

# Calvinism and Anglicanism

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Calvinism is a theological system that attempts to make sense of the biblical teaching about God and his dealings with the world. Though named after the Protestant Reformer John Calvin, its teachings have not only moved beyond that of Calvin, but many of its themes reach back through the centuries of church history.

Though Calvinism touches upon huge theological issues such as the problem of evil, the nature of God, and human freedom, most people, in mentioning Calvinism (or its counterpoint, Arminianism), are generally referring to personal salvation, or more specifically, the doctrine of election. For example, when someone says, "He's a Calvinist," they usually mean that he believes in *unconditional* election, that is, the belief that people choose Christ as a result of God's prior choice. That's what gets most of the attention. It's a hot topic in many Christian circles, but keep this in mind: all Christians (should) believe in election (or predestination) because it's a biblical concept. The debate between Calvinists and Arminians is not about whether or not God elects, but whether or not God's election is conditioned on man's choice. A Calvinist believes God's election of individuals to salvation is *not* based on man's choice (unconditional election) while an Arminian believes God's election of individuals to salvation *is* based on man's choice (conditional election). This distinction is often neglected.

There are two more crucial points to take into account: (1) Calvinism and Arminianism are large and complex theological systems, of which the doctrine of election is but one part among many. Their contribution to Christian theology is much grander than this one particular issue. (2) There are many voices in this debate that are unfair in their portrayal of the other position. Even good-intentioned folk often unknowingly misrepresent the other side. And it's good to know at the front end that both Calvinism and Arminianism are biblical, Protestant, and Christian positions. They share more in common with each other than not.

Anglicans as a whole have never taken an official position on this issue, which fits with their overall approach to doctrine: historically orthodox with a generous orthodoxy. In other words, Anglicanism intentionally allows space for believers and local churches to discuss, disagree, and develop their beliefs. Such a generous orthodoxy stems from a humility that recognizes that we as humans still see through a glass dimly and that our God is incomprehensible. Anglicans, then, often speak about mystery and tension, and how God should not be systematized or put in a box. This approach provides for a broad spectrum of theology that, while rooted in Scripture and historic orthodoxy, trusts the Holy Spirit to guide and direct the church of Jesus Christ even today.