

ARMINIUS, THE SCAPEGOAT OF CALVINISM

Dr. Vic Reasoner

John Wesley observed that “to say, ‘this man is an Arminian,’ has the same effect on many hearers, as to say, ‘This is a mad dog’” [*Works*, 10:358]. Richard Watson wrote that Arminius is accused of introducing corruptions into the Christian church, which he probably never thought of and which certainly have no place in his works [*Theological Dictionary*, p. 41].

Christopher Ness in *An Antidote Against Arminianism*, first published in 1700, called Arminianism “the last and greatest monster of the man of sin, the elixir of Anti-Christianism; the mystery of the mystery of iniquity, the spawn of Popery, and the varnished offspring of the old Pelagians.”

In his commentary on Romans, Richard Haldane wrote, “It is hatred to the sovereignty of God that influences the Arminian.”

Robert C. Harbach wrote, “*Arminianism* is that rejected error which has become the most insidiously devised heresy ever to lay claim to biblical support.” Harbach complained that Calvinists are the most hated people in the universe because they alone stand for the truth. In contrast, he defines Arminianism as everything he rejected, including Universalism, Romanism, and Pelagianism.

Louis Berkhof frequently lumped Arminians and heretics, such as Pelagius or Socinian, together without distinguishing the beliefs of the Arminian position. This amounts to guilt by association. Grant Osborne wrote,

One of the tragedies of our current situation in evangelicalism is the emotive code-words or labels which we attach to certain positions and which enable us to automatically reject the totality of that position on the basis of the label. One of the worse of these ‘code-words’ is ‘semi-Pelagian’ which means automatically that the position is a-biblical, and that the data within need not be studied further. To many strong Calvinists any Wesleyan-Arminian position is automatically ‘semi-Pelagian.’

Arminius is sometimes blamed for almost leading the Reformation off course. Carl Bangs characterized this view as, “Calvinism came in, Arminius nearly ruined it, and the Synod of Dort restored it.”

First, let us look at the man who has been so maligned and then look at his teachings which have been misrepresented. Jacob Hermansz was a Dutch theologian of the late sixteenth century. We know him by his Latin name, Jacobus Arminius. In 1582 James Arminius arrived in Geneva to study under Calvin's son-in-law, and successor, Theodore Beza. Beza had made the Calvinistic position more rigid and had taught supralapsarianism—that the decrees of election and damnation came prior to the decree to create man.

The fact is that the early Dutch reformers were not Calvinists when they overthrew Catholicism in 1566. When James Arminius was installed as pastor in Amsterdam in 1587, Calvinism was not in control. Arminius had the reputation of being a brilliant preacher, a gifted Bible exegete, and a humble and dedicated Christian. His expositional preaching drew large crowds.

As the city was opened to trade, new merchants arrived bringing in Calvinism and only toward the end of his fifteen year tenure as pastor did Calvinism become strong enough to create problems for Arminius.

Two ministers from Delft had debated Dirck Coornhert, a Catholic humanist, and as a result felt it was necessary to modify Beza's rigid position. In 1589 they published a book which did so. As a former student of Beza, Arminius was asked to defend his teacher, although there is no evidence to suggest that Arminius had ever accepted the position of Beza. There had always been a diversity of opinion among Dutch theologians. However, the influx of Calvinistic teaching was growing.

Arminius faced a crisis of conscience and he responded with integrity. He concluded that supralapsarianism made God the author of sin. No one could refute his scholarship, but preachers began to openly attack him from the pulpit. His words were twisted out of context and his enemies tried to destroy his influence.

In 1603 Arminius moved to Leiden to become professor of theology at the university. He was considered the greatest scholar of his day and taught until his death in 1609. He was the first ever to receive the Doctor of Divinity degree from the University of Leiden. Even at Leiden he was under attack from the Calvinist, Francis Gomarus. Finally, Arminius asked for a public hearing, but he died before the synod convened. He was about 49 when he died, and his death was probably hastened by the stress he was under.

After his death, 42 of his followers wrote their manifesto, the Remonstrance, in 1610. In 1618-9 the Synod of Dort was convened and adopted a high Calvinistic statement which included the supralapsarian position of Beza. Although it was Arminius who had called for

an open forum, there were 130 Calvinists present and 13 Remonstrants who were prisoners of the state and were given no vote. “The Remonstrants were at a disadvantage from the very start, and were summoned as defendants. They were denied seats in the council, and were treated throughout as accused parties.”

