based on his foreknowledge of the free choices of his creatures. Thus, “though he embraced the Reformed doctrine of

⁴³ Allison, *Historical Theology*, 292.

⁴⁴ Olson, *Arminian Theology*, 117.

⁴⁵ Olson, “Arminianism is God-centered Theology”.

⁴⁶ Roger E. Olson, “Arminianism and Providence” <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2014/03/arminianism-and-providence/> (accessed March 11 2014).

⁴⁷ John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Divine Providence*, 2nd. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 255.

providence, Arminius strongly distanced himself from the common linking of divine providence with the doctrine of the divine decree".⁴⁸ The cause of this is his concern for God's character. Olson remarks: "Arminius's and Arminians' rejection of absolute monergism and especially double predestination... was based on *their vision of the biblical portrayal of God's character as loving and good*".⁴⁹ Arminius's theological system is synergist because God's sovereignty takes into account men's decisions in matters of providence and salvation.

Conclusions

This section described the historical background and the concept of God's sovereignty in Arminius' theology. The historical review demonstrated that the Dutch reformer reacted against the high Calvinism taught by Beza and Gomarus, and eventually rejected the determinism implied in the doctrine of double predestination. After his death, his ideas were defended by the Remonstrants and eventually rejected by the Synod of Dort.

When the concept of God's sovereignty is analyzed and compared with Calvin's, some similar concepts and methodologies are found, but with a different meanings. These differences find their explanation in the different emphasis of both theologians. While Calvin set God's will and sovereignty as the final cause of everything, Arminius stressed God's loving and just character in this position, as shown in his consideration of God's foreknowledge of free decisions of men as the basis for salvation and providence. The system of Calvin was monergistic because only the grace and the will of God is what causes everything. Arminius's theology is synergistic because providence and salvation are the results both of God's actions and humanity's decisions.

Implications for the doctrine of Judgement

This section seeks to establish the implications of the concept of God's sovereignty in Calvin and Arminius in the doctrine of judgment. To reach this objective, we will analyze the relationship between God's sovereignty and Judgment. Then we will engage some of these implications in Calvin's and Arminius's theological systems.

Relation between God's Sovereignty and Judgment

⁴⁸ Allison, *Historical Theology*, 292.

⁴⁹ Roger E. Olson, "Responses to Paul Helm," in *Perspectives on the Doctrine of God: 4 views*, ed. Bruce A. Ware (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2008), 55.

Every theological system involves a closed relation among all doctrines encompassed in it. The doctrines of God and Judgment are not the exception. The doctrine of God is the ontological basis for such kind of system and affects the understanding of the whole doctrinal corpus.⁵⁰ This section treats the relation between one aspect of the doctrine of God (sovereignty) and a specific doctrine (judgment), with the presumption that different nuances of this aspect of God will lead to different understandings of the eschatological judgment.

For that reason, although all theologians who take the Bible as their epistemological starting point support some kind of doctrine of judgment, there are different interpretations of it. The concern here is not about its existence or not, but rather the theological and soteriological meaning of divine sovereignty. As the concept of divine sovereignty was already analyzed, this relation also involves at least three key theological concepts. They are the nature or character of God, his providence, and salvation. The first is the basis for the discussion of the other two, and the last two give the content for the former.

The judgment as a revelation of God's character

Judgment is a revelation of who God is. This point is recognized by Calvinists and Arminian theologians. In fact, for many of them, this is the only meaning of the eschatological judgment, especially for those who have a Calvinist approach. If salvation and providence are monergistic, that is, it depends only on God's will and sovereignty, the eschatological judgment is just a revelation of divine sovereignty, power, glory, and majesty. Thiessen explains:

The whole philosophy of future judgments rests upon the sovereign right of God to punish disobedience and the personal right of the individual to plead his case in court. Though God is sovereign, as judge of all the earth, he will do right (Gen. 18:25). He will do this not to submit to an external law but as the expression of his character.⁵¹

Within the same line, several theologians realize that God's absolute sovereignty is incongruent with the idea of a judge who decides

⁵⁰ Several theologians recognize this fact. Fernando Canale says: "The way we understand divine reality is very important because our views of this issue will directly determine our understanding of divine activities," see Fernando Luis Canale, *Basic Elements of Christian Theology: Scripture Replacing Tradition* (Berrien Spring, MI: Andrews University Lithothec, 2005), 40. Millard Erickson also points out: "The doctrine of God is the most important from the standpoint of ontology, since God is the ultimate reality, the source and sustainer of all that is". Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 480.

