

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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EXCURSUS: CALVINISM VS. ARMINIANISM (Part III)

One of the most important building blocks in the Arminian system is their distinctive understanding of *prevenient grace*, or (to use the theological latin) *gratia praeveniens*. According to Richard Muller, this refers to “*the grace that ‘comes before’ all human response to God*. A special term is given to the grace that necessarily precedes conversion, since mankind is universally sinful and incapable of salvation or of any truly good work without the help of God. A fully monergistic theology, Augustinianism or Calvinism, must assume that this grace is irresistible, whereas a synergistic system, semi-Pelagianism or Arminianism, will hold *prevenient grace* to be resistible.”¹ In other words, the Arminian doctrine of *prevenient grace* is not efficacious or effectual. It simply put all of mankind back into a state of *neutrality*. This enables them to affirm *totality depravity* while at the same time underscoring their doctrine of free-will and conditional election. The highly acclaimed 19th century Arminian theologian Richard Watson summarized it this way:

1. Everything which can be called in man, previous to regeneration is to be attributed to the work of the Spirit of God. Man himself is totally depraved and not capable of either thinking or doing any good thing, as shown by the previous article.
2. That the state of nature in which man exists previous to regeneration, is in some sense a state of grace—preliminary or *prevenient grace*.
3. That in this preliminary period there is a continuity of grace—the Holy Spirit, beginning, advancing and perfecting everything that can be called good in man. The Spirit of God leads the sinner from one step to another, in proportion as He finds response in the heart of the sinner and a disposition to obedience.
4. That there is a human co-operation with the divine Spirit, the Holy Spirit working with the free will of man, quickening, aiding and directing it in order to secure compliance with the conditions of the covenant by which man may be saved.
5. That the grace of God is given to all men in order to bring them to salvation through Jesus Christ, but that this grace so given, may be resisted by the free will of man, so as to be rendered ineffectual.²

The Scriptures are very clear and emphatic when addressing the nature of fallen man in sin. As noted last week, Eph. 2:3 declares forcefully that people are dead in trespasses and sins and that they are “by nature objects of wrath.” The wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23) and this death is a penalty (*poena*), that stems from our guilt (*culpa*) and exposes us to the liability of punishment (*reatus poenae*), and as such, deserving of God’s justice and wrath. Titus 3:3 confirms such a conclusion. “At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and *enslaved* by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another.” Note carefully, Paul declares that we were *enslaved* by all kinds of passions and pleasures. The Apostle clearly states that people who are enslaved by their own desires are under the domination and tyranny of sin. Furthermore, this kind of tyranny is not externally coerced. People do what they want to do, in that they pursue their own pleasures and desires. The bondage of the will, or *De Servo Arbitrio*, to use the title of Luther’s famous book, then, is a slavery to our own desires. *Non posse non peccare* “Not able not to sin” is how

Augustine put it. Fallen human beings are captivated by sin. Jesus himself diagnosed sinning as an indication of slavery. “Everyone who sins is a slave to sin” (John 8:34; cf. 2 Pet. 2:19). Paul confirms that unregenerate people are slaves of sin. He reminds the Romans that “you are slaves to sin” (Rom. 6:17) and speaks of the time “when you were slaves to sin” (Rom. 6:20). They had presented “the parts of [their] bod[ies] in slavery to impurity and ever-increasing wickedness” (Rom. 6:19). Believers have been crucified with Christ “so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin” (Rom. 6:6). “If Christ dies so that we should no longer be slaves to sin, the clear implication is that we were formerly slaves to sin. Sin is described in Romans 6 as a power that holds it captives in thralldom. Unbelievers are enslaved to sin in the sense that all they want to do is sin. They are free to do what is good in the sense that they have opportunities to do so. They fail to avail themselves of these opportunities, however, because they do not desire to do what is good. The captivity of sin is so powerful that they always desire to sin.”³

