

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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### EXCURSUS: CALVINISM VS. ARMINIANISM (Part IV)

The major issues between Calvinists and Arminians down through the centuries has revolved around the doctrine of election and the question of free-will. The Arminians were unwilling to say that man is totally unable to save himself; it held rather that, while human nature has been impaired by sin, the will is still free and able to respond to the grace of God.<sup>1</sup> It claimed that God determined to save all who believe, and it refused to accept the teaching that election is unto faith. It held that Christ died for all, even though only believers benefit from his death; that grace is not irresistible; and that faith may be lost. Besides publicly challenging the doctrines of predestination, sin, grace, and the perseverance of the saints, the Remonstrants indicated that they were unsure of other doctrine as well; original sin, justification by faith, the atonement, and even the deity of Christ were called into question. That they doubted Christ's deity is not a well-known historical fact, but it contributed to the seriousness and bitterness of the controversy. It was not until after the death of Arminius in 1609 that the drift toward Socinianism, a version of Unitarianism, became noticeable. The appointment of Conrad Vorstius to the chair of theology at Leiden, vacated by Arminius, aroused suspicions; in 1622 he made his espousal of Socinianism public.<sup>2</sup> As noted last week, John Wesley modified the standard Arminian position with his own distinctive understanding of prevenient grace.<sup>3</sup> However, Wesley and his followers could not escape the snare of Remonstrants as Buckanan notes. "The Wesleyan Methodists were a favourable specimen of the Evangelical Arminians, who stood opposed, both to the Pelagians on the subject of man's depravity, and to the Socinians on the subject of Christ's satisfaction; and yet they differed from the followers of Whitfield, and other evangelical Christians, on the subject of Justification; for while they ascribed the pardon of sin to the merit of Christ's expiatory death, they did not ascribe the acceptance of the sinner to the imputation of Christ's active obedience, or vicarious fulfillment of the precept of the divine Law. They agreed generally with Arminius on most of the five points,--but they agreed with him also in maintaining the Priesthood,--the vicarious sufferings,--and the atoning sacrifice, of Christ; and we cannot doubt that, holding so much evangelical truth, many among them have been so humbled under a sense of sin, and so impressed by the justice and mercy of God manifested in the Cross, as to 'flee for refuge to the hope that was set before them,' and 'to receive and rest upon Christ alone for salvation,' although from some confused or mistaken apprehension of its meaning, they might still hesitate to adopt, in its full sense, the doctrine of imputed righteousness. The germ of that doctrine is really involved in what they believe,--for they held the substitution of Christ in the room of sinners,--the imputation of their sins to Him,--and His bearing the punishment which these sins deserved; they further held, that what He did and suffered on the Cross is imputed to believers for their justification,--not what He suffered merely, but what He did, when He became 'obedient unto death.' Obedience was involved in His sufferings,--and if this was believed to be imputed to us for the pardon of our sins, as constituting, along with His sufferings, the satisfaction which He rendered to the law and justice of God, then they admitted the principle of His vicarious righteousness, which needs only to be extended so as to include His active obedience in fulfilling the precept, as well as the penalty, of the divine Law."<sup>4</sup>

“*Justification by faith only* is a truth that needs interpretation. The principle of *sola fide* is not rightly understood till it is seen as anchored in the broader principle of *sola gratia*.” So wrote J.I. Packer and O.R. Johnston in the preface to their translation of Luther’s magnum opus *De Servo Arbitrio* (The Bondage of the Will.) “The reason why grace is so little appreciated in our days is that the transcendent majesty and sovereignty and holiness of God are so little appreciated, and we do not see much more than a half step between God and our sinful selves.”<sup>5</sup> Where does *faith* originate? Is it a gift of God or is it something we do in order for God’s grace to be activated? Is *faith* wrought in us by the Holy Spirit or does salvation ultimately depend on some innate ability we all possess?<sup>6</sup> To affirm that men possess such an ability flies in the face of texts like John 6:43, 65 and Rom. 8:7; 9:16. It denies the Biblical teaching that we are utterly helpless in and of ourselves. The Bible categorically declares that we are *dead* in our transgressions and sins (Eph. 2:1). Why is it that *some* people respond to the Gospel and others do not? Is it because those who respond are righteous or more intelligent than those who do not? Of course not, no Christian would claim that. Then what is the difference? Some Christians who accept the Arminian notion of unrestricted *free will* hold that God makes a universal provision of salvation, and waits to see who will respond to His gracious offer. But, in the Arminian scheme of things, in order for salvation to be secure, we must *cooperate* with God’s grace. R.C. Sproul makes this poignant observation, “Man in his fallen state must reach out and grasp this grace by an act of the will, which is free to accept or reject this grace. Some exercise the will rightly (or righteously), while other do not. When pressed on this point, the Arminian finds it difficult to escape the conclusion that ultimately his salvation rests on some righteous act of the will he has performed.”<sup>7</sup> In John 6:41-65 we have one of the clearest statements in the Bible on the question of whether or not we possess the natural ability to please God.

