

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 64

Jacob Arminius and the Changing Protestant Church

WARNING: This lesson contains several obtuse words and theological terms that may seem painful to read or consider. Enter at your own risk (and wait for the oral lesson, it should help!).

Before we left mainline Church history in order to delve into the English Bible in a bit more depth, we had studied the Reformation movement of the 1500's. In 1520, the Catholic Church excommunicated Martin Luther and his congregants. They continued to worship throughout much of Northern Germany, as they understood the church was called to worship. Meanwhile in Switzerland, there were others (Zwingli, Calvin, *et al.*) who sought to follow the same basic theology of Luther, at least in its denial of the primacy of Rome over the church. These churches, like what was to be called the Lutheran churches in Germany, were still the organized church in their areas of Europe.

These church divisions were not like what we might experience in modern times. It was never a matter of some folks just deciding to start their own church. Instead, the church was seen as the foundation for government and society. There was to be one church. Those that stayed loyal to Rome ultimately bore the name Roman Catholic. But, those that either separated themselves or were separated by an act of the pope were still considered the one apostolic church in their own geographical region. Any other groups were considered heretical splinters and were punished accordingly. We saw this in the lessons on the Anabaptists (see Lessons 56 & 57).

In England, the situation was much the same. When Henry VIII took the Church of England away from Roman control, he considered it a true reflection of the status of the apostolic Church of England rather than the "start" of a new church.

As we roll into the 1600's, we see several divisions that have occurred in the church, but none of those really saw themselves as "separate churches" in a denominational mentality of today. Instead, each believed that it was an authentic apostolic church built upon scripture and standing properly in the successive line of church history. This is true going back even to the Coptic break off over 1,000 years earlier. It is similarly true for the division of the Eastern Church from the Western Church 500 years earlier (1054). As noted above, it is no less true for Luther, Calvin, or the Church of England. In the 1600's, however, we see changes coming. The rise of denominationalism begins in earnest.

JACOBUS ARMINIUS

Jacobus Arminius was born on October 10, 1560, in Oudewater, Utrecht (modern Holland, not far from Amsterdam). His father died when Jacobus was an infant; his mother died when he was fifteen. Through friends and an adoptive father, Jacobus was able to attend good schools and ultimately study theology at the University of Leiden. Leiden was a Protestant school and Jacobus received training in Calvinism there, but not all the professors were totally sold on Calvin's teachings about election. During his studies at Leiden (1576 – 1582), at least one professor who considered Calvinism¹ a belief that made God a tyrant and executioner was influential on Jacobus.

After finishing studies at Leiden, Arminius went in 1582 to study under Theodore Beza in Geneva (Beza was the biographer of Calvin who took over teaching theology at Calvin's academy in Geneva after Calvin's death in 1564). Beza taught a strong doctrine of election (predestination) as a logical part of both the sovereignty of God and the desolate lostness of humanity.²

In 1588 at the age of 29, Jacobus was called to pastor the Reformed Church of Amsterdam. By all accounts, Jacobus was well liked and appreciated by his congregants. They highly regarded both his preaching and his pastoral ministry. As the first Dutch Pastor of the Dutch Reformed Church, Jacobus quickly became a leading citizen in Amsterdam. Jacobus married the daughter of a powerful Amsterdam family and all things seemed rosy! (This is often a time for caution!)

¹ “Calvinism at this point was more than just the teachings of John Calvin. After Calvin's death, his students and cohorts took his doctrines and pushed them further than Calvin himself was willing to go. As the doctrines developed, they maintained the label of “Calvinism” even though much of it comes from others than John Calvin.

² Beza was one of those we could rightly call “second-generation reformers.” As such, he took the teachings he inherited from Calvin and others and added his own flavoring. Part of the changes in this second generation included a loss of some of the mystery that Luther, Calvin and others saw in God and theology. Luther and Calvin both recognized that God had revealed himself to humanity in ways important to salvation and worship, but God had clearly never fully revealed himself. There were aspects of God and his work that were beyond human comprehension. There were times and circumstances where all man could do is accept and marvel at God and his work, without always understanding it. This was a reaction to what was termed “scholastic theology.” Scholasticism seemed to reduce everything into a logical system fully understandable by any who cared to read the “system.” The system was not simply an explanation of scripture, but an application of philosophy and logic to address issues and concepts not found in scripture (Consider in this vein Thomas Aquinas, lessons 46 & 47).

