

## Righteousness of Saving Faith: Arminian Versus Remonstrant Grace

John Mark Hicks

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Arminianism, as a theological system, derives its name from Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609).<sup>1</sup> He served first as a pastor for the Reformed church in Amsterdam (1587-1603), and then as Professor of Theology at the University of Leiden (1603-1609). Much to his own dismay, he became the center of a beginning controversy in Dutch Protestantism. As a result, it is his name that has come down to us in history with such significance.

Immediately after his death, some leading ministers of the Dutch Reformed Church presented a “Remonstrance” to the States of Holland (1610). After this group was excluded from the state-controlled church in the aftermath of the Synod of Dort, they organized themselves into the Remonstrant Brotherhood and established their own theological school in Amsterdam.<sup>2</sup> Remonstrantism, then, is more associated with an historical group than a theological system.

The leading theologian of the Remonstrants, however, was Philip van Limborch (1633-1712).<sup>3</sup> He was raised as a second generation Remonstrant, and the great-nephew of Simon Episcopius who was the “successor” of Arminius. In 1667 Limborch became Professor of Theology at the Remonstrant theological institution. At the request of the Remonstrant church, he wrote a comprehensive theology. It became his *magnum opus*. He completed *Theologia Christiana* in 1686 and it went through six editions.<sup>4</sup> Since its publication it has been known as the “most complete and best known exposition of [early] Arminianism.”<sup>5</sup>

Arminianism and Remonstrantism have often been linked together as if they represented the same theological viewpoint. This linkage has been made by both Arminian<sup>6</sup> and Calvinist<sup>7</sup> writers. However, this coupling is theologically misleading. Arminianism, as understood in the sense of the theology of Arminius, is not Remonstrant in character. Arminius and Limborch stand as far apart theologically as do Wesley and

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<sup>1</sup> The definitive biography is Carl Bangs, *Arminius: A Study in the Dutch Reformation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> For a history of the Remonstrantsch Broederschap, see Lucie J. N. K. van Aken, *De Remonstrantsch Broederschap in verleden en heden, historische schets* (Arnhem, 1947) and G. J. Hoenderdaal, “Remonstrantie en Constraremonstrantie,” *Nederlands Archief Kerkegeschiedenis* 51.1 (1970), 49-92.

<sup>3</sup> The definitive biography of Limborch is P. J. Barnouw, *Philippus van Limborch* (Leiden, 1963).

<sup>4</sup> Limborch, *Theologia Christiana, ad praxin pietatis ac promotionem pacis christianae unice directa* (Amsterdam, 1686, 1695, 1700, 1715, 1730, 1735). It was abridged, translated into English and revised “with improvements from Bishop Wilkins, Archbishop Tilloston, Dr. Scott, and others” by William Jones, *A Complete System, or Body of Divinity* (London, 1713). All translations from this work are mine. The 1700 edition is utilized.

<sup>5</sup> H. Orton Wiley, *Christian Theology* (Kansas City, 1943) 1:87.

<sup>6</sup> For example, D. D. Whedon, “Arminianism and Arminius,” *Methodist Quarterly Review* 61 (July 1879): 405-426.

<sup>7</sup> For example, James Meeuwse, “Original Arminianism and Methodistic Arminianism Compared,” *Reformed Review* 14.1 (1960): 21-36.

Latitudinarian Anglicanism. It is the difference between evangelicalism and Pelagianism, between the Reformation and the Enlightenment.<sup>8</sup>

The purpose of this article is to illustrate the difference between evangelical Arminianism and rationalistic Arminianism by examining the righteousness of justifying faith in the thought of Jacobus Arminius and Philip van Limborch. The two systems are radically different, and if we are to retain the name “Arminian” in its historical character, then we must reserve the name “Remonstrant” for the theology which Limborch expounded. The differences between these two theologies of grace can be seen by outlining their respective doctrines of atonement and faith. In the wake of such an examination, it will become apparent why it is important to maintain both an historical and theological distinction between these two systems.

### **The Nature of the Atonement**

Arminius’ doctrine of atonement is often linked with either explicitly or implicitly with the governmental theories of Remonstrant thought.<sup>9</sup> One recent expositor, H. D. McDonald, continues this linkage by placing Arminius’ understanding of atonement in the context of Socinian and Remonstrant theorists.<sup>10</sup> Arminius, according to McDonald, deviated from Reformed thought by arguing that “Christ’s expiatory sacrifice was not an equivalent for the punishment due to sin.”<sup>11</sup> God’s law was relaxed or modified so as to accept a lesser payment for sin than what the rigor of divine justice required.

