

Arminians

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Years ago in one of my Bible studies I mentioned something about what Arminians believe, and I got a few curious looks. Finally one guy said, "Yeah, those guys are really funny looking. I saw some of those priests from the Armenian Church in Jerusalem when I was there." I immediately thought about what a huge difference the letter e can make. I was referring my comments to the followers of the theology originally developed by Jacob Arminius who was a Dutch theologian and professor of theology in Leiden around 1603. They mistook my reference to mean people from the country of Armenia.

What a Difference an e Makes

The nation of Armenia is a landlocked mountainous country to the east of Turkey which was a former part of the Soviet Union. Amazingly it was the first country to adopt Christianity as its official state religion back in 301 AD. This was ten years before the Roman Empire even granted Christianity legal status as a tolerated religion. They trace their Christian roots all the way back to two Apostles of Jesus---Thaddeus and Bartholomew. Their tradition tells us these two Apostles preached in Armenia around 60 AD. To this day, the Armenian Church is a separate church and not a part of the Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, or Protestant churches. Just as my student had said, they do have a presence in Jerusalem. The Armenian Church claims ownership to the historic and famous Church of the Holy Sepulchre where traditionally Christ is thought to have been buried. The Armenian priests have gotten a lot of press from their brawls with the Greek Orthodox priests who also claim the church. As late as November, 2008 Israeli police have had to break up large scale punch-outs in the church, and on June 9, 2009 a 34 year old Armenian priest was found dead having mysteriously fallen down a flight of stairs.

Jacob Arminius

The Arminius that I was referring to in my Bible study is well known in Protestant theological circles as the guy who dared to differ with the followers of John Calvin after the Reformation. Contrary to popular opinion, Calvin and Arminius never even met or conversed. Calvin died in 1564 and Arminius was born in 1560. Calvin had established a wonderful theological academy in Geneva, Switzerland and he picked one of his students and disciples to operate it after his death, Theodore Beza. Arminius had attended Leiden University for five years, but enrolled for higher education in Calvin's Academy about 1581. He and Beza got along famously, and Arminius appeared to be in full agreement to the teachings of Calvin during his studies there. In 1587, Arminius became a pastor in Amsterdam. There was quite a bit of debate going on at the time about Calvin's view of predestination, but there is no evidence that Arminius entered this debate until after he received his doctorate, and became a professor at Leiden University in 1603. Arminius rose to the forefront of the debate because he said he was concerned that the doctrine of election and predestination seemed to make God the author of evil. At the time, some of the second generation of Calvinists had gone beyond Calvin's teaching and were actually saying that the atoning work of Christ was only for the elect, and God actually prevented those non-elect from coming to Christ.

There is a huge distinction between saying God elects some unto salvation, and leaves the rest to their just rewards (Calvinism); and saying that God elects some to salvation and actively works unbelief in the lives of the rest (sometimes called double-predestination). Neither Luther or Calvin or any of the first generation reformers that I am aware of taught this type of double-predestination. James 1:13 seems to be very clear that God cannot tempt or lead anyone to evil.

The Remonstrants

The word remonstrants sounds like some sort of powerful laxative to me, but is a word meaning the protesters or objectors. It was a word used to describe the followers of Jacob Arminius who protested against the Calvinist teachings of predestination and election. Arminius argued until his death in 1609, that God's election of believers was an election conditioned on faith, meaning that in God's foreknowledge He foresaw who would believe. Furthermore, Arminius argued that God's foreknowledge did not require His determinism. From all of my research, Jacob Arminius does not seem to be a controversial combative guy. He was raising issues that disturbed him, and he asked for tolerance for his views, nothing more. In fact, two months before his death in 1609 he was acquitted of any doctrinal error by the State General. Nevertheless, his followers took the debate into a combative mode in 1610 by publishing five "articles of Remonstrance", formerly protesting in a public forum the teachings of Calvinism. This turned into a great controversy that transformed a mild Arminian movement into an attack on the dominant view of a very popular leader of the Reformation.

The Remonstrants took Arminian teaching to a higher more developed level that separated itself forever from Calvinism, which Arminius never meant to do. Arminius always considered himself as a Calvinist. As in any competitive debate, the competitors sought to draw wider distinctions between themselves. Thus both sides developed positions that neither Calvin or Arminius may have supported.

A little known fact is that the Arminian position as stated in the Remonstrants was the first FIVE POINTS. Most people have only heard of the Five Points of Calvinism, but they were actually the response of Calvinists to the five points of the remonstrants. The five points of the remonstrants were: 1. election was conditioned on faith, 2. Christ's atonement was unlimited in extent, 3. total depravity, 4. prevenient and resistible grace, 5. the possibility of apostasy (thus losing your salvation)

What's Up at Dort ?

