

Is Arminianism A Different Gospel?

by

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The seriousness and extent of Arminian thinking can be a point of contention at times. It is not unheard of that in Reformed circles critical comments about Arminianism are met with blank stares, a degree of indifference, or even a degree of hostility. The hostility may arise as it is felt that the criticism is unjust, extreme, inaccurate, or, even if it is correct, unnecessary as despite the differences those holding to Arminian theology are still Christians.

In recent reading I came across some remarks concerning Arminianism which showed both the seriousness and extent of Arminian thinking and how it is incompatible with the Reformed faith which, after all, is the Scriptural faith. In essence, in Arminianism we have a different gospel (see 2 Cor. 11:4; Gal. 1:6-8), a gospel which denies salvation is the complete gift of the sovereign God who graciously justifies sinners through faith alone.

Just to refresh your memory, Arminian thinking, so soundly renounced in the Canons of Dort, denies God's sovereign eternal election unto salvation. While affirming God's grace, Arminianism claims that God merely offers salvation and it is up to man who decides to accept or reject the gospel. One author summed up Arminian thinking as follows, ". . . God was made dependent on free-will-equipped-men for whom He politely had to wait, looking to see whether the man would be so kind as to believe."^[1]

Though the Reformers of the early 16th Century did not have to contend with Arminianism as such, since Arminianism arose late in the 16th century and early in the 17th century, they did have to contend with its theological cousin, Semi-Pelagianism. Semi-Pelagianism teaches that man is spiritually sick. As such he does need the help of God's grace in order to get better. However, it is up to man to take the spiritual medicine which God offers. God must have man's co-operation. In theological terms this was called "synergism". You can see the similarity to the Arminian position. The Reformers responded to this by stressing the sovereign grace of God, as heard in the cry "*Sola gratia*". God calls those dead in sin to new life (see Eph. 2:1-10). The Reformers stressed the helplessness of man in sin and the sovereignty of God in grace. This was a point of unity between the Reformers despite differences about other issues.^[2] In the Book "*The Bondage of the Will*" this was the point that

Luther argued with Erasmus.

We should note then that Arminianism is a reincarnation of Semi-Pelagianism with its emphasis on man's freedom. This explains why the churches acted so resolutely with respect to Arminianism. They saw it as a serious threat to the gospel and condemned it "as being in principle a return to Rome (because in effect it turned faith into a meritorious work) and a betrayal of the Reformation (because it denied the sovereignty of God in saving sinners, which was the deepest religious and theological principle of the Reformer's thought). Arminianism was, indeed, in Reformed eyes a renunciation of New Testament Christianity in favour of New Testament Judaism; for to rely on one's self for faith is no different in principle from relying on one's self for works, and the one is as unchristian and anti-Christian as the other."^[3]

The Reformed faith thus teaches the helplessness of man in salvation. Arminianism, in typical Semi-Pelagian style, teaches self-help religion. It is sovereign God versus sovereign man. It is indeed the different gospel which Paul warned about. It is appealing because it extols the dignity of man. It is a lie because man is dead in sin, totally helpless.

While the aforementioned points show the seriousness of the Arminian teaching and how it stands in contrast to true Reformation theology, to what extent is it found today? One author stated that "Arminianism . . . has had American evangelicalism in a strangle hold since the days of Charles Finney."^[4] Charles Finney (1792-1875) was a revivalist preacher who was very influential with his revival techniques. Another author states that 86 percent of American evangelicals hold to the Arminian position as comes out in their agreement with the phrase, "God helps those who help themselves."^[5] This comes out very clearly in the writings of the well known Billy Graham who has even written a religious self-help manual titled "*How To be Born Again*" in which the various steps to salvation are clearly spelled out.^[6]

The apostle Paul fought with great vigour against the "different gospel". In that gospel they will speak of Christ and use words like grace, election, faith, regeneration, etc. Yet, it is not the gospel of sovereign grace received through faith but of grace received on the ground of one's faith. The earlier mentioned reference linking Rome and Arminianism is worth drawing to your attention again. Actually, there is a common denominator in all false religion in that it ascribes ability and free will to man by which he can effect his own salvation

if he so wishes. It displays the arrogance of sinful man, even more so when he dresses lies with words of the gospel. That makes the enemy all the more difficult to detect as he works in his subtle way. We can all the more understand Paul's warning about Satan disguising himself as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14).

Personally I don't enjoy having to harp on the point of the Arminian danger. I fear, however, that it is necessary because it is not realized how serious and extensive a threat it is. The true church glories in the gospel of sovereign grace where God rescues dead sinners and grants them the righteousness of Christ through faith. Let me conclude quoting in full Paul's words in Gal. 1:6-9:

"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel — not that there is another gospel, but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, If any one is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed."

FOOTNOTES:

- [1] K. Schilder, *Extra-Scriptural Binding- A New Danger* (In American Secession Theologians on Covenant and Baptism & Extra-Scriptural Binding). (Neerlandia: Inheritance Publications, 1996. p. 131.)
- [2] J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston, "*Historical and Theological Introduction*," in Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (Cambridge: James Clarke/Westwood, N. J.: Revell, 1957, pp. 57-58.)
- [3] *Ibid.* p. 59.
- [4] R.C. Sproul, *Grace Unknown*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997) p. 180.
- [5] M. Horton, *In the Face of God*, (Word Publishing, 1996) Appendix CURE (Christians United for Reformation).
- [6] To give just two examples, Graham writes "The context of John 3 teaches that the new birth is something that God does for man when man is willing to yield to God", and "He gives the Holy Spirit to draw you to the cross, but even after all this, it is your decision whether to accept God's free pardon or to continue in your lost condition." (B. Graham, *How To Be Born Again*, Originally published 1977. Quoted from the 1989 edition by Word Publishers, pages 150, 162.)