However, these assessments ignore an important passage in the discussion between Arminius and Franciscus Junius.<sup>12</sup> Arminius maintains that the death of Christ was a full and complete satisfaction for sin according to the rigor of divine justice. The law of God is fundamentally “inflexible.” It was not a relaxation or modification of the law. Rather, the wisdom of God found a way to both satisfy the rigor of justice and at the same time offer mercy to humanity. The satisfaction for the justice of God was not based on some kind of relaxation of the law, but was executed according to the “the inflexible rigor of divine justice displayed, which could not grant, even to the intercession of His son, the pardon of sin unless punishment had been inflicted.”

This was effected through the penal substitution of Jesus Christ. God’s justice, according to Arminius, could be satisfied by either punishing the sinner or “by the exaction of the same punishment from Him who has offered Himself according to God’s

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<sup>8</sup> See my dissertation, *The Theology of Grace in the Thought of Jacobus Arminius and Philip van Limborch: A Study in the Development of Seventeenth Century Dutch Arminianism* (Ph.D. dissertation, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1985). Other similar studies include Carl Bangs, *Arminius*, pp. 332-349; Moses Stuart, “The Creed of Arminius,” *Biblical Repository* 1 (April 1831) 226-308; and Howard A. Slaate, *The Arminian Arm of Theology: The Theology of John Fletcher, First Methodist Theologian, and His Precursor, James Arminius* (Washington, D. C., 1977).

<sup>9</sup> One older example is J. A. Doner, *History of Protestant Theology*, trans. George Robson and Sophia Taylor (New York, 1970 reprint), 1:423. An example of implicit linkage is Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, 1977 reprint), 3:185-187.

<sup>10</sup> H. D. McDonald, *The Atonement of the Death of Christ in Faith, Revelation, and History* (Grand Rapids, 1985), pp. 199-201. For a response, see the review article by William S. Sailer, “H. D. McDonald, *The Atonement of the Death of Christ*. A Review Article,” *Evangelical Journal* 4.1 (1986) 29-36.

<sup>11</sup> McDonald, p. 200.

<sup>12</sup> Arminius, “Franciscus Junius,” XX, in *The Writings of James Arminius*, London Edition, trans. James Nichols and W. R. Bagnall, and with introduction by Carl Bangs (Grand Rapids, 1986 reprint), 3:194-195.

will as bail and surety for sinners.” He suffered both the eternal and temporal penalties of sin in our place.<sup>13</sup> He suffered the punishment due to sinful humanity. God imposed “upon his Son the punishment due from sinners, and taken away from them, to be borne and paid in full by Him.”<sup>14</sup> His death earned a real merit which is bestowed upon believers in justification.

Arminius’ doctrine of atonement is fundamentally the same as that of the Reformers except that he gives an explicit universal potential to the benefits of Christ’s death.<sup>15</sup> These benefits are universal in potential but not in actuality. They are actually applied to believers only. Christ is the potential substitute for everyone, but the actual substitute for those whom God has elected in Christ as believers. Yet, even this wording differs little from Reformed formulations of the time except for the phrase “elected in Christ as believers.”<sup>16</sup>

Limborch, however, maintains that the death of Christ is regarded by God as a satisfaction for sin according to grace, but not according to the intrinsic merit of the death itself. The death of Christ is meritorious for universal redemption only because God’s will has determined to regard it as such.<sup>17</sup> The intrinsic value of Christ’s death, according to the rigor of divine justice, is insufficient for the redemption of all humanity. “Christ did not suffer eternal death,” and therefore did not suffer the “punishment due to our sins.”<sup>18</sup> Thus the satisfaction which was rendered for sin was not full and complete.

Rather, God was satisfied by the determination of his own will rather than by the demands of his justice. Limborch is, in this context, voluntaristic.<sup>19</sup> God only punishes sin if He so wills, and the “retributive justice” of God is not an “essential attribute” of his nature so that he must punish.<sup>20</sup> While the death of Christ exhibited God’s wrath and did pay the temporal penalty of sin, it did not satisfy the retributive justice of God. Rather, God regards Christ’s death as a substitute for us even though it is a substitute which is insufficient according to the rigor of divine justice. The mercy of God moderated God’s wrath so that it was not inflexible with regard to our sin.<sup>21</sup>

Consequently, the death of Christ did not fulfill God’s just demands, but relaxed God’s demands upon humanity. This relaxation of the demands of the law has universal consequences so that anyone who has never heard the Gospel (the conditions of the New Covenant) may be saved by meeting the demands of the law according to the revelations available to them.<sup>22</sup> The effects of Christ’s death are universally applied without faith,

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<sup>13</sup> Arminius, “Apology,” IX, in *Writings*, 3:766-770. The detractors of Arminius only accused him of teaching that Christ did not bear the *temporal* punishment of sin, but admitted that he did teach that Christ rendered satisfaction for eternal punishment.

