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Jacob Arminius: The Humble Reformer and his Theology

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Jacob Arminius is well known for his dissension with the Calvinist doctrine of predestination and for his resultant rejoinder which incited the Arminian view of predestination to oppose the Calvinist doctrine. However, while his predestination theology is well studied and commonly known, Arminius is one of the least studied Protestant theologians from the Reformation period. As a scarcely studied Reformer, Arminius offers us an example of what humility looks like from the debate stand. At a time in the Reformation when belligerence and condescension were tools used by many Reformers to achieve their theological agendas, Arminius refrained from such antics and was more interested in getting to the truth of theological controversies. Thus, Arminius is worth studying not only for his theology, but more so for the theological humility and grace with which he held tightly to while occupying the debate stand.

To understand Arminius' embodiment of such humility even as the target of widespread slander and belligerence, we must first take a look at his roots and the background of the Arminian versus Calvin debates.

Arminius, known to most as the father of anti-Calvinist predestination doctrine, actually began his career as a well-studied Calvinist. He attained a university education at Leiden and then "his theological studies at Geneva and Basel confirmed him in a mature acceptance of Genevan Calvinism."¹ While studying in Geneva, Arminius was under the tutelage of Theodore Beza, John Calvin's successor, who wrote a letter of commendation on Arminius' behalf.² Arminius continued on to become the pastor of a Reformed congregation in Amsterdam and grew in fame and widespread respect from the laity as well as the academic theological community.

¹ Carl Bangs, "Arminius and the Reformation," In *Church History* 30.2 (1961), 155.

² *Ibid.*, 161.

Due to the respect he had gained as a pastor and a theologian, Arminius was asked to refute a Dutch humanist, Dirck Coornheert (also Koornhert), who rejected Calvinist doctrine, especially Calvin's doctrine of predestination. Arminius, set on refuting Coornheert, began to compare Coornheert's writing with Scripture and was suddenly entrenched in "a struggle of conscience," after which "he reached the conclusion that Koornhert was right."³ This is the point where Arminius began to branch off from the Calvinist theology he was previously disposed to. Perhaps the root of Arminius' humility lay in the reality that he shared the same background as those he debated against, creating greater sympathy and desire for them to understand his newfound realization. Arminius' humility is also already evident in his acceptance of a stance which he was set to refute. A servant of the Word, he is humbled by Scripture, able to toss aside his previously held theology to replace it with what he found to be more biblically sound. This is the mark of a humble servant of the Word.

After changing his position on predestination and once he had begun dissemination of what he now held to be the truth evidenced in Scripture, Arminius clashed with Francis Gomarus, a strict Calvinist who held to Calvinism's doctrine of predestination. Gomarus was a colleague of Arminius but was ruthless as they debated.⁴ After this clash, as Gonzalez eloquently writes, "It was thus that Jacobus Arminius, who considered himself a true follower of Calvin, gave his name to Arminianism, the doctrine that many since then have considered the very antithesis of Calvinism."⁵ The basis of the debate between Arminius and Gomarus hinged on whether the divine decree of predestination was based on the sovereign will of God (as argued by

³ Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity* Vol.2 (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 229.

⁴ Stephen W. Gunter, *Arminius and His Declaration of Sentiments: An Annotated Translation with Introduction and Theological Commentary*, (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012), 91.

⁵ Gonzalez, *Story of Christianity*, 230.

Gomarus) or rather on God's divine foreknowledge, "by which God knew what each person's response would be to the offer of salvation in Jesus Christ."⁶ Arminius denied the possibility that God's sovereign will determined who is to be saved or damned and rather affirmed that God had foreknowledge of who would freely respond to the work of salvation already accomplished in Jesus Christ.

The alleged year of Arminius' theological transition was 1590⁷ and twenty years later is when we have the Articles of Remonstrance, the crux of Arminius' dissension of the Calvinist doctrine concerning predestination. Written a year after Arminius' death, the Articles of Remonstrance sum up the five main points of Arminius and his followers' dissension to Calvinist predestination. In 1618, as a response and out of a desire to end the ongoing debate between the then-referred-to Remonstrants and Gomarists, a great ecclesiastical assembly was convened, known as the Synod of Dort. The Synod of Dort similarly had five articles which later led to the five points of Calvinism, referred to now by the acronym "TULIP".

The five juxtaposed points of both the Synod of Dort and the Articles of Remonstrance are as follows:

1. The Remonstrants (or Arminianists) affirm God's conditional election. They state, "God has immutably decreed...to save those men who, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, believe in Jesus Christ, and by the same grace persevere in the obedience of faith to the end."⁸ The Synod of Dort rather affirms that "election is absolute and unconditional"⁹, and the elect are determined by God before the creation of the world.

⁶ Ibid., 230.

⁷ Bangs, "Arminius" In *Church History*, 156.

⁸ Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), 517.

⁹ Ibid., 520.

