

THE HISTORY OF CALVINISM AND ARMINIANISM
AMONG ROMANIAN BAPTISTS

by
Nicolae Chiciudean
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INTRODUCTION

Stating the issue

The doctrine of salvation is one of the most important fundamentals of almost any Christian community. Ultimately Christianity is a religion in which God the Creator is elevated, around whom centers the universe, human life and history. But what is the personal relationship of human beings to such a living God?

The doctrine of salvation expresses the truth about this relationship in general, and the restoration of the once destroyed relationship in particular. Sin has entered the world through the disobedience of Adam and Eve, the first man and woman. The almighty and gracious God, as he revealed Himself, has intervened offering a solution for saving men from sin, restoring His relationship with mankind.

However, the whole dynamic of God's saving dealings has been much disputed along the centuries of church-history. From the role and position of Jesus Christ to the responsibility of humans, almost every aspect of this saving work was much debated.

As new Christian communities or groups arose, their religious identity was tightly bound to some aspect of soteriology. Donatists, Arians, Pelagians, Augustinians, Anabaptists, Reformed, Pentecostals, etc, have even received their names according to their particular position held in some soteriological aspect of the whole doctrine.

The Christian faith has suffered distortions and perversions all the time in the Church era. A first major controversy broke out concerning the deity of Christ which gave rise to the Nicean Council. Later a fierce controversy arose between Augustine and Pelagius concerning the free will of men. By the time of the Reformation a large portion of the whole doctrine of salvation was felt to be dangerously perverted. Christ was not considered anymore the only Mediator of grace, human merits were necessary for gaining acceptance in God's sight. Righteousness was not defined as

forensic, imputed by God to the believer, but as a gradual inner change. The list of such teachings can be continued.

It became the great responsibility of the Reformers to bring back the whole doctrine of salvation to its biblical foundation. The so-called Solas of the Reformation¹ give us a clear picture of the restored doctrines. Salvation was counted once again as the initiative of God who condescends in Christ to depraved sinners, saving them through His free grace by faith in Christ Jesus regenerating them by the Holy Spirit and sealing them for eternal glory.

But even a revolutionary time, such as the Reformation, could bring only a relative and short-lived unity in matters pertaining to biblical salvation. Controversies were now to arise among the newly formed religious bodies like the Lutheran, the Reformed, the Non-conformist, the Independent and Separatist churches, etc.

Calvinism vs. Arminianism: the heart of the matter

The old controversies broke out again. Only the scene and the persons involved were different. One of the controversies is known as the Calvinist-Arminian controversy.

John Calvin has given a strong foundation to theology through his magnum opus *The Institutes of the Christian Faith*. Later theologians have added or modified Calvin's theology, enlarging or modifying his theological work. One major change, which crossed the line of toleration of the Reformed church was effected by Jacob Arminius, a Dutch theologian. In attempting to defend Calvinistic predestination against the onslaughts of Dirck Volckertszoon Coornhert, it is contended that Arminius began to doubt and thus modified some parts of his view.

Arminianism holds to the following tenets:

¹ Sola Scriptura, sola gratia, sola fide, solus Christus, soli Deo gloria

- Humans are naturally unable to make any effort towards salvation
- Salvation is possible by grace alone
- Works of human effort cannot cause or contribute to salvation
- God's election is conditional on faith in Jesus
- Jesus' atonement was for all people
- God allows his grace to be resisted by those unwilling to believe
- Salvation can be lost, as continued salvation is conditional upon continued faith.²

In order to respond to Arminius's teachings, the Council of Dort was convened, which came up with those doctrinal verdicts known later as the so-called TULIP. Each of the five letters stands for a Calvinistic doctrine: Total depravity of the sinner, Unconditioned election, Limited or, historically more accurate, particular redemption, Irresistible grace and Perseverance of the saints.

The difference between Arminianism and Calvinism is defined by Cornelius van Til as follows:

If God was to be maintained in his incommunicable attributes, the Spirit of God, not man, had to effect the salvation of man. The only alternative to this would be that man could at some point take the initiative in the matter of his own salvation. This would imply that the salvation wrought by Christ could be frustrated by man. Suppose that none should accept the salvation offered to them. In that case the whole of Christ's work would be in vain and the eternal God would be set at naught by temporal man. Even if we say that in the case of any one individual sinner the question of salvation is in the last analysis dependent upon man rather than upon God, that is if we say that man can of himself accept or reject the gospel as he pleases, we have made the eternal God dependent upon man. We have then, in effect, denied the incommunicable attributes of God. If we refuse to mix the eternal and the temporal at the point of creation and at the point of the incarnation we must also refuse to mix them at the point of salvation.

It will be noted that the point discussed in the preceding paragraph is the difference between Arminianism and Calvinism.³

Calvinism thinks of man's salvation as initiated and carried out by God, without denying human responsibility, while Arminianism admits of cooperation of man with God in his own salvation.

² www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arminianism, accessed on Sept. 25, 2007

³ Cornelius van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., Phillipsburg, New Jersey, 1955), p. 18-19.

