

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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EXCURSUS: CALVINISM VS. ARMINIANISM (Part VI)

The great Princeton Theologian B. B. Warfield described the infiltration of Pelagian error in partial form this way: “But, as we have been told that the price of liberty is eternal vigilance, so the Church soon found that religion itself can be retained only at the cost of perpetual struggle. Pelagianism died hard; or rather it did not die at all, but only retired more or less out of sight and bided its time; meanwhile vexing the Church with modified forms of itself, modified just enough to escape the letter of the Church’s condemnation. Into the place of Pelagianism there stepped at once Semi-Pelagianism; and when the controversy with Semi-Pelagianism had been fought and won, into the place of Semi-Pelagianism there stepped that semi-semi-Pelagianism which the Council of Orange betrayed the Church into, the genius of an Aquinas systematized for her, and the Council of Trent finally fastened with rivets of iron upon that portion of the Church which obeyed it. The necessity of grace had been acknowledged as the result of the Pelagian controversy: its preveniency, as the result of the Semi-Pelagian controversy: but its certain efficacy, its “irresistibility” men call it, was by the fatal compromise of Orange denied, and thus the conquering march of Augustinianism was checked and the pure confession of salvation by grace alone made forever impossible within that section of the Church whose proud boast is that it is *semper eadem* (always the same). It was no longer legally possible, indeed, within the limits of the Church to ascribe to man, with the Pelagian, the whole of salvation; nor even, with the Semi-Pelagian, the initiation of salvation. But neither was it any longer legally possible to ascribe salvation so entirely to the grace of God that it could complete itself without the aid of the discredited human will—its aid only as empowered and moved by prevenient grace indeed, but not effectually moved, so that it could not hold back and defeat the operations of saving grace.”¹

Here is a brief summary of Warfield’s analysis of “Autosoterism.”

I. PELAGIANISM DENIES:

1. The sufficiency of grace;
2. The necessity of initial grace; and
3. The general necessity of grace.

II. SEMI-PELAGIANISM DENIES:

1. The sufficiency of grace; and
2. The necessity of initial.

III. SEMI-SEMI-PELAGIANISM DENIES:

1. The sufficiency of grace.

This in essence is what Arminianism boils down to – an explicit form of semi-Pelagianism, or at best semi-semi-Pelagianism.

Recently, Roger Olson wrote a book length defense of Arminianism and attempted to debunk the charge. Olson complains, "Why do so many Calvinists insist on identifying Arminianism as Pelagian or semi-Pelagian? This puzzles Arminians because of the great lengths they have gone to distance their theology from those heresies. Perhaps critics believe that Arminianism leads to Pelagianism or semi-Pelagianism as its good and necessary consequence. But if that is the case, it should be stated clearly. Fairness and honesty demand that critics of Arminianism at least admit that classical Arminians, including Arminius himself, do not teach what Pelagius taught or what the semi-Pelagians (e.g., John Cassian) taught."² Olson has on more than one occasion in this book acknowledged that Erasmus held a similar theological outlook to that later espoused by Arminius (p. 22), admitting that Arminians were "influenced by Catholic reformer Erasmus" (p. 63), and specifically contrasting Erasmus with Luther over the issues surrounding their debate over free-will (p. 94). Luther considered Erasmus a semi-Pelagian. Here is the rub: no less a figure than Karl Barth draws the same firm conclusion: "There can be no doubt that the Remonstrants were, in fact, the last exponents of an understanding of the Reformation which Erasmus had once represented against Luther and later Castellio against Calvin; an understanding which can and should be interpreted in the light of the persistence of mediaeval semi-Pelagianism no less than in that of the Renaissance. And as the last exponents of that understanding, they were also the first exponents of a modern Christianity which is characterized by the very same ambiguity."³ Olson actually tries to link Barth with Arminianism (p. 46), to which I think Barth would have responded as he did in his conflict with Emil Brunner with a very loud. "NEIN!" Whatever else one may think of him as the architect of Neo-orthodoxy, Barth has to be considered a theological giant; and as his Church Dogmatics demonstrate, he had a comprehensive grasp of the whole field of historical theology. (I should point out that my professor of theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, the late S. Lewis Johnson, studied under Barth in Basel and even though he did not agree with Barth on a number of theological points, he held Barth in high esteem, saying that Barth's real genius was as a church historian.) But we should not merely accept Barth's assessment, A close examination of Olson's own defense of Arminianism from the charge of semi-Pelagianism is needed.