⁵¹ Henry C. Thiessen and Vernon D. Doerksen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979; reprint, 1989), 387.

men's destinies and describes it as a revelatory event about God's character and attributes. Augustus Strong, for example, presents the last judgment as the "final and complete vindication of God's righteousness," which "will be accomplished by making known to the universe the character of all men, and by warding to them corresponding destinies".⁵² Berkhof also agrees that the judgment has the purpose of "displaying before all rational creatures the declarative glory of God in a formal, forensic act, which magnifies, on the one hand, His holiness and righteousness, and on the other hand, His grace and mercy".⁵³ Grudem states that "one of the great blessings of the final judgment will be that saints and angels will see demonstrated in millions of lives the pure justice of God, and this will be a source of praise to him for all eternity".⁵⁴

Other theologians don't consider judgment as a revelation of God's character, but point out some of his attributes as the final explanation of why judgment is done. Thus, Rolland McCune says that "the intrinsic nature of God demands that there be a final setting to rights of all moral imperfections and violations. The absolute and perfect moral order established in God's nature (i.e., His moral attributes) necessitates that right be rewarded and wrong be punished".⁵⁵

Fritz Guy presents this fact using clear and logical reasoning. He states that there are three ideas that Christian theology must affirm but they constitute a logical difficulty. These are divine love (character), divine governance (sovereignty), and divine judgment. The solution for the paradox is that one of them must be modified or reinterpreted in light of the Bible. For example, if God is love and wants the best for his creatures (salvation), since he is completely sovereign, the idea of judgment is affected because God should save everybody (universalism). On the other hand, if God is sovereign and some people are destroyed in the judgment, the idea of God's character is affected because he has to choose arbitrarily who is going to be saved (predestination). He proposes that divine character and judgment should be preserved, and the idea of sovereignty reinterpreted in the light of divine love, giving place to man's free will.⁵⁶

Setting apart the idea of universalism, this kind of reasoning highlights that the main difference between Calvinism and Arminianism

⁵² Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 1023.

⁵³ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 731.

⁵⁴ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1147.

⁵⁵ McCune, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, 410.

⁵⁶ Fritz Guy, "The Universality of God's Love," in *The Grace of God, the Will of Man: A Case for Arminianism*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1989), 31-33.

is the relation between God's sovereignty and character. Therefore, depending on the concept one has of the relation between God's sovereignty and character, this is reflected in one's interpretation of God's actions, especially through the eschatological judgment. For those who have a Calvinist perspective, the judgment especially reveals God's attributes of greatness, and those who have an Arminian view tend to see God's attributes of goodness through this same event.⁵⁷ The preconceived idea of God is made evident in the final result of the judgment.

Also, this reasoning characterizes the controversy in terms of monergism and synergism. If God's sovereignty has priority over his character, the resulting theological system is monergism. If God's loving and relational character is over his sovereignty, his acts in providence and salvation must be understood as synergism. In other words, synergism is the result of God's relational character that considers men's will.

This implies a reinterpretation of the idea of sovereignty, which does not "mean that people are without a significant and thus responsible amount of human freedom. On the contrary, God's sovereignty enables people by grace to respond to God in faith and thus become reconciled with God".⁵⁸ This is the solution to the problem that some theologians like Ben Witherington find in reformed theology and biblical interpretation:

Reformed exegetes have a hard time coming to grips with the paradox of a God who is both sovereign and free, and yet somehow so exercises that sovereignty and limits his freedom that he has made it possible for human beings to have and exercise a measure of freedom as well, including in matters of salvation. They have a hard time understanding that holy love does not involve determinism, however subtle. Indeed love, if it is real love, must be freely given and freely received, for God has chosen to relate to us as persons, not as automata. They have a hard time dealing with the idea that God programmed into the system a certain amount of indeterminacy, risk, and freedom. And maybe, just maybe the good old Evangelical lust for certainty leads us all to too quickly fill in gaps and silences of Scripture, driving us to bad exegesis.⁵⁹

This controversy between monergism and synergism set the basis for the discussion regarding providence and salvation in the eschatological judgment. The kind of God that these divine activities

⁵⁷ Guy, defending the Arminian view, writes that "in the character of God love is more important than control," and that "love is more fundamental than, and prior to, justice or power". *Ibid.*, 33, 35.

⁵⁸ Thorsen, *Calvin vs. Wesley*, Kindle Edition, Appendix: More ACURA than TULIP, Position 3559-3561.