In his teachings, Jacobus (by now we should start calling him Arminius) began speaking out against one of the latest theological raves coming from the students of Beza and the Geneva Academy. To understand the message of Arminius, we need to first consider this teaching he opposed. It is called “*supralapsarianism*”³ (that is not a typo!). In modern English, we might call this “*what took place before the fall* (or “lapse”) *of humanity – ism.*” Beza’s scholastic/philosophical approach taught that God had a logical order of decrees or decisions involving humanity and salvation that occurred before the fall of man.

The logical order of God:

- 1st – a decree to predestine some to salvation and others to Hell
- 2nd – having made that determination, a decree to create
- 3rd – with the determination to create, a decree to create in a way where humans can commit sin and fall
- 4th – a decree to send Christ in a rescuing sacrifice for those chosen for salvation, and
- 5th – a decree to apply that saving work to the elect

This seems to many like a ridiculous waste of time and thought. To others, it seems a bold robbing of God’s mystery and purposes. To Beza and others who think similarly, it was merely the logical working out of God’s redemptive work that brings glory to God.

There were other Calvinists who opposed *supralapsarianism* and took a position termed, “*infralapsarianism*” (of course this is not a typo either!). Infralapsarians believed that God’s first logical decision was to create followed by a decree to create in a way that allowed free choice and the fall (these were numbers 2 and 3 of the supralapsarians). According to infralapsarians, it was after these decrees that God made the decision to elect some and condemn others. In contrast, the supralapsarians put this decree first. The distinction between the two Calvinist camps hinged on how God sought to glorify himself. Did God’s glory come from his predestining some for salvation (*supralapsarianism*) or by creating humanity (*infralapsarianism*)?

Arminius was fairly new to his pulpit when the controversy over these positions broke out in Holland. The dispute was framed over interpretations of Romans 9.

³ Not to be confused with “Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious-ism” which many consider part of the Anglican movement since it is found in Mary Poppins.

The pertinent part of Romans 9 reads:

Not only that, but Rebekah's children had one and the same father, our father Isaac. Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls—she was told, "The older will serve the younger." Just as it is written: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."

What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: "I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.

One of you will say to me: "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?" But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'" Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?

What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath—prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory—even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles? As he says in Hosea: "I will call them 'my people' who are not my people; and I will call her 'my loved one' who is not my loved one," and, "It will happen that in the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' they will be called 'sons of the living God.'" (Romans 9:10-26, N.I.V.)

Beza and his followers taught that the chosen in Romans 9 were persons not yet created and not yet fallen. Beza understood this as the significance of Paul writing about a "lump of clay" in Romans 9. The "lump" is what God uses to make all the vessels. Yet, God makes the "choice" while a lump of clay exists. To Beza, this indicated that God made the choice of salvation or damnation prior to his choice of creation.

Arminius gave several years of sermons on Romans. His analysis led him to believe that the “chosen” were actually those who put their faith in Christ.⁴ God chose to elect, not certain persons, but the church as a whole. In other words, the election and predestination passages in the Bible were speaking of God’s decision to elect “believers” as opposed to individuals. The passages were reference to election of classes or groups of people rather than individuals. To Arminius, the “lump” Paul references is the aggregate of fallen man. In commenting on it, Arminius writes,

God makes man a vessel; man makes himself an evil vessel. Or a sinner; God determines to make man, according to conditions satisfactory to himself a vessel of wrath or of mercy, and this he in fact does, when the condition is either fulfilled or perseveringly neglected.⁵

Arminius wrote and taught that Jacob and Esau were “types” to give us an allegorical-type approach to understanding salvation. Esau, the eldest, represents those who seek salvation based upon law. Jacob, the younger, represents those who seek salvation by faith. God has chosen to save, then, those who seek salvation by faith as opposed to those who seek salvation by works. God has made the choice to save those with faith, Arminius taught, as opposed to those with works but no faith. God is not unfair or wrong in doing this, Arminius said, because it is his choice.

But in interpreting Romans 9 this way, Arminius does not accept Beza’s teaching that Jacob and Esau are saved/condemned by God’s choice followed by God giving Jacob is his saving faith.

