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# Will the Real Arminius Please Stand Up? A Study of the Theology of Jacobus Arminius in Light of His Interpreters

ARMINIUS AND HIS INTERPRETERS

Jacobus Arminius has been the object of much criticism and much praise during the past four centuries. “Arminians” have usually lauded him as the progenitor of their theological tradition. Non-Arminians, specifically those within the Reformed-Calvinistic tradition, have denounced him for departing from the Reformed faith. Both praise and criticism, however, have mostly proceeded from partisan biases and rested on misinterpretations of Arminius’s theology. Most Reformed critics have portrayed Arminius as a semi-Pelagian and a defector from Reformed theology. Most Arminians, both Wesleyans and Remonstrants, have cast him in Wesleyan or Remonstrant terms, failing to take seriously his theology itself and the context in which it was spawned.<sup>1</sup> Both these perspectives have seriously misunderstood Arminius, using him for polemical purposes rather than simply trying to understand and benefit from his theology.

Arminius’s theology has been interpreted in a number of ways. One perspective has held that he was a transitional thinker—that his theology was an incomplete move from Calvinism to Arminianism. An example of this viewpoint is Frederic Platt’s article in the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*: “Though it is probable that Arminius himself was less Arminian than his followers, yet the most distinguished of these, Episcopius (his successor at Leyden), Uytenbogaert (his close friend), Limborch and Grotius, who most ably elaborated his positions—all men of great talents—only carried his conclusions to issues which the early death of Arminius probably prevented him from reaching.”<sup>2</sup> This perspective sees Arminius’s theology as a departure from Reformed theology, though he

1. Arminius’s followers, the Remonstrants, though at first theologically close to Arminius, moved progressively further from him after his death.

2. *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings, s.v. “Arminianism,” by Frederic Platt.

did not make a complete and consistent departure because of his premature death. Many Reformed thinkers, also viewing Arminius as making a significant departure from Reformed doctrine, portray Arminius as “a clever dissembler who secretly taught doctrines different from his published writings.”<sup>3</sup> An example of such an opinion is found in Ben A. Warburton’s *Calvinism*:

Grave contentions arose which disclosed the fact that Arminius, despite his pledges [to teach nothing contrary to the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession of Faith], had been infecting the minds of many of the citizens. . . . That much cunning had been practised by Arminius there is little room to doubt, and that he was equally dishonest is clear. “Posing as orthodox amongst the orthodox he surreptitiously promulgated opinions the inevitable tendency of which was to undermine and overthrow the doctrine professed and to stir up distrust and dissension.” . . . Koornheert had been open in his opposition to the teachings of Calvinism, but Arminius acted with treachery.<sup>4</sup>

Most writers attribute to Arminius ideas that came after him. Many Calvinists do this by blaming him for everything from deism to universalism. In 1889 church historian J. H. Kurtz linked the theology of Arminius to latitudinarianism and deism.<sup>5</sup> Roger Nicole describes Arminius as the originator of a slippery slope that started with Episcopius and Limborch (who were “infiltrated by Socinianism”) and ended with Unitarianism, universalism, and the personalist philosophy of E. S. Brightman.<sup>6</sup> Reformed writers also consistently describe Arminius as a semi-Pelagian. Henry Bettenson, in his highly acclaimed *Documents of the Christian Church*, introduces “The Five Articles of the Remonstrance” with a short sketch of Arminius. He then describes Arminius as a semi-Pelagian who viewed predestination as tied to “God’s foreknowledge of human merit.”<sup>7</sup> Even more extreme than this is Kurtz’s assertion that Arminius “wandered into Pelagian paths.”<sup>8</sup>

3. Carl Bangs, “Arminius and the Reformation,” *Church History* 30 (1961):156.

4. Ben A. Warburton, *Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 51.

5. J. H. Kurtz, *Church History*, trans. John MacPherson, 3 vols. (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1889), 3:50.

6. Roger Nicole, “The Debate over Divine Election,” *Christianity Today* (October 21, 1959), 6.

7. Henry Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), 376.

8. Kurtz, 3:50.

Most Arminians, while praising Arminius, have viewed him in the light of either later Remonstrant or Wesleyan theology, thus describing him in more semi-Pelagian and synergist terms.<sup>9</sup> The tendency of most Arminians is to give a brief biographical sketch of Arminius, with the customary discussion of “Arminius as the Father of Arminianism,” and then to offer an exposition of the five points of the Remonstrance. Or, as Carl Bangs says, such biographical sketches are often followed by “copious references to Arminius’s successor, Simon Episcopius, who, although in many ways a faithful disciple of Arminius, is not Arminius.”<sup>10</sup>

However, none of the above portraits is accurate. Only when readers bring preconceived agendas to Arminius’s writings will they interpret them in these ways. Bangs summarizes this problem well:

It is evident that such accounts of Arminius assume a definition of Arminianism which cannot be derived from Arminius himself. It means that the writers begin with a preconception of what Arminius should be expected to say, then look in his published works, and do not find exactly what they are looking for. They show impatience and disappointment with his Calvinism, and shift the inquiry into some later period when Arminianism turns out to be what they are looking for—a non-Calvinistic, synergistic, and perhaps semi-Pelagian system. . . .<sup>11</sup>