I. THE ARMINIAN PROOF TEXT: John 1:9

This passage constitutes a bulwark to the Arminian way of thinking. Grant Osborne confidently declares that it settles the debate between Calvinists and Arminians. “The debate is over verses 12-13, for, according to verses 9, 11, ‘every man’ receives the light and is responsible to reject (v. 11) or accept (v. 12) it, yet those who do accept it are ‘born of God’ (v. 13), clearly a sovereign act and not controlled by man’s decision. How do we bring the two together? The one point to be stressed is that there is no hint of ‘irresistible grace,’ a doctrine that states that God’s compassionate act of grace irresistibly draws the elect to himself. To summarize the data, every person is enlightened and drawn toward the life that is in the Logos. Those who reject it are part of the ‘world,’ the realm of darkness. Those who accept it are ‘born of God’—i.e., they receive the new spiritual birth (see 3:3, 5) that comes from God alone.”⁴

Another leading Arminian, Roger Olson, claims that this conclusively proves the Arminian point on prevenient grace. “Grace heals the deadly wound of sin and enables humans, who are otherwise in bondage of the will to sin, to respond freely to the message of the gospel. Grace brings God’s undeserved and unmerited favor to humans who exercise faith with repentance and trust in Christ alone for salvation. In order to demonstrate Arminian theology’s truly high doctrine of grace, some reminders of the doctrine of sin (including depravity) and anticipations of the doctrine of justification (which is by faith) will be necessary. Knowledgeable Calvinists (and other non-Arminians) may already be anticipating questions and answers such as, Isn’t the bare human decision to accept and not resist God’s grace and mercy unto salvation a meritorious work? Arminians respond with a resounding no. In sum, and by way of preview, classical Arminianism argues that anyone who shows the first inkling or inclination of a good will toward God is already being influenced by grace. Grace is the first cause of genuine free will as liberation from bondage to sin, and grace is the source of anything good. In its prevenient (going before) form, it is the ‘quickening ray’ Charles Wesley wrote about in his famous Arminian hymn ‘And Can It Be?’ It awakens the prisoner lying helpless in the dungeon of nature’s night and breaks off his chains so that he can rise up and follow Christ.”⁵

II. NOT SO FAST: A CALVINISTIC RESPONSE

Thomas Schreiner has given the Arminian claims a close analysis and concludes that their “airtight case” is full of holes. “The crucial phrase in John 1:9 is *phōpanta anthrōpon* (enlightens every person), which enlightening is ascribed to ‘the true light.’ Wesleyans understand this enlightenment to refer to prevenient grace, which is given to all people, but there are serious reasons for doubting that this is the meaning of the verse. In fact, the verse can be understood in three other ways that do not yield the Wesleyan interpretation. First, the illumination could refer to general revelation, which is granted to all people through the created order. This shifts the debate to different ground, for some argue that general revelation is sufficient for salvation. Such a view is unpersuasive given Paul’s estimation of general revelation in Romans 1:18-32. In any case, D. A. Carson is correct in dismissing a reference to general revelation since this would have been more appropriately dealt with

earlier in the prologue (i.e., John 1:3-4). The specific context is not general revelation but the response of people to the incarnate Word of God, Jesus Christ. Second, the illumination may refer to an inward illumination that leads to conversion. In this case, John would not be saying that illumination is given to all people ‘without exception’ but to all ‘without distinction.’ The light is not confined to the Jews, but also has an effect among the Gentiles. Other sheep that are not of the fold of the Jews will be brought in (John 10:16). Jesus died not only for the Jews but also for the children of God scattered throughout the world (John 11:51-52). The context of John 1:9-13, however, suggests that another interpretation is the most probable. The word *enlighten* (*phōtizō*) refers not to inward illumination but to the exposure that comes when light is shed upon something. Some are shown to be evil because they did not know or receive Jesus (John 1:10-11), while others are revealed to be righteous because they have received Jesus and have been born of God (John 1:12-13). John 3:19-21 confirms this interpretation. Those who are evil shrink from coming to the light because they do not want their works to be exposed (v. 20). But those who practice the truth gladly come to the light so that it might be manifest that their works are wrought in God (v. 21). The light that enlightens every person does not entail the bestowment of grace, nor does it refer to the inward illumination of the heart by the Spirit of God. Rather, the light exposes and reveals the moral and spiritual state of one’s heart. C. K. Barrett rightly says that ‘the light shines upon every man for judgement, to reveal what he is. Or, as Carson remarks, ‘Inner illumination is then not in view’ but ‘the objective revelation’ that occurs at the coming of the ‘true light.’ John 1:9 is not, therefore, suggesting that through Christ’s coming each person is given the ability to choose salvation. The purpose of the verse is to say that the coming of the true light exposes and reveals where people are in their relationship to God.”⁶

CONCLUSION: I close with these observations from my long time friend and fellow Calvinist, Sam Storms.

