Jacobus Arminius

William R. Cannon

Jacobus Arminius, the anniversary of whose birth four hundred years ago we celebrate today, was not a towering figure in the history of Christianity. The land in which he was born and reared, his native tongue, the language in which he preached, the circumstances of his time and station, the natural talents of the man himself, were not such to enable him to make an outstanding contribution to the world and therefore to lift him to a position among the giants of history.

Although Arminius is not a major figure in Christian history, well-informed churchmen all seem to know his name. Few of these, however, are familiar with his career or can delineate with precision the core of his teaching. But he became the spokesman of an increasingly strong theological movement in the stream of which all of us swim. He was more the artificer of a popular slogan which expressed what everybody in his heart really wanted to believe than the discoverer of some new truth, the relevancy of which he had to teach mankind.

This man, whose Dutch name was Jacob Hermandszoon, was born in Oudewater, a small town in Southern Holland, on October 19, 1560. He was the youngest of three children. Probably he never remembered his father who died as a young man, leaving his little family ill provided for and almost at the mercy of the shifting circumstances of a rapidly changing age. For Europe as a whole, this was the period of the Reformation when individuals, families, local congregations, towns and counties, provinces, even whole nations, were re-thinking the tenets of their faith and moving to a new organizational expression of Christianity. For Holland, in particular, this was the time of revolution, the assertion of national independence, and the establishment of a new nation in the family of mankind. In the case of the Dutch people, revolution in government and reformation in religion were part and parcel of the same ideational piece. Politics and piety were inseparably intertwined. The Dutch hated Spain because of her tyranny. Like-

wise, the Dutch condemned Roman Catholicism as the false representation of Christianity. The new nation added a new army to the Protestant cause.

The intensity of such radical changes is emphasized by the fact that they took place within one generation. Many people born devout Roman Catholics died convinced and fervent Protestants. Likewise subjects of Spain as children were hardy patriots and citizens of the Dutch Republic as men. Indeed, Arminius was adopted by the parish priest of Oudewater, who was a convert to Protestantism and therefore a minister of the Protestant Church. It was he who gave the young boy his first instruction and when he was older sent him to Utrecht to school.

When Arminius matriculated at Utrecht, that city was the center of Dutch opposition to the Duke of Alva's tyranny. He was very young at the time, so as a small boy was fired with patriotic zeal; and stories of Alva's atrocities no doubt colored his imagination and lingered in lurid detail in his memory like a nightmare of hell all his days. "The child is father to the man," and the impressions of early life more often than we care to admit help to form the thoughts of maturity and the reflections of age. Arminius never lived to acquire age, but his mature thought stood against the fact of evil and never let loose of the necessity of giving an account of man's responsibility for it as a person, not merely as a member of the human race. The Duke of Alva, he remembered, was a man as well as the agent of Spain. Spain set policies, but Alva executed them in keeping with his own temperament and character. He could never escape the responsibility of being himself.

Arminius's studies at Utrecht came to an end when he was fourteen years old. His foster parent died in 1574, when the boy was only fourteen years old, and he had to return to his native village. Fortunately, however, a native of Oudewater had achieved success to the degree that he had won a professorship in mathematics at Marburg University in what is now Germany. Evidently he was impressed by the qualities the young boy displayed. He thought Arminius had real promise as a student, so he carried him back with him to Marburg where he entered him in that university, already a stronghold of Lutheran theology. It is very difficult to assess how much influence, if any, Marburg had on the development of Arminius's thought. The young man had scarcely arrived

until he left to return to Holland.

His departure from Marburg came with the suddenness of a thunderbolt. In fact, the noise that drove him out was a distant rumble from his own land, the result of Spanish lightning which had struck his own village and home. When the Spanish captured Oudewater, they put most of its inhabitants to the sword. Property and people were wantonly destroyed. Among the victims of the massacre were Arminius's own family; his mother, his sister, and his brother all perished. Though all was gone, love nonetheless compelled him back to the scene of destruction and desolation. Peter Bertius, a Protestant pastor in Rotterdam, took the boy into his custody and gave him a home.