<sup>14</sup> Arminius, “Junius,” XX, in *Writings*, 3:195.

<sup>15</sup> This is the burden of Arminius’ discussion with Perkins at many points. See *Writings*, 3:323-338.

<sup>16</sup> See the discussion by W. Robert Godfrey, “Reformed Thought on the Extent of the Atonement,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 37.2 (1975) 133-171.

<sup>17</sup> Limborch, *Theologia*, III, xxii, 5. In his commentary on Romans 3:25, he writes: “non rigori justitiae, sed voluntati divinae justae simul ac misericordiae satisfecerit (*Commentari in Acta apostolorum et in Epistolas ad Romanos et ad Hebraeos* [Rotterdam, 1711]).

<sup>18</sup> Limborch, *Theologia*, III, xxi, 6.

<sup>19</sup> Limbroch, *Theologia*, II, xii, 24-26.

<sup>20</sup> Limborch, *Theologia*, II, xii, 27.

<sup>21</sup> Limborch, *Theologia*, II, xii, 2; xiii, 1.

<sup>22</sup> This is expressed most clearly in a letter to John Locke, March 16, 1697, in *The Correspondance of John Locke*, edited by E. S. de Beer (Oxford, 1976), no. 2222: “If this is stated I think that it can be explained on

that is, God's law now stands relaxed for everyone. The gift of righteousness is given when one meets the demands of that relaxed law whether by the light of nature or on the grounds of the terms of the New Covenant.

The difference between Arminius and Limborch is the same difference which exists between Calvin and Grotius.<sup>23</sup> It is the difference between the penal theory of atonement and the governmental theory. According to the former, Christ paid the full penalty of sin as a substitute for us. According to the latter, Christ simply relaxed God's laws so that we would be able to effectively accomplish them. For Arminius, the law remains intact and inflexible, but fulfilled by Christ in his life and death. For Limborch, the Law is moderated and relaxed, and the related demands of the law are then met by us for our salvation. The ground of salvation in Arminius is a just and real fulfillment of the law's demands which is given by imputation, but in Limborch it is an abrogation of the just demands of the law. The difference between Arminius and Limborch here is the difference between what Christ has done for us and in our stead, and what we must do for ourselves in addition to Christ's work in the actual accomplishment of redemption. It is the difference between God imputing Christ's righteousness to the believer and the believer receiving the righteousness on the ground of his own act of faith.

### **The Merit of Faith**

Arminius explicitly declared that he found himself in "complete agreement" with the Reformed and Protestant churches on the topic of justification by faith.<sup>24</sup> His agreement is so thorough that he is willing to ascribe to all that Calvin said on the subject. Arminius writes:

Yet my opinion is not so widely different from his as to prevent me from employing the signature of my own hand in subscription to those things which he has delivered on this subject, in the third book of his *Institutes*; this is I am prepared to do at any time and to give them my full approval.<sup>25</sup>

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what ground, the principles stated above being preserved intact, those who have heard nothing of Christ, not even by hearsay, can be saved by Christ: [it is] surely because God attaches the grace obtained by Christ to those who (as this author says on p. 292 [Locke's *The Reasonableness of Christianity*]) by the instinct of the light of nature fly for succour to his grace and mercy, and repent of [their] misdeeds, and humbly ask pardon for them; and grants them for Christ's sake the remission of sins, and imputes righteousness to them; and so through the gracious imputation of God, who can spread his favours and benefits more widely than the words of the promises prescribe, those without direct belief in Christ, who has not been preached to them, may attain the benefit which, where Christ has been preached, cannot be obtained except through direct belief in him. So that the salvation of all men is thus founded on the propitiatory sacrifice of Christ."

<sup>23</sup> See for example, McDonald, pp. 187-195, 203-207.