Robert Reymond stresses the difference between the two theological positions especially in the way they conceive of Christ's atoning work. While Calvinism believes strongly in the penal substitutionary atonement of Christ, Arminianism favors the governmental theory of the atonement.⁴ He gives a quotation from a modern Arminian, Kenneth J. Grider, who writes:

Arminians teach that what Christ did he did for every person; therefore, what he did could not have been to pay the penalty for sin, since no one would then ever go into eternal perdition. Arminianism teaches that Christ suffered for everyone so that the Father could forgive the ones who repent and believe; his death is such that all will see that forgiveness is costly and will strive to cease from anarchy in the world God governs.⁵

At the rise of the Baptist movement, Evangelicals were already divided along the lines of Calvinism and Arminianism. There is no surprise then, that we find Baptists on both sides of the issue from the very beginning. Baptist mission started early in the 17th century from two different sources: General Baptists sprang up from an Arminian background through the Dutch Mennonites and Particular Baptists from an English puritan-separatist background.⁶ Their very name reflects the impact of the Calvinist-Arminian controversy. General Baptists gained their name from their belief in the universal atonement of Christ (Christ died for all men), while Particular Baptists sided with the Calvinist doctrine of particular or limited atonement of Christ, having as its object only the elect of God⁷.

Baptist Beginnings in Romania: sources of theology

It took more than two centuries for Baptist mission to cross the English Channel to continental Europe. From the very beginning, Baptist mission emerged from several

⁴ Reymond clarifies this theory in a footnote, writing: „The governmental theory of the atonement denies that Christ's death was intended to pay the penalty for sin ... but rather was simply a penal *example* of sin's dreadful and tragic nature” (emphasis his).

⁵ J. Kenneth Grider, „Arminianism,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1984), 79-81 quoted in Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, (Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, 1997), p. 474.

⁶ Cf. Leon H. McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, (Broadman Press, Nashville, 1987), p. 32ff.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 72-74.

sources, British and American. McBeth's first words about Baptist beginnings in Europe are these:

“Baptists in Europe wear a coat of many colors.” This apt description by a recent historian sums up the diverse origins, differing doctrinal views, and varied church practices of almost a million Baptists scattered over twenty-five or more countries of Continental Europe.⁸

He adds:

The Pietist environment placed a distinctive stamp upon European Baptists. Pietist heritage helped shape forms of worship, methods of evangelism, emphases in theology and daily Christian life-styles.⁹

After such an introduction we can expect also doctrinal variety among European Baptists concerning Christology and Soteriology, too. Continental Baptist mission started in Germany with Johann Gerhard Oncken, called also “the Father of Continental Baptists”, since as McBeth again writes:

Not only in Germany but also through-out Europe much of the Baptist work stems either directly from Oncken or from others whom he trained and sent out. He served in an almost apostolic role, making extensive missionary tours of his own, writing letters to win new converts and confirm others in the faith, and sending out missionaries and ministers to sustain the work thus begun.¹⁰

Such missionaries who were members in Oncken's church in Hamburg, were sent out to Hungary and Romania, who began the Baptist work there. Later Hungarian and Romanian nationals were trained at the Baptist Seminary in Hamburg and came back to give a greater input to the whole work.

It is to be expected, that at the very beginning, the doctrinal life of Romanian Baptists was shaped by the position of Oncken and the German Baptists.

We read about Oncken's doctrinal position:

⁸ Ibid., p. 464

⁹ Ibid., p. 466

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 470

In theology Oncken was fairly conservative, with a decided preference for Calvinistic emphases, and he injected that viewpoint into early Baptist confessions in Europe.¹¹

In our effort to survey how the Calvinist-Arminian controversy is reflected among Romanian Baptists, we shall distinguish four major periods. First is the period between 1846-1920. Here we need to analyze partly what happened among Hungarian Baptists, since for more than fifty years after the Baptists' beginnings the region called Transylvania (now Mid- and West-Romania) was a Hungarian territory. The most prominent beginning of Baptist mission was witnessed by Transylvania itself, a region of mixed mainly Romanian-Hungarian-German ethnic groups with several minor ethnic groups. Baptist missions started here almost simultaneously among the three major ethnic groups.

In historic Romania (now East- and South-Romania) Baptist beginnings had a source independent of Transylvania. However, it was not doctrinally independent since the first missionary came from the Oncken's very church and established a German speaking church in Bucharest, the capital city of Romania.

The second period is marked by the union of Transylvania with Romania, after First World War. This period lasts until the end of Second World War, when Romania fell under Communism (1920-1947).

The third period covers the entire Communist era (1947-1989). The fourth period begins with the December Revolution which overthrew Communism and witnessed doctrinal renewals and perversions simultaneously (1989 -).

¹¹ Ibid., p. 473

CHAPTER I

THE EARLY PERIOD: FROM THE BEGINNINGS TO 1920

The Romanian Baptist movement started around mid-nineteenth century. It sprang up almost simultaneously in Transylvania and old Romania. Both beginnings had German roots, so we can expect to find a strong Calvinistic emphases at the start.

