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

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Introduction

John Calvin (1509-1564) has been considered as "the most important systematizer of Protestant theology".[1] Although he is most known for his concept of predestination, some authors have said that the central idea of Calvin's theology was God's absolute sovereignty.[2] From this idea he built a whole system of doctrines that have been accepted by most evangelical churches and movements until the present.[3]

It is recognized that the main opposition to Calvin's theology in reformed Europe of the 16th century came from the Dutch theologian, Jacob Arminius (1560–1609). He rejected Calvin's idea of predestination based on the absolute sovereignty of God and stressed that God's predestination was based on his foreknowledge of the free decisions of

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[1] Justo L. González, *Story of Christianity, Volume Two: The Reformation to the Present Day* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1984), 61.

[2] Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, Second ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1998), 80; Williston Walker, *John Calvin: the Organiser of Reformed Protestantism, 1509-1564* (London, UK: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1906), 409-410; Ronald Cammenga and Ronald Hanko, "Saved by Grace: A Study of the Five Points of Calvinism," (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2002). http://www.prca.org/books/SavedByGrace.html (accessed January 8, 2014).

[3] The influence of Calvin's theology was strong in England among Presbyterians and Puritans, and from there it went to America. Churches that follow Calvin's teachings have been traditionally called "reformed". Although "reformed" and "Calvinist" are not exactly the same, this shows the importance of Calvin's theology in protestant thought. See Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries fo Tradition & Reform* (Leicester, UK: Apollos, 1999), 408-413; W. Standford Reid, ed. *John Calvin: His Influence in the Western World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982).

man. For Arminius, divine election for salvation includes all humanity but is conditioned by man's free will, contrary to Calvin's thought.

These emphases resulted in the split of Protestantism into different positions regarding salvation in which several doctrines were affected. Indeed, if the idea of predestination is altered, the underlying concept — God's sovereignty— is also modified to some degree. There is a close relationship between the concept of God and how the doctrine of salvation is understood. This is evident in the ideas of "monergism" and "synergism," two terms used in theology to explain how God works for the salvation of his children. According to the first view, "the grace of God is the only efficient cause in the beginning and effecting conversion".[4] This is the traditional position of reformed theology, and it can be traced from Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas, to Martin Luther and Calvin.[5] It stresses God's absolute sovereignty. The second concept, "synergism," refers "to the doctrine of divine and human cooperation in conversion".[6] It is used to describe the Pelagian tradition[7] that emphasizes man's moral responsibility and is linked to figures such as Erasmus of Rotterdam, Phillip Melanchthon, Arminius, and John Wesley. In the case of Arminius, his position is synergetic because it puts the will of man together with God's sovereignty as the cause of predestination.

Additionally, other doctrines seem to be affected by different views on God's sovereignty. This research focuses on the biblical doctrine of eschatological judgment. Some scholars see the judgment only as a revelation of God's sovereign will without any human participation,[8]

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[4] C. George Fry, "Monergism", *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984), 729.

[5] Ibid.

[6] C. George Fry, "Synergism", *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984), 1063.

[7] It refers the teachings of Pelagius (390-418), who denied Augustine's idea of original sin and said that men can do good works and reach righteousness by their own efforts and decisions. It is to say that not every synergist idea comes from the ideas of Pelagius, but it is considered as a common background of these different views.

[8] This is the position of the most of evangelical writers. See, for example, Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1976), 1025; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1941), 734; Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 1147; Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), 631;

while others think that it's a process of investigation and ruling of people's lives, with the active participation of God's creatures.[9] In this sense, it is evident that an appropriate understanding of God's sovereignty might be a clue to the correct grasp of the eschatological judgment, and that Calvin and Arminius offer the background of such interpretations.

The ideas of Calvin and Arminius God's sovereignty, predestination, and salvation produced two different systems of doctrines. As the concept of judgment depends on those systems, it is important to evaluate how the alteration of the view on God's sovereignty affected the theological perspective of the judgment.

In this context, the questions that this study attempts to resolve are: (1) What are the similarities and dissimilarities in the use of the concept of God's sovereignty in Calvin and Arminius' view of salvation? (2) What were the historical and theological contexts of the development of these differences? (3) What are some of the implications of these differences for the doctrine of the eschatological judgment?

The purpose of this work is to see how the idea of the absolute sovereignty of God in matters of salvation (monergism) affects the doctrine of judgment. It also aims to demonstrate how the Arminius view (synergism) affected the doctrine of judgment. Finally, it seeks to compare the different implications of these doctrinal systems.

This study follows a historical and systematic approach and is presented in two articles. This first one contains an evaluation of the historical and theological development of Calvin's concept of God's sovereignty and the historical irruption of the Arminius' opposition to traditional Calvinism. A second article establishes similarities and differences between Calvin's and Arminius's positions, as well as the implications in the doctrine of judgment of these interpretations.

Rolland McCune, *A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity, Volume 3: The Doctrines of Salvation, the Church, and Last Things.* (Allen Park, MI: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2010), 409.

[9] This is the traditional Adventist view of the judgment. See, for example: Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan*, Conflict of the Ages Series (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 1911), 479-491; John N. Andrews, *The Judgment: Its Events and Their Order* (Oakland, CA: Pacific Press, 1890), 15-24; Uriah Smith, *The Sanctuary and the Twenty-Three Hundred Days of Daniel 8:14* (Battle Creek, MI: Steam Press of the Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1877), 256-261; Norman R. Gulley, *Christ is Coming: A Christ-centerd Approach to Last-Day Events* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1998), 410-426; Gerhard F. Hasel, "Divine Judgment," in *Handbook of Seventh-Day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen, Commentary Reference Series (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 844.