Simon Episcopus, the successor of Arminius, delivered a speech of two hour length, so logical and magnanimous that it moved many hearers to tears. Yet the Synod of Dort condemned Arminianism as heretical and as a result some 200 Remonstrant ministers were ousted from their pulpits. Some were banished and persecuted until 1625.

Arminianism reintroduced the spirit of tolerance to the Church. The early Arminians were well educated and held strong convictions, but they displayed a different spirit. They had no animosity toward those who disagreed with them; they only asked that their views be permitted to exist.

There were theologians in England who taught the essence of what Arminius taught before Arminius. After the restoration of Charles II in 1660, Arminianism held great influence within the Church of England. Over time, however, the Arminians became the more liberal party in the church. In seventeenth century England the Latitudinarians were considered Arminian. In the eighteenth century the term was associated with Socinianism. It was not until the Wesleyan Reformation that the pure doctrine of Arminius was restored and the tendencies of Pelagianism and Unitarianism removed. John Wesley published the first popular account of the life of Arminius in English and this came in the first issue of *The Arminian Magazine* in January, 1778.

Having looked at the life, the spirit, and the influence of Arminius, I conclude that we should hold him in the highest regard. John Fletcher concluded that among the theologians who endeavored to steer their doctrinal course between the Pelagian shelves and the Augustinian rock, “none is more famous, and none came nearer the truth than Arminius” [*Works*, 2:281]. But what about his doctrines which are misrepresented?

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PART 2

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1. Arminius is misrepresented concerning total depravity

Lars Qualben in *A History of the Christian Church* states that Jacob Arminius and his followers taught “Man was not totally depraved and could therefore co-operate with God in the spiritual regeneration” [p. 351]. Louis Berkhof wrote, “Man has by nature an irresistible bias for evil. He is not able to apprehend and love spiritual excellence, to seek and do spiritual things, the things of God that pertain to salvation. This position, which is Augustinian and Calvinistic, is flatly contradicted by Pelagianism and Socinianism, and in part also by Semi-Pelagianism and Arminianism [*Systematic Theology*, p. 248]. Harbach wrote, “Arminianism, however, under its breath croons the siren song of man’s essential goodness.”

However, Samuel Wakefield, an early American Methodist theologian wrote, “True Arminianism, therefore, as fully as Calvinism, admits the total depravity of human nature.” Let Arminius speak for himself.

On account of this transgression, man fell under the displeasure and the wrath of God, rendered himself subject to a double death, and deserving to be deprived of the primeval righteousness and holiness in which a great part of the image of God consisted.

Arminius describes the effects of the first sin of the first man as “the withdrawing of that primitive righteousness and the whole of this sin, however, is not peculiar to our first parents, but is common to the entire race and to all their posterity.” Again, Arminius explains the effects of the sin of our first parents.

This was the reason why all men who were to be propagated from them in a natural way, became obnoxious to death temporal and death eternal, and devoid of this gift of the Holy Spirit or original righteousness: This punishment usually receives the appellation of “a privation of the image of God,” and “original sin.”

Kenneth Grider explains, “Original sin refers to a state of sin in us due to that original act of sin on Adam’s part.” In Wesley’s 272 page treatise, “The Doctrine of Original Sin,” he declared without this doctrine “the Christian system falls at once” [*Works*, 9:194].

Wesleyan-Arminians do affirm man's sinful nature, our basic inclination to sin, our total depravity which was inherited from Adam.

2. Arminius is misrepresented as teaching the absolute freedom of the will.

R. J. Rushdoony equates humanism with Arminianism. He refers to the old humanistic dream that every man, by his own free choice, can effect his salvation. "If this sounds very much like Arminianism, it is because the same principle undergirds Arminianism and humanism: salvation as man's decision" [*Systematic Theology*, 2:923].

John MacArthur wrote,

Pragmatism's ally is Arminianism, the theology that denies God's sovereign election and affirms that man must decide on his own to trust or reject Christ. That places on the evangelist the burden of using technique that is clever enough, imaginative enough, or convincing enough to sway a person's decision. . . . to teach or imply that human technique can bring someone to Christ is contrary to Scripture [*Our Sufficiency in Christ*, p. 152].

In *Willing to Believe: The Controversy Over Free Will* R. C. Sproul admits that the language of Augustine, Martin Luther, or John Calvin is scarcely stronger than that of Arminius regarding the fall [p. 126]. He concedes that Arminians teach justification by faith alone. Yet Arminianism contains "un-Christian elements in it" [p. 25]. For Sproul, the point of departure was that Arminius believed prevenient grace was sufficient, but not irresistible.