Those who bring their own presuppositions into the study of Arminius and read later Arminian themes into his thought fail to realize perhaps the most important thing about his theology: that it is distinctively Reformed. It is a *development* of Reformed theology rather than a *departure* from it. By focusing on Arminius’s doctrine of predestination and its differences with both Calvin and post-Dort Calvinism, people have emphasized Arminius’s differences with Calvin and the Reformed tradition rather than his similarities with them. Both Arminians and Calvinists have thought of Arminius’s theology as essentially a reaction against Reformed theology rather than the self-consciously Reformed

9. See, e.g., H. Orton Wiley, *Christian Theology*, 3 vols. (Kansas City, Mo.: Beacon Hill, 1958), 2:349-57.

10. Carl Bangs, “Arminius and Reformed Theology” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1958), 23.

11. *Ibid.*, 14.

theology that it is.<sup>12</sup> Wilhelm Pauck has correctly described Arminius's theology as an outgrowth of Reformed theology, rather than a polemic against it: "Indeed, there are many Calvinist theological traditions. The Reformed theologies of the Swiss, the German, the French, the Dutch, the Scotch, etc., are not so uniform as the theologies of the various Lutheran bodies are. The Arminians belong as definitely to the Calvinistic tradition as the defenders of the decisions of the Synod of Dort."<sup>13</sup> Those who see predestination as the essential core of Reformed or Augustinian-Calvinistic theology find it easy to say that, since Arminius did not articulate predestination in the same way Calvin did, he is a semi-Pelagian. Then they transfer this alleged semi-Pelagianism to all of his theology.<sup>14</sup> Generations of theological students have received this picture of Arminius. But this approach is simply wrongheaded. It fails to take Arminius's theology seriously and writes him off without a hearing.

The best way to understand Arminius, and thus to benefit from his unique and substantial contribution to Protestant theology, is to understand his theological context. That context consisted of his stated view of Reformed theology (specifically that of Calvin), his confessional beliefs, and his published writings. If one believes Arminius to be an honest man, rather than a "treacherous" one, one will see a picture of Arminius emerge that is radically different from the one(s) above.

12. Richard A. Muller has argued that Arminius's view of creation and providence and his intellectualism (versus voluntarism) differ somewhat from Reformed Scholasticism. This is perhaps responsible for his divergent view of predestination. See his *God, Creation, and Providence in the Thought of Jacob Arminius: Sources and Directions of Scholastic Protestantism in the Era of Early Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991). This observation, however, does not obscure the fact that, as will be shown below, there was no consensus on predestination in the Dutch Reformed Church of Arminius's time; nor does it detract from Arminius's inherently Reformed views on Original Sin, human inability, the penal-satisfaction nature of the atonement, or the imputative nature of justification.

13. Quoted in Bangs, "Arminius and Reformed Theology," 25.

14. Muller (4) has said, "'Arminius,' 'Arminianism,' 'Dort,' and 'TULIP' are part of the common language of modern Protestantism. Nonetheless, the fame of Arminius' views on this one issue [predestination] has only served to obscure the larger, general outlines of his theology and to conceal utterly the positive relationships that existed between Arminius' thought and method and the intellectual life of post-Reformation Protestantism." This paper will not deal with Arminius's doctrine of predestination; his views on the subject are well-known. Rather, this essay will seek to correct misinterpretations of Arminius's views of Original Sin, human inability, the nature of atonement, and justification. These are doctrines that have been assumed by Calvinists and Arminians alike as basically those that were later articulated by Remonstrants and Wesleyans—a more semi-Pelagian, synergistic, works-oriented view of sin and salvation. There is no doubt that Arminius differed from Calvin on the details of predestination, the irresistibility of grace, and the perseverance of the saints—and with later Calvinists on the extent of the atonement. This fact, however, should not be taken as proof that Arminius, like most later Arminians, held to a weak view of Original Sin and human inability, a governmental view of the atonement, a non-imputative view of justification, and a works-oriented view of perseverance.

## ARMINIUS'S CONTEXT

An awareness of the theological situation in the Dutch Reformed Church before and during Arminius's lifetime greatly enhances one's understanding of his theology. Most interpretations of it have been based on misconceptions about Arminius's situation.<sup>15</sup> Bangs mentions six misconceptions that are common among interpreters of Arminius:<sup>16</sup> (1) that Arminius was reared and educated amidst Calvinism in a Calvinist country; (2) that his education at the Universities of Leiden and Basel confirmed his acceptance of Genevan Calvinism; (3) that as a student of Theodore Beza he accepted supralapsarianism; (4) that, while a pastor in Amsterdam, he was commissioned to write a refutation of the humanist Dirck Coornheert, who derided the Calvinist view of election and said that the doctrine of Original Sin could not be found in Scripture;<sup>17</sup> (5) that while preparing his refutation, he changed his mind and defected to Coornheert's humanism;<sup>18</sup> and (6) that thus his theology was a polemic against Reformed theology. None of these six points, as Bangs has shown, is true.<sup>19</sup>