Many, indeed most, of the Dutch towns in that region suffered a similar fate. Yet Leyden had been able to put up a successful resistance. To celebrate her deliverance Leyden instituted a university, which became a militant training school for proselyting Protestantism. Arminius, now fired with the zeal of a fanatic to overcome all things Spanish, more especially Spain's religion, entered the new university as one of its first pupils. Evidently he won distinction as a student, for the Merchants' Guild of Amsterdam chose to sponsor him in graduate studies abroad. This was done on the recommendation of the burgomaster (mayor) of Amsterdam. In return for this support, Arminius had to promise to make his career as a minister of the gospel in Amsterdam.

His studies carried him first to Geneva and later to Basel. In Geneva, for example, he studied under Beza, the successor to Calvin. He seems to have been thoroughly orthodox in theology, yet at the same time he displayed a rugged independence of judgment which led him to question the formal logic of Aristotle. This proved so annoying to his professors that he had to leave Geneva for Basel. Here he continued his formal education and with such proficiency that the University offered him the doctorate in theology. This Arminius modestly declined on the grounds that he was too young for such an honor. He was only twenty-two years old at the time. He returned again to Geneva for three years, where he completed his studies at twenty-five years of age. Before returning to Holland, however, he went to Italy, where he stayed for more than six months visiting the cities of the Renaissance in the north and Rome. Probably he attended lectures at several of

the Italian universities. He seems to have tarried longer at Padua than anywhere else. Another Dutch student, Adrian Junius of Dort, was his traveling companion. Since they were both poor, they had to make the journey on foot. Each of them carried in his pockets a Hebrew Psalter and a Greek New Testament out of which he read every day.

The fall of 1587, probably in time to celebrate his twenty-seventh birthday, saw Arminius on Dutch soil, taking up his residence in Amsterdam. In August, 1588, he was ordained a minister of the gospel, having served under the watch care of others since February. This, strikingly enough, was the year of the defeat of the Spanish Armada off the coast of England. Youth was in the saddle of government in Holland. Prince Maurice, son of William the Silent, titleholder of Holland and Zeeland, was only twenty years of age. Already Holland was imitating England as a maritime power, and Amsterdam was entering an era of inordinate prosperity enabling her merchants to accumulate great wealth.

His career in Amsterdam, as one of its ministers, lasted, if we count his apprenticeship, sixteen years. He served that city just a few months under fifteen years after his ordination. One month before his thirtieth birthday he married the daughter of one of the leading magistrates of the city, L. J. Real. Her name was Margaret, and she proved to be a faithful and devoted helpmate as well as a convinced and fervent Protestant. She had joined her husband already in the fellowship of suffering, for her own brother had died on the rack, a victim of the Inquisition. Their home life seems to have been serene and beautiful, always a port of calm in which Arminius's ship could drop anchor after a tempestuous voyage on a stormy theological sea. Evidently this woman Margaret had a marvelous intellect and a keen and abiding interest in theology, for she entered with sympathy and support into the debates on which her husband engaged. Yet this did not in any way impair her effectiveness as a wife. She bore him nine children, seven of whom were sons, and all of them hale and hearty enough to survive their father.

Arminius was an active and vigorous leader in civic affairs. He did not confine himself to parish duties. He realized he belonged to the whole city and the welfare of all was his concern. In 1594, for example, six years after the beginning of his ministry, he reorganized the elementary schools of

Amsterdam, an organizational arrangement which has persisted with slight changes to this day. He advised leaders of state, nursed his parishoners through the dreadful plague of 1602, when the deathrate was as high as seven hundred persons weekly, and preached his regular course of doctrinal expository sermons from the pulpit of his own church.

This career as pastor and preacher was interrupted, indeed, terminated, in the spring of 1603, when Arminius was transferred to the chair of dogmatics at the University of Leyden. It is an ill wind that blows nobody any good. While Arminius was worried about his wife and children during the plague year, wondering about their support in case he fell a victim, the professor of dogmatics at Leyden did die with it, thus creating the vacancy which Arminius was to fill. Grotius, it seems, suggested his name. Though already he was a controversial figure he was the only Dutchman sufficiently prepared, and the rectors of the University were determined not to bring in a foreigner for that important post. Arminius served as professor at Leyden for six years. During this time he held the position of Rector, head of the University, for a term, representing it at public functions as well as directing its administrative affairs.

