

A Tulip in the Roman Curia: Proposing Novel Acronyms for Arminian and Lutheran Theology

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Abstract

The paradoxical relationships between free will, salvific grace, and human depravity have perplexed man for thousands of years. In the early days of the Christian Church, Catholics affirmed the free will of man while emphasizing that God was not bound by time. This meant that, although man was for all intents and purposes a free moral agent, God's foreknowledge of past, present and future allowed Him to know the "elect" before the foundation of the world. During the Protestant Reformation, new systems of theology were posited to explain the relationship between these concepts. The three most important of these theological systems are Calvinism, Lutheranism and Arminianism. In the Englishspeaking world, Calvinism has become the best-known and most easily-grasped Protestant theological system due to the ingenious mnemonic TULIP, i.e. total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints, to describe the five points of Calvinism. The purpose of this paper is to propose two new mnemonics to describe the theological systems of Lutheranism and Arminianism. These mnemonics are couched in the language of Calvinism for simplicity. For Lutheran theology, the acronym TAURUS is proposed. For Arminian theology, the acronym CURIA is proposed.

Keywords: Arminian, Arminianism, Acronym, Theological acronyms, Lutheran, Lutheranism, Tulip, Calvinism, Calvinist, Curia, Taurus, Theology, Depravity, Election, Atonement, Grace, Perseverance, Apostasy, Arminian acronym, Acronym for arminianism, Lutheran acronym, Acronym for lutheranism, Mnemonic, Theological mnemonics, Lutheran mnemonic, Arminian mnemonic, Mnemonic for lutheranism, Mnemonic for arminianism, Five points of lutheranism, Five points of arminianism

Introduction

The Christian concepts of free will, salvific grace, and human depravity have evolved over time. The earliest church theologians such as St. Augustine of Hippo and St. Thomas Aquinas held that free will was axiomatic. According to original Roman Catholic doctrine, man was imbued with free moral agency, and salvation could only be achieved through a combination of faith and works. This doctrine was exemplified by the passage from the Epistle of James that "faith without works is dead." [1]

Early Christian philosophers were quick to point out that human free will seemed incompatible with the omniscience of God. This was known as the paradox of free will. If God is omniscient, then He must know ahead of time how each individual will think and behave. If God knows something before the fact, is it not predestined? Does man really have free will? [2]

The Roman Catholic catechism calls upon the earlier teachings of St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas to answer this view. While man is imbued with free will to act as an independent moral agent, God himself is not bound by the dimension of time. This suggests that, for God, all moments are present in their immediacy. Past, present, and future are all simultaneous for God. In this way, free will from the human perspective and the omniscience of God are not incompatible. [4]

Despite the doctrinal position of the Roman Catholic Church, prominent theologians continued to argue concerning the paradox of free will throughout the Protestant Reformation. John Calvin, for example, advocated for predestination and did not believe in human free will. Jacob Arminius, on the other hand, espoused the reverse. This paper will discuss the three most important Protestant positions on free will, salvific grace, and human depravity espoused by John Calvin, Jacob Arminius and Martin Luther. The paper will describe the historical development of these doctrines vis-a-vis the Protestant Reformation and propose two novel mnemonics to describe the theological doctrines of Lutheranism and Arminianism. [3]

Calvinism

John Calvin was born in 1509 in Noyon, France, the son of Gerard Calvin, a prominent notary. At the instigation of his father, Calvin studied law at the University of Orleans, becoming a licentiate in law in 1532. As a young man, Calvin experienced a profound religious conversion and decided to become a minister. He settled in Geneva where in 1536 he published his seminal work the Institutes of the Christian Religion delineating the five points of Calvinism. [6]

The five points of Calvinism have been made famous by the acronym TULIP, which stands for total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints. Calvin believed that human beings were totally depraved, meaning that they were incapable of meriting salvation of their own volition. God’s gracious election of certain fortunate individuals to salvation was without respect to their personal merit or righteousness. On the contrary, certain individuals were “elect” solely on the basis of God’s sovereign choice and predestination. Those predestined to election was entirely up to God Himself and had nothing to do with individual behavior or personal merit. [5]