This is due also to the fact, that most of the Hungarian speaking Baptists in Transylvania came from the Reformed Church, the historic Calvinist church, which at this time became gradually liberal. The calvinistic roots were preserved especially in the country-people's piety. The first Baptists came from such an agricultural background, where hard life was conducive to preservation of pietistic roots.

Later Romanian historiographers consider that the Calvinism of these early Baptists (especially Hungarian speaking) is more a reminiscence of their pre-Baptist life than a conscious part of their Baptist thinking and teaching.

Alexa Popovici, the first and foremost Romanian Baptist historiographer comments on the Calvinism of the early Baptist under a heading called „Calvinist inclination”. It is worth quoting him extensively, since it is almost the only source about the early period.

„The first converts to Baptist faith, those in Salonta¹², which became later missionaries, came from the calvinists and it seems that they preserved some calvinist teachings. One of them was the teaching about men's predestination or election to be saved or not. Both M. Toth and Kornya have taught in their sermons and in their attitudes and were influenced by the teaching that if a man is elected by God unto salvation, then he will be saved either he wills or not, but if he is not elected, the person may try anything, he will be not saved. Kornya used frequently in his sermons in churches the phrase: „the elect of God”, and used in discussion with baptism candidates the phrase: „if they are elected by God, they will repent.” This disposition to predestinationism was recognizable with Mihaly Toth in the way he dealt with the

¹² Just 50 miles north from Arad, lying on the main road which links Arad and Oradea.

issue of church-discipline. According to the teaching of predestination, he treated harshly those fallen in sin or error, issued firm disciplinary verdicts, invoking the fact, that if a person is chosen by God, he/she will not be lost ... This exaggeration finds explanation in his calvinistic inclination, in a reminiscence of predestinationism.

... Mihaly Kornya, after a while, working much with those, who arose as good preachers among the Romanians, and who interpreted the Bible themselves, due to the light received from them, it seems that he was much influenced and he has lost much of his calvinistic disposition, which he had at the beginning. Some Romanian preachers, although they were influenced at the beginning by Kornya in matters of predestination, after long biblical researches and studies, have ceased to propagate and teach the doctrine of „election” in its calvinistic form.”¹³

It is clear that he writes from a critical point of view. It is interesting that in his opinion the calvinist influence decreased after Kornya’s mixing with Romanian preachers. All the Calvinism Popovici is aware of, comes through Kornya and Toth (the Hungarian missionaries) due to their former Reformed Church membership. But he is totally silent about Henry Meyer’s theology and influence, the German pastor who baptized and ordained the two Hungarian missionaries. Meyer was the pastor of the German Baptist Church in Budapest, since 1873. He was in charge of the whole Baptist missionary endeavor in Hungary and Transylvania. His influence cannot be overestimated in the life and theology of Hungarian and Romanian Baptists.

Coming directly from Oncken’s Hamburg Baptist Church and having worked for his whole life in harmony with Kornya and Toth, it should be expected that he was a Calvinist, too.

At least it can be asserted that doctrinal matters were not taken lightly. Beginning on 30th December 1893 Baptists in Hungary and Transylvania organized regular pastoral conferences¹⁴. Usually Meyer was the one who called the delegates together and conducted these meetings. Since most missionaries and preachers were lay people

¹³ Alexa Popovici, *Istoria Baptistilor din Romania*, vol. 1, 1856-1919, (The Romanian Baptist Church of Chicago, 1980). Alexa Popovici was Church-history and Practical Theology professor at the Romanian Baptist Seminary in Bucharest, in the first two decades after the Second World War. He says that the book was the Baptist history course taught by him at the Seminary. This means that the informations contained here were already gathered by 1945-1950.

¹⁴ Cf. Popovici, p. 267-278. Between 1893 and 1913 they organized nineteen conferences.

lacking any theological education (very often even any lay education), Meyer gave regular doctrinal and pastoral lectures on these conferences. One of these conferences is noteworthy.

At the conference held at Tulca (in Transylvania) between 24-26 April 1904, doctrinal issues enjoyed priority. The next year, 1905 was to be crucial for the Baptists in greater Hungary, because they gained recognition from the State, an event which required the composition of a Confession of Faith. It is called even today the 1905 Baptist Confession Faith. Now, the conference held at Tulca was one which worked toward doctrinal clarifications and reassessments. Although Popovici does not tell us which doctrines were discussed, he says thus much:

Concerning problems related to faith and order, it was said and clarified that the Christian life of church-members should be recognizable as clean by everybody. Concerning accepting candidates for baptism, it was established that only those can be accepted who can certify their repentance.¹⁵

We can assert from this at least, that Calvinistic spirituality was part of the Baptist life in this period of its history.

In old Romania, the Baptist mission started also with Germans coming from Oncken's church. Karl Johann Scharschmidt and his wife were the first Baptists. They came to Bucharest in 1856 and formed the first Baptist church of old Romania, which was a German speaking one. At that time Romania needed much industrial help from the developed countries of Western Europe and so a German community was established in Bucharest which reached an impressive number of 20.000 persons.