<sup>24</sup> Arminius, "Declaration of Sentiments," IX, in *Writings*, 1:695.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:700. Of course some of Arminius' contemporaries as well as modern scholars doubt his sincerity or candid nature. See, for example, A. A. Hodge, *Outline of Theology* (London, 1879), p. 105; A. Warburton, *Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, 1955), p. 6; Pieter Geyl, *The Netherlands in the Seventeenth Century. Part One: 1609-1648*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York, 1961), p. 45 and John R. de Witt, "The Arminian Conflict and the Synod of Dort," in *The Manifold Grace of God* (Puritan and Reformed Studies Conference, 1968), p. 10. For a response, see Carl Bangs, "Arminius and the Reformation," *Church History* 30.2 (1961) 156-157. F. Stuart Clark, "Arminius' Understanding of Calvin," *Evangelical Quarterly* 54.1 (1983) 25: "It is an accusation easy to make and hard to refute, because of the practice of the theological

Nevertheless, Arminius has often been accused of heterodoxy on this point, and such accusations continue. For example, Praamsma argues that Arminius taught that “man is justified before God not on the basis of the imputed righteousness of Christ but by the human act of believing which constituted his righteousness before God.” Praamsma adds that this contradicts the answer to question sixty-one of the Heidelberg Catechism.<sup>26</sup> But when Arminius was questioned about his doctrine of justification at The Hague in 1608, he replied by quoting the answers to questions sixty and sixty-one of the Heidelberg Catechism as his own opinion.<sup>27</sup>

According to Arminius, the righteousness which man receives in justification is wholly external to himself. It is, in fact, the righteousness of Christ which is imputed to him. As he stood before the States of Holland at The Hague, Arminius offered this succinct statement of his views:

I believe that sinners are accounted righteous solely by the obedience of Christ; and that the righteousness of Christ is the only meritorious cause on account of which God pardons sins of believers and reckons them as righteous as if they had perfectly fulfilled the law.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, the ground of our justification is that God “bestows Christ on us for righteousness, and imputes his righteousness and obedience to us.”<sup>29</sup> At the heart of this concept is Arminius’ doctrine of atonement. It is, like that of his Reformed critics, both substitutionary and penal in its nature. The merit of Christ is imputed to the believer as the ground of justification. He believes that “God reckons the righteousness of Christ to have been performed for us and for our benefit.”<sup>30</sup> The critics of Arminius believed that he attributed merit or righteousness to the human act of faith, and the charge continues.<sup>31</sup> This misperception is rooted in Arminius’ understanding that faith is both an act and an instrument. It is an act of the human will which has been graciously enabled by the work of God’s Holy Spirit. Faith is an act of the human will, but an act that is rooted in God’s prevenient grace. God grants both the ability and the will to believe, but the act of faith itself is a matter of cooperative grace.<sup>32</sup>

Faith, however, is also passive. First, the act of faith never arises out of the human subject alone. The grace of God not only precedes, but accompanies and follows any

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professors of the time, including Arminius, of boarding students in their own homes and giving them private teaching, but if it is true, there is no point in studying Arminius’ published view of Calvin or of anyone or anything else. My own position is that it would have been psychologically impossible to express the full-blooded views of grace etc. that Arminius did, while privately believing the wishy-washy Pelagianism that this view would attribute to him.”

<sup>26</sup> Louis Praamsma, “The Background of the Arminian Controversy (1586-1618),” in *Crisis in the Reformed Churches*, ed. Peter Y. DeJong (Grand Rapids, 1968), p. 55. Contrast Slaate, *Arminian Arm*, p. 55: “The Arminian view of justification by faith is basically that held by the Reformers.” My dissertation upholds Slaate’s conclusion (Hicks, pp. 70-110).

<sup>27</sup> Bangs, *Arminius*, p. 298.

<sup>28</sup> Arminius, “Declaration of Sentiments,” IX, in *Writings*, 1:700.

<sup>29</sup> Arminius, “Private Disputations,” XLVIII.v, in *Writings*, 2:406.

<sup>30</sup> Arminius, “Letter to Hippolytus,” V, in *Writings*, 2:702.

<sup>31</sup> Meeuwssen, “Original Arminianism,” pp. 31-32.

<sup>32</sup> See his discussion in “Nine Questions,” VIII, in *Writings*, 2:270.

good that man accomplishes.<sup>33</sup> Second, the act of faith has no inherent merit. Arminius attempts to make this clearer:

Christ has not obtained (*promeritum*) by his merits that we should be justified by the worthiness and merit of faith and much less that we should be justified by the merit of works: But the merit of Christ is opposed to justification by works; and in the Scriptures, faith and merit are placed in opposition to each other.<sup>34</sup>

Faith is the instrumental cause of justification. It receives the gift of righteousness. It does not, as an act, contain within itself saving righteousness. The righteousness of justification is the righteousness of Christ which he earned in his life and death and is bestowed upon the believer as if he were personally righteous. Faith is the condition for the reception of that righteousness, but it contains no merit within itself. It receives all merit from outside of itself and does not constitute its own righteousness.