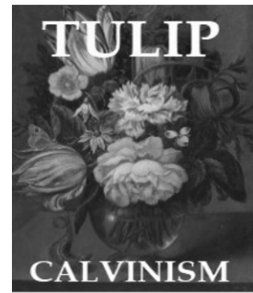


Illustration 1: The Most Famous Acronym in Christian Theology

TULIP: total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace and perseverance of the saints

It followed that Christ’s sacrifice on the cross was applicable only to the “elect” and not to the entire population of mankind. The concept of irresistible grace, moreover, refers to an individual’s inability to resist his or her election. God chose those whom He loved most to be with Him in heaven, and on what basis He so chose was not for human beings to endeavor to comprehend. It was simply a matter of His sovereign choice. This was seen by Calvin as merciful rather than unfair, since God was under no obligation to “elect” anyone at all. On the contrary, the total depravity of all men meant that universal damnation would be entirely just. Since election was something entirely dependent upon God’s sovereign prerogative, no one could lose the status of election by his or her own personal lapse. This final Calvinist point would become known as the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. [6]

Table 1: Standardized Dichotomous Terms

Standard Calvinist Term	Antithetical Standardized Term
Total depravity	Incomplete depravity
Unconditional election	Conditional election
Limited atonement	Unlimited (universal) atonement
Irresistible grace	Resistible grace
Perseverance of the saints	Apostasy of the saints

Table 2: Definitions of Key Terms

Key term	Definition
Total depravity	Man is totally depraved and, left to his own devices, stands no chance of living righteously and meriting salvific grace of his own accord.
Incomplete depravity	Man is not entirely depraved and has the power, through his own free choice, to live a life of righteousness and merit salvific grace of his own accord.
Unconditional election	God chooses the elect unconditionally and without respect to the individual's personal merit or righteousness.
Conditional election	God chooses the elect based on individual merit and righteousness.
Limited atonement	Christ's atonement ransoms only the elect, not the entire population.
Unlimited (universal) atonement	Christ's atonement ransoms the entire population of the earth, giving everyone the opportunity to accept Christ's atonement of their own accord based on personal free choice.
Irresistible grace	If God chooses an individual for salvific grace, that individual does not have the power to refuse the gift, even if it is contrary to his or her personal will. This concept is also known as monergism and is related to double predestination.
Resistible grace	If God chooses an individual for salvific grace, the individual has the power to refuse the gift by his or her personal free choice. This concept is also known as prevenient grace or synergism and is related to single predestination.
Perseverance of the saints	Once chosen by God for salvific grace, the outcome cannot be changed. The individual or "saint" will persevere in faith until his or her own death.
Apostasy of the saints	Even if chosen by God for salvific grace and even if this gift of grace is accepted by the individual, it is not always permanent. Some individuals may fall away and lose their faith at a later time due to a personal decision to give up the faith based on free will.

Arminianism

Jacob Arminius was born in 1560 in Utrecht, the Netherlands, where he was among the first students

of Leiden University. He became an ordained minister in 1588 at the age of 28. He preached in Amsterdam for several years before returning to Leiden University, where he became a professor of theology. His seminal work, the Five Articles of the Remonstrants, was published posthumously in 1610. He was survived by his wife and nine children. [7]

Arminianism is at the opposite end of the theological spectrum with respect to Calvinism. The five points of Arminian theology can be learned by the mnemonic CURIA, which stands for conditional election, unlimited atonement, resistible grace, incomplete depravity, and apostasy of the saints. For Arminius, man's free will allows him to choose between good and evil. While predisposed to evil in some instances, man is not completely depraved; he has the ability to freely choose to live a righteous life meritorious of salvific grace. Man is therefore "elect" conditional upon his personal merit and righteousness. Election is not predestined, but follows from man's actions. Like Luther, Arminius believed that Christ died for the sins of all mankind, i.e. the doctrine of the unlimited or universal atonement. Man's free agency allows him to either embrace or reject God's salvific grace when offered, further emphasizing the centrality of free will in Arminian thought. Lastly, Arminius held that men could fall from a state of grace through personal lapse. [8]

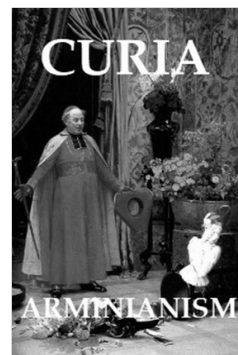


Illustration 2: The word "curia" refers to the administrative clergy of the Roman Catholic Church. The five points of Arminianism are best described by the acronym CURIA: conditional election, universal atonement, resistible grace, incomplete depravity, and apostasy of the saints