This makes salvation synergistic, not monergistic. Sproul argues for monergism and that regeneration must precede faith. Monergism, as defined by Sproul, means that God is the single actor in regeneration. He defines synergism as a relationship in which God assists and humans cooperate. This, he says, leads to human autonomy and differs only slightly from the Roman Catholic view of faith as a meritorious work. I fail to see how "cooperation with" means the same thing as "autonomy from." Sproul asserts that "any view of the human will that destroyed the biblical view of human responsibility is seriously defective. Any view of the human will that destroys the biblical view of God's character is even worse."

While the rest of the book is devoted to a historical survey of the teachings of Pelagius, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Arminius, Edwards, Finney, and Chafer with regard to their teaching concerning the fall, free will, and regeneration, Sproul never defines the will. Nor does he show how Calvinism escapes the charge of destroying human responsibility. His

chapter on Arminius ends with a review of the heretic teachings of Clark Pinnock.¹ The inference is that any who abandons Calvinism is liable to end up just as confused. Yet Pinnock's new views go beyond historic Arminianism and orthodox Christianity [pp. 142-3]. Therefore, Pinnock is a straw man.

Early Methodism taught that we were saved by free grace. Call it by either term, we could only cooperate as we were enabled by prevenient grace. This emphasis is neither Pelagianism nor absolute human autonomy. James Arminius declared

But in his lapsed and sinful state, man is not capable, of any by himself, either to think, to will, or to do that which is really good, but it is necessary for him to be regenerated and renewed in his intellect, affections or will, and in all his powers, by God in Christ through the Holy Spirit, that he may be qualified rightly to understand, esteem, consider, will, and perform whatever is truly good. When he is made a partaker of this regeneration or renovation, I consider that, since he is delivered from sin, he is capable of thinking, willing, and doing that which is good, but yet not without the continued aids of Divine Grace.

In this state, the Free Will of man towards the True Good is not only wounded, maimed, infirm, bent, and weakened; but it is also imprisoned, destroyed, and lost. And its powers are not only debilitated and useless unless they be assisted by grace, but it has no powers whatever except such as are excited by Divine grace.

Free Will is unable to begin or to perfect any true and spiritual good, without Grace. . . . I affirm, therefore, that this grace is simply and absolutely necessary for the illumination of the mind, the due ordering of the affections, and the inclination of the will to that which is good: It is this grace which operates on the mind, the affections, and the will; which infuses good thoughts into the mind, inspires good desires into the affections, and bends the will to carry into execution good thoughts and good desires. This grace goes before, accompanies, and follows; it excites, assists, operates that we will, and cooperated lest we will in vain.

John Wesley said that the will of a sinner is "free only to evil" ["The Spirit of Bondage and of Adoption," Sermon #9, II.7]. In another context Wesley stated that he came to the very edge of Calvinism:

1. In ascribing all good to the free grace of God
2. In denying all natural free will and all power antecedent to grace

¹ While the Society of Evangelical Arminians firmly rejects Open Theism, it does not consider the view heresy and does not have an official position on Clark Pinnock's orthodoxy.

3. In excluding all merit from man even for what he has or does by the grace of God [*Works*, 8:285].

Our emphasis is not upon free will, but upon God's grace, including prevenient grace. John Fletcher stated that Arminianism asserts "that obedient free will is always dependent upon God's free grace; and disobedient free will upon God's just wrath" [*Works*, 2:229]. John Wesley wrote, "Natural free-will, in the present state of mankind, I do not understand: I only assert, that there is a measure of free-will supernaturally restored to every man, together with that supernatural light which 'enlightens every man that cometh into the world'" [*Works*, 10:229-30].

It is not historic Wesleyan-Arminianism which overemphasized free will, it was the later teaching of Charles Finney, a Pelagian, who influenced the holiness movement at this point. Robert Chiles surveyed three major transitions in American Methodism between 1790 and 1935. He concluded,

The third major change in Methodist theology, 'from free grace to free will,' began with the Wesleyan doctrine of grace as free for all and in all and as the sole power of salvation. Steadily the areas of achievement assigned to man's freedom were increased. . . . Repentance and, eventually, faith came to be considered essentially human acts, not God's gifts, and salvation proper became man's divinely assisted effort to moralize and spiritualize his life.

