Did Arminius Win?

Some Calvinists may not be convinced, but Arminius won. We are of course talking about the spirit of Arminius, who had been in the tomb a good few years before his defenders' Remonstrant theses were hotly debated at the Synod of Dort, of which this year marks the fourth centenary.

Our present age likes nothing better than achievement, and the more spectacular the better. Even those of us who work mundane jobs know the danger of not performing as the statistics demand. Honorific and financial rewards are enormous for performance in business, politics, philanthropy, scientific research, popular culture, and sports. The stars of these worlds are the celebrities whose opinions are respected as having authority outside their fields, a modern fallacy if ever there was one—what do Hollywood glitterati know of poverty, injustice, truth, or right?

Recently I watched the finale of the twelfth stage of the Tour de France bike race, in which the riders made three phenomenal climbs of 1500 meters to reach the top of the Alpe d'Huez. The effort expended was so astounding that my muscles ached in sympathy from my recliner. The only black spot in this spectacle was when a spectator tried to push one of the leaders, who has been accused of doping, off his machine, probably deeming him unworthy to compete. This is where the spirit of Arminius steps in, claiming that it is shabby to minimize the importance of human effort. Effort is commendable. Performance is the dividing line between the meritorious and the unworthy, the successful and the also-rans. When we talk about grace and unmerited mercy today, we find ourselves out of tune with what the modern age admires. It is not only unbelievable that God might give us something for nothing and that we might even need it; it is also demeaning both for God and man. Moreover, in taking the grace tack, you enter the arbitrary field of who benefits from grace and why those who seem to most merit it do not receive it. Grace trumps equality, and that can never be, dixit the self-made autonomous man.

The apostle Paul knew about the problem of effort and achievements when he wrote some scandalous words to the Corinthians about "not many wise according to worldly standards, nor many powerful, not many of noble birth" being called of God. He turned human expectations on their head: the wise, the debaters, and the scribes of the age are out in the cold, so that no one can boast (1 Cor 1:18–31). It is not the productive people of the age who are called, but the also-rans. Referencing this shows that the spirit of Arminius is not limited to the modern age: it has always been around,

as something inherent in human nature. In fact, it has invariably had the upper hand in the world. Any system of thought that places the accent on man's ability falls into this category: the Pharisees, Pelagius, the semi-Pelagianism of the Roman Church, the Council of Trent, Erasmus, Loyola, Arminius himself, and the Remonstrants, Wesley, Moody, and a host of modern-day evangelical believers. Theological liberalism in its various forms is essentially Arminian, with its accent on human ability, progress, and the social gospel, as are sects such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Mormons, and all works religions. If we have ever been under the impression that Calvinists are all-time winners, thinking along this line will be sobering and show us that we are only a sideshow at the fair.

The Pelagian-Arminian line of thought has various manifestations, and its adherents are not all to be evaluated in the same way. They stood over against those who denied human cooperation, or synergism in salvation, in various degrees: Augustine, the Council of Orange (ad 529), Aquinas, Luther and Calvin, the Fathers of Dort, Whitefield, Spurgeon, all stood for sovereign grace. Then there were those, following a sidetrack from Aquinas, who sought a middle-of-the-road solution: Fonseca, Molina, Suarez, Amyraut, down to William Lane Craig in the present.[1]

Anyone who thinks Arminius is a piece of cake ought to read him.[2] The debates are often complex and not for the faint-hearted. There is little doubt that we can see the dangers much more clearly if we look back in light of historical developments. We are indebted to the fathers of Dordrecht who discerned the problems with his thought. The controversial is- sues revolve around the question of divine justice and the freedom of the will in accepting the gospel. These questions are intertwined, one conditioning the other. But which should have the primacy? If man does not have the freedom to accept the gospel, how can God be fair? If God is just, how can man not be recognized as a partner in the work of salvation? As Jason Van Vliet formulates the question in his article, "since our merciful God is also perfectly *just*, how can he simply and sovereignly choose some for eternal bliss while sending others to eternal anguish?"

The question of the freedom of the will cannot be resolved without giving some thought to the capacity of human nature in its present state. All positions that can be considered as being over against the Augustinian line do so by attributing some quality of action to human nature in the realm of the intellect and consequently the will. They also reinterpret what Scripture says about the essential points of how

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[1] See Henri A. G. Blocher, "'Middle Knowledge': Solution or Seduction?," *Unio cum Christo* 4.1 (April 2018): 29–46.

[2] James Arminius, *Works*, 3 vols. (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986); on Arminius, see Carl Bangs, *Arminius: A Study in the Dutch Reformation* (Wilmore, KY: Francis Asbury, 1985); and Richard A. Muller, *God, Creation, and Providence in the Thought of Jacob Arminius* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991).

salvation is received and the efficacy of the cross. In this way the meaning of total depravity is changed, render- ing man saveable, and the cross is broadened in its intention. Human effort in salvation is given some room, whether it be small or great. Without a biblical doctrine of sin, in terms of man's total depravity, there is no biblical doctrine of grace. This is not a minor issue, and it has profound implications for biblical salvation as a whole. Is it God alone who saves us? Can we get out of the mess that the human race is in by ourselves, rank Pelagianism, or do we cooperate with God in the synergism of Arminius?

The consequences of this are far reaching. "Sin, in other words, in keep- ing with the intellectualism of Arminius' theology, distorts the function of the will and the affections, but leaves the intellect quite intact." The role of the intellect is the launchpad of the modern age, as in the seventeenth century; it "satisfies the demands of the new rationalism and of the dawning of the modern scientific perspective of the early modern era."This turn is of great importance not only for the development of Protestant theology, but also for that of modern culture. "Of the three major systematic models arising out of Protestantism, the Lutheran, the Reformed, and the Arminian, only one the Arminian, generally proved open to the new rationalism, particularly in its more empirical and inductive forms."[3]

At this point, Arminianism meets the humanism of the Renaissance at the crossroads. The dilution of the biblical doctrine of sin is a feature of this type of thought.Whereas humanism believes not in a fall, but in the perfectibility of man, Arminianism believes that sin's effects are limited. Somehow, in the intellect or the will, depending on which one puts first, lies the possibility of opening up to the gospel. Man is not totally depraved, and extremism is sidelined.

This explains the popularity and the appeal of Arminianism. Arminius's thought was more in sync with the spirit of the dawning age, one which would give an ever-increasing place to man's decisions and actions, through deism, down to the French revolution with its "Ni Dieu, ni maître" (Neither God, nor master), the scientific and the industrial revolutions, and secular- ism. God became a "God of the gaps," ever more excluded from the world. Today this confidence in man is unraveling, and it is human nature itself that is under attack.

Sometimes the question is asked:Why Augustine or Pelagius, why Calvin or Arminius? Between the two there lies no third position, no *tertium quid*. Arminianism is the natural tendency of the human heart; Calvinists were Arminians, then the light dawned.

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[3] Muller, God, Creation, and Providence, 283–85.