

In What Sense are We Arminians?

By Laurence K. Mullen*

October 10, 1560, marks the birth of James Arminius, a man to whom protestant theology owes high allegiance. Born in Oudewater, Holland, a small town about 18 miles north-east of Rotterdam, James Arminius seemed destined from birth to render the Christian Church an invaluable and permanent service. The purpose of this article is to investigate in a brief way just what that service was, and in what sense we today as a church qualify to call ourselves "Arminian" in theology and doctrine.

EARLY INFLUENCES

It will aid us greatly in our evaluation of Arminius to take account of the early influences that shaped his life and thought. Born four years before the death of John Calvin and one hundred and forty-three years before the birth of John Wesley, he serves as the main theological link between the Reformation period (mainly 1500-1550) and the period of John Wesley (1703-1791).

The early training of Arminius was under Theodore Beza, a friend and biographer of John Calvin and his successor at the head of the government in Geneva. Consequently, Arminius embraced the tenets of Calvinism with firm conviction and was prepared to defend the doctrine at all costs. Had Arminius continued in this persuasion of mind it is quite possible that protestant theology would have gone in a far different direction than we find it today. However, circumstances that we cannot help but feel were ordered of God came to bear upon Arminius, causing a theological revolution in his mind. At the age of 29, while pastoring a distinguished church in Amsterdam and still being loyal to Calvinistic theology, he was appointed to answer an anti-Calvinistic attack led by another Dutchman, Dirck Coornhert. It was Calvin's doctrine of "decrees" as to election and reprobation that was under attack, and Arminius set to work in earnest to be a defender of the faith. Ironic as it may seem, it was while studying the arguments of his opponent in order to refute them that Arminius fell prey to the reasonableness of Coornhert's position, and not least of all to the clear support of a multitude of scriptures that contradicted the Calvinistic doctrine.

Surrendering to his opponent, Arminius renounced Calvinism and embraced wholeheartedly the two underlying principles of the anti-Calvinistic theology—the free moral agency of man and the universality of the atonement.

Such an outcome was a shock to Calvinists. It set the stage for a bitter controversy between Calvinists and Arminians, between determinism and freedom, between a limited atonement and a universal atonement. The controversy is still very much alive and goes on today.

NEW DEVELOPMENTS

Not until after the death of Arminius in 1609, at the untimely age of 49, was there formulated a systematic statement of so-called Arminian theology. This task was accomplished by two of his followers, Johan Uytenbogaert and Simon Episcopius, during the year 1610. The published document quickly earned the

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title of the "Remonstrance" from which the party gained the name "Remonstrants."

The "Remonstrance" can be summarized briefly in a few sentences. (1) Against the doctrine that Christ died for the elect only, it asserted that He died for all, though none receives the benefits of his death except believers. (2) It was at one with Calvinism in denying the ability of man to do anything really good of himself—all is of divine grace. (3) It opposed the Calvinistic doctrine of final perseverance (the "eternal security" teaching of this generation) and asserted the possibility of falling from grace. (4) It opposed the doctrine of irresistible grace and taught that grace may be rejected. (5) Contrary to the unconditional predestination of Calvinism, it taught a predestination which is based on God's foreknowledge.

The resulting furor caused by the publishing of the Remonstrance was widespread in Holland. The excitement grew until in 1618 it was necessary for the government of Holland (pro-Calvinistic) to call a special session which was held in the town of Dort from November 13, 1618, to May 9, 1619. Besides representatives from the Netherlands, delegates were present from Germany, Switzerland and England. By a unanimous vote the Remonstrance was condemned and the followers of Arminius were banished from Holland. Furthermore, the group that met (later known as the Synod of Dort) published its own "Remonstrance." The document contained the following five main points: unconditional election, limited atonement, inability of the will, irresistible grace, final perseverance.

These five points form the heart of Calvinistic theology, all stemming as should be observed, from Calvin's insistence on the unlimited sovereignty of God's will.

WHY ARMINIANS?

The question as to why we as a church call ourselves Arminians can best be answered by the fact that we believe in the free will of man and in a universal atonement—understanding by the latter an atonement that is "provisionally" universal. Contrary to what some believe and teach, we are not Arminian because we believe in entire sanctification. It took Wesley, with the help of his two chief apologists, John Fletcher and Richard Watson, to lay the foundation of our holiness doctrine. Consequently we are not only Arminian in theology but also Wesleyan—Arminian because we believe in freedom and a universal atonement, and Wesleyan because we believe in entire sanctification.

But did not Arminius also teach entire sanctification? The answer is "yes." Arminius taught that there is a death to the "old man," a "quickening" and "enlivening" of the new man, and that the human will is delivered from the dominion of indwelling sin. However, it should be recognized that Arminius gave very little attention to the doctrine of sanctification in his writings, whereas he dwelt at length on the doctrines of sin, salvation, atonement, and the other subjects of theology.

It would be unfair to minimize the contribution of James Arminius on this account. In fact, his contribution to theology is permanent and far-reaching. But on the other hand, there is a danger of giving to him more credit than is his due in regard to the doctrine of entire sanctification. Neither to minimize or to over-do can be justified.

Importunity Pleads for Immediateness

We need more immediateness in prayer. So many prayers are offered in a spirit which really says: "I will not be grieved if the answer does not come soon; and, in fact, if it does not come at all, I will not be greatly disappointed."

There is so little real urgency in many prayers, that the petitions total up to little more than pious wishes.

The possibilities of importunity in prayer are mostly forgotten. Importunity pleads for immediateness.

Daniel understood by the word of God that the time was ripe for the deliverance of His people, and with that spirit he prayed; and, while he was praying, the answer came by the hand of the angel Gabriel, who was caused of God to fly swiftly (Dan. 9:20-21).

Immediateness in our prayer puts swiftness in the answer. It is said that in one of Mr. Spurgeon's prayer meetings, a little boy arose and asked prayer that his father might read the Bible. After prayer was offered, Mr. Spurgeon looked for the boy, but he could not find him. At the conclusion of the service, he spied the lad, and asked him why he had left the meeting. He replied:

"After you prayed for my father to read the Bible, I ran home to see him do it!"

"Did he do it?" asked Spurgeon.

"Sure! there he was reading it—and I came back to tell you."

It is a spur to faith to look at some of the immediates in the New Testament. In the Gospel according to St. Mark there are at least forty:

"Immediately the fever left her," (1:31).

"Immediately the leprosy departed," (1:42).

"Immediately he (the sick of the palsy) arose." (2:12).

"Straightway the fountain of her blood was dried up," (5:29).

"Immediately he received his sight" (10:52).

The fervent prayers of the persecuted Christians brought the sudden answer in the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. "And suddenly there shined around about him a light from heaven."

The answer to prayer for the endowment of the Holy Ghost came suddenly when their faith reached the proper level. Suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind," (Acts 2:2).

Paul and Silas in prison at Philippi received a sudden and immediate answer. "At midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God: * * * and suddenly there was a great earthquake," (Acts 16:25-26).

Although there are many prayers that will receive gradual answers, there are thousands of others that will be immediately answered, provided there is the faith for God's immediate working.—Herald of His Coming.

Our only concern is to win the victory regardless of cost.—S. M. Zwemer.

Can I dare to hope that by reading this article you will have a clearer concept of what the term "Arminian" means, and that your appreciation of Arminius the man will be extended.

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