⁵⁹ Ben Witherington, *The Problem with Evangelical Theology: Testing the Exegetical Foundations of Calvinism, Dispensationalism, and Wesleyanism* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2005), 5.

reveal depends on the ontological presupposition of the reality of God. The next sections explore these topics.

Synergistic sovereignty and God's providence in the judgment

As Olson rightly states, “in classical Christian thought, God’s sovereignty is expressed most generally in the doctrine of providence”.⁶⁰ This providence is manifested in three ways or categories: “Preserving or sustaining, concurring, and governing”.⁶¹ While a monergism sets God as the only explanation of everything that happens, a synergistic (relational and loving) view of God’s sovereignty gives to the acts of God’s providence some special nuances. The eschatological judgment is not the exception.

On one side, a monergistic view of the judgment exalts the sovereign position of God over creatures. This is why Charles Hodge states that the judgment shows “that men in this world are subject to the moral government of God”.⁶² Surprisingly, even an Arminian theologian as John Miley presents a similar position in a vague description of the judgment:

The length of the time is not revealed, and we have no means of knowing what it shall be. Nor can we know anything of the manner of the judgment. It is represented as in the order of a court, but such representation may be largely figurative, so far as the actual manner is concerned, yet with the deepest meaning as to all that constitutes its reality. The manner must be such as will answer the chief end of the judgment—the vindication of God in his moral government.⁶³

In defense of Miley, the use of the word “vindication” –instead of another with a restricted sense of mere revelation– is an advance toward a synergistic view. “Vindication” involves a rectification, a response or proof about an accusation,⁶⁴ which implies that God is reacting to the action of someone else. A God who reacts shows that he is willing to take into account the actions of his creatures in the way that he directs his activities in creation. His providence in judgment is a response to his creatures.

⁶⁰ Olson, *Arminian Theology*, 116-117.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁶² Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Williams Eerdmans, 1940), 3:844.

⁶³ John Miley, *Systematic Theology*, 2 vols. (New York, NY: Hunt & Eaton, 1893), 2:461.

⁶⁴ Vindicate is defined as “clear (someone) of blame or suspicion,” and “show or prove to be right, reasonable or justified”. Erin McKean, *The New Oxford American Dictionary (NOAD)*, 2nd ed (2005), s.v. “vindicate”.

In a slightly more synergistic view of the judgment, Grenz presents it as a day of reckoning in two aspects: the judgment of the cosmos and the judgment of humankind. Regarding the first, he points out that “God does not simply abandon his creation”, and sees two dimensions of God’s ordering of creation about it: he “directs the entire cosmos in accordance with his purposes,” and “calls creatures to account”.⁶⁵

In this sense, a synergistic approach to judgment concerning God’s providence involves preserving and governance, so that more than a day of reckoning, it is a day of *accountability* for God and humanity. Human beings are accountable for what was given to them: their part of the synergistic administration of this world. God is accountable for his participation in the solution of the problem of sin. When it is said that God is accountable, it does mean that his providential governance is also synergistic, because he allows his creatures to participate with him in the decisions of the universe. That happens in the judgment, as the Bible witnesses.⁶⁶

When the judgment is seen as an event in which finite creatures are involved, the biblical descriptions as a process of examination of names, with witnesses, judges, and a verdict, is possible. It is not an event occurring swiftly or instantaneously, as theologians suggest,⁶⁷ but a process of true examination, deliberation, and a final ruling.

Synergistic Sovereignty and Salvation

The soteriological aspect of the judgment can be seen as an extension of God’s providence. If providence comprises the preservation and governance of creation, salvation has to do with the preservation of creatures, who are part of God’s creation. In this sense, man is accountable for the grace that he received from God in order to believe. Besides, one must consider that although the doctrine of judgment is part of Christian eschatology, it is also closely related to the doctrine of salvation, and they can be considered as “twin topics”.⁶⁸

On the other hand, the relation between God’s sovereignty and salvation is a given in the doctrine of predestination, in which God decides unilaterally who is saved and who is not. As it was mentioned,

⁶⁵ Grenz, *Theology for the Community*, 624.

⁶⁶ There are several hints in the Bible that indicate the involvement of the creatures in the judgment. Daniel 7:9-10 speaks about “thrones,” in the plural, and that “thousand thousand ministered unto Him” in the moment of Judgment. The same is seen by John in Rev 20:4, where the thrones are occupied by some people whose “judgment was given to them”. Paul also says that “the saints shall judge the world” (1 Cor 6:2).

⁶⁷ Grenz, *Theology for the Community*, 631.

