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Arminius—Hero or Heretic?

No doubt many would answer 'The Latter' to Dr Cameron's question without further ado. The author, who is minister of St Ninian's Church, Dunfermline, suggests that we find out what Arminius really said and this may lead to a somewhat different answer.

Some proclaim Arminius as a hero. Others denounce him as a heretic. It may, however, be more accurate to describe him as an enigma. Commenting on the enigmatic character of Arminius, Carl Bangs writes,

Some Calvinists, finding that his writings do not produce the heresies they expected, have charged him with teaching secret heresy, unpublished. Many Arminians, finding him too Calvinistic, have written him off as a transitional thinker, a 'forerunner'.¹

Arminius is a largely misunderstood theologian. He is frequently assessed according to superficial hearsay. Much has been written on Calvin. A great deal less work has been done on Arminius. This article may go a little way towards redressing the balance. A serious attempt to understand Arminius will carefully avoid two less than helpful approaches—rushing towards an overhasty 'Calvinist' critique of Arminius, and setting Arminius on a pedestal where he is beyond criticism. It is hoped, then, that this short study of Arminius will encourage a more constructive approach to the Calvinist—Arminian debate.

This article is chiefly concerned with a discussion of the doctrines commonly known as 'the five points of Calvinism'. We begin, however, with three introductory points regarding Arminius.

(1). We should not exaggerate the differences between Calvin (1509-64) and Arminius (1560-1609).

(2). We should pay close attention to Arminius' concern with reconciliation between himself and his Calvinist critics.

(3). We should note carefully Arminius' avowed commitment to Scripture. *First*, the differences between Calvin and Arminius should

¹ *Arminius: A Study in the Dutch Reformation* (Grand Rapids, 1985), 18.

not be exaggerated. It would come as a great surprise to many to hear Arminius recommending Calvin's *Commentaries* in the following terms:

after the reading of Scripture, which I strenuously inculcate . . . more than any other . . . I recommend that the *Commentaries* of Calvin be read . . . in the interpretation of the Scriptures Calvin is incomparable . . . his *Commentaries* are more to be valued than anything that is handed down to us in the writings of the Fathers . . . I concede to him a certain spirit of prophecy in which he stands distinguished above others, above most, indeed, above all.²

Second, we should pay close attention to Arminius' concern with reconciliation. In his lecture, 'On Reconciling Religious Dissensions Among Christians' (February 8, 1606), he says that there are four things we must keep in mind:

first, it is very difficult to discover truth and avoid error; second, people who err are more likely to be ignorant than malicious; third, those who err may be among the elect; and fourth, it is possible that we ourselves are in error.³

Third, we should note carefully Arminius' avowed commitment to Scripture. Arminius maintains that his only ambition is 'to inquire with all earnestness in the Holy Scriptures for divine truth . . . for the purpose of my winning some souls for Christ'.⁴ Concerning the controversial subject of predestination, he writes,

One caution ought to be strictly observed, that nothing be taught concerning it (predestination) beyond what the Scriptures say.⁵

Shortly before his death, Arminius wrote:

I have guarded with the greatest solicitude and care against advancing or teaching anything which, after a diligent search into the Scriptures, I had not found exactly to agree with those sacred records.⁶

Before entering upon our discussion of 'the five points of Calvinism' (*Canons of Dort*, approved at the Synod of Dort, 1618–19), we note two basic observations concerning the difference between Arminius and Arminianism. First, Fred Klooster, in his

² *Praestantium ac eruditorum virorum epistolae ecclesiasticae et theologicae*, no. 101. This excerpt from a letter to Egbertsz., May 3, 1607 is cited by Bangs, *Op. cit.*, 287.

³ *The Works of James Arminius, D.D.*, (American edition of 1956; = *Works*), I, 183. Cited by Bangs, *Op. cit.*, 276.

⁴ *Works*, II, 475–478. Cited by Bangs, *Op. cit.*, 296.

⁵ *Works*, I, 569. Cited by Bangs, *Op. cit.*, 263.