Olson begins early in the book by listing all the areas in which classical Arminianism lines up with Protestant Orthodoxy, insisting most emphatically that when it comes to the doctrine of total depravity, Arminians stand shoulder to shoulder with the Calvinists (p. 33). Indeed, as Olson documents, this is affirmed as such by all the leading classical Arminians that he cites. As a result of the Fall, all of humanity was plunged into sin and as a result 'are totally depraved.' However, in Arminian theology this important doctrine gets eclipsed. How so? According to Olson a better way of saying this would be "were totally depraved," with the operative word being "were." Olson begins by first underscoring the importance of a distinctively Arminian understanding of prevenient grace. "The emphasis on the prevenience and preeminence of grace forms common ground between Arminianism and Calvinism. It is what makes Arminian synergism "*evangelical*" (p. 36). When Arminians like Olson speak of prevenient grace they are affirming "a universal healing of total depravity by the grace of God through the atoning work of Christ...it also mitigated the corruption of inherited depravity" (p. 151). In other words, as Olson goes on to say, "People everywhere have some ability to hear and respond to the gospel freely" (p. 154). (In other words, *total depravity* is *not* a descriptive category that is true of anyone. In fact, Olson candidly admits that as a result of prevenient grace "no person is left by God entirely in that state of nature without some measure of grace to rise above it if he or she cooperate with grace by not resisting it" (p. 155). Here is where Calvinism stands in stark contrast with Arminianism. This is why Warfield declared that, "*irresistible grace, or effectual calling* is the hinge of the Calvinistic soteriology."⁴ In the Arminian scheme, grace is resistible and the human will completely autonomous. Olson likes to speak of the *freed* will. By prevenient grace the will has been liberated from bondage so that it may freely chose to cooperate with God's grace (p. 156). This concept of prevenient grace enables the Arminian to affirm total depravity as a biblical truth, while at the same time rendering it a useless category. Olson writes, "The person who receives the full intensity of prevenient grace (i.e., through the

proclamation of the Word and the corresponding internal calling of God) is no longer dead in trespasses and sins. However, such a person is not yet fully regenerated. The bridge between partial regeneration by prevenient grace and full regeneration by the Holy Spirit is *conversion*, which includes repentance and faith” (p. 36). Note what Olson is saying here. What the Apostle Paul is affirming of people who had been dead in trespasses and sins but have been made alive with Christ, i.e., regeneration (Eph. 2:1-8), Olson declares to be true of people who are in a partial or semi-regenerate state. According to Arminius this constitutes “an intermediate stage between being unregenerate and regenerate” (p. 164). This is stunning. Do these people who are semi-regenerate lapse back into being dead in their trespasses and sins if they do not cooperate with prevenient grace, or do they remain in a state of partial regeneration all their lives as a result of prevenient grace? This is a can of worms. But wait, says the Calvinist, are you saying that all that God’s grace does is put us all in a position to *allow* the Holy Spirit to make us “more alive” and do His “complete” work of regeneration? If so, then the ultimate factor is my own “free-will?” Olson uses language that says, in effect, “That’s right.” “Arminianism holds that salvation is all of grace—every movement of the soul toward God is initiated by divine grace—but Arminians recognize also that the cooperation of the human will is necessary because *in the last stage* the free agent decides whether the grace proffered is accepted or rejected” (p. 36, my emphasis).