John Calvin's use of the concept of God's sovereignty

This section deals with the historical and theological developments of Calvin's idea of divine sovereignty. To understand the background and grasp Calvin's concept, this section presents a historical background of Calvin and the Reformation, and then an analysis of Calvin's idea of sovereignty. Also, we will include a review of some later developments of this theological concept within Calvinism.

Historical Background

The historical context of the life of Calvin is strongly associated with the Protestant Reformation. To find some historical references that could have motivated Calvin's emphasis on the idea of sovereignty, this section offers some historical considerations of this period relevant to our topic.

Europe before the Reformation

Europe of the early 16th century saw the convergence of several movements in its political, social, and intellectual world.[10] In theory, it was politically and theologically controlled by the Roman Church, but an apparent unity and cohesion among the continent's inhabitants that the church bestowed had been eclipsed by abuses practiced by the ecclesial leadership. While "the century before the Reformation was characterized by a degree of engagement in a matter of worship and theology,"[11] most of the people and political leaders were disappointed by the corrupted moral and political situation of the church. Indeed, "Rome became a byword, especially in Germany, for venality and avarice".[12]

The decadent situation of the church affected not only the political life of Europe. Also, the theological discussion seems to have lost any sense of practical issues. Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466-1536), a Dutch

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[10] Justo González mentions that the factors that contributed to the preparation of the reformation were: The birth of the moderns European nations, skepticism regarding the hierarchy of the church, the alternative offered by mysticism, the impact of nominalism on scholastic theology, and the humanism of the Renaissance. Justo L. González, *A History of Christian Thought, vol. 3: From the Protestant Reformation to the twentieth century*, rev. ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1987), 11-24.

[11] Andrew Pettegre, "Reformation and Counter-Reformation," in *A World History of Christianity*, ed. Adrian Hastings (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 238.

[12] Williston Walker et al., *A History of the Christian Church*, 4th ed. (New York, NY: Scribner, 1985), 419.

humanist who is considered a pre-reformer,[13] was maybe the most influential writer of the beginnings of the 16th century. Although he is considered one of the greatest theologians of the transitional age known as the Renaissance, for him a theologian was virtually synonymous with "scholastic speculative thinker," especially due to the complicated ways in which they explained theology.[14] This negative view of the medieval theology led him to propose an ethical reformation rather than a theological one.[15] For him, the church needed a theology reduced to the absolute minimum and return to the scriptural and patristic sources.[16]

One of the outcomes of this mixture between corruption and a distant theology was the division between theory and practice in some topics. Indeed, the church developed an especially contradictory way to conceive the doctrine of salvation. In this regard, the historian Roger Olson comments:

> Although on paper the official theology of the Roman Catholic Church was solidly anti-Pelagian and even anti-Semi-Pelagian, and although some of its leading thinkers strongly advocated Augustinian monergism, the popular theology of the church had fallen into a nonevangelical synergism that would have had both Augustine and Aquinas spinning in their graves.[17]

This theological practice was the system of merits and indulgences carried out by the institutional church. This situation, together with other political and social factors, created and prepared the path for the reformation. To this point, however, most people believed that there was no alternative to the church for their salvation and spiritual welfare.[18] Any change could only come coupled with a new soteriological view.

The Reformation

Most historians relate the beginning of the Reformation with German monk, Martin Luther (1483-1546). He started a theological revolution with special emphasis on soteriological and ecclesiological

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[13] For a glance at Erasmus' life and theology see Erika Rummel, "The Theology of Erasmus," in *The Cambridge Companion to Reformation Theology*, ed. David Bagchi and David C. Steinmetz (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 28-38.

[14] Olson, *Story of Christian Theology*, 361.

[15] González, *History of Christian Thought, vol. 3*, 20.

[16] Paul Johnson, *A History of Christianity* (New York, NY: Antheneum, 1977).

[17] Olson, *Story of Christian Theology*, 372.

[18] Euan Cameron, *The European Reformation* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1991), 68.

aspects, provoking the reaction of the church and later the division of the church.

In matters of soteriology, Luther reacted against the system of merits that the Roman church had established as legitimate means to reach salvation. His "Ninety-Five Theses" was the beginning of an explosion of theological confrontations about the role of human works in the process of salvation. From the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone, he established the principles of *Sola Gratia*, *Sola Fide,* fostered by his fundamental *Sola Scriptura*, that was the basis of Reformation theology.

These revolutionary concepts changed the general understanding of how God works in salvation. In this sense, "the heart and essence of Luther's theological contribution, then, was salvation as a gift of divine mercy for which the human person can do nothing".[19] He had a very monergist view, in which human free will was unable to help him reach salvation. For him, "belief in freedom of the will… evidenced a refusal to accept God's action on our behalf as the sole hope for salvation".[20] This idea carried him to other concepts like double predestination and "the hidden God".[21]

The implications of these teachings were enormous in ecclesiology. Indeed, if salvation comes through faith in Christ alone, there was no place for the mediation by the Church of Rome and by the priest.[22] Thus, Luther rejected the papal supremacy, and the hierarchical administration of the church, stressing the universal priesthood of believers. This meant a shift of emphasis regarding the role of divine authority in believers, the church, its structure and tradition, the Bible, and God himself without any kind of intermediary.

With some little theological differences, Philip Melanchton (1497-1560) continued Luther's work in Germany. The Lutheran German reformation was the first of several similar movements in other countries of Europe.[23] Although the initial intention of Luther was not to cause a

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[19] Olson, *Story of Christian Theology*, 380.

[20] Ibid., 383.