⁴ Scholars disagree on when Arminius came to this conclusion. As noted before, Arminius had actually studied under Beza at the Geneva Academy prior to taking his pulpit in Amsterdam. We have a letter Beza wrote to those scholarshipping Arminius in his student days giving Beza’s report on Arminius. In that letter, Beza is quite complimentary of Arminius noting, “God has gifted him with an apt intellect both as respects the apprehension and the discrimination of things...this power of intellect...will be productive of the richest fruits.” Beza did not see Arminius’s attack on predestination coming!

⁵ Arminius generally wrote in Latin. There is a good three-volume translation of his works into English that was originally done by James and William Nichols in the 1800’s. Baker Book House reprinted the work in 1999.

Beza and “Calvinism”⁶ would see God as making his choice of salvation and damnation for his own reasons and glory in no way dependant on man. Arminius would consider God making his saving choice based upon which humans put their faith in Christ as opposed to some religious system of works. Arminius here uses Romans 8:29, “for those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son.” For Arminius, the key is God’s foreknowledge of which people will accept his grace by faith. To those, God has given his election for salvation.

Arminius’s approach was deemed heretical by strict followers of Beza and Calvin. They challenged Arminius as a heretic before the city officials. After looking into the issue, the city officials cleared Arminius.

In 1603, Arminius was appointed as a professor of theology at the University of Leiden. Also at the University was Professor Franciscus Gomarus, one of the most staunch and outspoken supralapsarians of his day. Gomarus waged a relentless campaign against Arminius, accusing him of multiple heresies and asserting Arminius was a secret sympathizer with the Jesuits, a Catholic sect that had put a good bit of political fear into the Dutch at the time.⁷ This controversy and alleged association of Arminius went beyond the academic halls of the University. It spilled into the streets, the pulpits, and the halls of government. Arminius supporters fought to disavow the rumors while his opponents stoked the flames at every opportunity.

Before anything too drastic could happen to Arminius individually, he died of tuberculosis on October 19, 1609, just nine days after his 49th birthday.

THE FALLOUT

After Arminius died, his thoughts carried on. On January 10, 1610, forty-six Dutch ministers and laymen signed a document setting out five points of disagreement with the Calvinists of the day. These five points were:

⁶ We put “Calvinism” in quotation marks because Beza has taken the teachings of Calvin to a new level. Calvin taught predestination and election, but never with the emphasis or detail of Beza. Beza and his followers took Calvin’s thought further than Calvin himself. The expressions that come from Beza *et al.*, sometime bear the label of “hyper-Calvinism” or “high Calvinism.”

⁷ During this same period, Spain was seat to the Jesuits and also a strong Catholic nation that sought to extend its political reach to the Dutch. Anyone believed to be in league with the Jesuits or the Spanish were considered treasonous.

1. God decided before the foundation of the world to save those who believe in Christ and persevere in that faith (predestination of a particular *class*, not of particular *persons*) citing John 3:36 (“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him”).
2. The atonement was intended for all mankind, even those who would never accept it, citing 1 John 2:2 (“And he is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world”).
3. Man cannot exercise saving faith by himself, citing John 15:5 (“I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”).
4. An act of God is necessary for saving faith, but God does not force it upon anyone. Man can choose to resist it, citing Acts 7 (where Stephen makes a lengthy speech to the Sanhedrin – explaining all their history from the Old Testament and finishes up calling them “stiff-necked” people with uncircumcised hearts and ears and then he says that, “You always *resist* the Holy Spirit.”)
5. Believers can choose to resist sin through the assisting power of the Holy Spirit, but whether man can choose to fall from grace was uncertain to these men.

This document and the positions espoused actually started riots in the streets! Sermons were preached back and forth on the issues and against those involved and finally a political solution was needed. Prince Maurice was the leading politician in the Netherlands at the time and he ordered a national synod (gathering of top theologians and ministers) to meet on the issue.

The Synod of Dort was held from November 1618 through January 1619 with over 100 attending from Holland, England, Scotland, Germany, and Switzerland. Arminianism was condemned as heresy and over 200 ministers lost jobs (about 80 were sent into exile or were imprisoned). It was this synod that set out the five points of Calvinism commonly associated with the Dutch tulip!

