

Who was Arminius?

by

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James Arminius (Jacob Harmenszoon) is undoubtedly the most famous theologian ever produced by the Dutch Reformed Church. His fame is a great irony since the Dutch Reformed Church historically was a bastion of strict Calvinism and Arminius has given his name to a movement very much in opposition to historic Calvinism. Who was this Arminius? What did he teach? Are the differences between Calvinism and Arminianism important today?

Who Was Arminius? Arminius was born in 1559 in Oudewater — a small city in the province of Holland. Holland was one of seventeen prosperous provinces then known as the Netherlands or the Low Countries, which today are divided into the Netherlands, Belgium and part of northern France. In 1559 His Most Catholic Majesty Philip II was the king of Spain and Sovereign of the Netherlands.

Despite Philip's ardent Roman Catholicism and persecuting zeal, Reformation movements had been strong in the Low Countries for decades. In the late 1540s Calvinism emerged as an attractive, popular religion in the Netherlands, especially in the southern provinces. In 1559 Guido de Brès wrote the first edition of the Belgic Confession, which clearly summarized the Calvinistic faith and set it off from Roman Catholicism and Anabaptism. The Belgic Confession became one of the basic doctrinal standards of Dutch Calvinism.

The decade of the 1560s saw dramatic developments in the Netherlands. The Belgic Confession was published. A storm of iconoclasm broke out, destroying many images in Roman Catholic churches throughout the provinces. Guido de Brès was martyred for the faith. Philip II increasingly alienated the nobility and the people with his fiscal and religious policies. Revolts broke out against royal authority.

By the early 1570s civil war had begun in earnest against Spain. History knows this revolt as the Eighty Years War, which was not settled until 1648. Growing up in the midst of civil war in state and church, Arminius knew the bitterness of war. In 1575 his mother and other members of his family died at the hands of Spanish troops in a massacre at Oudewater.

In October of 1575 Arminius entered the newly founded University of Leiden. He was the 12th student to enroll in the school that honored the heroic resistance of Leiden to Spanish siege in 1574. He was a talented student and like many students of his day continued his education at other schools. From 1581 to 1586 he studied in Geneva and Basle.

While in Geneva Arminius seemed to have some trouble with Theodore Beza, Calvin's staunch successor. The evidence suggests not theological, but philosophical, differences. Indeed there is very little evidence as to exactly what Arminius' theology was in his student years. What is clear is that when Arminius was ordered to return to the Netherlands in 1586 to take up pastoral responsibilities in Amsterdam, he was given a very good letter of recommendation from Beza to the Dutch Reformed Church.

Before returning to Amsterdam, Arminius took a trip into Italy to see the sights. This trip was later used by some Calvinists to accuse Arminius of having Roman Catholic sympathies. But such charges were clearly untrue and unfair.

Once back in Amsterdam he became one of several pastors there and in 1590 he married Lijsbet Reael, a daughter of one of Holland's most influential men. Arminius became allied to a regent family and his convictions on the relation of church and state were the same as that of most regents. Indeed, he was appointed in 1591 to a commission to draw up a church order in which the church was given a position clearly subordinate to and dependent on the state. This position (usually called Erastianism) was not held by most clergy in the Dutch Reformed Church. Most followed Calvin's conviction that the church must have a measure of independence from the state, especially in matters of church discipline.

The issue of discipline was a controversial one in the Netherlands. The Belgic Confession had stated that discipline was one of the marks of the true church and Calvinists strongly believed that the church ought to have the right especially to regulate the teaching of its ministers. But in the Netherlands the government had at times protected ministers who were targets of church discipline. Arminius' Erastianism distinguished him from most of his ministerial colleagues.

Most of the years of Arminius' pastorate (1587-1603) in Amsterdam were peaceful. But there were some controversies. Arminius preached through the

book of Romans and some of his sermons did evoke opposition. In 1591 he preached on Romans 7:14 and following. The standard Calvinist interpretation argued that Paul in these verses is speaking as a regenerate Christian. Romans 7 then presents the Christian's continuing struggle resisting sin in his life. By contrast, Arminius taught that Paul is remembering his previous, unregenerate state. For Arminius the struggle against sin in Romans 7 is a struggle before conversion. The Calvinists objected sharply to this interpretation, asking how the unregenerate can delight in the law in the inner man (Rom. 7:22). In 1593 Arminius preached on Romans 9 and his sermons on predestination seemed inadequate to many Dutch Calvinists.

Still these controversies passed. When two vacancies in the theological faculty at the University of Leiden had to be filled in 1603, people of influence in the government thought Arminius ought to be appointed, but strict Calvinists objected, unsettled by too many questions about Arminius' orthodoxy. The disagreement was resolved when both sides agreed to allow the one remaining member of the faculty, Franciscus Gomarus, to interview and evaluate Arminius for this position. Gomarus was a strict Calvinist of undoubted orthodoxy. After the interview Gomarus declared himself satisfied with Arminius and that latter was installed as a professor at Leiden.