Arminius was not predisposed to a supralapsarian view of predestination. He rather shared the views of numerous Reformed theologians and pastors before him. He was not reared in a "Calvinist country." A brief look at the Reformed Church in the sixteenth century will reveal this. The origins of the Reformed Church were diverse, both historically and theologically. When Calvin came out with his views on predestination in the 1540s, many within the Reformed Church reacted strongly. When Sabastien Castellio exhibited disagreement with Calvin's view of predestination, he was banished from Geneva. Yet the Reformed in Basel gave him asylum and soon offered him a professorship there. It was said that, in Basel, "if one wishes to scold another, he calls him a Calvinist."<sup>20</sup> Another Reformed theologian who reacted negatively to Calvin's doctrine of predestination was Jerome Bolsec, who settled in Geneva in 1550. When Calvin and Beza sent a list of Bolsec's errors to the Swiss churches, they were disappointed with the response. The Church of Basel urged that Calvin and Bolsec try to emphasize their similarities rather than their

15. The background information in this section is taken from Bangs, "Arminius and the Reformation," 155-60.

16. These misconceptions arise from the Peter Bertius's funeral oration for Arminius and Caspar Brandt's *Life of James Arminius*.

17. Bangs, "Arminius and the Reformation," 156.

18. *Ibid.*

19. See Carl Bangs, *Arminius: A Study in the Dutch Reformation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971), 141-42.

20. Bangs, "Arminius and the Reformation," 157.

differences. The ministers of Bern reminded Calvin of the many biblical texts that refer to God's universal grace. Even Bullinger disagreed with Calvin, though he later changed his mind. Bangs notes that the German-speaking cantons provided most of the resistance to Calvinist predestinarianism,<sup>21</sup> but even in Geneva, there was a fair amount of resistance. This is evidenced by the presence of the liberal Calvinist Charles Perrot on the faculty of the University of Geneva, even during Beza's lifetime.

"From the very beginnings of the introduction of Reformed religion in the Low Countries," says Bangs, "the milder views of the Swiss cantons were in evidence."<sup>22</sup> Because of Roman Catholic persecution, the first Dutch Reformed synod was held at the Reformed church in Emden (later called "the Mother Church of the Churches of God"), where Albert Hardenberg was pastor. Hardenberg, who was closer to Philip Melancthon than to Calvin on predestination, had great influence on the early leaders in the Dutch Reformed Church—most notably Clement Martenson and John Isbrandtson, who openly opposed the introduction of Genevan theology into the Low Countries.<sup>23</sup> The Synod of Emden adopted the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession of Faith. Both of these documents allowed room for disagreement on the doctrine of predestination, but some ministers who had been educated in Geneva began attempts to enforce a supralapsarian interpretation of them.

Soon there arose two parties in the Dutch Reformed Church. Those who were less inclined to a Calvinistic view of predestination inclined more toward a form of Erastianism and toleration toward Lutherans and Anabaptists. The Genevan elements, however, wanted strict adherence to Calvinism and Presbyterian church government. It turns out that the lay magistrates and lay people tended toward the former, while more clergy tended toward the latter. However, a significant number of clergy clung to the non-Calvinistic view of predestination. As late as 1581, Jasper Koolhaes, a Reformed pastor in Leiden, after being declared a heretic by the provincial Synod of Dort because of his non-Calvinistic interpretation of predestination, was supported by the magistrates at Leiden.<sup>24</sup> The provincial Synod of Haarlem of 1582 excommunicated him, along with the magistrates and some ministers of Leiden. The Hague, Dort, and Gouda opposed this action. The Synod also attempted to force the Dutch churches to accept a rigid doctrine of predestination but did not succeed.

21. *Ibid.*, 158.

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*, 159.

24. Koolhaes taught at the University of Leiden while Arminius was a student there. The first rigid predestinarian did not teach at the University until the arrival of Lambert Daneau.

Koolhaes continued to write, and the States of Holland and Leiden magistrates backed him. A compromise between the two factions proved unsuccessful. Thus there were mixed opinions on the doctrine of predestination in the Dutch Reformed Church when Arminius was coming of age as a theologian.<sup>25</sup>

#### ARMINIUS, THE CONFESSIONS, AND CALVIN

Within this historical context Arminius worked out his Reformed theology. As a devout Dutch Reformed theologian, Arminius was loyal to the symbols of his church: the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession of Faith. On numerous occasions he reaffirmed his faithfulness to these documents. Under the attack of the consistory in Amsterdam in 1593, Arminius felt it necessary to affirm his loyalty to the Catechism and Confession. He repeatedly reaffirmed this loyalty, as in 1605, when he responded to deputies of the Synods of North and South Holland.<sup>26</sup> In 1607, at the meeting of the Preparatory Convention for the National Synod, Arminius and some other delegates argued that the church's rule of faith and practice should be the Scriptures, not the confession or the Catechism, emphasizing the priority of the Word of God over the confessions. Arminius, among others, suggested that the documents should be open to revision by the Synod, to clarify certain doctrines (e.g., the use of the plural when discussing Original Sin in the Catechism). This did not mean, however, that Arminius disagreed with anything the documents said. Arminius made this clear in a letter to the Palatine Ambassador, Hippolytus a Collibus, in 1608: "I confidently declare that I have never taught anything, either in the church or in the university, which contravenes the sacred writings that ought to be with us the sole rule of thinking and of speaking, or which is opposed to the Belgic Confession or to the Heidelberg Catechism, that are our stricter formularies of consent."<sup>27</sup> In his *Declaration of Sentiments* that same year, Arminius challenged anyone to prove that he had ever said anything "in conflict with either the Word of God or the Confession of the Dutch Churches."<sup>28</sup> Arminius lived and died with complete loyalty to the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession of Faith. It is hard to believe that one would consistently lie both in public statements and in

25. *Ibid.*, 160.