3. Arminius is misrepresented as teaching a works salvation.

Louis Berkhof wrote in his *Systematic Theology*, "The Arminian order of salvation, while ostensibly ascribing the work of salvation to God, really makes it contingent on the attitude and the work of man" [p. 421].

J. I. Packer concluded, "Thus, Arminianism made man's salvation depend ultimately on man himself, saving faith being viewed throughout as man's own work and, because his own, not God's in him."

In contrast, Kenneth Grider stated that "we Arminian-Wesleyans are not Pelagians, since we believe in original sin and since we believe that prevenient grace is necessary to enable us to use our freedom for taking savory directions in our lives." Grider then clarifies what he means.

This view means that we will not say to a congregation in an evangelistic service, "You do your part and God will do His part." Unregenerate persons cannot do any such thing until God first does His part of extending prevenient grace to them.

This view also means that the Arminian-Wesleyan will not say, “God will meet you halfway.” We cannot initiate our own salvation. Being fallen creatures, inclined to evil and that continually, God must come all the way to where we are and initiate in us our “first faint desire” to turn to Christ - as John Wesley said.

Arminius declared that “faith, and faith only, is imputed for righteousness. By this alone are we justified before God, absolved from our sins, and are accounted, pronounced and declared RIGHTEOUS by God, who delivers his judgment from the throne of grace.” Arminius also wrote,

Evangelical faith is an assent of the mind, produced by the Holy Spirit, through the Gospel, in sinners, who through the law know and acknowledge their sins, and are penitent on account of them: By which they are not only fully persuaded within themselves, that Jesus Christ has been constituted by God the author of salvation to those who obey Him, and that He is their own Saviour if they have believed in Him; and by which they also believe in Him as such, and through Him on God as the Benevolent Father in Him, to the salvation of believers and to the glory of Christ and God.

Two years after his Aldersgate experience, Wesley explained that he had wandered many years in the “new path of salvation by faith and works,” but about two years ago it pleased God to show us the old way of salvation by faith only” [*Journal*, 22 June, 1740. Those who claim the Wesleyan-Arminian doctrine teaches otherwise need to read “Justification by Faith,” which is the fifth sermon of the doctrinal standards of Methodism.

Arminius did not object to saying, “the righteousness of Christ is imputed to us,” but he did object to saying that “the righteousness of Christ is imputed to us for righteousness.” He wanted to avoid saying that Christ’s righteousness is a cloak over our unrighteousness. He believed that in the imputation of Christ’s righteousness we are partakers in Christ.

John Wesley also embraced the doctrine of imputed righteousness, but pronounced a similar caution, “In the meantime what we are afraid of is this: lest any should use the phrase, “The righteousness of Christ,” or, “The righteousness of Christ is ‘imputed to me’,” as a cover for his unrighteousness” [“The Lord our Righteousness,” Sermon #20, II.19].

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PART 3

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In an essay entitled “What is an Arminian?” John Wesley raised this question, “How can any man know what Arminius held, who has never read one page of his writings?” Wesley proceeded to offer this advice, “Let no man bawl against Arminians, till he knows what the term means.”

Wesley said Arminianism was usually charged with five errors:

1. they deny original sin
2. they deny justification by faith
3. they deny absolute predestination
4. they deny the grace of God to be irresistible
5. they affirm a believer may fall from grace

Wesley said that Arminians pleaded “not guilty” to the first two charges. In fact Wesley claimed the doctrine of original sin was “the first, grand, distinguishing point between heathenism and Christianity” [“Original Sin,” Sermon #44, III.1]. Concerning justification he also wrote that he thought just as Mr. Calvin did. “In this respect I do not differ from him an hair’s breadth” [*Journal*, 14 May, 1765].

Concerning the third charge, though, there is an undeniable difference between Calvinists and Arminians. Calvinists believe absolute predestination; Arminians believe in conditional predestination. Wesley explained that Calvinists hold that God has absolutely decreed, from all eternity to save the elect and no others. Christ died for these and none else. Arminians, on the other hand, hold that God has decreed, from all eternity, “He that believeth shall be saved: He that believeth not shall be condemned.” In order to make this possible, “Christ died for all.”

Wesley said the last two points are the natural consequence of the third. Calvinists hold that the saving grace of God is absolutely irresistible; that no man is any more able to resist it than to resist the stroke of lightning. But if predestination is conditional, then grace is not irresistible. Most of the popular “Bible teachers” today accept the premise of Arminius, but the conclusion of Calvin.

Finally, Calvinists hold that a true believer in Christ cannot possibly fall from grace. Arminians hold, however, that a true believer may make shipwreck of faith and a good conscience. Not only may he fall into gross sin, but he may fall so as to perish forever.