Scharschmidt himself was not a preacher. So after a while he asked Oncken for help. In 1863 August Liebig came to lead the ministry at this new church. He left the church in Bucharest in 1867 to pastor another German church in Romania.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 271

Being left without a pastor, the church in Bucharest made a decision that in every worship-service they should read from Spurgeon's sermons which were published weekly. Even Popovici considers them „good and instructing sermons”¹⁶. From this we can conclude again that Calvinism represented the main theological background of this Baptist mission in old Romania.

Concluding the survey of this period in Romanian Baptist history, it should be noticed that its theology depended heavily upon the German missionaries who brought the first seeds of the Gospel to both Transylvania and old Romania. Their theology was a Calvinistic one, but probably not as strict as it used to be in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The strong emphasis on evangelism and the affinities with Spurgeon's sermons shows that human responsibility was equally stressed along with God's sovereignty.

The most visible feature of this Calvinistic background was the clear evangelistic message concentrated on the repentance of sinners. Obviously it definitely lacks the Arminian „decisionist” language of later times.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 20

CHAPTER II

THE TIME OF CONSOLIDATION: FROM 1920 TO 1947

The first period in Romanian Baptist history comes to an end at the time of the First World War. The German influence decreased heavily in Romanian society along with Germany's blame for the disasters of the Great War. Baptist mission in Romania becomes more and more Romanian than German. The first Romanian pioneers, too, who were under strong German influence, leave the earthly scene.

Romania found itself on the winning side of the Great War, which had as a consequence the union of Transylvania with old Romania, forming Great Romania¹⁷. Therefore the Baptists started immediately to build the foundation of a society, which should unite them into one institutional body. After an ad-hoc meeting in Buteni (County of Arad) between 8-10 June, 1919, the founding congress of the Romanian Baptist Union was held at the same location on 14-16 February, 1920. The leadership of the Union was involved first of all in defending religious liberty for Baptists in every historical region of Great Romania and with strengthening the organizational structures of the new denominational body. Theological issues came up only in their defense against the Orthodox Church, which manipulated the authorities in order to persecute Baptists and in other apologetic instances like the appearance of the Adventists in Romania.

From all the historical data we can conclude that the heavy emphasis on evangelism had softened the edges of Calvinism in this second period. With the

¹⁷ The greater part of today's Republic of Moldova (formerly the Soviet Republic of Moldova) was joined to old Romania, too together with today's North-East Bulgaria called the Quadrilater.

decrease of the initial German influence, we discover a growing American influence. Among the first published brochures, which were distributed in evangelistic campaigns we find one written by R. A. Torrey entitled “How to win souls for the Saviour”¹⁸.

However, Calvinistic influences were maintained through the publishing of John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* and two biographies of C. H. Spurgeon along with his sermons and *The Treasury of David*. It is obvious then, that this time in Romanian Baptist history is marked by a continuous dilution of Calvinism which makes the later, though almost unnoticeable, shift to Arminianism much easier.

The newly founded Baptist Theological Seminary also played an immense role in shaping Baptist theology not only for this period but for the whole 20th Century. The first president and professor of the Seminary was the most influential for the rest of the century. His name is Ioan R. Socaciu¹⁹. His theological position is felt even today among Baptist pastors who are graduates of the Bucharest Baptist Seminary. He led the Seminary between 1921 and 1931 and then between 1946 and 1954, which falls into the third period. His influence is tremendous. Considering his theological position it should be noted that the Seminary was sponsored, from the very beginning through the Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention²⁰. Together with J.B. Gambrell, president of the Southern Baptist Convention, E. Y. Mullins, president at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, at this time, arrived in Bucharest in October 1920. The immediate consequence was the theological and

¹⁸ It was published in 1926.

¹⁹ After graduating high-school in Romania, he emigrated to America with his parents. While there he studies theology at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary under E.Y. Mullins. He comes back to Romania after the First World War and becomes the main theological source for Romanian Baptists between 1920-1970. His theology is still to be discovered today among the older active pastors among the Romanian Baptists.

²⁰ Popovici, vol. 2, p. 344.

financial support offered for the Seminary in Bucharest. The Americans arranged for the land and the building of the Seminary, which is still in use today.

Socaciu's theology was basically the Romanian reprint of Mullins theology. Socaciu did not publish a Systematic Theology, but later students (Ioan Bunaciu and Ionel Truța) who as successors will publish one each of them, still draw heavily on Mullins' theology. Socaciu's theology had also another source, but much weaker in influence, namely another American Baptist theologian, Augustus Strong. Socaciu has left behind an unpublished Systematic Theology course²¹, which becomes our main source in clarifying the Calvinist-Arminian theological issue among Romanian Baptists.

