

Arminianism

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Arminianism is a theological movement far greater than the career of its founder would suggest. It is dubious that the Leyden professor ever went in his thinking beyond the mere negative restriction that God's power is limited by His justice, that God could never have allowed Himself to predetermine the damnation of men prior to their conception and birth. Indeed, even his followers were very cautious as to the extent of their variation from Calvinistic dogma. They were, certainly at first, hardly prepared to say more than their teacher had said. Yet what they said they said more clearly and in more systematic form than what Arminius had said.

The anomaly of history is that the classic statement of Arminianism was not made by Arminius at all, nor was it issued during his lifetime. It came out of that troubled period between his death in 1609 and the convocation of the Synod of Dort in 1618. A group of his supporters issued without signatures a theological tract proclaiming their own orthodoxy yet showing their divergence from contemporary Calvinism as regards predestination and election. It is difficult to say who really wrote the document, nor is it important. Its significance lies in the fact that an increasing number of Dutch Calvinists was becoming more and more dissatisfied with Calvinism and that which these malcontents announced as their platform for the present was destined to become a foundation on which so much of evangelical Protestantism was to build in the future.

On January 14, 1610, forty-six ministers of the Dutch church issued the following proclamation:

(1) God in Christ elected out of the mass of fallen and sinful humanity such as would, through His grace, accept Jesus Christ as Saviour and persevere to the end in faith and obedience. Likewise, God rejected the unbelievers and left them to eternal damnation.

(2) Jesus Christ died for all men on the cross, and all are potentially the beneficiaries of His atonement. Actually, how-

ever, His death is effective only for those who believe and persevere.

(3) Man cannot attain salvation in his own strength. He requires the grace of Christ in order even to exercise his free will.

(4) All good works are the result of this free unmerited grace. Yet this grace is not irresistible.

(5) True believers are given sufficient grace to overcome sin and the devil and persevere in righteousness to the end. But by their own fault they may lose the same and be damned.

The Calvinists, in contrast, had made predestination the very cornerstone of the Gospel. The sovereignty of God required that His divine purpose and will decide everything that was, that is, and that is to be. Consequently they went to the wildest extremes in announcing their theological position:

(1) In the first moment of time, God determined the damnation of unborn numbers of persons. Their damnation glorified His name and power as much as the salvation of others He purposed to redeem.

(2) In the second moment of time, God determined to create these persons so that He could damn them.

(3) To be just in this act, He had to enable them to sin. Thus He created them upright, caused them to be tempted, and allowed them to sin.

Therefore God knew before the foundation of the world those who would be damned because of their sins. He knew this because He had planned in detail how it would happen and thus throughout history He causes to take place what He originally planned. To quote Calvin: "God makes happen what he appears to despise and causes to be what he appears to hate."

The lines were now clearly and rigidly drawn between the two opposing theological parties in the Dutch church. Feelings were so intense and passions so inflamed that it looked as if doctrinal disputation would eventuate in actual civil war. In vain did the political parliament legislate a policy of toleration allowing both views to express the opinion of Dutch Protestantism. The issue had to be settled by an international Protestant conclave comparable to the old ecumenical councils of the once catholic Christian Church.

At first it was difficult to win consent for the calling of such a conclave from the States General of the Dutch Republic. The political sentiment of the new nation was largely that the state

should decide all ecclesiastical issues. Roman Catholic tyranny, illustrated too vividly on Dutch bodies by the Spanish occupation, was the hated example of superiority of Church over State. The wrangling and disputes exemplified in the present controversy over predestination were what was to be expected when Church was allowed complete independence from government, so that separation of Church from State was viewed as a dangerous annoyance, if not the downright evil of ecclesiastical supremacy. Consequently the States General would gladly have served as a perpetual final court of arbitration in all ecclesiastical affairs including even the exact and precise area of doctrine. Only the organization of local militia, the antagonism between the Stateholder and the Chief Advocate of the nation, pressure from England, danger from Roman Catholic enemies, and the imminence of civil war, forced the States General by a mere majority vote to summon a National Synod, consisting of six delegates from each of the provincial synods of whom at least three, preferably four, had to be ministers. Representatives were also invited from the major centers of Reformed Protestantism abroad, especially England. Dort in South Holland, in the very province most strongly approved to the synod, was selected by the States General as the meeting place, and the month of November, 1618, was designated as the date of its opening.