Lutheranism

Martin Luther was born in 1483 in the small town of Eisleben in the Holy Roman Empire, the son of an alderman. Luther briefly studied law at the University of Erfurt, where initially he seemed to thrive. However, one dark night, while traveling alone outside during a heavy rainstorm, he underwent a religious epiphany; he promised God that he would become a monk if delivered from the storm. Surviving the storm, Luther promptly disenrolled from law school and entered St. Augustine's Monastery, where he became a member of the Augustinian Order. In 1512, he received a Doctor of Theology from the University of Wittenberg and was invited to the faculty of the university the same year. In 1517, he published the Ninety-five Theses in which he enumerated the theological points of Lutheranism. [9]

Lutheranism is in many respects a cross between Calvinism and Arminianism. The theology of Luther can best be described by the acronym TAURUs, which stands for total depravity, apostasy of the saints, unconditional election, resistible grace, and universal atonement. Like Calvin, Luther believed that man was totally depraved and utterly incapable of meriting salvific grace of his own accord. Luther also affirmed the doctrine of unconditional election, emphasizing that the "elect" were predestined to salvific grace by God's sovereign choice and without regard to personal merit. Notwithstanding their predestination to salvific grace, individuals could lose their state of grace due to personal lapse and enter into a state of apostasy. An elect individual's losing his or her salvation was therefore no fault of God, but the fault of the individual himself. God's salvific grace was, after all, resistible. An individual could exercise his or her free will to choose whether to accept the salvific grace to which he or she was predestined. In this way, Lutheranism affirms both free will and predestination to varying degrees. Lastly, Luther believed in the universal atonement, meaning that Christ's sacrifice on the cross was applicable to all people. [10]

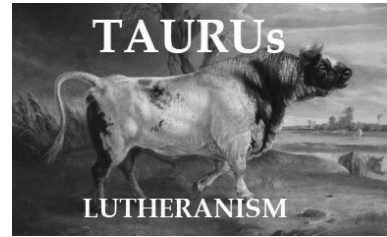


Illustration 3: The acronym descriptive of Lutheran theology
TAURUs: total depravity, the apostasy of the saints, unconditional election, resistible grace, and universal atonement

The Calvinist-Arminian Theological Spectrum

Calvinism and Arminianism exist on a theological spectrum. Calvinism was a refinement and exposition of the teachings of St. Augustine of Hippo and, for this reason, is sometimes referred to as Augustinian Calvinism. Calvinism, with its divine election based on God's sovereign choice and predestination, is on one end of the theological spectrum. There is no place for substantive free will in Calvinism. [11]

Arminianism, on the other hand, is an outgrowth of Pelagianism, affirming the free will of man and emphasizing that man has the capability to seek God of his own accord. In Arminian theology, man has the free will to live righteously and come to faith in Christ. In nineteenth century theological works, there are numerous references to the concept of Pelagian Arminianism, though in modern parlance this terminology has fallen out of favor. Modern analysts endorse that Arminianism preaches total depravity, however the Arminian conception of total depravity is sufficiently different from that preached by Calvinism to merit a slightly different terminology. The variety of total depravity preached by Arminian theologians would be more appropriately termed incomplete depravity, since it advocates for the free agency of man to seek God through prevenient grace. [12-16]

Table 3: The Calvinist-Arminian Theological Spectrum

Arminianism	Lutheranism	Calvinism
Free Will Pelagianism Prevenient Grace	Single Predestination Semi-Pelagianism Synergism	Double Predestination Augustinianism Monergism

Conclusion

The best way to understand the theologies of Luther and Arminius is to couch them in Calvinist terminology. Without developing a common vocabulary, it is almost impossible to understand the three theological systems in reference to one another. As we have seen, Calvinism and Arminianism can be thought of as polar opposites, whereas Lutheranism can be discerned as intermediate between the two. While previous mnemonics have utilized disparate terminologies for the three theological systems, the novel acronyms of TAURUs and CURIA presented herein allow for a common terminology. In conclusion, it is hoped that these novel acronyms will help students of theology to easily understand the key differences and similarities between Calvinism, Lutheranism and Arminianism.

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