[21] The idea of a God at the same time "hidden" and "revealed" was the Luther's way to attempt to explain the apparent contradiction between God's love and sovereignty.

[22] Bruce L. Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 4th ed. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2013), 249-250.

[23] Traditionally, historians considers that Reformation includes four fundamental movements in Europe: Lutheran, Reformed, Anabaptist, and Anglican. González, *History of Christian Thought, vol. 3*, 63.

division of the the Roman Church, the outcome was the creation of several national churches, completely separated from the Roman Church.

In Switzerland, Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) began the reformed movement in Zurich in 1522.[24] Based on the same principles regarding Scripture and salvation, "Zwingli placed the sovereignty of God in a special position within Christian theology".[25] He put the fundamentals for the later developments carried out by John Calvin.

The Person of John Calvin

John Calvin was born in Noyon, Picardy, in France, on July 10, 1509.[26] His mother died when he was a child, and his father was a notary for the bishop and a person of certain social standing in that city.[27] John was chaplain of Noyon's Cathedral while studying. In 1523 was sent to Paris to continue his studies, receiving his Master in Arts degree in 1528. He was eighteen years old. Under his father's influence, he shifted his studies from theology to law preparation that year, moving to Orleans. After his father died in 1531, he returned to Paris to finish his studies in law and humanism, which occurred the next year.

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[24] Walker et al., *A History of the Christian Church*, 443.

[25] Olson, *Story of Christian Theology*, 402.

[26] There are several biographical books about John Calvin: Theodore Beza and John Mackenzie, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of John Calvin* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2009); Thomas Cary Johnson, *John Calvin and The Genevan Reformation: A Sketch* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2009); Thomas H. L. Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1975); Herman J. Selderhuis, *John Calvin: A Pilgrim's Life*, trans., Albert Gootjes (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009); William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteen-Century Portrait* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1988); Hugh Y. Reyburn, *John Calvin: His Life, Letters, and Work* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2009); Georgia Harkness, *John Calvin: The Man and His Ethics* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1958); Walker, *John Calvin*; Richard Taylor Stevenson, *John Calvin: The Statesman* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2009); Philip Vollmer, J. I. Good, and W. H. Roberts, *John Calvin: Theologian, Preacher, Educator Statesman* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2009); Alexandre Ganoczy, *The Young Calvin*, trans., David Foxgrover and Wade Provo (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1987).

[27] Harkness, *John Calvin*, 3.

Most historians suggest that his conversion to the reformation's cause occurred at the end of 1533.[28] He was a second-generation reformer and therefore received a great influence from Luther and other reformers' theology and teachings. Indeed, "young Calvin was assisted in developing his biblical theology by Luther's writings".[29] Due to opposition that was raised against the Reformation, he fled from France to Basil, Switzerland, in 1534. There, he published the first version of his *Institutes of Christian Religion*[30] in 1536, which was written both to give a decisive statement of the doctrinal position of reformers and to defend the French reformation before King Francis I.[31] This work was well received and made his name known among the reformers.[32] Calvin was not a university-trained theologian, nor an ordained minister.[33] He had a shy and quiet character, and he aspired to continue supporting the Reformation by being a scholar, through studying and writing. With that purpose in mind, he decided to move to Strasbourg. He was going to that city when came to Geneva. Once there, William Farel convinced him to stay, place where he would carry out most of his work for the Reformation. Eventually, he died in Geneva on May 27, 1564.

Calvin's philosophical and theological sources

The historical background allows us to see that Calvin received some significant influence that affected his writings to some degree. He took into account the doctrine of other reformers like Luther, Bucer, Zwingli, and Melanchthon, but adapted them to his mood and

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[28] Evangelista Vilanova, *Historia de la Teología Cristiana, vol. 2: Prereforma, Reformas, Contrarreforma* (Barcelona, Spain: Editorial Herder, 1989), 358; Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations* (Cambridge, MA: Blackweel Publishers, 1996), 252.

[29] Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 251.

[30] Although the word that Calvin chose for his work (*Institutio*) is generally translated as "Institutes," it can signify "instruction," "manual," or "summary". Bouwsma, *John Calvin*, 17.

[31] Parker, *John Calvin*, 34.

[32] This first edition only had six chapters. After several editions, the last of them in 1559, became to have eighty chapters. It is considered his most important work. For additional information of this work and its content, see González, *Story of Christianity, vol. 2*, 63-64; David Beale, *Historical Theology In-Depth: Themes and Contexts of Doctrinal Development since the First Century*, 2 vols. (Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 2013), 2:56-64.

[33] Selderhuis, *John Calvin*, 47; David C. Steinmetz, "The Theology of John Calvin," in *The Cambridge Companion to Reformation Theology*, ed. David Bagchi and David C. Steinmetz (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 113.

circumstances, [34] because "none of these theologians entirely satisfied Calvin, for he used them without completely following any of them; he adopted only those ideas which stood up under his criticism".[35] Additionally, Calvin has been related to his historical background of scholastic theology and humanist thought.[36] Calvin's concept of sovereignty has been also related to the Scottish scholastic theologian Duns Scotus (1265-1308), who taught that God's will is sovereign and free.[37] However, this is rejected by Calvinists[38] that consider Scotus' position as mere voluntarist.[39]

Calvin also studied the Church Fathers, among which he showed a certain preference for Augustine.[40] Indeed, "he draws inspiration from his doctrines of free will and of the sacraments, and in the chapters on grace and predestination, he employs all the Augustinian arguments to his purpose".[41] That is also true concerning the idea of sovereignty, because "Calvin's doctrine of God is thoroughly Augustinian, which he considered thoroughly biblical. Like Augustine, Luther, and Zwingli, he viewed God as the all-determining reality and taught God's meticulous providence over nature and history".[42] In this sense "the theory of

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[34] Vilanova, *Historia de la Teología Cristiana, vol. 2*, 366.