⁶ *The Works of James Arminius, D.D.* (London edition of 1825, 1828, and 1875), I, 46–47. Cited by Bangs, *Op. cit.*, 330.

article, 'The Doctrinal Deliverances of Dort', points out that Arminius 'did not work out or develop the system of doctrine that has come to be called by his name'.⁷

Second, Alan Sell, in his book, *The Great Debate. Calvinism, Arminianism and Salvation*, maintains that 'in important respects, Arminius was not an Arminian'.⁸

The 'five points of Calvinism' are frequently referred to by the acronym 'TULIP', with each of the five letters of the word 'tulip' standing for one of the five points of Calvinism: Total depravity, Unconditional election, limited atonement, Irresistible grace, Perseverance of the saints. In discussing these matters, we must take care that the system does not take precedence over the gospel. When the system prevails over the gospel, the question which preoccupies us is this: Are you a Calvinist or an Arminian? When the gospel is at the forefront of our attention, the question which really concerns us is this: Is the gospel really coming through to me in my reading of Scripture? As we explore this subject, the grace of God in salvation, we must seek earnestly and prayerfully that the gospel will really come through to us.

Total Depravity

The issue which concerns us here is the relationship between 'free will' and grace. Arminius stated that his objective was to present 'a theology of grace which does not leave man "a stock or a stone"'.⁹ There is in fact, a twofold objective here.

First, Arminius wants to present a theology of grace, a theology which is really and truly a theology of grace, and not a man-centred theology of works. Second, he wants to understand grace in a way that will not devalue the real significance of human experience.

Arminius struggles to avoid determinism. He emphasizes that the real contrast is not between determinism and free will. Rather, it is the contrast between grace and sin.

In presenting his theology of grace, Arminius affirms that 'grace (is) essential for the beginning, continuation, and consummation of faith'.¹⁰ He stresses that the possibility of faith is 'a possibility of grace'.¹¹ Faith is not a good work by which man earns salvation. Our act of believing does not give us any grounds for boasting before God.

⁷ P. Y. de Jong (ed.), *Crisis in the Reformed Churches: Essays in commemoration of the great Synod of Dort, 1618-1619* (Grand Rapids, 1968), 54.

⁸ Worthing, West Sussex, 1982, 97.

⁹ *Works*, III, 529-530. Cited by Bangs, *Op. cit.*, 195.

¹⁰ Bangs, *Ibid.*, 343.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 343.

Arminius stresses that there is no 'free will' in the life of sin.¹² Sinful man is in bondage. He can only be liberated by an act of grace. In a lecture entitled, 'On the Free Will of Man and Its Powers' (July 23, 1605), Arminius 'spares nothing in describing the loss of free will in the state of sin'.¹³

In this state the free will of man towards the true good is not only wounded, maimed, infirm, bent, and weakened, but it is also imprisoned, destroyed, and lost . . . it has no powers whatever except such as are excited by divine grace.¹⁴

In this account of the relationship between grace and sin, Arminius 'leave(s) no room at all for an initiation of repentance and faith by free will'.¹⁵ It is hardly surprising that Carl Bangs comments:

Few of those who called themselves Arminians in later centuries could have accepted a position so strongly Calvinistic.¹⁶

This is not, however, all that Arminius says about 'free will'. He distinguishes between freedom from necessity and freedom from sin. Man may be 'addicted to evil',¹⁷ but he is not the prisoner of a deterministic necessity. In emphasizing the sinfulness of man and the necessity of divine grace, Arminius insists that

The entire process of believing—from 'initial fear' to 'illumination, regeneration, renovation, and confirmation'—is of grace.¹⁸

Stressing that man is not the victim of deterministic necessity, Arminius maintains that 'Grace rescues free will, but not without the choice of the will thus rescued'.¹⁹ He contends that

Evangelical belief is the free choice to receive offered grace, which offered grace makes the free choice possible. In all this man does nothing apart from grace: he earns nothing; he contributes nothing; but he chooses freely.²⁰

By emphasizing that the real contrast is the contrast between grace and sin, and not the contrast between determinism and free will, Arminius is able to make two very important points:

¹² *Ibid.*, 191.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 269.