The Synod of Dort in 1618-1619 was a church council type meeting of mainly Calvinist representatives from England, Switzerland, Germany, and France. The synod ruled that Arminius' teachings were heretical, and responded with its own five points which in history came to be known as the FIVE POINTS OF CALVINISM which are now associated with the acrostic TULIP---1.Total depravity, 2. Unconditional election, 3. Limited atonement, 4. Irresistible grace, 5. Perseverance of the saints

Struggling With That #3

Let me attempt to review these points:

1. I consider myself a Calvinist to the extent that he was actually an Augustinian. What Calvin did a great job of was to reestablish and develop the original doctrines of Augustine which had been so altered and stretched during the medieval ages and middle ages up until the Reformation. Total depravity does not refer to specific sins that we are continuously offending God with so much as a position of the entire human race alienated by God by the general state of sin begun by Adam. We are all separated from God by a wide chasm that only Jesus Christ can bridge for us. In our state of alienation (before Christ), we cannot please God until we are reconciled to God. You may say, "but how can I be held responsible for the sin of Adam?" His original act of rebellion was preceded by God's warning that "you shall surely die" if you disobey. This death meant more than just physical death, it meant a complete separation from God, and it was conveyed to the entire human race. If anyone disagrees, I have the statistics on death, and they are impressive. From the point in time sin entered the world, everything changed for the entire human race. Therefore, we are all together in need of reconciliation with God, and God out of His great love has provided the sacrifice of His Son to accomplish that reconciliation.

2. I have no problem with unconditional election which is a necessity because of total depravity. God must intervene with His grace for me to be saved because of the wide chasm between me and His holiness. I believe that people have a misnomer which is sometimes called double predestination which did not arise from Calvin, and is not a part of the majority view. This unbiblical misnomer is that God not only elects (chooses and calls), but also prevents the non-elect from being saved. Traditional Calvinism is that God chose whom to save, and left the rest to themselves so that justice is served. I don't have a problem with justice for the world, but I am amazed that God would show grace to you and I. As James said, God does not cause sin or unbelief in their lives. Praise God that He is merciful to us, and gives justice to all. I found a good quote from R.C. Sproul, "If God is required by some cosmic law apart from Himself to be merciful to all people, then we would have to conclude that justice demands mercy. If that were so, then mercy is no longer voluntary, but required and is no longer mercy, but justice."

3. I do have a big problem with #3, the so called limited atonement—meaning Christ only died for the elect. The Bible does not present it that way, but I believe is clear that Christ's atoning work was sufficient for all the sins of the whole world, and that by rejecting Christ, unbelievers are held responsible thus preserving the responsibility of man. If Christ did not die for everyone, then how could they be held responsible? We are all familiar with Jn.3:16, "For God so loved the world...that whoever believes", but look at the corresponding verses 17-18 that says that whoever does not believe has been judged---this means that people are held responsible for not believing. This is not the only passage, but there is a wealth of others like Acts 3:25-26, 1 Tim.2:3-4, 2 Peter 3:9, 1John 2:2 and many more. Unlimited atonement means that Christ's death was sufficient to atone for the sins of all people and whoever does not believe is therefore responsible.

4. Irresistible grace simply means that God's grace is effective in preparing and calling the heart and mind to believe in the Gospel. Without God's grace, we continue in the state of separation from God under the dominion of sin. We need God's grace to bridge that chasm to God. That is why we say that we are saved by grace alone and it is received by faith. Grace alone is a less offensive way of saying irresistible grace, but the important thing is that it is the grace of God and no act of our own. If it was resistible, it would not only imply a work or act of our own, but it would be insane that someone God prepares and calls to receive eternal life in bliss and glory in Heaven would turn it down.

The fifth point of "the perseverance of the saints" is simply that once God saves you, you have the security of your salvation. I think a review of Romans 8:31-39 and such passages as John 10:27-30 will offer a better explanation than I can give.

What Difference Does it all Make?

I don't blame you for asking, but a thorough study of church history and the history of doctrine as it pertains to sin and salvation may prove that when groups of people get "off the track" on these issues it leads over time to destructive problems. These problems are not limited to: an emphasis on the work of man as opposed to the work of God, humanism instead of glorifying God, having a lower view of God's Word, no emphasis on "walking in the Spirit", and paying more attention in our seminaries to what theologians say instead of what God says.

Isn't This Stuff Divisive ?

It was, but it doesn't have to be. I am convinced that if Jacob Arminius had lived another 10 years there would have been no Remonstrants, no "in your face" challenges to the church leaders. Arminius had already demonstrated that he was a peacemaker who was trying to discuss concerns that he had about preserving the holiness of God. His requests had been for a church council meeting to ask for tolerance for his views. It was his followers after his death that took his views to another level of protests that were received as threats. After all, Arminius considered himself a Calvinist, and earlier he had been affirmed by Theodore Beza who was more "Calvinist" than John Calvin.

Many people confuse Arminius with Pelagius. Pelagius was a totally different situation. The views of Pelagius were clearly heresy, and have no place in Christianity. Pelagius supported a works based salvation, but Arminius held to salvation by faith alone. Arminius also believed in the doctrine of original sin and total depravity. I disagree with his followers on several issues, but I am convinced I will see him in Heaven.

In all things let us make sure that our purpose is to glorify God and not man. As Paul said, "whatever you do in word or deed, do in the name of the Lord Jesus."

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