[35] Ganoczy, *The Young Calvin*, 134.

[36] Ibid., 168-181.

[37] Harkness, *John Calvin*, 69-70; Vilanova, *Historia de la Teología Cristiana, vol. 2*, 368; Walker, *John Calvin*, 149. For an explanation of the ideas of Scotus, see Denis R. Janz, "Late Medieval Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Reformation Theology*, ed. David Bagchi and David C. Steinmetz (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 8-10.

[38] James Mackinnon, *Calvin and the Reformation* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2009), 216.

[39] Auguste Lecerf, "La Soberanía de Dios según el Calvinismo," in Westminster hoy (2010). Accessed Feb 10, 2014, http://westminsterhoy.wordpress.com/2010/07/07/la-soberania-de-dios-segun-el-calvinismo-por-auguste-lecerf/. This appreciation of Scotus is denied by Wendel, who find connection between Calvin and Scotus. François Wendel, *Calvin: The Origins and Development of His Religious Thought* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1963), 127-129.

[40] Vilanova, *Historia de la Teología Cristiana, vol. 2*, 367.

[41] Wendel, *Calvin*, 124-125.

[42] Olson, *Story of Christian Theology*, 410. It is said that "Augustine wrote *The City of God* in part to teach the providence of God over nations and civilizations, especially in light of the crisis caused by the fall of Rome to the barbarians". Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), Kindle Edition: Chapter 10, position 6474.

personal predestination was not, then derived from biblical exegesis but was a doctrine demanded by logical necessity to defend the absolute sovereignty of God against the sovereignty of the Church".[43] Calvin recognized this Augustinian influence when he said: "Augustine is so wholly with me, that if I wished to write a confession of my faith, I could do so, with all fullness and satisfaction to myself, out of his writings".[44]

This influence is visible not only in his doctrine of God but also in the idea of Predestination. Indeed, Augustine has been pointed out as "the first predestinarian in Christian theology",[45] and Calvin built on his philosophy. Indeed, "Calvin's premise was Augustine's conclusion".[46] Augustine had come to this idea based on his conception of the total depravity of men, and that therefore God has the lordship over men's will. For him, "God is the highest good… the eternal and immutable being than which there is nothing better or higher".[47] His idea of predestination seems to see a logical conclusion of his line of reasoning, which he believed as biblical.[48]

In developing his ideas, Augustine took the tools and structures of Platonist philosophy. It provided him with "important strategic and methodological principles for his thinking about the divine… Indeed Platonism provided Augustine with a rich repertoire of ideas and arguments that he would use to probe and articulate the Christian conception of God".[49] The importance of this relation between Augustine and Greek Philosophy and the later influence in protestant theology is recognized by theologians, to the point that "the impact of the Platonic and Neoplatonic worldview is the context in which Augustine, and

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[43] Mildred B. Wynkoop, *Foundations of Wesleyan-Arminian Theology* (Kansas City, KS: Beacon Hill Press, 1967), 39.

[44] John Calvin, *Calvin's Calvinism: A Treatise on the Eternal Predestination of God*, trans., Henry Cole (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2009), 20.

[45] Clark H. Pinnock, "From Augustine to Arminius: A Pilgrame in Theology," in *The Grace of God, the Will of Man: A Case for Arminianism*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1989), 27.

[46] Wynkoop, *Foundations*, 39.

[47] Scott MacDonald, "Augustine," in *A Companion to Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jorge J. E. Gracia and Timothy B. Noone, Blackwell Companions to Philosophy (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 157.

[48] Wynkoop, *Foundations*, 30.

[49] MacDonald, "Augustine," 165.

subsequent traditional theology, have constructed their understanding of God and all doctrines".[50]

The last is true about Calvin's idea of God, which is affected by the neo-platonic concept of reality, in which God is outside time and space, and is not affected by what occurs in the physical world. Although he used biblical data and language, thus giving the impression of being based only on Scripture, in his writings –as in Luther's– "the Neoplatonic, Augustinian and Ockamist influences are at work, in an implicit rather than explicit manner".[51]

God's Sovereignty in Calvin's Theology

The historical, philosophical, and theological background just presented show how Calvin, although undoubtedly a great theologian, to some degree was the systematizer of the ideas already presented by other theologians, especially Luther and Zwingli. In fact, "it would be difficult to find any doctrinal insights or contributions in Calvin's work that were not already discovered and articulated by Luther and Zwingli".[52] However, his contribution was the building of a system of truths connected by theological concepts.[53] One of the most important, if not the most, was his conception of God's sovereignty, which was paired with another key teaching of the Reformation: the predestination of men for salvation and destruction. How they work together in salvation is explained in the following section.

How God is sovereign for Calvin

Calvin's conversion meant a departure not only from the Roman Church but also from the humanist ambition of placing man at the center of everything, which Calvin replaced with man's total dependency on God's sovereignty, which resulted in the doctrine of predestination.[54] Calvin put God's sovereignty as the final explanation of everything, which he exerts through eternal decrees. For him, God is the arbiter and

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[50] Norman R. Gulley, *Systematic Theology: God As Trinity*, vol. 2 (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2011), 469.

[51] Fernando Luis Canale, "God," in *Handbook of Seventh-Day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen, Commentary Reference Series (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 145.

[52] Olson, *Story of Christian Theology*, 399.