2. The Remonstrants affirm universal atonement, believing that “Christ, the Saviour of the world, died for all men and for every man.”¹⁰ In dissension, the Synod of Dort rather espoused limited atonement, stating that “the saving efficacy of the atoning death of Christ extends to all the elect [and to them only].”¹¹
3. The Remonstrants affirm the need for saving faith but also acknowledge that man is “unable to attain to saving faith, unless he be regenerated and renewed by God in Christ through the Holy Spirit.”¹² The Synod of Dort holds to Augustine’s doctrine of original sin and on a similar note state that men, “without the regenerating grace of the Holy Spirit, they are neither able nor willing to return to God.”¹³ While both positions acknowledge the fallen nature of mankind (though to different degrees) and the need for the Spirit’s regeneration, the Remonstrants also acknowledge the dual reality of our need to accept God’s offer of free grace while the Synod of Dort would vehemently disagree with the idea that man has any part to play in his own salvation.
4. As follows from point three, the Remonstrants believe in resistible grace while the Synod of Dort affirms God’s irresistible grace. The fourth article of Remonstrance states, “This grace is not irresistible, for many resist the Holy Ghost (Acts vii).”¹⁴ On the contrary, the fourth head of the Canons of Dort states, “Faith is therefore the gift of God, not on account of its being offered by God to man, to be accepted or rejected at his pleasure...by the exercise of his own free will.”¹⁵

¹⁰ Ibid., 518.

¹¹ Ibid., 520.

¹² Ibid., 518.

¹³ Ibid., 522.

¹⁴ Ibid., 518.

¹⁵ Ibid., 522-3.

5. Finally, the Remonstrants advocate for the uncertainty of the perseverance of saints, while the Canons of Dort with certainty believe that those who are God's elect can be assured that they will receive salvation because they have been chosen by God. The Remonstrants would affirm that assurance of salvation can be had if one continues on in obedience of faith, but would also affirm that one can "lose their salvation" if they turn to disobedience or choose to no longer believe. The idea of discontinued belief would be considered preposterous by the Synod of Dort due to God's irresistible grace.

Following this summary of the popularly known debate between Calvinists and Arminians, as incited by the Articles of Remonstrance and the Synod of Dort, it must be noted that a common *post hoc* fallacy is made which attributes the Arminian movement and the Articles of Remonstrance to Arminius himself.¹⁶ Arminius, who died in 1609, before the Articles of Remonstrance were written, never had the intention of inciting another belligerent group of dissenters who vehemently disagree with the commonly held views. This "accounts for a great deal of the perplexity expressed by those who read Arminius but who do not find there what is expected of an Arminian."¹⁷ Arminius' tone in his own writings and sentiments are much more grace-filled than the Remonstrance and Arminian movements. Arminius never meant to create a new branch of theology, but rather he hoped to bring Calvinist views back to what he truly believed John Calvin intended them to be.

The Articles of Remonstrance embody the crux of Arminius' position against Gomarus' view of predestination, but the resultant fragmentation and belligerent refutation which came to

¹⁶ Bangs, "Arminius", In *Church History*, 156.

¹⁷ Ibid.

be attributed to the Arminians is uncharacteristic of the humility and intentions which Arminius conducted himself with. To understand the depth of Arminius' humility and the urgency by which he opposed Gomarus' version of predestination, we must now turn to Arminius' personal sentiments. Arminius is contemporarily known as a declared heretic by the Synod of Dort and is known as a hero to others, but aside from the Articles of Remonstrance and the resulting Arminian view which was attributed to his name *post hoc*, little of Arminius' own thoughts and reactions are known or studied. We will now explore a first-hand account of Arminius' sentiments on how the debates over predestination were conducted and his response to wide spread criticism.

In *A Declaration of Sentiments*, written by Arminius to the "Supreme Governors, the Noble Lords of the states of Holland," Arminius relays his personal thoughts on the unjust accusations and slander towards him and defends his motives and intentions against men who would rather see Arminius become a man of ill-repute than actually seek to find the truth.¹⁸ Arminius begins his sentiments by noting the comments of his colleague, Gomarus, against his theological position and Arminius then states his response to such strong allegations. Arminius' sentiments are as follows:

Franciscus Gomarus declared that the theological differences between us were of such import that he would not dare to appear before God holding such opinions. Furthermore, he asserted that unless proper steps were taken to prohibit the consequences of these theological differences in our native land, armed chaos would ensue with provinces, churches, cities, and even private citizens taking up

¹⁸ Gunter, *Declaration of Sentiments*, 90.

arms against one another. To these sweeping allegations I made no reply, except that I was not conscious of holding any such atrocious religious sentiments as those described by him.¹⁹

Gomarus and others who share his theological inclinations dismiss Arminius' theological position on the topic of predestination without first being willing to debate him in person. Arminius' views were vehemently attacked from a distance and yet his response is one filled with humility. He doesn't lash back at Gomarus but legitimately wants to seek truth and in his mind, bring Calvinism back to what he believes Calvin originally intended of it.

In the same response to Gomarus' loaded accusation, Arminius writes, "I also expressed the hope that I would never be the cause of division in God's church or of division in our native land."²⁰ This sentiment summarizes the majority of Arminius' written sentiments and expressed desire for a united church, but also a church that abides in God's truth found in Scripture. Sentiments such as these are what leave many modern Calvinists perplexed because the Arminius who expresses himself in his sentiments differs by and large from the Arminius whose name is attached *post hoc* to a movement which has caused theological and ecclesiastical division for 400 years.