The reason Gomarus was satisfied with Arminius is unclear. It is as unclear as the reason that Beza recommended him or that his orthodox colleagues in Amsterdam got along with him as well as they did. Perhaps Gomarus failed to ask the right questions or Arminius was not candid with his answers. Another possibility is that Arminius' theology changed significantly after the interview, but it is difficult to speculate.

Within a few years, however, suspicions began to arise about Arminius. People criticized the books he assigned students. Others worried about his private sessions with students. Gomarus became convinced that Arminius was not orthodox on the doctrine of predestination. These suspicions led Arminius' classes to try to examine Arminius' doctrine, but the trustees of the university would not permit that. Some said the issues surrounding Arminius' teaching could only be resolved at a national synod. But the government was unwilling to allow a national synod to meet.

Tensions within the church finally led to a government investigation in 1608. In the course of that investigation, Arminius wrote his "Declaration of

Sentiments,” probably the best summary of his beliefs. Arminius had been insisting that he was only trying to protect the church from the extremes of Calvinism, especially supralapsarianism. Gomarus had replied that the issue was not peripheral matters such as supralapsarianism, but rather the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith. With no satisfactory resolution to the matter, Arminius became ill and died in 1609, a minister in good standing in the Dutch Reformed Church.

What did Arminius teach? Arminius is best known theologically for his rejection of the Calvinist doctrine of predestination. In this definition Arminius states his belief that faith is the cause of election: “It is an eternal and gracious decree of God in Christ, by which He determines to justify and adopt believers, and to endow them with eternal life, but to condemn unbelievers, and impenitent persons.” But such a position reverses the biblical pattern (e.g., Romans 8:30 and Acts 13:48) where election is clearly the cause of belief. For orthodox Calvinists faith is a gift of God. If election — God's purpose to give faith according to His sovereign will — does not precede faith, then faith is not truly a gift.

Arminius expanded his basic definition of predestination in four theses.

First, God decreed absolutely that Christ is the Savior who will “destroy sin”, “obtain salvation”, and “communicate it by his own virtue.”

Second, God decreed absolutely to save “those who repent and believe, and, in Christ, and for His sake and through Him to effect salvation of such penitents and believers as persevered to the end.”

Third, God decreed “to administer in a sufficient and efficacious manner the means which were necessary for repentance and faith” according to divine wisdom and justice.

Fourth, God decreed “to save and damn particular persons” based on the foreknowledge of God, by which He knew from all eternity those individuals who would, through his preventing [i.e., *prevenient*] grace, believe, and through his subsequent grace would persevere.”

In his exposition of predestination Arminius sought to have a theology of grace and to avoid all Pelagianism. He stated that “that teacher obtains my highest approbation who ascribes as much as possible to divine grace,

provided he so pleads the cause of grace, as not to inflict an injury on the justice of God, and not to take away the free will of that which is evil.” Arminius wanted a theology of grace that made God seem fair in all his dealings with and also wanted to leave room for people to reject grace. Like many others Arminius thought this kind of theology would make it easier to preach the Gospel and emphasize human responsibility. But Arminius ultimately failed to have a true theology of grace. For Arminius grace is essential and grace is necessary, but God's grace is not absolutely efficacious. Man's response to grace remains the final, decisive factor in salvation. Jesus is no longer the actual Savior of His people. He becomes the one who makes salvation possible. Man's contribution, however sincerely Arminius tried to limit it, became central for salvation.

Arminius also gave faith a different place in his system from the role that faith had occupied in earlier Reformed theology. Arminius taught that faith itself was imputed to the sinner for righteousness, whereas the earlier teaching had stressed that it was the object of faith, namely Christ and His righteousness, that was imputed to the sinner. This shift is important because again it shifts the primary focus of salvation from God's work in Christ to man's faith. Arminius can even speak of faith being the one work required of man in the New Covenant. This kind of teaching led to Gomarus' charge that Arminius was undermining the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith. Arminius' teaching turns faith from an instrument that rests on the work of Christ to a work of man, and tends to change faith from that which receives the righteousness of Christ to that which is righteousness itself.

After the death of Arminius controversy continued in the Netherlands about the teachings of Arminianism. Forty-two ministers in 1610 signed a petition or Remonstrance to the government asking for protection for their Arminian views. The heart of this Remonstrance summarized their theology in five points: conditional election, universal atonement, total depravity, sufficient but resistible grace and uncertainty about the perseverance of the saints. The Calvinists answered with a Contra-Remonstrance in 1611. It is surely ironic that through the centuries there has been so much talk of the “five points of Calvinism” when in fact Calvinists did not originate a discussion of five points. Indeed Calvinism has never been summarized in five points. Calvinism has only offered five responses to the five errors of Arminianism.