Arminius illustrated the active nature of faith and yet the passive reception of external righteousness by the metaphor of a beggar who received wealth from a rich man. “Does it cease to be a pure gift,” he asks, “because the beggar extends his hand to receive it?”<sup>35</sup> Consequently, faith receives the righteousness which Christ earned. Interestingly, Reid explains Calvin’s view of the nature of faith in similar terms. Just as for Arminius, faith is the instrument by which “the sinner lays hold upon Christ’s righteousness freely offered to him in the Gospel.” Or, to use the analogy that Reid employs, “it is the empty outstretched hand which receives by imputation the righteousness of Christ.”<sup>36</sup> Whether one refers to “laying hold” or “holding out an empty hand,” the point is that faith is a human act enabled by grace and it contains no merit within itself. Calvin and Arminius are agreed on these points.

On the contrary, Limborch explicitly rejects the imputation of Christ’s righteousness. “Nowhere,” he writes, “does Scripture teach that the righteousness of Christ is imputed to us.”<sup>37</sup> This, of course, is an implication of his rejection of penal substitutional atonement. But this immediately raises the question: “From where, then, does justifying righteousness come?”

According to Limborch, the righteousness which man receives in justification is partly based upon his own imperfect, yet righteous, act of faith. It is partly his own righteous act and partly a righteousness which God grants independently of the righteousness of Christ. Faith does not contain within itself a justifying righteousness according to the rigor of divine justice, but it does contain a righteousness which God graciously regards as justifying. Limborch explicitly denies that this is an imputation of Christ’s righteousness. In Limborch’s system, God is willing to declare man righteous because of what Christ has done *and* because of man’s faith.

He argues that God has willed to show his mercy by two means (*media*): “one is outside of us, and another is in us.”<sup>38</sup> The external *medium* is the redemptive act of Christ

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<sup>33</sup> Arminius, “Apology,” XVI-XVII, in *Writings*, 2:16-20.

<sup>34</sup> Arminius, “Private Disputations,” XLVIII, Corollary iii, in *Writings*, 2:408.

<sup>35</sup> Arminius, “Apology,” XXVII, in *Writings*, 2:52.

<sup>36</sup> W. Stanford Reid, “Justification by Faith According to John Calvin,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 42.2 (1980) 295-296.

<sup>37</sup> Limborch, *Theologia*, VI, iv, 25.

<sup>38</sup> Limborch, *Theologia*, VI, iv, 20.

on the cross and the internal *medium* is the act of human faith.<sup>39</sup> The redemption of humanity depends upon the righteousness of Christ only in the sense that his blood opened the way of salvation by the propitiation of God's wrath. His righteousness, then, may be considered an "external means" in that it established a new covenant between God and us, but it is not an "internal means" in the sense that we are considered righteous by virtue of his righteousness through our acceptance of God's gracious offer in the gospel.<sup>40</sup> Rather, our own faith is the internal means of achieving righteousness. With this structure, Limborch is able to argue that one is justified both on account of (*propter*) Christ and on account of (*propter*) human faith. This is clear in his definition of justification itself:

Justification is a merciful and gracious act of God by which sinners who truly repent and believe are fully absolved from all guilt through and on account of (*propter*) faith in Jesus and that same faith is graciously imputed for righteousness.<sup>41</sup>

Consequently, the death of Christ and human faith stand on equal footing. Just as the death of Christ earned or merited something for us, we earn or merit something for ourselves by faith. Neither merits anything according to the rigor of divine justice, but in God's voluntaristic gracious accounting both have a meriting function.<sup>42</sup>

However, all that Christ did was to relax the law so that what we do God can regard as righteousness.<sup>43</sup> Faith becomes an act of human righteousness which meets the demands of the relaxed law. It is accounted righteousness graciously because Christ's work relaxed the law, but it is true righteousness in that it does meet the actual demands of the unrelaxed law. Yet, even the work of Christ is based upon a relaxation of the law rather than a real fulfillment of its demands. Christ did not pay the penalty of sin according to divine justice, but God accepted a lesser payment for the real one. Thus, the ground of salvation is two-fold: Christ's work and man's faith. Though the former precedes the latter, the faith actually earns the righteousness by which we stand in the presence of God. This is not simply because faith is the mere instrument or receptacle by which righteousness is received from Christ, but because it is itself a work of righteousness and forms the foundation of God's accounting us righteous. In other words, we must be righteous according to the relaxed demands of the law, in at least this real sense, before God can count us as perfectly righteous. Indeed, technically, God does not graciously count us as righteous since by faith we are, in fact, righteous in that we have met the actual demands of the relaxed law. It is imputed to him or counted as his only in the sense that man needed the work of Christ to relax the law. This is the "gracious" accounting in Limborch's theology of grace.