26. Carl Bangs, "Arminius As a Reformed Theologian," in *The Heritage of John Calvin*, ed. John H. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 216.

27. Quoted in *ibid.*, 217.

28. *Ibid.*



published writing after published writing when it would have been much easier to open a distillery, as Koolhaes did, or enter some other occupation that was less psychically strenuous. If Arminius was not a “dishonest,” “surreptitious,” “treacherous” man, one confidently believes that he was a loyal defender of the symbols of his church to his dying day.

In light of the fact that most interpreters have cast Arminius as a foe of Calvin, Arminius’s statements on Calvin are most interesting. Arminius made explicit references to Calvin throughout his writings, and quoted Calvin a great deal—most of the time positively. Arminius had a high regard for Calvin as an exegete and theologian. His only important disagreement with Calvin centered on the particulars of the doctrine of predestination. Arminius did not, however, think predestination was the essential core of either Reformed theology or Calvin’s theology. Arminius expressed his high regard for Calvin in a letter to the Amsterdam Burgomaster Sebastian Egbertszoon in May of 1607. The occasion of the letter was a rumor that Arminius had been recommending the words of the Jesuits and of Coornheert to his students. Arminius says:

So far from this, after the reading of Scripture, which I strenuously inculcate, and more than any other (as the whole university, indeed, the conscience of my colleagues will testify) I recommend that the *Commentaries* of Calvin be read, whom I extol in higher terms than Helmichius . . . himself, as he owned to me, ever did. For I affirm that in the interpretation of the Scriptures Calvin is incomparable, and that his *Commentaries* are more to be valued than anything that is handed down to us in the writings of the Fathers—so much so that I concede to him a certain spirit of prophecy in which he stands distinguished above others, above most, indeed, above all. His *Institutes*, so far as respects Commonplaces, I give out to be read after the [Heidelberg] Catechism. . . . But here I add—with discrimination, as the writings of all men ought to be read.<sup>29</sup>

In his *Declaration of Sentiments* to the States of Holland, in declaration nine, “The Justification of Man before God,” Arminius sets forth his doctrine of justification and then says, in essence, that if he is wrong, then Calvin too must be wrong: “Whatever interpretation may be put upon these expressions, none of our divines blames Calvin or considers him to be heterodox on this point; yet my opinion is not so widely different from

29. Quoted in Bangs, “Arminius As a Reformed Theologian,” 216.



his as to prevent me from employing the signature of my own hand in subscribing to those things which he has delivered on this subject, in the third book of his *Institutes*; this I am prepared to do at any time, and to give them my full approval."<sup>30</sup> Arminius's opinion of Calvin in these passages does not sound like that of an antagonist but rather like one who has great respect for Calvin and is in agreement with him on most things. It is a mistake to exaggerate the importance of the doctrine of predestination to the point that it is the only doctrine that matters. Though Arminius differed with Calvin on this doctrine, he was, and believed he was, consistently Reformed.

An examination of Arminius's historical and theological context, his confessional loyalties, and his opinion of Calvin does a great deal to establish his theological position. However, the final court of appeal will be his writings. An analysis of his doctrinal works will show that Arminius was in essential agreement with the Augustinian, Calvinistic, and Reformed expressions of the faith. It will show that he can in no sense be described as semi-Pelagian or synergistic, much less out-and-out Pelagian. Rather, we will see that Arminius articulated the reality of Original Sin and the necessity of divine grace just as strongly as any Calvinist, though in a different way.

#### ARMINIUS AND ORIGINAL SIN

Arminius's doctrine of Original Sin has been the source of a great deal of confusion. He has usually been associated with semi-Pelagianism and sometimes with outright Pelagianism. Most writers, both Arminian and Calvinist, have dissociated Arminius and his theology from that of Augustine. An investigation of his theological writings, however, reveals that he held an Augustinian view of Original Sin.

Before examining Arminius's writings, it will be beneficial to investigate his confessional beliefs. As was indicated above, Arminius stated on many occasions his agreement with the Dutch Reformed confessions of his day: the Belgic Confession of Faith and the Heidelberg Catechism. A look at the Heidelberg Catechism will reveal the Reformed hamartiology that characterized Arminius's theology. Questions seven, eight, and ten of the Catechism read:

Q. 7. *Where, then, does this corruption of human nature come from?*

30. James Arminius, *The Works of James Arminius*, trans. James Nichols and William Nichols, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 1:700. Arminius's doctrine of justification will be dealt with later in the essay.