So, Wesley concluded, in effect the three final questions hinge upon one, Is predestination absolute or conditional? Wesley's objection to Calvinism is based upon his objection to their doctrine of predestination.

John Wesley closed the essay in which he defines an Arminian with a caution against using labels and calling names. He said it was the duty of every Arminian preacher to never in public or private to use the word *Calvinist* as a term of reproach. And it is equally the duty of every Calvinist preacher to never in public or in private, to use the word *Arminian* as a term of reproach [*Works*, 10:359-61].

John Fletcher wrote a tract entitled, "The Reconciliation; or, An Easy Method to Unite the People of God." This tract contains essays on "Bible Calvinism" and "Bible Arminianism." Fletcher concluded the Church needs Bible Calvinism to defeat Pharisaism and she needs Bible Arminianism to defeat antinomianism [*Works*, 2:283-363]. While Fletcher may have been too optimistic about how "easy" this unity would be to attain, yet he understood the need for balance.

When John Wesley, the Arminian, preached the funeral of George Whitefield, the Calvinist, he said there was a trait Whitefield exemplified which was not common. Wesley said he had a "catholic spirit." He loved all, of whatever opinion, mode of worship, or denomination who believed in the Lord Jesus, loved God and man, delighted in pleasing God and feared offending Him, who was careful to abstain from evil and zealous of good works ["On the Death of George Whitefield," Sermon #53, III.7].

Wesley recorded in his *Journal* for December 20, 1784 that he had the satisfaction of meeting Charles Simeon. However, it was Simeon who preserved the account of that conversation.

Sir, I understand that you are called an Arminian; and I have been sometimes called a Calvinist; and therefore I suppose we are to draw daggers. But before I consent to begin the combat, with your permission I will ask you a few questions.... Pray, Sir, do you feel yourself a depraved creature, so depraved that you would never have thought of turning to God, if God had not first put it into your heart?

Yes, says the veteran, I do indeed. And do you utterly despair of recommending yourself to God by anything you can do; and look for salvation solely through the blood and righteousness of Christ?

Yes, solely through Christ. But, Sir, supposing you were at first saved by Christ, are you not somehow or other to save yourself afterwards by your own works?

No, I must be saved by Christ from first to last. Allowing, then, that you were first turned by the grace of God, are you not in some way or other to keep yourself by your own power?

No. What, then, are you to be upheld every hour and every moment by God, as much as an infant in its mother's arms?

Yes, altogether. And is all your hope in the grace and mercy of God to preserve you unto His heavenly kingdom?

Yes, I have no hope but in Him. Then, Sir, with your leave I will put up my dagger again; for this is all my Calvinism; this is my election, my justification by faith, my final perseverance: it is in substance all that I hold and as I hold it; and therefore, if you please, instead of searching out terms and phrases to be a ground of contention between us, we will cordially unite in those things wherein we agree.

Across their ministry both Arminius and Wesley patiently denied that they were heretics, but confessed agreement with historic Christianity and the great ecumenical church councils. Arminius declared, "If any one will point out an error in this my opinion, I will gladly own it: Because it is possible for me to err, but I am not willing to be a heretic." Wesley also issued this appeal,

"Are you persuaded that you see more clearly than me? It is not unlikely that you may. Then treat me as you would desire to be treated upon a change of circumstances. Point me out a better way than I have yet known. Show me it is so, by plain proof of Scripture."
["Preface" to Wesley's Sermons, ¶9].

These men were not heretics, but reformers. Their authority was the Word of God. As we contend for their doctrine, let us also exemplify their spirit with a quiet confidence that the Spirit of Truth is able to convince men. Mildred Wynkoop wrote, "One of Wesley's concerns was that there was something biblically defective about the Calvinism of his day. But his polemic was doctrinal, never personal. It was fearless and forceful, but never bitter. This 'break' with Calvinism was not a break in Christian fellowship but a correction of what he believed to be a false interpretation of Scripture."

Today we still share Wesley's concern that the doctrine of absolute predestination "is not only false, but a very dangerous doctrine, as we have seen a thousand times" [Letter to Lady [Maxwell], 30 Sept, 1788]. Yet we cannot legislate correct doctrine through force. Nor will we win the debate through name-calling and misrepresentation. Our task is to set the standard of consistent biblical interpretation. May God enable us to teach the Scriptures with integrity—regardless of what pejorative terms we are called.

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