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<sup>39</sup> Limborch, *Theologia*, VI, iv, 21-22.

<sup>40</sup> Limborch, *Theologia*, III, iii, 15.

<sup>41</sup> Limborch, *Theologia*, VI, iv, 14.

<sup>42</sup> Limborch, *Commentarius*, cv. Romans 3:25; also cv. Romans 6:23.

<sup>43</sup> Limborch, *Theologia*, III, xi, 25. F. A. O. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis, 1950 reprint), 2:239, recognized that the Remonstrants made "Christ a new Lawgiver" since their "position amounts to saying that Christ demands less by way of works than Moses to obtain salvation." See Richard A. Mueller, "The Federal Motif in the Seventeenth Century Arminian Theology," *Nederlands Archief voor Kerkegeschiedenis* 62.1 (1982) 102-122 for a discussion of Limborch's covenantal theology.

Thus, according to Limborch, we become righteous by the righteousness inherent in faith rather than by a righteousness that is given external to faith. This is consistent with his principle that there is no righteousness but what is personal.<sup>44</sup> Thus, we are righteous by the righteousness inherent in our own act of faith rather than by something external to ourselves.

The difference between Arminius and Limborch at this point is of paramount importance. It is the difference between an external gift of righteousness and an internal or inherent righteousness. Limborch holds that God graciously regards our own act of faith as righteousness itself based upon our true accomplishment of the demands of the law. His concept of grace is rooted in God's relaxation of the demands of the law. Arminius holds that God counts faith as the condition for the reception of righteousness external to personal faith. This grace is a free gift of true merit given to believers. Limborch regards faith as containing merit (in the sense of the relaxed law) but Arminius excludes merit from faith. Limborch denies that righteousness is *extra nos*, but Arminius affirms the Reformation dogma of the imputation of Christ's righteousness as the ground of acceptance before God.

While Limborch and Arminius may sometimes write with similar terminology (such as the "act of faith"), their presuppositions and framework for understanding faith give an entirely different sense to their words. In a similar way, Limborch's use of the terms "propitiate," "satisfy," and "redeem" in reference to the work of Christ does not imply that he meant the same thing that his contemporary opponents among the Contra-Reonstrants meant. Presuppositions determine the meaning which is attached to a particular term. This is certainly the case between Limborch and Arminius. While they often use similar terminology, they mean very different things. It is, therefore, improper to read Limborch's understanding of the merit of faith into Arminius' description of faith as an act. Faith for Arminius is only a receptacle for the gift of righteousness. It is not a meritorious act. But for Limborch the death of Christ and the act of faith are meritorious in exactly the same sense, that is, God graciously accepts them as sufficient for redemption even though neither measure up to the rigor of divine justice.

### **The Significance of Arminianism**

The distinction between Arminius and Limborch, between evangelical Arminianism and Remonstrantism, is significant both historically and theologically. It is historically significant because the term "Arminian" has become synonymous with "opposition to Calvinism." Consequently, theological systems dubbed "Arminianism" have ranged from Wesleyan to Socinian, from Catholicism to naturalistic Pelagianism. "Arminian" has become a historically imprecise appellation.

The differences between the two systems demonstrate that the two cannot be regarded as the same nor construed to be logically related by implication. Arminius' theology constantly emphasizes grace while Limborch's constantly emphasizes human ability. The presuppositions from which they approach the theology of grace are radically

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<sup>44</sup> Limborch, *Theologia*, IV, iv, 1. Cf. *Commentarius*, cv. Rom. 5:18: "The sins of every man are certainly personal actions which do not reach any farther and neither are they capable of being passed from one man to another."



different. Thus, the two systems must be distinguished in the historical categorization of theology.