Arminius continues on for pages in his sentiments explaining the ways in which slanderous accusations against him bear no merit. Up to the point when Arminius released his own sentiments, he received outrageous allegations of intentionally refusing to give his personal thoughts in order to hide behind his heretical theology. However, Arminius points out the inconsistency of their claims: "I cannot fathom how they complain I refuse to make a public

¹⁹ Ibid., 91.

²⁰ Ibid., 91.

declaration of my sentiments...accusing me of introducing novel, impure and false doctrines into the Church...If I do not openly profess my sentiments, how can they know what harmful opinions I might introduce?”²¹ All of the accusations against Arminius up until his sentiments were released were based on hearsay and not on statements made by Arminius himself.

Arminius was also widely accused of Pelagianism, the heresy condemned by the church during Augustine’s time, which more or less espoused that believers could attain their own salvation. Based on certain tenants of Arminius’ position on predestination, he was accused of propagating the already-condemned heresy of Pelagianism. Arminius recognizes the danger of Pelagianism and even writes of the dangers himself, saying, “For the merit of salvation is then attributed to free will, human strength and power—in a word, Pelagianism. For these reasons the purveyors of this predestination [Calvanist] labor diligently to preserve the purity of this doctrine to oppose any variation of teaching they consider an innovation.”²²

Arminius has no intention of propagating his own doctrine at the expense of espousing heresy or church division. At the close of his sentiments concerning the groundless claims against his name, Arminius explicitly states his desire for truth and his willingness to recant if his position is found to be unsupported by Scripture. In a bold statement which is saturated in both humility and truth, Arminius writes:

Can any of the sentiments that I have openly declared be demonstrated to be in contradiction either to the Word of God or the Confession of the Churches of the Netherlands? If the latter be the case, then formal charges should be brought against me...If the former can be demonstrated, that any of my opinions are contrary to the

²¹ Ibid., 101.

²² Ibid., 107.

Word of God, then my blame is even greater. I should be required to recant or to resign my position, especially if the main points of the doctrine are detrimental to the honor of God and the salvation of humankind.²³

Arminius sought to debate until truth and correct doctrine could be determined and he was convinced that his theological position on the matter of predestination was biblically sound. He was so convinced that he was willing to stake his reputation and career on it. Should this be considered bold arrogance or humble service to the Church?

If Arminius never sought to divide the Church or cause needless argument, then what are the Calvinist claims that he found so important to call into question? Arminius gives an explicit and exact account of the points of Calvinist doctrine which he disagrees with based on the evidence found in Scripture.

Arminius' reason for deviating from accepted Calvinist predestination is based on his belief that Calvinist predestination as espoused by Gomarus is injurious to the glory of God and dishonorable to the work of Jesus Christ. According to Arminius, this doctrine inevitably leads to the conclusion that God is the author of sin because "God incites the creature to sin through an irresistible action according to his own divine action and primary intention—all this without the creature being inclined to disobedience through any prior sin or warranted defect."²⁴ This is a bold claim but Arminius supports it by logically deducing how the removal of free grace for everyone (grace being only for the elect) is detrimental to the image of God because without the

²³ Ibid., 101.

²⁴ Ibid., 120.

option of grace someone can't be held accountable for following the only option they were given, which is sin and damnation for the non-elect.

Similarly, Arminius states that this form of predestination is dishonorable to Jesus Christ because "this predestination affirms that humanity was predestined to be saved prior to Christ's being predestined to save them, and thus it assumes that Christ is not the foundation for election."²⁵ Calvinist thought at the Synod of Dort presupposed that Arminius gave too much credit to man's part in salvation and thus robbed God of his glory and ultimate sovereignty. On the contrary, Arminius sought in his theology to make sure God remained glorified and Christ received proper honor and devotion. In Arminius' opinion, a God who freely gives grace to a few but withholds it from the rest, leaving them with no option except sin is not the God found in Scripture.

The accusations against Arminius such as Pelagianism and diminishment of God's sovereignty are each dealt with in Arminius' sentiments, which unfortunately are not the foundational documents used by the Arminian movement. Arminius receives more slander than a man of such humble attitude and God-fearing theology should. The splintering caused by a movement which adopted his name has left it tainted in the history books. As evidenced in Arminius' personal sentiments, he deeply desired God's glorification and the unity of the church under a banner of unified, Scriptural truth. From his beginnings as a staunch Calvinist who was willing to admit fault in the theology he had dedicated his studies to, Arminius proved his loyalty to God's truth over his own ego. Such humility has since been lost in the heat of struggle between Arminians and Calvinists. Whether someone considers Arminius' theology to be sound

²⁵ Ibid., 121.

doctrine or heresy, they shouldn't deny the lesson in humility we must learn from great men such as this, who can teach us to take greater strides towards ecumenism and humility before God in our interpretation of his Word to us.

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