A. From the fall and disobedience of our first parents, Adam and Eve, in the Garden of Eden; whereby our human life is so poisoned that we are all conceived and born in the state of sin.

Q. 8. *But are we so perverted that we are altogether unable to do good and prone to do evil?*

A. Yes, unless we are born again through the Spirit of God.

Q. 10. *Will God let man get by with such disobedience and defection?*

A. Certainly not, for the wrath of God is revealed from heaven, both against our in-born sinfulness and our actual sins, and he will punish them accordingly in his righteous judgment in time and eternity, as he has declared: "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the Law, and do them."<sup>31</sup>

The Belgic Confession of Faith, in article fifteen, *The Doctrine of Original Sin*, says: "We believe that by the disobedience of Adam original sin has been spread through the whole human race. It is a corruption of all nature—an inherited depravity which even infects small infants in their mother's womb. . . . Therefore we reject the error of the Pelagians who say that this sin is nothing else than a matter of imitation."<sup>32</sup> Thus, if Arminius was telling the truth when he stated his agreement with the confessions of his church, the doctrines of the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession of Faith may rightly be said to have been Arminius's doctrine. These confessional statements provide the context of Arminius's writings on the doctrine of sin.

Three main works in Arminius's writings outline his views on Original Sin: his *Apology against Thirty-One Theological Articles*;<sup>33</sup> his *Public Disputations* in the essays entitled "On the First Sin of the First Man" and "On Actual Sins";<sup>34</sup> and *Private Disputations*, in a disputation entitled "On the Effects of the Sin of Our First Parents."<sup>35</sup> An examination of these three works will further reveal Arminius's view of Original Sin. In his *Apology*

31. *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part 1: Book of Confessions* (New York: The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church [U.S.A.], 1983), 4.005-012.

32. *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions* (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1987), 91.

33. Arminius, *Works*, 2:10-14.

34. *Ibid.*, 2:150-61.

35. *Ibid.*, 2:374-75.

against *Thirty-One Theological Articles*, Arminius argued against teachings that certain individuals had ascribed to him or his colleagues, but which neither he nor they had ever taught. In the essays on Articles thirteen and fourteen, Arminius argued against the condemnation of infants based on Original Sin; however, he stopped far short of a disavowal of Original Sin itself but rather attempted to defend his position on Reformed grounds. Arminius opened the essay with a saying that had been attributed to Borrius, but which, Arminius argued, Borrius had never said. "Original Sin will condemn no man. In every nation, all infants who die without (having committed) actual sins, are saved."<sup>36</sup> Arminius then said that Borrius denied ever having taught either statement.<sup>37</sup> Arminius's primary aim in this essay was to deny infant damnation. The doctrine of Original Sin and its imputation to the race were tangential to the argument, yet he discussed both doctrines. While disagreeing with Augustine on infant damnation, Arminius was thoroughly Augustinian on the doctrine of Original Sin. He agreed with Borrius that all infants "existed in Adam, and were by his will involved in sin and guilt."<sup>38</sup> Arminius argued that Francis Junius had agreed with Borrius that the infants of unbelievers may be saved only by "Christ and his intervention."<sup>39</sup>

Arminius discussed his views on sin in a more systematic manner in his *Public Disputations*. He summarized his doctrine of Original Sin in a section entitled "The Effects of This Sin." It is clear from this passage that Arminius was Augustinian. He stated that the violation of the law of God results in two punishments: *reatus*, a liability to two deaths—one physical and one spiritual; and *privatio*, the withdrawal of man's primitive righteousness.<sup>40</sup> Arminius believed that Adam's sin caused physical death for the entire race and spiritual death for those who are not in Christ. His position on the effect of Adam's sin on the race was that "the whole of this sin . . . is not peculiar to our first parents, but is common to the entire race and to all their posterity, who, at the time when this sin was committed, were in their loins, and who have since descended from them by the natural mode of propagation."<sup>41</sup> Arminius believed that all

36. *Ibid.*, 2:10.

37. *Ibid.*, 2:11.

38. *Ibid.*, 2:12.

39. *Ibid.*, 2:14.

40. *Ibid.*, 2:156.

41. *Ibid.* It may be inferred from this statement that Arminius would accept (in the terminology of later Protestant Scholastic theology) a "natural headship" view of the transmission of sin, rather than a "federal headship" view. Rather than Adam being "federally" appointed as head of the race, he was naturally the head of the race, and individuals are sinful as a natural consequence of their being "in Adam" or in the race.

sinned in Adam and are guilty in Adam, apart from their own actual sins. In the *Private Disputations*, Arminius echoed the sentiments of his public disputations. In disputation thirty-one, he stated that “all men, who were to be propagated from them [Adam and Eve] in a natural way, became obnoxious to death temporal and death eternal, and (*vacui*) devoid of this gift of the Holy Spirit or original righteousness.”<sup>42</sup>

Arminius’s views on Original Sin stand in stark contrast to the standard caricature of them, seen for example in the following quotation from Alan F. Johnson and Robert E. Webber:

The semi-Pelagian dogmas were revived again in the theology of Jacob Arminius. . . . Arminius argued that although all are sinners, they are sinners, not because they participate in Adam’s sin, but because, like Adam, they sin. His theory, which came to be known as voluntary appropriated depravity, is based on the assumption that each person has an inborn bias to evil. Arminius, like the semi-Pelagians of the ancient church, wanted the responsibility of sin to rest on the individual. This doctrine of individual responsibility also extends to personal salvation.<sup>43</sup>

An examination of Arminius’s confessional beliefs and his writings makes it impossible to sustain such interpretations of his doctrine of Original Sin. Another example of such misinterpretation is that of James Meeuwsen in his *Reformed Review* article on Arminianism.<sup>44</sup> Meeuwsen says that in Arminius’s view of Original Sin “Adamic unity is shattered” and that Arminius’s view “implies that original sin is nothing more than a habit which was eventually acquired by man.”<sup>45</sup> One is led to wonder from reading Meeuwsen if he is really taking Arminius’s theology

42. *Ibid.*, 2:375.

43. Alan F. Johnson and Robert E. Webber, *What Christians Believe: A Biblical and Historical Summary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 223-24.

44. Meeuwsen relies heavily on Presbyterian theologian William G. T. Shedd (*A History of Christian Doctrine* [New York: Scribner’s, 1867]), who wrongly read Arminius through the lens of the works of Episcopius and other Remonstrant theologians whose theology differed significantly from that of Arminius. At one point, Meeuwsen says: “Arminius and his followers held that the imputation of actual guilt was entirely contrary to the justice and equity of God. Shedd fully agreed with such an interpretation when he paraphrased their beliefs in this way: ‘Imputation is contrary to divine benevolence, right reason, in fact it is absurd and cruel’” (23). Meeuwsen then goes on to quote Episcopius for about half a page. See James Meeuwsen, “Original Arminianism and Methodistic Arminianism Compared,” *Reformed Review* 14 (September 1960):21-36.

45. Meeuwsen, 22.

seriously or if he is merely reading later Arminian theologians into Arminius. Meeuwsew's statements simply cannot be sustained. How can Arminius's clear statements, cited above, be reconciled with such claims? Arminius makes it quite clear that human beings deserve the punishment of God (eternal death) because of Original Sin and original guilt, not merely their own actual sin and their own actual guilt.<sup>46</sup> Meeuwsew goes on to say that Arminius denies that humanity is guilty on account of Adam's sin.<sup>47</sup> But Arminius makes it clear that he does not. When asked the question, "Is the guilt of original sin taken away from all and every one by the benefits of Christ?" Arminius says that the question is "very easily answered by the distinction of the *soliciting*, *obtaining*, and the *application* of the benefits of Christ. For as the participation of Christ's benefits consists in faith alone, it follows that, if among these benefits 'deliverance from this guilt' be one, believers only are delivered from it, since they are those upon whom the wrath of God does not abide."<sup>48</sup>

Arminius's treatment of Original Sin and guilt is clearly Reformed. Again, later Arminian theology has been mistaken for Arminius's theology itself. Johnson and Webber and Meeuwsew have read later theology into Arminius's theology. Only when this is done can Arminius be labeled as semi-Pelagian or Pelagian in his doctrine of Original Sin. An objective examination of either Arminius's confessional beliefs or his doctrinal writings shows that such allegations cannot be sustained.

#### ARMINIUS: SOLA GRATIA AND SOLA FIDE

With Arminius cleared of the charge of semi-Pelagianism with regards to the sinfulness of humanity, it will be beneficial to examine how he believes people may be rescued from this state of sinfulness. On the subjects of grace and faith, again interpreters have charged Arminius with holding semi-Pelagian and synergistic views that make God's foreknowledge of a person's merit the basis of redemption and that view individuals as sharing with God in their salvation. A brief look at Arminius's views of grace, free will, and human inability, followed by a more extended examination of Arminius's doctrine of justification through faith, will reveal Arminius's loyalty to Reformed theology.

Arminius believed that human beings have no ability to seek God or turn to him unless they are radically affected by his grace. Most interpreters have assumed (based on the assumption of semi-Pelagianism)

46. Arminius, *Works*, 2:374.

47. Meeuwsew, 23.

48. Arminius, *Works*, 2:65.

that Arminius held a doctrine of free will that makes individuals naturally able to choose God. However, Arminius's view of human freedom does not mean freedom to do anything good in the sight of God or to choose God on one's own. For Arminius, the basic freedom that characterizes the human will is freedom from necessity. Indeed, for Arminius, "it is the very essence of the will. Without it, the will would not be the will."<sup>49</sup> This has sounded to some like semi-Pelagianism. However, though Arminius believed that the human will is free from necessity, he stated unequivocally that the will is not free from sin and its dominion: ". . . the free will of man towards the true good is not only wounded, maimed, infirm, bent, and (*attenuatum*) weakened; but it is also (*captivatum*) 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 are excited by divine grace."<sup>50</sup> Fallen human beings have no ability or power to reach out to God on their own. Arminius explained that "the mind of man in this state is dark, destitute of the saving knowledge of God, and, according to the apostle, incapable of those things which belong to the Spirit of God."<sup>51</sup> He went on to discuss "the utter weakness of all the powers to perform that which is truly good, and to omit the perpetration of that which is evil."<sup>52</sup>