The Arminius of history was of course the writer and theologian. As such his career was signal, whether expressed in the duties of pastor and preacher at Amsterdam or as professor at Leyden. His grand concern was to free the conscience of Protestantism from the Calvinistic interpretation of predestination and divine foreordination of some human creatures to hell. To accomplish this end he was willing to set himself against what his contemporaries thought was the entire bent of the Reformation, to lift his own opinions against those of Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, and Beza, and to run the risk of being mistaken for a papist, a member of the very crowd who had slaughtered his family in cold blood.

The origin of his conviction, oddly enough, seems to have been accidental. Arminius had been brought up in the strictest Calvinistic interpretation of theology. Beza praised his theological competency and orthodoxy when he was his student in Geneva. He had passed his examinations for ordination with Calvinistic answers to the questions propounded. Indeed, he had been chosen by the city of Amsterdam to refute the heretical writings of a layman, Koornhert of Delft, who had

championed the doctrine of human freedom. This layman had insisted that it is a crime to punish a person for heresy. Arminius assayed his task with characteristic thoroughness. Yet his refutation never came out. The reason was simply that as Arminius studied the issues he was won over to Koorhnert's position. John Milton wrote about this dispute in his *Areopagitica:* "The astute and distinct Arminius was perverted merely by the perusing of a nameless discourse written at Delft, which he first took in hand to confute." That of course is an unfair appraisal, but then Milton was himself a Puritan Calvinst. Arminius had studied the opinions of worthies of the whole Church on the issue. He had drunk again at the fountain of the Fathers, Greek as well as Latin. "Theological truth," he wrote to a Dutch statesman, "is sunk in a deep well, whence it cannot be drawn without great labor."

Like Luther and Augustine, as well as Calvin, he turned again to Paul in Romans yet with entirely different results. Paul's Romans seems to be the perpetual source of all theological movements. Barth, most recently of all, got his inspiration and guidance from that epistle. Arminius analyzed the seventh chapter of Romans, and in that analysis there is displayed a remarkable psychological understanding of human nature. He treats the contents as though they provide a description of the natural man, one standing as it were on the threshold of conversion but not having entered the door. Thus he conceded some virtue to our nature outside the office of divine grace.

This concession brought down on him the polemical wrath of Peter Plancius, the great Dutch navigator who was one of the chief ministers of Holland. He forgot all about voyages of discovery on the high seas when he realized he had discovered a heretic among his own ecclesiastical brethren. He accused Arminius of Pelagianism and Socinianism wrapped into one flabby bundle of human personality. His sources of authority were the *Belgic Confession* and the *Heidelberg Catechism*. Arminius, for his part, relied on Erasmus and many of the Church Fathers. The dispute between the two ministers was not resolved. The city council of Amsterdam tried to intervene, but what could city magistrates do in the realm of theology? They finally had to fall back on their prerogative of exercising restraint to keep the peace. They forbade both ministers to engage in public controversy. Each, as a result

of the notoriety of the debate, drew huge audiences at church on Sundays. In fact, this was the making of Arminius's reputation as a great preacher. People came to hear him if for no other reason than to try to catch him in some theological error. He was only thirty-two years old at the time. In May, 1593, this issue was at least overtly settled, and a truce was accepted by both ministers.

Five years later, in 1598, Arminius undertook by way of a literary tract to refute the errors of an Englishman named William Perkins who had published a very popular book on predestination. He objects strenuously in his writing to Perkins' teaching that the death of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ on the cross was for the elect only. The Scripture teaches that Christ died for the sins of the whole world, which means, according to Arminius, the whole race of mankind. He put the matter theologically when he wrote: God's sufficient grace was available for all people. It was God's efficacious grace which was lacking when the sinner fell. This tract of Arminius, fortunately no doubt for his career, was not published until after his death.