⁶⁸ Hasel, “Divine Judgment,” 815.

this monergistic system implies a distortion of God's character and turns the judgment into something meaningless or only a revelatory event concerning God's will. For example, Erickson declares that "the final judgment is not intended to ascertain our spiritual condition or status, for that is already known to God. Rather, it will manifest or make our status public".⁶⁹ For him, "the standard based on which the evaluation will be made is the revealed will of God".⁷⁰

A soteriological synergistic sovereignty has to do with the fact that both God and man have a part in the process of salvation. God acts according to his loving character and bestows free salvation and enables man to accept or reject it using his will. This human participation has to be evaluated in order to determine his final destiny. Judgment is best understood when what will be evaluated is defined. In the Arminian view, this aspect is human free will; therefore, the judgment is an evaluation of the use of this divine gift. The result of the judgment depends on this evaluation.

Calvin's and Arminius's Implications in the Doctrine of Judgment

This final section applies the previous analysis to the theologies of Calvin and Arminius. The concept of God's sovereignty in providence and salvation directly influences the doctrine of judgment. Certain theological implications regarding the theological systems of both reformers will be presented.

God's Sovereignty and Judgment in Calvin

Calvin did not develop a doctrinal declaration about the doctrine of judgment, but there are some hints of it in his writings. In several declarations Calvin confirms his view of a God that is absolute and sovereign. The judgment is a revelation of divine justice regarding the righteous and God's wrath for the wicked. Consequently, in his understanding of the relation between God's sovereignty and character, men must "revere God as the judge of right and wrong,"⁷¹ and "who, as a just judge, cannot permit his law to be violated with impunity, but is armed for vengeance".⁷² Moreover, "as God is the fountain of all righteousness, he must necessarily be the enemy and judge of man so long as he is a sinner".⁷³ Thus, speaking about the knowledge about God,

⁶⁹ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1207.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 1209.

⁷¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, II, viii, 11.

⁷² *Ibid.*, II, xvi, 1.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, II, xvii, 2.

Calvin says that the pious man regards God “as a just judge, armed with severity to punish crimes,” and therefore “he keeps the Judgment-seat always in his view,” however “he is not so terrified by an apprehension of Judgment,” because “he embraces him not less as the avenger of wickedness than as the rewarder of the righteous”.⁷⁴ For Calvin God is the source and executor of the judgment, without any human participation, confirming his strong monergism. Indeed, for Calvin, “the whole sum of our salvation, and every single part of it, are comprehended in Christ”.⁷⁵

There are, however, some contradictions in Calvin’s declarations. As noted, he eventually recognizes human participation in God’s decisions, at least in the case of the wicked: “for though, by the eternal providence of God, man was formed for the calamity under which he lies, he took the matter of it from himself, not from God since the only cause of his destruction was his degenerating from the purity of his creation into a state of vice and impurity”.⁷⁶ Also he seems to point out the participation of the redeemed in the decisions of the judgment: “it is most consolatory to think, that judgment is vested in him who has already destined us to share with him in the honor of judgment”.⁷⁷ Still, he did not explain what this means.

In summary, Calvin’s concept of divine sovereignty implies a monergistic concept of judgment, in which God is revealed as just and righteous, saving with justice to who elected, and destroying with wrath to who reprovved. This is done based on his own will as law and norm of righteousness. His creatures are only spectators of what he already decided beforehand without considering them.

God’s sovereignty and judgment in Arminius

Our conclusions regarding Arminius’s concept of God’s informed us that for him, divine attributes are controlled by or depend on his relational and loving character, resulting in a synergist view of his providence and salvation. The first part of this section demonstrates how this concept affects the doctrine of judgment concerning its purpose, its implementation, and its evaluative aspect.

Like Calvin, Arminius did not develop a doctrinal declaration about divine judgment. He did comment about in the form of declarations regarding what God determined, in this case, by his foreknowledge. Thus,

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, I, ii, 2.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, II, xvi, 19.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, III, xxiii, 9.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, II, xvi, 18.