Sinful human beings, for Arminius, have free will, but this is not a free will that has within its power to do any good but is rather in bondage to sin.<sup>53</sup> The grace of God is the only power that can bring people out of this state. Arminius was not a synergist; he did not believe that individuals share with God in their salvation. Human beings are saved by grace through faith. This excludes human merit of any kind. The faith that is the instrument of justification (not the ground) cannot be had without the grace of God. Divine grace alone gives individuals the power to come to God.<sup>54</sup> Grace, for Arminius, is necessary and essential to faith from start to finish. But Arminius differed from Calvin and many Reformed theologians of his day by stating that this grace of God "which has appeared to all men" can be resisted. Arminius denied the distinction between a universal call and a special call. He insisted that the gospel call is universal. Yet, the grace of God through this call can be and is resisted by men and

49. Bangs, *Arminius: A Study in the Dutch Reformation*, 341.

50. Arminius, *Works*, 2:192.

51. *Ibid.*

52. *Ibid.*, 2:193.

53. Millard J. Erickson repeats the common misunderstanding that, according to Arminius, human inability in salvation is "physical and intellectual, but not volitional." See his *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 634.

54. Arminius, *Works*, 2:194-95.

women. He said that “the whole of the controversy reduces itself to this question, ‘Is the grace of God a certain irresistible force?’ . . . I believe that many persons resist the Holy Spirit and reject the grace that is offered.”<sup>55</sup>

Though Arminius differed from Calvin and some of the Reformed on the particulars of grace, he still maintained that salvation is by *sola gratia*. Arminius can in no way be considered a semi-Pelagian or a synergist. This fact is further attested in Arminius’s doctrine of justification.

Justification is another doctrine on which Arminius has been grossly misunderstood. As with the doctrines of Original Sin and grace, his doctrine of justification is usually seen through the eyes of later Arminian theology.<sup>56</sup> Many Reformed writers have harshly criticized Arminian soteriology because, by and large, it has rested on the governmental theory of atonement as articulated by the Remonstrant theologian Hugo Grotius.<sup>57</sup> If one, however, reads Arminius in light of Grotius, one misreads Arminius. To ascertain what Arminius’s doctrine of justification by faith consists of, it is helpful to examine his confessional beliefs and his writings.

Arminius agrees with what the Belgic Confession says on the doctrine of justification. Article twenty-two, *Of Our Justification through Faith in Jesus Christ*, after stating that justification is “by faith alone, or faith without works,” says that “we do not mean that faith itself justifies us, for it is only an instrument with which we embrace Christ our Righteousness. But Jesus Christ, imputing to us all his merits, and so many holy works, which he hath done for us and in our stead, is our Righteousness.”<sup>58</sup> The Heidelberg Catechism establishes the Reformed view of justification by the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ apprehended by faith, which follows forth from the penal satisfaction theory of atonement. The Catechism states that “God wills that his righteousness be satisfied; therefore payment in full must be made to his righteousness, either by ourselves or by another.” However, we cannot make this payment ourselves. Only Jesus Christ, God incarnate, can make this payment for us. Thus, he pays the “debt of sin” and satisfies God’s righteous requirements. When people have faith in Christ, they are “incorporated into [Christ] and accept all his benefits,” they are in union with Christ, which means Christ bears their sins and they have the benefit of his

55. Quoted in Bangs, *Arminius: A Study in the Dutch Reformation*, 343.

56. See, e.g., Meeuwssen, 27-28.

57. *Ibid.*

58. *Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth Century*, ed. Arthur C. Cochrane (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966), 204.



righteousness.<sup>59</sup> The Catechism further says, in answering question sixty, that “God, without any merit of my own, out of pure grace, grants me the benefits of the perfect expiation of Christ, imputing to me his righteousness and holiness as if I had never committed a single sin or had ever been sinful, having fulfilled myself all the obedience which Christ has carried out for me, if only I accept such favor with a trusting heart.”<sup>60</sup> Question sixty-one reads:

Q. 61. *Why do you say that you are righteous by faith alone?*

A. Not because I please God by virtue of the worthiness of my faith, but because the satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ alone are my righteousness before God, and because I can accept it and make it mine in no other way than by faith alone.<sup>61</sup>

This is the same conception of atonement and justification as that in the Belgic Confession. Arminius claims to agree with both these documents, and his writings are fully consonant with them.

Arminius’s view of justification is summarized in article seven of disputation nineteen in his *Public Disputations*. There he stated that justification is that act by which one, “being placed before the throne of grace which is erected in Christ Jesus the Propitiation, is accounted and pronounced by God, the just and merciful Judge, righteous and worthy of the reward of righteousness, not in himself but in Christ, of grace, according to the gospel, to the praise of the righteousness and grace of God, and to the salvation of the justified person himself.”<sup>62</sup> Justification for Arminius is forensic and imputative in nature. He had stated in his disputations on Original Sin that eternal, spiritual death was the punishment for sin. Like the Reformed, Arminius believed that God must punish sin with eternal death unless one meets the requirement of total righteousness before him. So he portrayed God as a judge who must sentence individuals to eternal death if they do not meet his requirements. In typical Reformed fashion, Arminius employed the analogy of “a Judge making an estimate in his own mind of the deed, and of the author of it, and according to that estimate, forming a judgment and pronouncing sentence.”<sup>63</sup> The sentence pronounced on the sinner who cannot meet the

59. *Ibid.*, 307-8, 311-12.