Predestination and Election

Socaciu asserts, speaking about God's decrees, that

Since the whole plan of God regarding His creatures is called predestination, the purpose of making some to believe and to be saved is called election, and the purpose of permitting some to refuse to believe and to be lost is called damnation.²²

After this he adds: "Scriptures declare that God has decreed: 1. the salvation of those who repent and believe in Christ."²³

Later, discussing the application of salvation, he brings up in more detail the question of election. His method is to put questions and give his position as answers to these question.

His first question is this:

²¹ His course grew in material along the years. The course which serves as our source was used at the Romanian Baptist Seminary in the school-year 1946-1947. One of the students in that year, Sima Handra, confessed in an interview (to Nicolae Chiciudean, Arad, the 13th October 2007) that Socaciu's theological position did not change significantly during his professorate. So this coursebook can be taken as a faithful reflection of his theology.

²² Ioan Socaciu, *Systematic Theology*, (Class notes, Baptist Theological Seminary, Bucharest, 1946), p. 65.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 66

Are some human beings elected unto salvation because of their works or because God foresees that they will believe the gospel when it will be preached to them?

Answer: No doubt, God knows from eternity past and sees before the faith or unbelief of each individual ... Therefore, when it comes to those saved and the sinners who reject salvation, the authors of Holy Scriptures call the saved ones of every generation the elect of the Lord, and the unsaved the reprobate sinners from eternity past, because God knows from eternity those who will receive the Gospel and also those who will reject the message of salvation.²⁴

It is clear that Socaciu has crossed here the Calvinist line and landed on the Arminian side. His election-theory is based not on the decrees of God, on foreordaining some to salvation, but builds on God's foreknowledge. He wants to avoid putting any merit for salvation on the human side, which makes his arguments in the different parts of his work to go against each other.

At this point his system looks to be more an Arminian one, than an inconsistent or a mild Calvinism. His system looks to be very much built on the thin dividing line of the two historic theological systems. While his doctrine of God's decrees is closer to Calvinism, his doctrine of election is definitely Arminian.

Following the first answers, he clarifies the issue of free will. He asserts that humans are totally free to believe or not, to receive or not Christ as Saviour. In his opinion "God decreed that absolut liberty of man. Therefore God is limited in His method of work because of man's sin, man being able to choose one of the three objects: the world, himself or God."²⁵

The doctrine of sin

Socaciu speaks in detail first about the dynamic of the sinful nature followed by the universality of sin and comes in the third session to speak about the origin and consequences of sin.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 150

²⁵ Ibid., p. 151

Among the consequences he speaks first of death (both physical and spiritual). By spiritual death he means that our forefathers have become estranged from God and have lost the divine grace. Spiritual death includes also the loss of harmony between body and soul, man becoming a prey of his own wickedness, and the loss of God's image in men. The consequence of this change is a weakened will.²⁶

He then adds:

As a result of Adam's sin, every descendant is born under the same condition in which he fell. So, these are the consequences of sin: depravity, guilt and reprobation.

1. By depravity we understand the fall from original righteousness and corruption of fallen and unstable men's moral nature.²⁷

Socaciu does not believe in a total depravity which makes the intervention of God absolutely necessary before the sinner can make any positive reaction of repentance.

The doctrine of atonement

Socaciu discusses the issue of atonement under the offices of Jesus Christ.

Speaking about him as Highpriest, he begins to detail the doctrine of atonement with this statement:

Holy Scriptures teach that the Lord Jesus submitted himself and suffered in our place in order to satisfy the unchangeable demand of divine holiness, thus putting aside the obstacle which was in the divine mind concerning forgiveness and reestablishing the guilty one.²⁸

He then explains the idea of atonement and how Jesus is the atonement for sin. He asserts that Jesus is the generic humanity and we are his members, so when God's justice condemns sin, His love ratifies the judgment and so makes in Christ full atonement for sin and satisfies the demands of the Father's holiness.²⁹

²⁶ Ibid., p. 119-120

²⁷ Ibid., p. 122

²⁸ Ibid., p. 137

²⁹ Ibid., p. 138

It is not clear that he understands atonement to be always penal. His understanding of atonement mixes the idea of penal substitutionary and governmental atonement. Says he: “Atonement is shown as a payed ransom in order to be freed from sin’s bondage. In the next paragraphs it will be shown that Christ’s death is the price for our deliverance from sin and death.”³⁰

The Bible teaches us that Jesus died as a Redeemer, i.e. his death was the price to be paid in order to redeem us from condemnation and death.³¹

In conclusion, we can assert, that Socaciu adheres finally to an inconsistent penal substitutionary theory of atonement.

At the end of his discussion about atonement he adds a section about the extension of Christ’s atonement. It is worth quoting at length:

Holy Scripture represents the atonement of our Lord Jesus Christ as an act done for every men and sufficient for the forgiveness and salvation of all. Therefore not the atonement itself is limited but its application through the work of the Holy Spirit.

