

CONTINENTAL THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

THREE THEOLOGICAL POSITIONS OF JACOBUS
ARMINIUS

AN ESSAY PREPARED
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 1

THREE THEOLOGICAL POSITIONS OF JACOBUS

ARMINIUS 3

God's Hidden Will 3

Original Sin 4

God's Foreknowledge 6

CONCLUSION 8

BIBLIOGRAPHY 10

INTRODUCTION

Even though there is a lot on which I disagree about with Jacobus Arminius, when I read his works, they bring some sort of happiness to my inner being. Jacobus Arminius was a bold theological daredevil. In my opinion, he was a light in the darkness of Calvinism. Even though on many things he was in agreement with the doctrines of Calvinism (as we shall see in this essay), he opened the way for many others to continue investigating whether the doctrines of Calvinism stood the test of close scrutiny. This was one of the reasons why he even dared to ask to have the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism revised, which was a very courageous thing to do in those days, considering what atrocious acts were committed by Calvinists in those early years. My view on the history of the Arminians is that Simon Episcopius was right when he stated that: “I can only attribute it to the special interference of the restraining power of God that we were not seriously hurt, if not actually murdered by this infuriated people.”

Whether I agree with Arminius's views on certain topics or not, is not important for this essay. This essay is meant to be an academic review of his theological positions on some views. If I succeed in writing an accurate and honest representation of his views, I will be satisfied.

The three subjects which I will discuss in this essay are: God's hidden will, original sin and God's foreknowledge. As this essay is meant to represent Arminius's views accurately, I will work from his own writings, which I will compare with those of other prominent theologians. I will do so only as a means of bringing more clarity to Jacobus Arminius's position.

My prayer is that this essay, in some way, like the different ministries that are summed up in Ephesians 4:11, will be used by our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ "to prepare God's holy people for the work of serving, to make the body of Christ stronger" (Ephesians 4:12, CEV).

THREE THEOLOGICAL POSITIONS OF JACOBUS ARMINIUS

God's Hidden Will

On the subject of whether Jacobus Arminius believed in the hidden will of God, as described by John Calvin or Maarten Luther, we can clearly state that he did not agree with any of them. Concerning the original sin that our parents committed, Arminius said that they "had both the obligation and the ability to resist" He does not believe that God secretly decreed their fall and all other events (whether past, present or future) that come to pass, including sin, nor that He unconditionally decreed the salvation or perdition of a certain group of people before they were born. Jacobus Arminius responded, in his theological works, to the Calvinist view (on this topic) by saying that stating such a thing is equal to committing the greatest act of injustice towards God. Furthermore Arminius wrote that it is an absurd and sinister interpretation of Paul's

works, especially of his letters to the Romans. Arminius clarifies that God is not angry at sinners before they commit their crime but that He is angry with them, from the moment they committed this sin, since it was their choice. Or, to put it differently, Arminius believed it was not God's choice, secret decree,... that this sin would happen, but solely the choice of the sinner. Arminius's understanding was that in no way do we have to conclude that there are two wills in God, one hidden and one revealed. In his works, Arminius gives us an interesting sentence, which I prefer to rephrase in the form of a question: "Is the hidden will armed with omnipotence, hindering God's [weaker] revealed will to be carried out?"

Original Sin

On the doctrine of original sin, we could say that James Arminius was pretty much in agreement with Augustine and with his Calvinist colleagues. One view on original sin holds that all descendants of Adam and Eve sinned "in Adam", because they were in Adam's loins and therefore they are also guilty of that first sin of Adam and Eve. Jacobus Arminius agrees with that latter view, stating that the sin of our first parents does not belong exclusively to our first parents (Adam and Eve) but that it also belongs to all their descendants, who were in their loins. When Arminius gave a reason for this view, he stated: "According to the primitive benediction: For *in Adam* "all have sinned." This brings us to the following point I would like to make on this. Although Arminius was accused by certain opponents of being a "Pelagian", he most certainly was not, since the prime attribute of a Pelagian is that he is someone who denies that the descendants of Adam and Eve inherit original sin, while Arminius affirmed it.

God's Foreknowledge

Arminius believes that God knows the future, not by looking into the future but because He is God. He states that God's

understanding is perfect. This, according to him, is also true about God's understanding of the future. James Arminius uses Acts 15:18 and the platonic idea that God is outside of time, as a means of claiming God's absolute foreknowledge.

As stated before, Jacobus Arminius does not agree with the Calvinists that God foreordains whatsoever comes to pass. But because God is, according to James Arminius, outside of time, he believes that God's salvific call to the individual is predestined and will not be different than what God saw, outside of time. He believes that if this were not so, this salvific decree, would be altered.

As close as these statements might seem to come to the Calvinist doctrine of God's eternal decree, James Arminius, like Thomas Aquinas, hastens to aid the reader in not misunderstanding what he wants to express; he wants to make crystal clear that he does not hold to a deterministic view of what God decreed. Arminius acknowledges that God, in His foreknowledge allows for humanity to fall into sin, but, in Arminius's view, God does not cause it. To Arminius, God then is sovereign over people and over time, but He is certainly not the author of sin, since the word sovereignty does not have the same meaning as the word determinism.

CONCLUSION

In the introduction of this essay, I described the heroic character of Jacobus Arminius, in light of the time period in which he lived. I then expressed my wish of creating an academic, objective essay, in which I represent some theological views of James Arminius. The subjects which I have studied are: God's hidden will, original sin and God's foreknowledge.

On the subject of God's hidden will, I concluded that Jacobus Arminius does not believe, like Martin Luther and John Calvin, that God has a hidden will in addition to his revealed will. This means that, contrary to John Calvin, Arminius does not believe that God has predestined every event that was going to happen, including sin. Neither does Arminius believe that God predestined some to Heaven or Hell, as indicated by John Calvin.

Concerning the doctrine of original sin, my conclusion was that Jacobus Arminius was in agreement with Augustine and the Calvinist theologians. He believed that all descendants of Adam and Eve were in the loins of Adam and that they in that sense took part in committing the original sin of eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Furthermore, I concluded that Jacobus Arminius was most certainly not a Pelagian, since the Pelagians deny that the descendants of Adam were born with original sin, that they sinned in Adam or inherited the sin of Adam.

James Arminius affirmed the absolute foreknowledge of God. This means that he believed that God knew perfectly what happened in the past, what happens in the present and what will happen in the future. Arminius attributed this knowledge to the nature of God. He did not attribute this to God looking somehow in the future and "learning" what the choices of men would be.

To defend this position in his *Works*, he used Acts 15:18 as a proof text for this doctrine. Jacobus Arminius also used the platonic argument that God does not live in time, like we do, but that He lives outside of time.

This made Arminius believe that God's salvific decree will not be altered, because what will happen in time, concerning salvific events, has already been foreknown. If it would change, contrary to the knowledge of God, God's knowledge would be imperfect.

James Arminius, however, does not agree with the Calvinists when it comes to God's decisions before the foundation of the world, namely that God decreed every single thing that would come to pass (as I had already discussed in the first section). Although God, in His foreknowledge, knew about the fall and every single sin that every person on this earth would commit, He nevertheless allowed it. Jacobus Arminius agrees with Thomas Aquinas in that from this allowing, it does *not* follow that the origin of sin should be attributed to God. Sin must be attributed to the choice of the sinner and it should not be attributed to God supposedly decreeing that sin to happen.

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