60. *Ibid.*, 314.

61. *Ibid.*, 315.

62. Arminius, *Works*, 2:256.

63. *Ibid.*, 2:256.

requirements of divine justice is eternal death. Yet, since no one has this righteousness, it must come from someone else. It can come only from Christ. He pays the penalty for sin on the cross—"the price of redemption for sins by suffering the punishment due to them."<sup>64</sup> When individuals exhibit saving faith, they come into union with Christ; this union results in their being identified with Christ in his death and righteousness.<sup>65</sup> Hence, justification takes place when God as judge pronounces one just or righteous because he has been imputed this righteousness of Christ through faith. Arminius distinguished sharply between imputed righteousness and inherent righteousness, saying that the righteousness by which we are justified is in no way inherent, or within us, but is Christ's righteousness which is "made ours by gracious imputation."<sup>66</sup>

For Arminius, this emphasis on justice does not mitigate against God's mercy, as some later Arminians held. God never had to offer Christ for the redemption of man in the first place. If God had not made a way of satisfaction for his justice (through mercy), *then*, Arminius said, is when humanity would have truly been judged according to God's "severe and rigid estimation." Those who are under the law, Arminius argued, are judged in this severe and rigid way; those who are under grace, through faith, are *graciously* imputed the righteousness of Christ, which in turn justifies them before God the Judge.<sup>67</sup>

Arminius's enemies had charged him with teaching that we are not justified by the imputation of Christ's righteousness which is ours through faith, but that it is our faith itself which justifies us. In the *Apology against Thirty-One Defamatory Articles*, Arminius dealt with the statement his enemies had attributed to him: "The righteousness of Christ is not imputed to us for righteousness; but to believe (or the act of believing) justifies us."<sup>68</sup> Arminius's reply was that he never said that the act of faith justifies a person. He held that Christ's righteousness is imputed to the believer by gracious imputation *and* that our faith is imputed for righteousness. The reason he held both of these is that he believed the Apostle Paul held them both.

I say, that I acknowledge, "The righteousness of Christ is imputed to us"; because I think the same thing is contained in the following words of the Apostle, "God hath made Christ to be sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God

64. *Ibid.*, 1:419.

65. *Ibid.*, 2:403-4.

66. *Ibid.*, 2:257.

67. *Ibid.*, 2:256-57, 406.

68. *Ibid.*, 2:42.

in him." . . . It is said in the third verse [of Romans 4], "Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness"; that is, *his believing* was thus imputed. Our brethren, therefore, do not reprehend ME, but the APOSTLE.<sup>69</sup>

Arminius thought his foes were wrong to place the two concepts in opposition to one another, since Holy Scripture does not. He argued that faith is not the *ground* or *basis* (the meritorious cause) of justification, but rather the instrument *through which* one is imputed the merits of Christ (the instrumental cause).<sup>70</sup> Faith is necessary for Christ's righteousness to be imputed, and Arminius did not see a necessary opposition between the phrases "the righteousness of Christ imputed to us" and "faith imputed for righteousness."

Arminius's view of justification by grace through faith by the imputed merit of Jesus Christ was thoroughly Reformed. In another place, to clear himself of any misunderstanding, Arminius stated his full agreement with what Calvin said with regard to justification in his *Institutes*: Calvin said:

We are justified before God solely by the intercession of Christ's righteousness. This is equivalent to saying that man is not righteous in himself but because the righteousness of Christ is communicated to him by imputation. . . . You see that our righteousness is not in us but in Christ, that we possess it only because we are partakers in Christ; indeed, with him we possess all its riches.<sup>71</sup>

This phrase is almost identical to many of Arminius's statements on justification in the *Public Disputations*.

#### CONCLUSION

An investigation of Arminius's writings shows that his theology must be cleared of the charge of semi-Pelagianism, Pelagianism, and synergism. For Arminius, humanity is dead in trespasses and sin, guilty before God, and can only be saved by *sola gratia* and through *sola fide*.

This examination of Arminius's historical and theological context in Reformation-era Holland, his loyalty to the Dutch Reformed Confessions,

69. *Ibid.*, 2:43-45.

70. *Ibid.*, 2:49-51.

71. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1:753.

his stated views of Calvin, and, most importantly, his writings has shown that Arminius's essential theology of sin and redemption was thoroughly Reformed. Most interpreters of Arminius have viewed him in light of later Arminianism, most of which has tended toward a denial of the Reformed view of Original Sin and total depravity and an espousal of synergism in the plan of salvation, the governmental view of atonement, and perfectionism. It has been shown that it is irresponsible simply to read these later Arminian themes back into Arminius just because his name is attached to the Arminian theological systems. A thorough analysis of Arminius's theology itself reveals that it was more a development of Reformed theology than a departure from it.