“Christ, having been appointed by God to be the judge of all men, will pronounce a sentence of justification on his elect, and will bestow on them everlasting life; but after the sentence of condemnation has been uttered against the reprobates, they will be tormented with everlasting punishments”.⁷⁸

For him, “there is some supreme judge, who will institute a strict inquiry, and will pass judgment. But this judge is God”.⁷⁹ The relation between divine judgment and God's sovereignty is not responsible for the bad choices of human beings. Although God wills that everybody is saved, his loving character respects the free decisions of his creatures. Arminius saw this as divine judgment in the fact that

God condemns no person, except on account of sin; and that he saves such a multitude of men who turn themselves away [or are converted] from sin; which he could not do, unless it was his will to allow as abundant scope to his love for the creatures, as is permitted by righteousness [or justice] under the regulation of the Divine judgment.⁸⁰

For Arminius, God's predestination consists in that he decided beforehand to save and destroy certain groups of people –those who believe in him and those who reject him–, and not individuals. The judgment would be to determine who is in which group. When he describes the decree of reprobation, he wrote: “we define reprobation to be a decree of the wrath or the severe will of God; by which he resolved from all eternity to condemn to eternal death unbelievers, who, by their fault and the just judgment of God, would not believe, for the declaration of his wrath and power”.⁸¹

The doctrine of judgment Arminius had in mind does not differ much from Calvin's. The difference occurs in the basis for salvation, which demanded a different explanation regarding judgment. His concern focused on God's character in salvation and providence. Indeed, “Arminians believe in free will because they see it everywhere assumed in the Bible and because it is necessary to protect God's reputation”.⁸²

Norman Gulley has a point when he observes that the Dutch reformer did not have the complete background for his theological system: “to Arminius, the divine decree was not some arbitrary election/reprobation that ignored the importance of human response. Though this view represented progress, Arminius never went on to think through the

⁷⁸ Arminius, *Works*, Public Disputation 14, 2:225.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, Private Disputation 14, 2:337.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, Declaration of Sentiments, 1:635.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, Public Disputation 15, 2:228.

⁸² Olson, *Arminian Theology*, 98.

implications of free will to the issue in the cosmic controversy”.⁸³ This is true in the case of the eschatological judgment, regarding which he neglected the implications of his teachings.

Conclusions

The statement of the problem in the introduction included three questions that must be answered now. The first one is: What are the similarities and dissimilarities in the use of the concept of God’s sovereignty in Calvin’s and Arminius’ view of salvation? The similarities found in both theologians have to do with their concern regarding the person of God as the source and provider of salvation. While both theologians stressed divine sovereignty, its meaning is dissimilar. Calvin focuses on God’s will as the only cause of salvation, without consideration of another factor, in a clear monergistic view. Arminius considered that that view did not match the biblical description of God’s character. For him, God considers human decisions in salvation. Thus, he presented a synergistic view of salvation, with divine and human participation.

The second question is: What were the historical and theological contexts of the development of these differences? The historical background showed that Calvin developed his ideas from an Augustinian and Lutheran perspective, reacting to the legalistic and abusive actions of the Catholic Church. While Arminius was part of the Calvinist Reformed tradition, he reacted against a specific idea of Calvin, double predestination, which had led Calvinists to extreme positions. He considered it unscriptural.

And finally, What are some of the implications of these differences for the doctrine of the eschatological judgment? A monergistic Calvinist position demands an understanding in which the judgment is a revelatory event of what was already predestined by God. It also reveals God’s greatness, majesty, justice, and authority over his creatures. In this sense, Calvin seems to be consistent with his view. On the other hand, a synergist view of God regarding providence and salvation has the potential of several implications for judgment. As a revelatory event, the judgment shows those attributes related to his goodness, such as love and mercy, but also justice and righteousness. This implies a vindication of God’s character and of his children. A synergistic view of God’s providence can also mean that his creatures are involved in the decisions of the judgment, rendering it as a process more than an instantaneous revelation. Additionally, a synergistic view of salvation involves an evaluation of human participation in salvation, which in Arminius’s case

⁸³ Gulley, *God as Trinity*, 500.

is congruent with the use of free will. However, Arminius did not seem to understand the implications of his position. The few references to the judgment do not present modifications from the traditional understanding of his time.

In addition, this research opens the possibility for some recommendations for further studies of this topic. In the first place, historical research on later developments about the relationship between God's sovereignty and judgment is necessary, especially to know the historical basis for building an Adventist view of judgment. Establishing a historical relation with the Arminian tradition can be useful for an understanding of the theological bases of the Adventist view.

In the second place, a synergistic view of God constitutes an argument against some contemporaneous positions that are questioning the traditional Adventist understanding of judgment as an investigative and deliberative process. It would be necessary to study and evaluate the development of the doctrine of judgment from this synergistic view in Adventist theology. That includes a revision of the understanding of assurance of salvation, which is the most controversial topic regarding judgment. A Christocentric view of this topic doesn't necessarily undermine the assurance of salvation; rather, when the loving character of God is highlighted, the beauty of Christ and his work for humanity can be better appreciated.