## I. JESUS’ RESPONSE TO THE MURMURING CROWD

### A. The Source of Life and Resurrection (John 6:43-44)

In answer to the murmuring of the Jews Jesus said, “Murmur not among yourselves. No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day.” No man, declares our Lord, can of himself come to Jesus Christ, and in this fact is taught the important truth of the inability of man. This is the unanimous teaching of the Lord and His apostles as G.C. Berkouwer has shown. “To hear, to learn, to be drawn, to be given, and then to come--that is the evangelical incursion of all synergism. It is the reference to God's electing grace (cf. John 3:27), which in faith and experience is understood, not as a coercion and an annihilating superiority which takes away man's very breath, but as divine liberation. This absoluteness of giving, drawing, and learning we meet in the radical and exclusive testimony of Paul when he says, for instance, that 'no man can say, Jesus is Lord, but in the Holy Spirit' (I Cor. 12:3). The message of Scripture repeatedly accentuates that human inability. The impotence of man is not something pessimism has discovered; it is most literally described in Scripture (cf. John 3:27; 1 Cor. 2:14; Rom. 8:5, 6, 7, 8).”<sup>8</sup> The key word in the statement is “draw.” It is the Biblical word for effectual grace, and it is a word of successful force. If there is one thing plain from the words, “No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him” (v. 44), it is that the approach of the soul to the Lord Jesus for salvation and life is “NOT ORIGINATED BY THE MAN HIMSELF, BUT BY A MOVEMENT OF DIVINE GRACE”<sup>9</sup> The salvation of a soul does not arise from the decision of man's free will. It is the Godhead that seeks and saves (cf. 4:23; Luke 19:10). What is stated plainly here has been implied in verse thirty-seven (cf. 12:39).

### B. The Real Cause of Salvation:

The Greek verb HELKUO (“draw”) is found in the old Testament Septuagint, the Greek translation of the old Testament, in the sense of efficacious grace (cf. Jer. 31:3, “with loving kindness have I drawn thee”). In its uses, two things may be of interest. In the first place, there is usually involved a certain resistance on the part of the thing or person drawn (cf. John 12:32; 18:10; 21:6, 11; Acts 16:19). But, as Morris has pointed out, “There is not one example in the New Testament of the use of this verb where resistance is successful.”<sup>10</sup> The words “no man can come” points up the total inability of man, but the same God who sends Christ draws men to Him.

Occasionally readers of the Bible and theology draw from this doctrine of man's inability the mistaken notion that, therefore, there is no hope for man. Warfield's strictures are important at that point, "We may point out, therefore, that the doctrine of inability does not affirm that we cannot believe, but only that *we cannot believe in our own strength* (italics mine). It affirms only that there is no strength within us by which we may attain to belief. But this is far from asserting that on making the effort we shall find it impossible to believe."<sup>11</sup>