[53] Vilanova says that although Calvin didn't have the geniality of Luther, he was much more systematic in his theology and work, in large due to his formation and temperament. Vilanova, *Historia de la Teología Cristiana, vol. 2*, 365.

[54] Ibid., 358.

the governor of all things, both natural and moral laws, together with all entities.

Concerning the natural world, Calvin saw natural laws and properties as mere instruments that God uses for his operations. For example, "the sun does not daily rise and set by a blind instinct of nature, but is governed by Him in its course, that he may renew the remembrance of his paternal favour toward us".[55] For him, nothing happens in the universe without the special and particular command of God.[56]

God not only controls the inanimate things but also intelligent beings. This is true especially regarding the lives of men because the Almighty has predestinated his decisions beforehand in eternity according to his will. The following quotations describe how Calvin conceived God's control of the universe:

> God is the disposer and ruler of all things, - that from the remotest eternity, according to his wisdom, he decreed what he was to do, and now by his power executes what he decreed. Hence, we maintain, that by his providence, not heaven and earth and inanimate creatures only, but also the counsels and wills of men are so governed as to move exactly in the course which he has destined.[57]

> The internal affections of men are not less ruled by the hand of God than their external actions are preceded by His eternal decree; moreover, God performs not by the hands of men the things which He has decreed, without first working in their hearts the very will which precedes the acts they are to perform.[58]

For Calvin, the divine control of everything is total. Nothing happens out of his will and everything is caused by it. In this sense, "Calvin denied any real distinction between God's will and his permission".[59] His will is causative in the events of this world and the decisions of men. It is the source of the final destiny of men, because "inasmuch as God elects some and passes by others, the cause is not to be found in anything else but in his own purpose".[60]

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[55] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans., Henry Beveridge, 4 vols. (Garland, TX: Galaxie Software, 1999), I, xvi, 2.

[56] Ibid., I, xvi, 7.

[57] Ibid., I, xvi, 8.

[58] John Calvin, *Calvin's Calvinism: A Defence of the Secret Providence of God*, trans., Henry Cole (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2009), 23.

[59] Olson, *Story of Christian Theology*, 410.

[60] John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries: Romans*, Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries (Albany, OR: Ages Software, 1998), Rom 9:14.

Calvin strongly excludes that God uses his foreknowledge to evade the force of the emphasis which he considers that Scripture places upon the pure sovereignty of God's election of some and rejection of others.[61] God's predestination and election are not based on his foreknowledge of man's actions and decisions; rather, "God's foreknowledge is based on election".[62] Indeed, foreknowledge "is not bare prescience… but the adoption by which he had always distinguished his children from the reprobate".[63] His will and not his foreknowledge is the source of predestination. Rather, "God's foreknowledge is due to what He decreed",[64] because he "foresees future events only because he decreed that they take place".[65]

God's will also determines the moral character of actions and things. He is "the only lawgiver" and "his will is to us the perfect rule of all righteousness and holiness, and that thus in the knowledge of it we have a perfect rule of life".[66] His will is, in this sense, wholly unconditioned and free to determine what is right and wrong.[67] This means that, in principle, Calvin rejects any exterior influence apart from God's own will as the source and explanation of his decisions. His sovereignty is absolute and free from whatever additional force. The doctrine of predestination derives from this idea, in which God decides to save some people and destroy others according to his own will.

Calvin distinguished between a "revealed" will and a "secret" one, through which he attempted to explain why God wants to save everybody (1 Tim 2:3,4; 2 Pet 3:9) but decides to save only some people.[68] He said that man cannot explain and understand some aspects of God's will because it is out of his comprehension. For him, "it is a monstrous infatuation in men to seek to subject that which has no bounds to the little measure of their reason".[69] However, he says that man only can

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[61] John Murray, *Calvin on Scripture and Divine Sovereignty* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2009), 57-58.

[62] Richard Rice, "Divine Foreknowledge and Free-Will Theism," in *The Grace of God, the Will of Man: A Case for Arminianism*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1989), 122.

[63] Calvin, *Romans*, Rom 8:29.

[64] Gulley, *God as Trinity*, 489.

[65] Calvin, *Institutes*, III, xxiii, 6.

[66] Ibid., IV, x, 8.

[67] Harkness, *John Calvin*, 69.

[68] Olson, *Story of Christian Theology*, 411.

[69] Calvin, *Institutes*, III, xxiii, 4.

understand those things that are revealed in Scripture and understood under the power of the Holy Spirit:

> The predestination of God is indeed in reality a labyrinth, from which the mind of man can by no means extricate itself: but so unreasonable is the curiosity of man, that the more perilous the examination of a subject is, the more boldly he proceeds; so that when predestination is discussed, as he cannot restrain himself within due limits… the Holy Spirit has taught us nothing but what it behooves us to know, the knowledge of this would no doubt be useful, provided it be confined to the word of God. Let this then be our sacred rule, to seek to know nothing concerning it, except what Scripture teaches us: when the Lord closes his holy mouth, let us also stop the way, that we may not go farther. But as we are men, to whom foolish questions naturally occur, let us hear from Paul how they are to be met.[70]

According to this, Calvin rejected any attempt to explain the divine consideration of other factors in human terms. For example, when he was accused of being God the author of evil and injustice, he says that nobody can accuse God to be unjust, because "the will of God is the supreme rule of righteousness so that everything which he wills must be held to be righteous, by the mere fact of his willing it. Therefore, when it is asked why the Lord did so, we must answer, because he pleased".[71] For Calvin, God "is a law to himself".[72]

However, regarding this, Calvin seems to fall into some kind of contradiction, because although he understands that the final explanation of everything is God's will, he doesn't separate it from his nature. Indeed, God's will is one of a being of wisdom and righteousness, because "though to our apprehension the will of God is manifold, yet he does not in himself will opposites, but, according to his manifold wisdom".[73] That is the reason why some scholars said that Calvin establishes a balance between the rationalist Thomistic view and the nominalist voluntarist one, in the sense that God's will is an expression of his character.[74] In this sense, "for Calvin, God's will is never arbitrary because it is expressive of God's nature, while God's nature is never to be identified with impersonal law because God's nature is never taken in separation from God's will. It is thus that complete personalism and therefore complete

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[70] Calvin, *Romans*, Rom 9.14.