On the basis of this principle of a universal atonement, but a special application of it to those elect, we must interpret the following texts: Eph. 1:4,7; 2Tim. 1:9,10; Jn 17:9,20,24, - declaring the special sacrifice of atonement as being efficient for the elect. Other passages, like 2Pt 2:1; 1Jn 2:2; 1Tim. 2:6,4,10; Tit 2:11 – declare that our Lord Jesus Christ’s atoning death is for everybody.

To the question in what sense is Christ the Saviour of every human being, we give the following answer:

1. That Christ’s atonement assures for everybody a delay in the execution of judgment of sin and a space of time for repentance together with the continuance of life’s common blessings which were brought to nought by disobedience.³²

Socaciu affirms a general or universal atonement and does not hold to particular redemption.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 138

³¹ Ibid., p. 140

³² Ibid., p. 146

The doctrine of salvation's application in respect to the Holy Spirit

The Calvinist doctrine of irresistible grace was launched to clarify whether or not a sinner makes the first step in his salvation by choosing to receive Christ or is God the initiator of men's salvation.³³ To this is connected another question: whether or not the sinner can oppose God's salvific work. Can the sinner jeopardize the decree of God concerning election unto salvation?

Socaciu maintains that God is always the initiator of man's salvation³⁴. We will see how he understands this act of God.

Without mentioning it, he criticizes Calvinism with these words:

Some pretend to know that God has elected some human beings unto salvation and rest of humankind unto damnation. Thus they have restricted the saving grace which arrived through Jesus Christ and which has been manifested, and continues to be manifested to every human being. They have also limited the atoning death of our Lord Jesus Christ to only some, although the New Testament teaches that the Lord Jesus Christ came to save everything, which is lost and died for all. So, salvation won by Him is offered to each sinner.³⁵

At this point Socaciu does not make any distinction between limited/universal atonement and limited/universal offering of salvation to sinners. Sound Calvinism maintains that atonement is particular for God's elect, while the offer of salvation is universal. Nobody knows on earth who are the elect. The Gospel should indeed be offered to everybody. Those denying the universal offer of salvation are called by C. H. Spurgeon hyper-calvinists³⁶. Socaciu seems to be unaware of this distinction.

Therefore, when he discusses in detail the question of free will, he claims:

God left and still leaves every human being with free will. Man is free to believe or not, to receive or not Jesus as his Saviour. The call of the heavenly Father is

³³ The doctrine of regeneration has to say more about this issue.

³⁴ Socaciu, . p. 149

³⁵ Ibid, p. 149

³⁶ Cf. Iain Murray's book on Spurgeon's controversy with the hyper-calvinists.

addressed to everybody. God's calling through the voice of the Son in the gospel is addressed to man's faculties and powers, which distinguish him as a moral, spiritual and personal being. Man is intelligence, emotions and will and a cooperation of these – the mode of activity – namely, conscience. God's grace will not pour out its blessings until it is received by the individual.³⁷

After these words, it is not clear whether God or man makes the first move in the application of salvation. Speaking about the Holy Spirit who convicts sinners of their sin, he claims:

The Spirit's work is moral and personal in itself. He leaves us free. He does not constrain us. When the Holy Spirit works in the heart of man and upon his soul, man is more conscious of his personality and liberty than ever. Thus, the Holy Spirit received in our lives is the immanent God in us.³⁸

Socaciu says that the Holy Spirit uses external means in influencing (not effecting salvation for) sinners, like the preaching of God's Word and the testimony of believers. He admits that the Holy Spirit awakens the sinner, He convicts him of sin, but these are not decisive steps in the *ordo salutis*. By the way, he builds an *ordo salutis* upon experience and not on the Scriptures, where the first element is repentance followed by faith³⁹. He concludes with these words: "The Saviour enters only that soul in which entered first the ambassador of repentance, namely the Gospel"⁴⁰.

The perseverance of saints.

Socaciu treats this doctrine under the general heading of sanctification. Perseverance is connected to the ongoing sanctifying process conducted by the Spirit. However, the manuscript misses the first paragraphs of the section treating the question of perseverance. Despite this we can quote solid evidence to clarify his theological position on this issue. Answering different objections to the doctrine of

³⁷ Socaciu, p. 151

³⁸ Ibid., p. 154

³⁹ Ibid., p. 156

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 158

the saint's perseverance, he writes: "We must understand that God not only cares for believers but in His providence brings such influences upon the regenerate believers, that these saved sinners should persevere in the faith which was given once for all to the saints."⁴¹

Answering the classic objection that this doctrine makes believers prone to immorality, he answers:

This does not accord with truth, because the doctrine of the saint's preservation in divine grace declares that God saves the sinner through assuring him of his preservation in holiness and a born-again believer, which is united to Christ, although he can fall into sin, cannot feel himself well and live in sin.

... Holy Scriptures do not show us that it is possible or sure that a truly born-again believer will fall out of faith.⁴²

It is clear that he believed in the perseverance of saints and their preservation in grace. Answering objections, that there are persons in the Bible who actually have fallen away, he writes: "Such believers are usually either men which were reformed outwardly, as was the case of Judas Iscariot and Ananias and Saphira, but they were believers which were never born-again in their hearts."⁴³

He admits that believers can fall temporarily into sin. But if they were really born-again, he concludes, they will return to the Lord before they pass away from this life.