- C. The Support of the Teaching (John 6:45-46). The following statement, "It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall be all taught of God,'" a reference to Isaiah 54:13. To be "taught of God," then, is simply to be "drawn by the Father." The following words, "Every man therefore that hath heard, and hath learned of the Father, cometh to me," individualizes the "all" of the previous clause. There are three steps, then, in the drawing of the Father: (1) He teaches; (2) they listen and learn; (3) they come. John 6:46 corrects a false impression. It might be thought from the preceding that one must see the Father to be a listener and a learner. This is denied, as 1:18 has indicated. Only one exception exists to the general rule that no man has ever seen God; that exception is the Son of God. He shares the vision of God with no mere man.
- D. The Proof of Unconditional Election. (cf. John 6:37, 44, 65). There is in this passage an airtight case for the doctrine of unconditional election. It sounds the death knell of Arminianism. It is found in comparison with v.47 thrown in for good measure. In logic, a *necessary condition* is a circumstance in whose absence a given event could not occur, or a given thing could not exist. A *sufficient condition* is a circumstance such that whenever it exists a given event occurs or a given thing exists. A *necessary and sufficient condition* for the occurrence of a given event (say, for example, divine election) or the existence of a given thing (say, election to salvation) is, therefore, a circumstance in whose absence the event could not occur or the thing could not exist, and which is also such that *whenever it exists, the event occurs or the thing exists*. In other words, when we have a necessary and sufficient condition for the occurrence of a given event existing, then the event occurs, or the thing exists. The reason that the existence of a necessary and sufficient condition for the occurrence of a given event, or the existence of a given thing, makes for an airtight case for the event or thing is that it provides a complete induction and admits of no exceptions. In John 6:37 Jesus says, "All that the Father giveth me shall come to me." We have here a *sufficient condition* for coming to Christ. If the individual is "given," then he will come. Every single individual given shall come. There is no failure in coming, if one is given. It is sufficient to be given to come or, to put it a bit more clearly, in order to come one must simply be given. All the given come. Now in John 6:65 Jesus says, "Therefore said I unto you, that no man can come unto me, except it were *given* unto him of my Father." We have here a necessary condition for coming to Christ. No man can come unto Him, except it were given to him of the Father. Every single individual who comes to Christ must have been previously given to Christ by the Father. There is no failure in coming, if one is *given*. It is necessary to be given, before one can come. To put it as clearly as possible, all who come have been given. All the given ones come. All who come have been given. There are no exceptions.

**CONCLUSION:** The inability under which man and his will labor is not an inability to exercise volitions. It is an inability to be willing to exercise holy volitions. Luther once said, "Free will is an empty term, whose reality is lost. And a lost liberty, according to my grammar, is no liberty at all." Man cannot originate the love of God in his heart. "To assume," said my esteemed professor, the late S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., "that because man has the ability to love, he, therefore, has the ability to love God of himself, is about as foolish as to assume that, since water has the ability to flow, it, therefore has the ability to flow uphill."<sup>12</sup> A final word from Calvin, "The whole faculty of free will which the Papists dream about is utterly overturned by these two clauses (he is speaking of v. 45). For if we begin to come to Christ only when the Father has drawn us, neither the beginning of faith, nor any preparation for it, lies in us. On the other hand, if all come whom the Father has taught, He gives them not only the freedom to believe but faith itself."<sup>13</sup>