First, The Arminian doctrine of “prevenient grace” is exhaustively universal; meaning, it is extended to all people regardless of *whether or not they have heard the gospel*. This appears to be in direct contradiction to the Bible, for instance the apostle’s question: “how can one believe if they have not heard?” and “...faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.” – Rom. 10:14-17. This view, then, affirms (or at least makes room for) the idea that the gospel is not cognitively necessary for one to be saved. In spite of the overwhelming case made by Paul against the Gentiles in Romans 1-3, some Arminians believe that if a person is faithful, that is, responds believably to, the degree of revelation made to them then God will accept that faith and impute it to them as righteousness, whether or not they have actually heard the gospel. This is, of course, purely speculative and not derived from revelation.

Second, prevenient grace is not effectual but rather renders the sinners “neutral” – able to decide for themselves whether they will accept or reject Christ. First, since we must always go to Scripture as our authority in matters of faith (especially matters of this magnitude) we must seriously inquire whether there is any biblical evidence whatsoever to substantiate the Arminian dogma that there is a state of being that God places sinners into that is neither regenerate nor unregenerate, an in-between state which is neither corrupt nor good. It is imperative that this “state” is substantiated biblically, not merely by unaided speculation or logical necessity. Where does the Bible say that when God gives grace to people, they become partly regenerate but not fully regenerate?

Lastly, in the end, the problem with Arminian prevenient grace is that it is guided by unaided human logic and rationality rather than the Scriptures. The Scriptures testify that the man without the Spirit cannot understand the things of God (I Cor 2:14). Even with prevenient grace theoretically putting humanity in a neutral position, we would still lack the quickening Spirit to give us what we need. How is it then that the natural man can understand or desire God independent of such quickening and renewing grace? Can a blind man see prior to his eyes being opened? Can a man with a heart of stone love and desire God before his heart is made flesh? How can an ox desire flesh to eat ...can water rise above its source? We believe that salvation is of the Lord from beginning to end. He deserves all the glory. While we were still

helpless Christ died for us and His death purchased everything we need to be saved, including our regeneration. For an unregenerate man would not ever desire the things of God on his own. If God's grace does not save us then man still ultimately decides based on some principle within, either good or evil.⁷

ENDNOTES

¹ R. Muller, Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms (Baker, 1984) p. 132. Muller expands by adding: " *Gratia Resistibilis*: *resistible grace*; a theological concept used by both the Lutherans and the Arminians to argue against the Reformed that *gratia salvifica* (q.v.), salvific or saving grace, is both universally offered and resistible. Whereas the Arminian teaching clearly indicates a *cooperatio* (q.v.), a cooperation or a synergistic relationship, between God and man in the effecting of salvation, the Lutheran teaching observes that only God's grace is *efficax*, or effective, in salvation but that, since it is not an immediate operation of the divine *omnipotentia* (q.v.) but rather a mediate operation of God in and through designated *media gratiae*, or means of grace, it may be resisted. In other words, the Arminian insists that man may both effectively resist and also effectively cooperate with the *gratia praeveniens* (q.v.), prevenient grace, whereas the Lutheran orthodox allow only a resistance to, but not an effective cooperation with, the *gratia praeveniens*. The Reformed, by way of contrast, allow neither resistance to nor cooperation with the *gratia salvifica praeveniens* and insist that it is both an irresistible grace (*gratia irresistibilis*) and a particular grace (*gratia particularis*).

² R. Watson, Theological Institutes II (Carlton & Porter, 1850) as cited by H. Orton Wiley, Christian Theology II (Beacon Hill press, 1952) p. 352.

³ T. R. Schreiner, in The Grace of God: The Bondage of The Will: Historical and Theological Perspectives on Calvinism II eds. T. R. Schreiner and B. A. Ware (Baker, 1995) p. 375.

⁴ G. Osborne, in The Grace of God: The Will of Man: The Case for Arminianism ed. C. Pinnock (Zondervan, 1989) p. 244.

⁵ R. Olson, Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities (IVP, 2006) p. 160.

⁶ Schreiner, op.cit.

⁷ S. Storms, <http://www.enjoyinggoddministries.com/article/the-arminian-doctrine-of-prevenient-grace>.