We can conclude, that Socaciu had only this last doctrine in common with Calvinism. Speaking generally about his theology, although his theological language comes often very close to that employed by Calvinists, it is to be rendered more as Arminian.

Socaciu was a man of his day. The heavy emphasis put on evangelism made Romanian Baptists more interested in the application of the gospel to sinners, in which they were Calvinists insisting strongly on repentance and faith in Jesus Christ,

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 178

⁴² Ibid., p. 179. In support of his argument he quotes Spurgeon. It is the first time, that he appeals to such an out-spoken Calvinist as Spurgeon was.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 179

but the theological background was not very precisely drawn. Romanian Baptists were not confronted with the Modernist controversy which Americans fought while Socaciu paved the theological way of several future generations.

The evangelistic effort has softened Calvinism in America, too and Socaciu brought to Romania an Evangelical theology, which showed the same characteristics as its American counterpart.

Concluding the survey of this period in Romanian Baptist history, the best thing to do is to quote again historian Popovici. He has a whole section about the Calvinism and Arminianism of this period:

Being inherited from the first preachers, Mihai Kornya and Mihai Toth and others, which came from the Calvinists, this characteristic, namely the predestinational nuance remained with the next generation of preachers, too. They maintained that who is elected unto salvation will indeed be saved, because the circumstances will work together in such a way that that human being will be saved. And the other way round, the one who is not elected unto salvation, even if he repents, will fall away and remains lost. Although the Transylvanian pastors did not go with their expositions so deep into analysis and apologetics, but limited themselves just to enunciation (of this doctrine), from the preachers, who by the way of preaching and discussing asserted this predestinational, Calvinist nuance, this teaching became known and affirmed by the believers.

However, as in those time evangelism and missions were predominant, along with the clear process of affirming the believer's faithfulness in applying the New Testament's teachings and with the powerful confrontation with other denominations, in the battle for affirming the Baptist opinions, the predestinational nuance was left out from the preachers's preoccupations, it did not represent a major interest in the ministry.

As the years passed by, especially with the arrival of several preachers from America, through the contact with marked preachers and theology professors from England and America, this very subtle nuance of the confession of faith began to disappear, because, if at the beginning the question of election enjoyed a whole chapter in the confession of faith, later it did not show up in the subsequent confessions of faith. Preachers trained in the Seminary, emphasized the universality of grace and thus by and by the Calvinist nuance has gone with the wind, *being displaced by the Arminian understanding of election.*⁴⁴ (emphasis added).

After the Second World War, Baptists resumed their evangelistic activity with new zeal and did not care too much for the Calvinist/Arminian issue. The local churches being heavily decreased in numbers, after suffering great losses, pastors and theologians cared for the reconstruction of the denomination. In theology they just

⁴⁴ Popovici, vol. II, p. 392

continued the path set between the two world wars. Socaciu went on teaching until almost 1970 his systematic theology without significant change. But it should be noted that in this second period the sermons of Spurgeon still abound in the printed literature of the Baptist Union and the doctrine of the application of salvation maintains faithfully the Calvinist emphasis on repentance coupled with faith as absolutely necessary for salvation⁴⁵.

In a few years, at the end of 1947, the Communists took over, and with them started a new era for Baptists, the third one. The major issue of interest in the study of the next period is the loss of the final contact with Calvinism, namely the doctrine of the saint's perseverance unto final salvation.

⁴⁵ Cf. the issues of *Farul Creștin* printed after the Second World War and before the Communist era.

CHAPTER III

THE COMMUNIST PERIOD: FROM 1947 TO 1989

Socaciu's theological heritage was continued in this third period by Ioan Bunaciu, who became his successor as professor of Systematic Theology at the Baptist Union's Seminary. Although Socaciu's influence cannot be overemphasized among Romanian Baptists, others, like Constantin Adorian and Alexa Popovici have contributed to the theological heritage. Alexa Popovici, the well-known Romanian Baptist historian, was History- and Practical Theology professor until 1967 at the Baptist Seminary. In contradistinction to Socaciu, he studied exclusively in Romania before emigrating to US. His theological shape is even more Arminian than Socaciu's.

The main sources for this period are the Systematic Theology manual published by Bunaciu in 1976, the 1949 Confession of Faith and the only Baptist printed periodical allowed by Communists, the *Îndrumătorul Creștin*⁴⁶.

We will look firstly to the 1949 Confession of Faith, which was published at the beginning of the Communist regime. The state required all denominations to submit a confession of faith and organizational by-laws in order to gain authorization. The Baptists compiled rapidly a confession of faith, which is basically the work of Socaciu and Popovici⁴⁷. This Baptist Confession of Faith is Arminian in its language, although it preserves some Calvinist traits when it comes to the doctrine of repentance and saving faith.

⁴⁶ In English: *The Christian Guide*.

⁴⁷ According to Sima Handra, *Interview*.