[71] Calvin, *Institutes*, III, xxiii, 2.

[72] Ibid., III, xxiii,2.

[73] Ibid., III, xxiv, 17.

[74] Lydia Jaeger, "Le rapport entre la nature de Dieu et sa volonté dans l'Institution chrétienne," *European Journal of Theology* 11, no. 2 (2002): 109-118.

stability are combined".[75] If that was Calvin's view, it is not clearly stated in his writings.

Another problem in Calvin's understanding of the final cause of God's decisions concerns the wicked. It was said that Calvin put God's will as the only factor in the decisions regarding the predestination of people. However, he eventually seems to recognize the participation of man's elections in God's decisions: "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] This "appears to contain a sheer logical contradiction in light of Calvin's clear rejection of any distinction between divine will and divine permission".[77] Calvinists explain it by separating the source and the result. The election is based on God's decision; condemnation is produced by the guilt of man's sin.[78]

In summary, apart from these apparent contradictions, it is to say that Calvin is consistent in using God's sovereign will as the final explanation of reality. That includes his providence and the way he provides men's salvation through his eternal predestination and decree. The relation between his sovereignty and his nature derives from the fact that God is his own rule regarding righteousness and the law. In a strong monergistic system, he excludes any possibility of human participation and other influences in divine predestination and providence.

Relation with Other Doctrines

Calvin's divine sovereignty in salvation is related to other doctrines of the French reformer. Indeed, "Calvin's doctrine of the decrees, especially the decree of reprobation, cannot by a process of extrapolation be lifted out of its context and set above the doctrines of creation and redemption without being transmuted into a rationalistic metaphysic which would then change the nature of his entire theology".[79] Additional to its influence regarding God's providence and salvation – which are mentioned in the previous sections–, this concept is present in certain doctrines such as God's revelation, his law, and the church, to mention a few.

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[75] Cornelius Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company: Phillipsburg, NJ, 1969), 100.

[76] Calvin, *Institutes*, III, xxiii, 9.

[77] Olson, *Story of Christian Theology*, 412.

[78] Murray, *Calvin on Scripture and Divine Sovereignty*, 61.

[79] Edward A. Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology*, 3rd. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 218.

With respect to the doctrine of Revelation, God's sovereign control of the universe led Calvin to say that nature can provide knowledge of God as the creator and sustainer of the world.[80] However, this knowledge about God must come in the first place from Scripture, which is self-authenticating, and does not need another interpreter than itself. This knowledge is available with the aid of the Holy Spirit, who is superior to reason.[81]

For Calvin, there is a close relationship between God's sovereignty and his law, and this relation led him to establish a higher standard for the Christian life. Indeed, Calvin "conceived the will of God in terms of Biblical literalism and set up a legalistic moral code".[82] The application of this idea can be seen in Calvin's administration of the city of Geneva, where he established a severe discipline system.[83]

Also "Calvinism's emphasis upon the sovereignty of God led in turn to a special view of the state… Calvin taught that no man –whether pope or king– has any claim to absolute power".[84] In this sense, some scholars see Calvin's emphasis on absolute divine sovereignty in matters of providence and salvation as a reaction against the absolutism and abuses of the medieval Catholic Church, which was also true regarding salvation.[85] Despite that, Christians must respect and obey civil authorities, even if they are corrupted, except in some specific cases that he describes as tyranny.[86] In Geneva, Calvin strived to establish a church autonomous from civil powers.[87]

Later Developments

Calvin's successor in Geneva was Theodore Beza (1519-1605). He developed and led Calvin's ideas in an extreme position known as

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[80] Norman R. Gulley, *Systematic Theology: Prolegomena*, vol. 1 (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2003), 207.

[81] Ibid. See Calvin, *Institutes*, I, vii, 2; I, vii, 5; I, viii, 1.

[82] Harkness, *John Calvin*, 63.

[83] Selderhuis, *John Calvin*, 215-217. The most extreme and known case of Calvin's discipline is the execution of Michael Servetus, a Spanish physician who opposed to some ideas of Calvin. González, *Story of Christianity, vol. 2*, 67.

[84] Shelley, *Church History*, 279.

[85] Wynkoop, *Foundations*, 41.

[86] According to Calvin, the first case of exception is when a magistrates would be shirking their responsibility of defending the interests of the people, and the second one is when something is contrary to the laws of God. See González, *History of Christian Thought, vol. 3*, 158.