Prior to that time, state and church were agitated by political maneuvers, the outcome of which guaranteed the condemnation of Arminianism before the theological issues were debated or, for that matter, even seriously discussed. Prince Maurice not only secured the disbanding of the local militia but also the removal of all town officials opposed to his policies or in confederation with his political rivals. At the same time, the Calvinists in the local and provincial synods organized so thoroughly that, except for Utrecht, every city in Holland elected predestinarian delegates to the Synod of Dort and excluded the Arminians entirely.

The Synod of Dort condemned the five Arminian propositions as heretical, putting in the place of each a contrary interpretation of the true Christian revelation. (1) Nothing is required on the part of sinners to secure their election by God to eternal life. Humility, honesty, the use of the light of nature, all such human endeavors have nothing to do with man's election. God chooses whom He will.

(2) Though Christ's death is in merit more than sufficient to expiate the sins of all mankind, the divine Son of God made the gift of Himself once offered only for the elect. Election, therefore, is prior to and regulative of the atonement of Jesus Christ.

(3) There is no good in men apart from the grace of God.

(4) Grace is irresistible.

(5) To be sure sin does exist in believers, for such is the condition of all in this depraved world, but such sin does not preclude final salvation. The elect of God will persevere to the end. Once a person is saved he is always saved.

The synod closed on May 6, 1619. The Arminians were expelled from the Church. A great dinner was held for all the delegates. Four days later the great Arminian statesman, the civil advocate of the Republic, was executed as a criminal. Thus the Synod of Dort forced Arminianism underground. Protestants now hunted heretics in their own ranks, and the Inquisition became the tool of the Reformation generally as originally it had been the tool of Rome.

Indeed, the seventeenth century was a grim and gloomy epoch in the history of Arminianism. Holland, which had sheltered the Pilgrims of England and which foreigners called the land of liberty, expelled her own sons. Arminian clergy now were given the choice either of surrendering their ministerial rights and living in complete sacerdotal retirement or else in accepting exile from their native land. The thin line of covered wagons belongs to this unhappy epoch in Europe as well as to the optimistic period of American history when our forefathers moved westward to tame a vast wilderness. Of course many of these people had the hardihood to leave home only to return again and organize movements to preserve Arminianism among the Dutch people.

Grotius, only thirty-six years old, was imprisoned. He escaped through the ingenuity of his wife. Though her husband was locked behind thirteen doors, she persuaded the authorities to let her into him and to permit her to carry books back and forth to him from the library. This she did by means of a large chest. The guards would lift it in and out of his cell for her. On one occasion, they exclaimed as they carried it out, "O this is heavy enough to hold the heretic himself. He must read a mighty lot." Well, it was as heavy as it was because in fact it did hold Grotius at the time. He fled Holland to carry

on his mighty work abroad. His little book, *The Truth of the Christian Religion*, became a classic. It had wide and persuasive appeal. Indeed gradually the restraints imposed by the Dutch on Arminianism were lifted and what had been heretical in the first part of the seventeenth century was being looked upon as orthodox before its close. Grotius, the greatest Dutchman of his age, did not live to see this. He died in exile, but the Age of the Wars of Religion was giving place to the Age of Reason, and Arminianism seemed more attractive than Calvinism to the rationalists. Grotius' statement of Arminianism is, in my opinion, unexcelled: "God created man and some other intelligences superior to man with a liberty of acting; which liberty of acting is not in itself evil, but may be the cause of something that is evil. And to make God the author of evils of this kind, which are called moral evils, is the highest wickedness."