In one sense, Arminianism and Remonstrantism can be classified together. They both adhere to certain points which give them a common heritage: universal potential of the atonement of Christ, the election of believers in Christ, and the resistibility of grace. These are *sine qua non* principles of Arminianism though one Arminian system may interpret them differently and set them into an entirely different framework. Yet, there is some justification for placing Arminianism and Remonstrantism into this broad category. However, this classification does nothing more than distinguish it from pure Augustinianism. This is merely a category of anti-Calvinism since one may place Socinians, Pelagians, and other groups into this same broad category.

Therefore, while these common principles may mean that both Arminianism and Remonstrantism share a common anti-Calvinist posture, they do not provide a useful historical classification. Arminius may be called an “evangelical Arminian,” “early Arminian,” or “low Arminian” in distinction from Remonstrantism which may be called “liberal Arminianism,” “later Arminianism,” or “high Arminianism.”<sup>45</sup> But these categories are not useful since “Arminian” here simply means anti-Calvinist, and may even presuppose some logical development from one to the other. Instead of seeking some overarching principle which unites Arminius and Limborch against Calvinism, it is best to view Arminianism and Remonstrantism as two separate theological systems because even the principles they share are absorbed into the respective systems so differently. The categories of “Arminian” and “Remonstrant” represent the historical roots more accurately and provide a clearer theological distinction between them.

Historical theologians must, therefore, be more careful in the discussion of Arminianism because the theological distinction is real and important. It is a distinction between evangelical and non-evangelical theology, between evangelicalism and legalism or moralism. As historians of theology, we owe it to those who have preceded us to carefully understand and categorize their thought. The Arminian tradition is the historical line of Arminius and Wesley. The Remonstrant tradition is the historical line of Grotius, Limborch and Latitudinarianism.

Recent research bears this out in the study of nineteenth century Methodism where there were Methodists who represented both the Arminian and Remonstrant positions.<sup>46</sup> The Restoration Movement of the Disciples also represented this Arminian-Remonstrant tension in the nineteenth century.<sup>47</sup> The danger of any development which

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<sup>45</sup> See the terminology used, for instance, by R. L. Dabney, *Systematic and Polemic Theology*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (Richmond, 1927), p. 579 and Wiley, 2:107.

<sup>46</sup> Elden Dale Dunlap, “Methodist Theology in Great Britain in the Nineteenth Century, With Special Reference to the Theology of Adam Clarke, Richard Watson, and William Burt Pope,” (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1956) and Robert E. Chiles, *Protestant Transition in American Methodism, 1790-1935* (Washington, D.C., 1983). This is even reflected in the way in which John Wesley was interpreted in the nineteenth century until the “rediscovery” of evangelical Arminianism by G. C. Cell, *The Rediscovery of John Wesley* (New York, 1935).

<sup>47</sup> This is indicated by several factors, but most importantly by the diverse views of the nature of the atonement and the almost universal denial of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness. One example is an article by Clement, “The Atonement,” *The Lard’s Quarterly* 5 (April 1866) 158-193 where the governmental theory of atonement is defended and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness is denied. See the discussion of C. Leonard Allen, *The Cruciform Church: Becoming a Cross-Shaped People in a Secular World* (Abilene, 1990), pp. 113-148.

leaves evangelical theology is represented in both of these historical movements. The movement will either find a dead-end in the moralism of religious pluralism, or frustrate itself with a legalism that subtly looks to the sinner to save himself.

The distinction between Arminianism and Remonstrantism is, more importantly, theological significant. It is a watershed issue for evangelicalism. It is the watershed issue of the Reformation itself. If Arminianism is to remain evangelical, it must take seriously the importance of its doctrine of atonement and justification. From where does justifying righteousness come—*extra nos* or *intra nos*? Is righteousness a gift wholly external to ourselves, or is it show inherent within the act of faith?

The righteousness which is imputed, according to Arminianism, is the righteousness which Christ merited through his obedience. The righteousness which is imputed, according to Remonstrantism, is God's gracious estimation of the human act of faith. This is no mere semantical difference. It is a fundamental disagreement concerning the ground of grace itself. It is the difference between being clothed in Christ's perfect righteousness and being clothed in our own partial righteousness graciously estimated by God to be perfect. It is the difference between a real righteousness forensically imputed to us and a fictitious righteousness voluntaristically (i.e., "graciously" in Limborch's terminology, but not true righteousness according to divine justice) imputed to us. It is the difference between righteousness being wholly derived from Christ's work or righteousness partially derived from our own faith.