[87] Vilanova, *Historia de la Teología Cristiana, vol. 2*, 400.

supralapsarianism, which was the result of discussions and speculations that he held with other post-Calvin Reformed theologians about the logical order of the divine decrees and the ultimate purpose of God in everything.[88] This gave way to a major emphasis on philosophy and logic to construct highly coherent systems of Protestant doctrine, a tendency in theologic style and method called "Protestant scholasticism".[89] The influence of Zwingli's concept of predestination was strong in the new scenario, resulting in some modifications in Calvin's initial teaching. While Calvin had set the sovereign predestination in the context of soteriology, Zwingli put it together with the doctrine of providence and creation.[90] This meant a slight alteration in the doctrine of God and his sovereignty, as Olson observes:

> Beza and certain other Calvinists were obsessed with the doctrine of predestination more than Calvin himself ever had been. Whereas Calvin located the doctrine within the category of redemption as part of the gracious activity of God and admitted mystery regarding God's purposes in divine election and reprobation, Beza located predestination within the doctrine of God as a direct deduction from God's power, knowledge, and providential rule.[91]

Beza's Supralapsarianism taught that election and reprobation was defined in the mind of God before the will to create men, with the intention "to exclude all possibility of understanding human merit as a ground of the divine choice of some for salvation".[92] This meant that the Calvinistic idea of sovereignty was closer to determinism.[93] Those who opposed this view developed another approach called "infralapsarianism".[94] Both are considered part of the Calvinistic tradition of the Reformed and Presbyterian churches today.

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[88] Olson, *Story of Christian Theology*, 456-457.

[89] Muller highlights that this label must not be identify with a particular thinker or theologian, but rather a method used in this context of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Richard A. Muller, "John Calvin and Later Calvinism: The Identity of the Reformed Tradition," in *The Cambridge Companion to Reformation Theology*, ed. David Bagchi and David C. Steinmetz (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 141.

[90] González, *History of Christian Thought, vol. 3*, 243.

[91] Olson, *Story of Christian Theology*, 457.

[92] Muller, "John Calvin and Later Calvinism," 144.

[93] González, *History of Christian Thought, vol. 3*, 246.

[94] Infralapsarianism concedes priority to God's decision to create and after to the will of save some and reprove others. For a description and analysis of these views see Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 927-931; Olson, *Story of Christian Theology*, 458-459.

Finally, it is said that there are some contemporary attempts to reconcile Calvinism with the idea of free will. However, this is considered by some writers as an "inconsistent Calvinism," because they maintain the concept of unconditionality related to God's will, which retains them as deterministic.[95]

Jacob Arminius' concept of sovereignty

After viewing Calvin's idea of sovereignty, we now turn to Arminius's theology. It presents a historical background of Arminius' life and theology and an analysis of his concept of sovereignty, which is compared with Calvin's. This establishes a basis to search for the implications of the doctrine of judgment.

Historical Background

For a better understanding of Arminius's theology and work, this section is divided into two parts. The first one gives a summary of the life and works of Arminius, and the second succinctly describes the events of his confrontations with Calvinists. This will allow us to identify the proper context in which Arminius developed his theology.

The Life of Jacob Arminius

Jacob Arminius[96] was born in Oudewater, in South Holland, probably on October 10, 1560.[97] At the moment of his birth, that part of Europe was at the beginning of a hard military confrontation between the dominion of the Catholic empire of Charles V and the local resistance of protestant influence.[98] With his father already dead, he was taken by priest Theodorus Aemilius –of Protestant sympathies–[99] to study in Utrecht. When Aemilius died, Rudolph Snellius brought him to Marburg.

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[95] Jack W. Cottrell, along with giving some examples of this kind of attempts, establishes that see Jack W. Cottrell, "The Nature of the Divine Sovereignty," in *The Grace of God, the Will of Man: A Case for Arminianism*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1989), 99-106.

[96] Jacob (sometimes Jacobus or James) Arminius is the Latinized form of the Dutch name Jacok Hermanszoon. For a complete biography of his life, see Caspar Brandt, *The Life of James Arminius*, trans., John Guthrie (London, UK: Ward & Co., 1854); Carl Bangs, *Arminius: A Study in the Dutch Reformation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1971).

[97] Bangs impugns this date and proposes the year 1559, without any sureness of the specific day. Bangs, *Arminius*, 25-26.

[98] For a description of the development in the Low Countries, see González, *Story of Christianity, vol. 2*, 94-101.

[99] Bangs, *Arminius*, 33.

While he was there, his mother and siblings were killed in the Oudewater massacre, in 1575. After that, he went to the recently founded University of Leiden to study theology (1576-1582).[100] He was 22 years old.

Since he was too young for pastoral duties, the Merchant's Guild of Amsterdam supported him to continue his studies in the Academy of Geneva (1582-1587), headed by Calvin's successor, Theodore Beza. Due to some differences with his professors, he moved to Basel (1582-1584), but eventually returned to Geneva.[101]

In 1587, he began his pastoral ministry in Amsterdam, where was ordained a minister in August 1588. He remained there until 1603 when he became a professor of Theology at the University of Leiden. He remained there until his premature death by tuberculosis on October 19, 1609.

Controversies with Calvinism

Although Arminius' differences with Theodore Beza's high Calvinism seem to have appeared during his studies in Geneva,[102] it was not until his ministry in Amsterdam that they were clearer. He was asked in 1591 to refute an infralapsarian version of the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, but he failed. Although he never rejected predestination, at that time he was inclined to an infralapsarian view because supralapsarianism magnified the power of God immensely and annihilated the space for human freedom and choice.[103] However, although there were some hints, during this time as church pastor he did not publicly manifest his ideas.

In 1604, already a professor at Leiden University, he came into dispute with Franciscus Gomarus (1563-1641) –another university professor who was supralapsarian– concerning the understanding of God's predestination of man. There were several public presentations and disputes on predestination and related topics. His studies of the Epistle to the Romans concluded that faith, and not God's will, was the cause of

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[100] Th. Marius Van Leeuwen, "Introduction: Arminius, Arminianism, and Europe," 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 Chuch History (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2009), x.