- T – Total depravity. Post-Adam and the fall, man cannot reach for or find God on his own.
- U – Unconditional election - Before the creation of the world, God chose whom he would redeem without regard to the acts of man.
- L – Limited atonement – The death of Christ was only for those who were predestined for salvation.
- I – Irresistible grace. Whomever God chooses for salvation cannot refuse it
- P – Perseverance of the saints. Once one is saved, they will remain saved. They cannot fall away.

In spite of the Synod at Dort, Arminianism never died out. We see it forming the roots of division in the Reformation movement that will move entire groups to seek independent status in forms that ultimately become denominations.⁸ In most countries, there are those who follow their faith in practice as Calvinists while others do so as Arminians. Ultimately, we will see Arminianism embraced by the Wesleys as a core teaching of what becomes the Methodist Church.

POINTS FOR HOME

Wow!! Do we put in points here that establish true answers to these huge issues that have plagued great minds for the last four centuries? Do we push scholasticism and philosophy by setting out the logical answers that give constructive five sentence resolutions to these questions?

Nope...

But, we do affirm several teachings of scripture:

1. There is a mystery here. We can see passages that indicate “In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will” (Eph. 1:4-5, which Arminius would construe as referring to the church and not individuals!). We can also see passages that teach, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.” (Mt 23:37). Is it God’s choice or man’s? Is it both? Can we affirm biblical teaching and yet leave some room to remember God’s declaration that “my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways” (Isaiah 55:8)? We are captive to time. God is beyond time. Does that mean the past and future have no meaning for God? How can we understand divine existence without the limited shackles of our finiteness in time? Somewhere, we must affirm what we believe scripture to teach and yet watch that we do not lose sight of God’s mystery. We must also hold to faith and his clear salvation in the process.⁹

⁸ It still divides churches today. The Nov. 26, 2000, Greenville News, a South Carolina newspaper, held an article on the Lee Road Baptist Church splitting over this issue. The write-up can be accessed on the internet at <http://209.157.64.201/focus/f-chat/1625961/posts>.

⁹ It has been said that on the gates that lead to eternal life are two sayings. On the outside, the gate reads, “Whosoever will may come.” Entering the gate, one can look back and read the inscription: “Chosen from the foundation of the world.” The Bible teaches that any who put their faith in Christ are saved. The teachings of election and choice are given only to those who have faith in Christ. It is a reassurance that God has chosen them; they need not fear otherwise.

2. “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works so that no one can boast.” Eph. 2:8-9. That is the gospel truth. Any who put their faith in Christ, have the salvation that comes by the death of Christ through faith. Any debate over predestination must be kept in context that the message of Christ is for EVERYONE. Any who put their faith in him, have salvation. We do not need to look behind the curtain to make this decision. We need only hear and respond.
3. We should never lose sight of the FACT that the believer is saved. This assurance is important. God does not need children walking in fear of rejection now or in the future. Peter told those at Pentecost to repent and be baptized “for the forgiveness of sins.” He put no tense on that.¹⁰ Not past sins, but sins period. Past, present, and future. That is blessed assurance that Jesus is mine. It is a foretaste of glory divine. We are heirs of salvation, purchased of God, born of his Spirit, and washed in his blood!
4. Our Christian lives begin with faith, and they are lived daily by that same faith. “For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed – a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”

¹⁰ The reassurance that the doctrine of perseverance offers is well summed up by Charles Stanley. He writes, ““John wrote an entire epistle to assure a group of people, people he was not even around to observe, that they were in fact saved: 1 John 5:13 ‘These things I have written to you who believe in the Son of God, in order that you may know you have eternal life.’”

Where there is no assurance of God’s acceptance, there is no peace. Where there is no peace, there is no joy. Where there is no joy, there is a limitation on one’s ability to love unconditionally. Why? Because a person with no assurance is by definition partially motivated by fear. Fear and love do not mingle well. One will dilute the other.

Furthermore, fear spills over into worry. Let’s be realistic for a moment, if my salvation is not a settled issue, how can I be “anxious for nothing”? Phil. 4:6.

Also at stake here is the extent of God’s forgiveness. When Christ died, which of your sins did He die for?...to differentiate between forgiven and unforgiven sins is to make a distinction foreign to scripture. The timing of your sins is irrelevant since they were all in the future from the perspective of the cross. To disregard eternal security is to take away from what happened at Calvary.” *Eternal Security* (Thomas Nelson Publishers 2002).