Controversy raged in the Netherlands over Arminianism, even threatening civil war. Finally in 1618, after a change of leadership in the government, a national synod was held at Dordrecht — the Synod of Dort — to judge the Arminian theology. By the time the Synod of Dort met, the issues raised by the Arminians were being widely discussed in the Reformed community throughout Europe. Reformed Christians from Great Britain, France, Switzerland and Germany expressed great concern for the dangers posed by the Arminian theology.

William Ames, one of the great English Puritans, wrote that Arminianism “is not properly a heresy but a dangerous error in the faith tending to heresy...a Pelagian heresy, because it denies the effectual operation of internal grace to be necessary for the effecting of conversion and faith.” In this evaluation Ames rightly saw the conflict between Calvinists and Arminians as related to the conflict between Augustine — the champion of grace — and Pelagius — who insisted that man's will was so free that it was possible for him to be saved solely through his own natural abilities.

The Synod of Dort had delegates not only from the Netherlands but also from throughout Europe, the only truly international Reformed synod. The Synod rejected the teaching of the Arminians and in clear and helpful terms presented the orthodox Calvinist position in the Canons of Dort. Unanimously approved by the Synod, they were hailed throughout the Reformed churches of Europe as an excellent defense of the faith.

The Canons of Dort responded to the five errors of Arminianism and expressed the Calvinist alternative to those errors:

1. God freely and sovereignly determined to save some lost sinners through the righteousness of Christ and to give to His elect the gift of faith;
2. God sent His Son to die as the substitute for His elect and Christ's death will certainly result in the salvation of His own;
3. Man is so utterly lost in sin that without the regenerating grace of God, man cannot desire salvation, repent, believe or do anything truly pleasing to God;
4. God's grace saves the elect sinner irresistibly since only irresistible grace can overcome man's rebellion;

5. God in mercy preserves the gift of faith in His elect to ensure that the good work He began in them will certainly come to completion in their salvation.

Do the differences between Arminians and Calvinists matter today? Many argue that the differences between Calvinists and Arminians no longer matter. After all, some argue, Arminius lived 400 years ago. Are his views still important and influential? The answer to that question must be a resounding yes. Arminianism is very influential in evangelical and Pentecostal circles today. Indeed Arminianism today usually goes much further in emphasizing free will than Arminius did or would ever have approved of doing.

Some downplay the differences between Arminians and Calvinists out of an activism that is rather indifferent to theology. Such activists often argue that, with so much to do for Christ in the world and with so much opposition to Christianity in general, theological differences must be minimized.

It is certainly true that the theological differences between Calvinists and Arminians should not be overemphasized. Most Arminians have been and are evangelical Christians. But the differences between Calvinists and Arminians are important precisely for the work that all want to do for Christ. What is the work that needs to be done and how will it be done? The answers to those questions depend very much on whether man has a free will or not. Does one seek to entertain and move the emotions and will of men whose salvation is ultimately in their own hands? Or does one present the claims of God as clearly as possible while recognizing that ultimately fruit comes only from the Holy Spirit? Those kinds of concerns will affect the ways in which Christians worship and witness and serve and live.

Some argue that the differences between Calvinism and Arminianism are unimportant because the theological terms of the controversy were wrong or are now outmoded. They argue that just as progress has been made in so many fields, so theological progress has transcended the old controversies. This claim may be an attractive one until it is examined closely. On close examination such a claim proves to be false. Either salvation is entirely the work of God or it is partially the work of man. There is no way to “transcend” this reality. On close examination those efforts to transcend Calvinism are at best other forms of Arminianism.

Some try to split the difference between Arminianism and Calvinism. They

say something like, “I want to be 75% Calvinist and 25% Arminian.” If they mean that literally, then they are 100% Arminian since giving any determinative place to human will is Arminian. Usually they mean that they want to stress the grace of God and human responsibility. If that is what they mean, then they can be 100% Calvinist for Calvinism does teach both that God's grace is entirely the cause of salvation and that man is responsible before God to hear and heed the call to repentance and faith.

Today some Calvinists are hesitant to stress their distinctives because they feel that they are such a small minority within Christendom. They must remember that in the providence of God, Calvinism has gone through varying periods. In some it has flourished and in some it has declined. God does not call His people to be successful; He calls them to be faithful.

Calvinists should still confidently teach the sovereign grace of God as it was summarized in the Canons of Dort. They should do so because, according to this author and the witness of Reformed Christians in church history, Calvinism is both biblical and helpful. It is helpful because in a world that is often foolishly optimistic and man-centered, Calvinism teaches the seriousness of sin and the glories of the redemptive work of Christ for sinners. In the face of so much religious shallowness, the profundity of Calvinism is needed. Shallow religion produces shallow Christian living. The depths of God's grace should lead Christians to live gratefully, humbly, joyfully and carefully before God. Today the church of Jesus Christ does not need less Calvinism. Rather it needs to recover a forceful and faithful commitment to the God-centered biblical message.

Author

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