[101] These conflicts raised by his adherence to the logic of Petrus Ramus. See Bangs, *Arminius*, 56-63, 71; Mark Galli and Ted Olsen, *131 Christians Everyone Should Know* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 42.

[102] Galli and Olsen, *131 Christians*, 41-42.

[103] Leeuwen, "Introduction," xi-xii.

election. This brought to him to denounce Pelagianism.[104] During the first part of 1605, he was chosen *Rector Mafnificus* of the University for one year, and disputation became intense. The conflict continued during that year and the next one. Arminius asked a national Synod to resolve these differences biblically and friendly, with the hope of demonstrating by Scripture the validity of his argumentation. This would mean a revision of the Reformed confession, which at that moment consisted of the *Confession of Faith* (1561)[105] and the *Catechism of Heidelberg* (1563).[106] However, the preparatory Convention for that Synod held in 1607 came to a deadlock, because most participants wanted discussions not only based on the Bible but also on those documents.

At the end of 1608, Arminius delivered the address to the States of Holland and West-Friesland, which was to be known as the *Declaration of his Sentiments concerning Predestination*. After this document, the States called on the two opponents (Arminius and Gomarus) to consent to a reconciliatory meeting in August 1609, which never happened because Arminius suffered from tuberculosis, eventually causing his death in October.

The Remonstrants and the Synod of Dort

The death of Arminius didn't mean in any case the death of his ideas. More than 40 ministers expressed their agreement with him on January 1610 through a document called "Remonstrance" (reproof). These documents contained five articles in which they defended Arminius' version of predestination, like the conditional election, the unlimited scope of atonement, resistible grace, and the uncertainty of perseverance. They also rejected the accusation of Pelagianism, affirming the idea of the total deprivation of man. The Remonstrants, as they became known, pleaded a revision of the Reformed Confession.

After that, the controversy became "involved in a host of political and social issues".[107] The Arminian position was supported by the

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[104] Galli and Olsen, *131 Christians*, 42.

[105] Also known as *Belgic Confession*, The *Confession of Faith* is a doctrinal standard document that Dutch Reformed churches subscribed, which was written by Guido de Bres. For the complete document's text, see http://www.reformed.org/documents/BelgicConfession.html [accessed Feb 25, 2014].

[106] The *Catechism of Heidelberg* or Palatinate Catechism is the result of the asking of Elector Frederieck III for a new catechism for his territory. Zacharius Ursinus is commonly regarded as its principal author. For the complete document's text, see http://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/confessions/heidelberg-catechism, [accessed Feb 25, 2014].

[107] González, *History of Christian Thought, vol. 3*, 258.

maritime provinces, especially by the bourgeoisie, which also supported the authority of John Barneveld, a republican politician and national leader who was in opposition to Maurice of Nassau, prince of Orange. The strictly Calvinist position was supported by the latter, who had more influence in the lower rural classes and the fishermen from the islands.

In 1618, Barneveld was imprisoned and Maurice of Nassau had absolute dominion over the country. The General Dutch Estates convoked a great ecclesiastical assembly to put end to the theological debate, which met from November 1618 to May 1619, known as the Synod of Dort (Dordrecht). In this meeting, Arminianism was condemned and traditional Calvinism was affirmed. Along with rejecting the points of the Remonstrants, the Synod established for the first time the five points of Calvinism: total deprivation, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and the perseverance of the saints.[108]

After the Synod, Barneveld was executed and the Arminian ministers were ordered to leave the country and abandon their pulpits. This situation continued until Maurice of Nassau's death in 1625. Finally, tolerance to Arminians was granted officially in 1631. The impact of Arminius' teachings would be notorious more than 100 years later, with the arrival of John Wesley and Methodism to England and America.[109]

Preliminary conclusions

We have described, in the first place, the historical background of the idea of sovereignty in Calvin's theology. A Catholic church in crisis, the reformation, and Calvin's humanist background established a scenario in which the French reformer organized and connected a solid theological system. He worked with elements that were already present. Also, we

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[108] These five points became to be known during the 20th century with the acronym TULIP, and it is usually accepted as the expression of the authentic Calvinistic orthodoxy. See an English version of the *Canons of Dort* in http://www.spurgeon.org/~phil/creeds/dort.htm [accessed March 2, 2014].

[109] It is to note that although Wesley found some similarities between Arminius and his theology, Don Thorsen has pointed out that his theological roots must be related with what he calls "Anglo-Catholic" tradition, because "Wesley's theological background did not come primarily from continental Europe and the magisterial Protestant Reformation of Luther and Calvin," but "it came more from the Anglican tradition, which drew deeply from the catholic (or universal) traditions of Christianity, including Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant churches". In fact, he "did not appeal to Arminius and Arminianism during most of his life and ministry. Only later in life did Wesley identify with the established theological tradition of Arminianism". Don Thorsen, *Calvin vs. Wesley: Bringing Belief in Line with Practice* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2013), Kindle Edition, Position 381-383, 3735-3736.

explained how Calvin conceived that God's sovereignty worked out his providence and predestination. We also showed the main sources for Calvin's theological system, where Augustine figures prominently. Calvin considered God's sovereignty as key to his system, although he did not ignore God's nature and character. However, the weight given to sovereignty eventually meant a more deterministic interpretation by his followers.

The arrival of the ideas of Arminius brought a strong discussion in reformed circles. Arminius did not intend to establish a new branch of thought inside the Reformed Tradition; rather, he wanted to adjust those aspects he considered incongruent with the Bible's depiction of God's character. The second part of this article examines how these two viewpoints compare and how they affect the idea of judgment.