Finally, heed the warning of J. I. Packer, “if we travel the Arminian road, there are three precious things that we necessarily lose. These are; the clear knowledge of God’s sovereignty in our salvation, the clear sight of Christ’s glory as the Savior of His people, and the clear sense of the Christian’s eternal security in the covenant of grace. Also, our piety, unless inconsistent with and superior to our principles (as John Wesley’s, for instance, seems to have been), must center on the thought that at each present moment everything—future salvation, present blessing, current usefulness to God—depends on the use *I* make of opportunities and resources already given, for God, having made me able to do what I should do, is standing back, so to speak, waiting to see if here and now I shall do it. Self-reliance rather than dependence, strain rather than spontaneity, and an anthropocentric fixity on dedication which inhibits the theocentric instinct for doxology will thus become characteristic of our Christian lives, and the inner relaxation and gaiety witnessed to by such far-out workers for God as Paul, George Whitefield, and C. H. Spurgeon, who knew themselves to be carried along and kept every moment by the power of God, is something to which we are likely to be comparative strangers. These are sad, and saddening, losses, which impoverish the children of God in the same way that Roman Catholicism impoverishes them. There is more comfort and joy for God’s children set forth in the Scriptures than the Roman and Arminian theologies allow them to possess. At this point, at least, Rous’ verdict stands: Romanism and Arminianism show themselves to be all too much akin.”<sup>14</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> Arminians like Charles Finney and most recently the radical Arminians who have taken Arminianism to its logical conclusion of Open Theism declare that even though we are born with an inclination to sin, we are not born sinners until we actually sin – because in this system, sin consists primarily in a misuse of human freedom. cf. C. Pinnock and R. Brow, Unbound Love: A Good News Theology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (IVP, 1994) p. 65.
- <sup>2</sup> See the discussion of M. E. Osterhaven in Evangelical Dictionary of Theology ed. W. A. Elwell (Baker Books 1991) also at <http://mb-soft.com/believe/txh/dort0.htm>.
- <sup>3</sup> Charles Hodge provides us with a breakdown of the differences. “The Arminian system received such modifications in the hands of Wesley and his associates and followers, that they give it the designation of Evangelical Arminianism, and claim for it originality and completeness. It differs from the system of the Remonstrants -- 1. In admitting that man since the fall is in a state of absolute or entire pollution and depravity. Original sin is not a mere physical deterioration of our nature, but entire moral depravity. 2. In denying that men in this state of nature have any power to cooperate with the grace of God. The advocates of this system regard this doctrine of natural ability, or the ability of the natural man to cooperate with the grace of God as Semi-pelagian, and the doctrine that men have the power by nature perfectly to keep the commandments of God, as pure Pelagianism. 3. In asserting that the guilt brought upon all men by the sin of Adam is removed by the justification which has come upon all men by the righteousness of Christ. 4. That the ability of man even to cooperate with the Spirit of God, is due not to anything belonging to his natural state as fallen, but to the universal influence of the redemption of Christ. Every infant, therefore, comes into the world free from condemnation on the ground of the righteousness of Christ, and with a seed of divine grace, or a principle of a new life implanted in his heart. According to this view of the plan of God, he decreed or purposed, (1) To permit the fall of man. (2.) To send his Son to make a full satisfaction for the sins of the whole world. (3.) On the ground of that satisfaction to remit the guilt of Adam’s first transgression and of original sin, and to impart such a measure of grace and light to all and every man as to enable all to attain eternal life. (4.) Those who duly improve that grace, and persevere to the end, are ordained to be saved; God purposes from eternity, to save those whom He foresees will thus persevere in faith and holy living. Systematic Theology II (rpt. Eerdmans, 1975) p. 329.
- <sup>4</sup> James Buchanan, The Doctrine of Justification, (rpt. Baker, 1977) p. 178.
- <sup>5</sup> A.N. Martin, The Practical Implications of Calvinism (Banner of Truth, 1979), p. 8.
- <sup>6</sup> Noted Evangelical apologist Norman Geisler emphatically declares that saving faith is *not* a gift of God. On the contrary, he claims that all men possess the ability to please God by exercising common, ordinary faith. cf. His, Chosen But Free: A Balanced View of Divine Election (Bethany House, 1999), pp. 181-191. (I wrote a critical review of this book for *Reformation & Revival: A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership* (Vol. 8, No. 4, fall 1999). The foremost evangelist of this century, Billy Graham, takes a similar approach when he says, “the new birth is something God does for man when man is willing to yield to God.” How to be Born Again (Word, 1977), p. 150.
- <sup>7</sup> R.C. Sproul, Willing to Believe: The Controversy over Free Will (Baker, 1997), P. 26.
- <sup>8</sup> G.C. Berkouwer, Divine Election (Eerdmans, 1960), p. 49.
- <sup>9</sup> J. H. Bernard, The Gospel According to St. John I (T & T Clark, 1928), p. 204.
- <sup>10</sup> Leon Morris, The Gospel of John (Eerdmans, 1981), p. 371.
- <sup>11</sup> Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield (P & R, 1973), P. 726.

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- <sup>12</sup> I am indebted to my former professor of Theology, at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, S. Lewis Johnson for his penetrating analysis of this section of John's Gospel. cf. His "Human Inability and Divine Ability, or Thinking Christians and Unconditional Election," *Believer's Bible Bulletin* (Dallas, June 1982).
- <sup>13</sup> Calvin's New Testament Commentaries IV (rpt. Eerdmans, 1989), p. 165.
- <sup>14</sup> J. I. Packer, "Arminianisms" in Thought Christ's Word: a Festschrift for Dr. Philip E. Hughes, eds. W. R. Godfrey and J. L. Boyd III (P & R, 1985) p. 145.