What took place in Britain during the seventeenth century was not identical with those developments we have just described in Holland. Though the Church of England was represented at the Synod of Dort and though her King James I had done as much, if not more, than anybody else in stirring up the issues between the Calvinists and Arminians, what he was bold to do abroad he was more cautious to do at home. The British divines at Dort were there only in the capacity of observers and counselors, though one participated to the extent of being secretary of the conclave. They did not carry home as legislation for the Church of England the doctrine which the church in Holland adopted. Indeed it would be less than accurate to say that what we style "The Arminianism of Britain" was ever the result of what Jacobus Arminius did. It cannot in any direct way be traced to the thinking of his followers or the five theological propositions which they advanced and which were subsequently condemned by the Synod of Dort. Grotius, to be sure, spent time in England, but then he found like-minded thinkers already there; he did not make intellectual converts or constitute afresh disciples of his cause. As a matter of fact, British divines were thinking in a way similar to and even less rigidly Calvinistic than Jacobus Arminius before Arminius himself published his thoughts to the world. As indicated in the first lecture, there is nothing really original about Arminius' ideas; they are those of the semi-Pelagians of the fifth century. They correspond almost

exactly with the opinions of Caesarius of Arles, which the Synod of Orange in 529 made normative for the Church Universal.

The reign of James I saw divines in influential areas who were not content to be tutored alone by Luther or Calvin. They wanted to drink for themselves the pure waters of Patristic times. The most catholic in his scholarship and the most penetrating in his doctrinal understanding was the King's own favorite preacher, Lancelot Andrewes. He preached seventeen times in his career on Christmas Day before the King at Whitehall--that is, he was the court preacher for seventeen years at Christmas, each time instructing his sire on the meaning of the Incarnation: "He (God) cannot, we may be sure, account evil of that nature which is now become the nature of his own Son--his now, no less than ours." John Doone said before Charles I, son and successor of James I, when he preached at Whitehall, that God must be discharged from "all imputation of tyranny" and man from any "necessity of perishing."

Archbishop Laud, a man of practical affairs, by means of liturgy and service turned people back from the cold, colorless forms of Geneva to the pomp and beauty of the orders of the Middle Ages. Like Andrewes, he turned back to "the two testaments, the three creeds, the four councils, and the five first centuries." The theological trend in Britain from the beginning was towards the emphasis on free will and human responsibility. Someone has said that the British have always leaned toward Pelagianism.

This trend was interrupted briefly by Puritanism which came to power with Oliver Cromwell and the Commonwealth, but it came back into vogue with greater strength with the Restoration. Indeed, in the closing years of the seventeenth century, in Britain as on the Continent, scientific inquiry was superseding theological concern. Foreknowledge, election, divine decrees, predestination no longer interested people. Rigid Calvinism was out of date in the Age of Reason.

The eighteenth century in Britain was ushered in by the Deists and Latitudinarians. What did they care about these old issues? "What is Paul, Apollos or Cephas?" cried Henry More, in his sermon on *Pure Religion*. "What is Bellarmine, Calvin, or Arminius? Was Arminius crucified for you, or were you baptized in the name of Calvin?"

The old issue was revived and given a new meaning by John Wesley in the eighteenth century. With him, it was considered less with reference to the concept of God than with reference to the nature of man. Although he did say in exasperation that Calvin's God was his devil, still the reason of his investigating, as well as the understanding he gained from that investigation of election, was man's capacity or incapacity for the gospel of conversion preached by Wesley. Consequently free will came to be for him the decisive element in man's religious life. In saying this, I am aware that Mr. Wesley was not a Pelagian. He believed in total depravity. He knew that grace was necessary from beginning to end in the process of salvation. Yet grace, like sunshine, he took for granted as being universal. The atonement of Christ had made it available for all. Whether a man accepted it to life or rejected it to death depended entirely on that man himself. When God made man in the beginning, He gave him, as an inalienable part of his nature, free will. God remains eternally loyal to the nature of the things He has made. Consequently He will not save a man apart from that man's own willingness to be saved.

This introduced into theological consideration the note of decision--"Now is the appointed time." The Gospel strikes man with urgency; he has the power to accept or to reject divine grace. Thus what is made of human life cannot be made either apart from God or apart from man. Our tabernacle of hope, "not made by hands, eternal in the heavens," whose maker and builder is God, still was let on earth on our signature; and the agreement, honored in glory, is conditioned on the assent of the creature, forgiven, converted, cleansed, and sanctified by his own obedience and faithfulness in time.