The same was true in regard to his correspondence with his former schoolmate and friend, Junius, who was then at Leyden. Both men, in this correspondence, appear dissatisfied with the extreme views of Calvin and Beza on predestination. Each is prepared to emphasize God's positive act in claiming and saving the elect through redemption rather than in stressing his negative work in choosing and damning to hell a large portion of mankind. Junius, for example, insists that the divine decrees dealt with natural man as God made him in His own image before he fell into sin; while Arminius stops short even of this by saying they become applicable only in the person of Christ the Redeemer and were designed to aid and save sinful man after the fall.

Arminius's real doctrinal difficulties came after he had begun his career as professor at Leyden. The debate with Peter Plancius had been no more than a tempest in a tea cup compared with them. Nothing can be fiercer or worse than a theological wrangle among colleagues at a university. Leyden at the time of Arminius's appointment was at its theological zenith. It had a faculty of strong, and within the limits of Calvinism, independent thinkers. To this group Arminius came not altogether welcome by his colleagues. He had been opposed by

Gomarus, the senior professor in his own discipline. Indeed, it was only on condition that he satisfy Gomarus in his interpretation of chapter seven of Paul's Epistle to the Romans that the magistrates of Amsterdam would release him. This fortunately he succeeded in doing. In fact, his departure from Amsterdam and coming to Leyden was not only satisfactory but triumphant. He took examinations from his future colleagues and won the first doctor's degree in theology that Leyden conferred. This public disputation on the *Nature of God* was hailed as a masterpiece.

This period of peace and adulation from the public was short-lived. The opening of the year 1604 saw him in conflict with his senior colleague Gomarus. Gomarus accused him of infringing on his prerogatives when Arminius began to substantiate his theological lectures by references to the New Testament. Evidently their courses were so divided that Gomarus treated New Testament theology and Arminius was supposed to confine his source material to that of the Old Testament. It is extremely difficult to imagine how one could competently delineate the teachings of Christian theology without access to the New Testament.

He aroused everybody's suspicions when he began to interpret Augustine and when he delivered his disputations on *Predestination* and *Sin in Our First Parents*. These works did not base men's tendency to sin on the predetermination of their character and lives by God, as Gomarus and his colleagues insisted the true doctrine of predestination required. This would have been too much, Arminius contended, even for Augustine. The Bishop of Hippo taught that God chose those whom He would save from a host of luckless sinners already created and left those whom He had not chosen to their fate.

The dispute became the concern of the nation at large when graduates of the University of Leyden showed diversity of theological opinion in their sermons. The public became generally aroused. Yet as late as 1605, four years before Arminius's death, the theological faculty issued a statement signed even by Gomarus that there was no serious divergence of opinion on doctrine among them. This is remarkable. People realized a national synod was needed to adjudicate in such a case. Arminius welcomed such a conclave and suggested that laymen preside at its sessions and that its aim be to achieve full religious toleration. He was bold enough to suggest that disputed

doctrinal issues be referred back to local synods seeking first their endorsement of any controverted point before it be looked upon as reformed dogma.

Unfortunately this national synod was not held during Arminius's lifetime. He and Gomarus were twice summoned before the Great Council at the Hague to state their differences, once in 1608, and again in 1609. Gomarus was so tense and excited that he cried out he would be afraid to face the judgment if he entertained the theological opinions of his colleagues. A lay witness at the discussion, however, said he would much rather risk his chances at the judgment with Arminius's errors than with Gomarus's bitter hatred of Arminius.

The second conference in the Hague broke down because of Arminius's ill health. He was forced to leave the discussion and return home to die.

The burden of Arminius's theological conviction as indeed it was the burden of his life can best be summarized in one statement out of his letters to Junius: "God can indeed do what He wills with His own; but He cannot will to do with His own what He cannot rightfully do, for His will is circumscribed within the bounds of justice." Put into the language of today the statement means: God's power is regulated by His goodness. His justice prescribes that man be judged by his deserts determined by his own freedom to accept or reject divine grace.