Concerning the doctrine of the saint's perseverance (later known as eternal security) we see a definite change to Arminianism. The Confession has a separate chapter about the saint's perseverance, consisting of only one paragraph, put this way:

We believe and confess that a believer saved by the saving sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ through personal repentance and faith, is kept in this gracious state by the power of God until the moment of unbelief (when by his own good will he leaves this state). For this purpose He gave the Holy Spirit to the believers to comfort, to illumine, to lead and to perfect them. In remaining in grace, the will of man flows into the divine will, his battle, being sustained by the power of God, is to conquer temptations and the trials of sin.⁴⁸

Towards the end of the Communist period, in early 1980', we find a study of the doctrine of the saint's perseverance in grace presented to the pastors in a pastors-meeting. Such meetings were held regularly for fellowship and for theological improvement. The author of this study, Sandor Kulcsar, vice-president of the Baptist Union at that time, quotes first the text of the Confession of Faith, followed by the presentation of false doctrines about the believer's preservation in grace. He makes a very detailed presentation of the Calvinist doctrine, arguing that it flows directly from the Calvinist understanding of election.⁴⁹ His main argument in dismissing the Calvinist doctrine is, that it emphasizes only the divine aspect neglecting totally the human one. He insists that Scriptures teach clearly that humans can fall from faith, i.e. from the state of grace. This, of course, is not because of God but because of man and his attitude.

Bunaciu joins the ranks of those who criticize vehemently the Calvinist doctrine of the final preservation of saints. He attributes the whole doctrine to abstract logical deductions, which, according to him, were absent from the New Testament authors. He dismisses the Arminian doctrine, too, calling it extreme, and tries to build a

⁴⁸ The 1949 Baptist Confession of Faith, p. 19

⁴⁹ Sandor Kulcsar, *Pastrarea sfinților în har*, (study material for pastors' meeting. The year is not mentioned). But pastor Sandor Kulcsar, emigrated to the US in 1986, so the study was presented earlier in this decade, while he was vice-president of the Romanian Baptist Union. Usually only the Union's leaders or theology professors gave lectures at pastors' meetings.

balanced doctrine of the saint's preservation in grace. He says that the Calvinist doctrine presents a mechanical preservation, God preserving the saint against his will. His own doctrine of preservation emphasizes God's work through the will and faith of the believer, so that he finally will not leave the state of grace⁵⁰.

His position seems to be more balanced than Kulcsar's one. He tries to avoid falling into both Calvinism and Arminianism, but finally his position is clearly closer to the Arminian side, even if it presents a much milder version.

The fact that this doctrine has not reached a universally accepted definition among Romanian Baptists, who wavered between the Calvinist and the Arminian position, is supported by an article in the *Îndrumătorul Creștin*⁵¹, where the author states:

This eternal life is not limited in time, because it is defined as „eternal”, - which refers to a life that has no end! i.e. it lasts as much as the Eternal God.

There is a certain theology, that maintains, that a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ can have one day life in Christ and the next day he can loose it! But then, this life from one day to the other is not eternal life anymore, because something, which has an end, is not eternal.

The Communist era ended with Romanian Baptists being clearly on the Arminian side. No doubt, the Communist's isolationist politics, which guarded strongly against Western influence of any kind has also contributed to this. Usually pastors had a minimal access to theological literature. Therefore it is not strange to find out that the theological position of Romanian Baptists at the end of the Communist era was much the same as at the beginning of it.

⁵⁰ Ioan Bunaciu, *Systematic Theology*, (The Union of Christian Baptist Churches, Bucharest 1976), p. 300ff.

⁵¹ *Îndrumătorul Creștin*, issue nr. 9-10, 1978, p. 28. The author signed himself with the monogram S, who remains unknown for the author of this essay.

CHAPTER IV

NEW DEPARTURES: FROM 1989 TO THE PRESENT

Like a valley flooded by water when the gates of a dam are opened, Romanian Baptists were inundated by all kinds and types of Western Christians (not only Baptists) after the December Revolution in 1989.

Soon theological differences were to be felt in almost every theological department.

Another phenomena, which contributed to the diversification of the theological scene was the growing number of young men, which went to study theology at several theological centres in Western Europe and US.

While some have continued to keep strongly to the Romanian Baptist theological heritage hammered out in the previous decades⁵², others began to discover the differences among Baptist theologies and to change their positions. This influence was strengthened by the many translations of theological books by an increasing number of Christian publishers⁵³ and by several theological programs started by Western Baptist theological institutes⁵⁴. All these have rebalanced the theological scene by bringing Calvinism back into the focus of theological discussions.

⁵² Note especially the publication of another Systematic Theology book written by Ionel Truta and published post-mortem by his wife in 1996.

⁵³ The *Cartea Creștină Publishing House*, a Baptist publisher in Oradea, has recently published in Romanian language *The Institutes of Christian Religion* of John Calvin.

⁵⁴ Among these a noteworthy place is occupied by Central Baptist Theological Seminary, Plymouth Minnesota.

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