Look at Col. 2:13 and note the language used by the Apostle Paul and compare it with that of Roger Olson. Contrary to Olson’s claim, our natural condition (in Adam) is not only one of wretchedness, but of culpability due to our sins and fallen nature. Second, this condition results in hostile disobedience and alienation from God. Third, and most important, God makes alive unto salvation – and not, as Olson would have us believe, “partially” so that we can respond to the grace of God by an act of our free-will which has benefited from being “almost” regenerated by prevenient grace! Finally, God’s action of “making alive” is connected with the redemptive work of Christ – and NOT merely to the activity of the Holy Spirit in bringing us to the doorstep of salvation and then waiting to see if we will avail ourselves to it. Herman Bavinick correctly saw this. “There is no sharing in the benefits of Christ unless we share in his person, *because the benefits cannot be separated from the person*; the benefits are not deposited in a merely human person, or a priest, or in a church (i.e. the sacraments)...the treasury of the blessings of Christ has been deposited nowhere but in Christ...there is no fellowship with the person of Christ without sharing with his person...*Christ himself and all his benefits* belong to the church through the Holy Spirit.”⁵

CONCLUSION: Olson’s protestations notwithstanding (and methinks he doth protest too much, anyway), and so as the saying goes, “If it looks like a duck, walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it’s a duck.” Barth was right. This is semi-Pelagianism, and the inevitable result of all types of synergism. Olson’s repeated emphasis on the prominence of grace in the Arminian system is also suspect. Simply using the word “grace” does not guarantee that works are not involved as Sinclair Ferguson points out, “In fact the late medieval church was almost obsessed with grace – and how the individual gets ‘more’ of it by doing what he can. The Reformers well understood that Roman Catholic theology did not outright deny the necessity of grace. Rather they recognized that the ‘grace’ referred to was really not grace at all – since its reception was so conditioned on a man’s good works. To say ‘grace’ is by no means the same thing as to understand or teach ‘grace.’ One should never be misled by the regular occurrence of the word ‘grace’ into assuming that a biblical understanding of grace is well understood.”⁶ I close with a final word on the subject from Spurgeon. “I suppose there are some persons whose minds naturally incline towards the doctrine of free-will. I can only say that mine inclines as naturally towards the doctrines of sovereign grace. Sometimes, when I see some of the worst characters in the street, I feel as if my heart must burst forth in tears of gratitude that God has never let me act as they have done! I have thought, if God had left me alone, and had not touched me by His grace, what a great sinner I should have been! I should have run to the utmost lengths of sin, dived into the very depths of evil, nor should I have stopped at any

vice or folly, if God had not restrained me. I feel that I should have been a very king of sinners, if God had let me alone. I cannot understand the reason why I am saved, except upon the ground that God would have it so. I cannot, if I look ever so earnestly, discover any kind of reason in myself why I should be a partaker of Divine grace. If I am not at this moment without Christ it is only because Christ Jesus would have His will with me, and that will was that I should be with Him where He is, and should share His glory. I can put the crown nowhere but upon the head of Him whose mighty grace has saved me from going down into the pit. Looking back on my past life, I can see that the dawning of it all was of God; of God effectively. I took no torch with which to light the sun, but the sun enlightened me. I did not commence my spiritual life—no, I rather kicked, and struggled against the things of the Spirit: when He drew me, for a time I did not run after Him: there was a natural hatred in my soul of everything holy and good. Wooings were lost upon me—warnings were cast to the wind—thunders were despised; and as for the whispers of His love, they were rejected as being less than nothing and vanity. But, sure I am, I can say now, speaking on behalf of myself, “He only is my salvation.” It was He who turned my heart, and brought me down on my knees before Him. I can in very deed, say with Doddridge and Toplady—

‘Grace taught my soul to pray,
And made my eyes o’erflow;’

And coming to this moment, I can add—

‘Tis grace has kept me to this day,
And will not let me go.’”⁷

ENDNOTES

¹ B. B. Warfield, *The Plan of Salvation* (rpt. Simpson Publishing, 1989) p. 30.

² Roger Olsen, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* (IVP, 2006) p. 81.

³ K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of God II* (T & T Clark, 1957) p. 67.

⁴ *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield V* (rpt. Baker, 1981) p. 359.

⁵ H. Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith: A survey of Christian Doctrine* (Eerdmans, 1956) p. 399.

⁶ S. Ferguson, in *Justified In Christ: God’s Plan For Us In Justification*, ed. K. S. Oliphint (Mentor, 2007) p. XX.

⁷ C. H. Spurgeon, “A Defense of Calvinism,” available at <http://www.spurgeon.org/calvinis.htm>.