Faith is trusting in the merits of Christ. Faith is trusting only in Christ's merits.<sup>48</sup> Faith remains a human act, yet an act that is responsive to and enabled by God's grace. Faith is a human act, but it receives all its saving merit, all its saving righteousness, from outside of itself. Faith is a receptacle for God's gift of righteousness which Christ earned for us in our stead. It is not a human act of merit which arises out of man's natural ability and meets the demands of the law of God. It is an outstretched and empty hand that looks only to God to provide the righteousness by which redemption is secured.

This is the message of the gospel itself. The distinction that Paul draws in Philippians 3:9 is the distinction between Arminianism and Remonstrantism. Paul yearns to be found in Christ, "not having a righteousness of my own that come from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith." Remonstrantism, as any legalism, is a righteousness that is derived from law; a righteousness that is earned by meeting the demands of law, whether it is relaxed or not. Arminianism seeks a righteousness from God through faith so that the ground on which we stand before God is Jesus Christ and his righteousness rather than our own.

The theological distinction between Arminianism and Remonstrantism, then, is rooted in the understanding of the ground of grace—in the nature of the gospel itself. In particular, their differing views of the atonement of Christ result in differing views concerning the nature of faith. The result is that while Arminianism receives the external gift of righteousness by which we stand perfect in God's sight, Remonstrantism looks to the believer to measure up to a relaxed standard of righteousness which God accepts in the place of actual righteousness. The latter is a fiction, but the former is the perfect righteousness of Christ.

## Conclusion

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<sup>48</sup> Alan C. Clifford, "The Gospel and Justification," *Evangelical Quarterly* 57.3 (1985) 254.

Arminianism, as represented by Arminius and Wesley, does not contain a substantial departure from the theology of grace in the Reformers. In particular, the theology of Arminius is fundamentally Reformed in character.<sup>49</sup> Arminianism holds to the Reformation doctrines of penal substitution and *extra nos* righteousness.

Remonstrantism, however, involves an acceptance of certain premises which are destructive of the theology of the Reformation. In the development of Remonstrant thought one finds the spirit of the Enlightenment. Living in the ‘age of reason,’ the Remonstrant leaders, and Limborch in particular, became one of the major forces in the undermining of evangelical theology. Frederick Platt concluded that “Arminianism [i.e., Remonstrantism] was the medium by which the humanistic spirit of the Renaissance was translated into the theological and exegetical sphere. Its great men—Grotius, Episcopius, Limborch, Brant, Le Clerc—are all men of literary faculty and humanistic temper.”<sup>50</sup>

Arminianism, therefore, stands with the theology of Reformation while Remonstrantism represents the breakdown and disintegration of that theology. Arminianism is fundamentally evangelical while Remonstrantism is humanistic. The difference is the difference between the Reformation and the Enlightenment. The church was moving into a new age, and as it moved, its theology changed. This change not only affected Dutch Arminianism but Swiss Calvinism<sup>51</sup> and English Anglicanism.<sup>52</sup> It was reflective of the age in which reason dominated, and faith in Scripture was slowly being eroded by the rise of autonomous philosophy and science.

It is even now reflective of the modern struggle of evangelical Arminianism to find some sort of self-definition. Any definition of Arminianism will ultimately look back to both Arminius and Wesley, and when it does not find itself there, it may discover that it is not Arminian after all. It might be, in fact, Remonstrant.

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<sup>49</sup> Slaate, P. 23: “James Arminius was simply a left-wing Calvinist!” Stuart, however, believed that Arminius was “merely a *moderate Calvinist*; and moderate too in a very limited degree,” p. 304. This is the burden of Carl Bangs, “Arminius and Reformed Theology” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1958).

<sup>50</sup> Frederick Platt, “Arminianism,” *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. by J. Hastings (New York, 1908), 1:814.

<sup>51</sup> Richard C. Gamble, “Switzerland: Triumph and Decline,” in *John Calvin: His Influence in the Western World*, ed. by W. Stanford Reid (Grand Rapids: 1982), pp. 55-71.

<sup>52</sup> Geoffrey F. Nuttall, “The Influence of Arminianism in England,” in *Man’s Faith and Freedom*, ed. by Gerald O. McCulloh (Nashville, 1962), pp. 46-63; Gordon S. Wakefield, “Arminianism in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” *The London Quarterly and Holborn Review* 185 (1960) 253-258; and T. M. Parker, “Arminianism and Laudianism in Seventeenth Century England,” in *Studies in Church History*, ed. by C. W. Dugmore and Charles Duggan (London, 1964), 1:20-34.