¹⁴ *Works*, I, 526–529. Cited by Bangs, *Op. cit.*, 269.

¹⁵ Bangs, *Ibid.*, 269.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 269.

¹⁷ *The Works of James Arminius, D.D.* (London edition of 1825, 1823 and 1875), III, 470–471. Cited by Bangs, *Op. cit.*, 215.

¹⁸ Bangs, *Ibid.*, 341.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 216.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 216.

First, all the glory for salvation must be given not to ourselves but to God; Second, it would be quite wrong to imagine that we ourselves have no say in whether or not we believe in Jesus Christ for salvation.

Unconditional Election

It should not be supposed that Arminius denies the doctrines of election and predestination. Concerning the doctrine of election, he writes,

I do not present as a matter of doubt the fact that God has elected some to salvation, and not elected or passed by others, for I think that this is certain from the plain words of Scripture.²¹

He insists that 'no one is saved except through an act of predestination'.²² He offers the following definition of predestination:

Predestination . . . is the decree of the good pleasure of God in Christ by which he resolved within himself from all eternity to justify, adopt, and endow with eternal life, to the praise of his own glorious grace, believers on whom he had decreed to bestow faith.²³

He emphasizes that this decree is an eternal decree 'because God does nothing in time which he has not decreed to do from all eternity'.²⁴ According to Arminius, this predestination—'believers shall be saved, unbelievers shall be damned'—is absolute.²⁵ Arminius insists that he is not 'inserting the element of conditionality into the arena of grace'.²⁶ He is not teaching that salvation is 'purchased by man' through his act of faith.²⁷ Arminius stresses that 'repentance is not a meritorious work' and that '(t)he same is true of faith'.²⁸ He writes,

We give the name of 'believers' not to those who would be such by their own merits or strength, but to those who by the gratuitous and peculiar kindness of God would believe in Christ.²⁹

²¹ *Works*, III, 94. Cited by Bangs, *Op. cit.*, 201.

²² *Praestantium ac eruditorum virorum epistolae ecclesiasticae et theologicae*, no. 26. Cited by Bangs, *Op. cit.*, 204. The manuscript of this letter to Uitenbogaert is in 'the Remonstrant collection housed in the University of Amsterdam, R. K., III E, 17' (Bangs, *Ibid.*, 203, n. 36).

²³ *Works*, I, 565. Cited by Bangs, *Op. cit.*, 262.

²⁴ *Works*, I, 566. Cited by Bangs, *Op. cit.*, 262.

²⁵ *The Works of James Arminius, D.D.* (London edition of 1825, 1828, and 1875), III, 451. Cited by Bangs, *Op. cit.*, 219.

²⁶ This phrase is borrowed from M. Charles Bell, *Calvin and Scottish Theology: The Doctrine of Assurance*, (Edinburgh, 1985), 9.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁸ Bangs, *Op. cit.*, 351.

²⁹ 'Public Disputation, 15', in *Works*, I, 567. Cited by Bangs, *Op. cit.*, 351.

In emphasizing that faith is not a meritorious work, he points out that

no one except a sinner can know or acknowledge Christ for his Savior, for he is the Savior of sinners.³⁰

We will now make some comments on Arminius' view of predestination. *First*, he teaches that predestination is 'in Christ'.³¹ These words 'in Christ' are very important. We do not need to think in terms of a deterministic necessity in order to avoid the idea that faith is a meritorious work. We simply need to utter those precious words, 'in Christ'. Commenting on Paul's use of the words 'in Christ', G. C. Berkouwer writes,

Ephesians 1:4 emphasizes the exclusion of all merit by mentioning the name of Christ.³²

Second, he describes predestination as 'the decree of the good pleasure of God'.³³ Commenting on the phrase 'the good pleasure of God', a phrase which is used in the Authorised Version's translation of Ephesians 1:5, 9, G. C. Berkouwer stresses that it should not be 'detached from the grace of God' and that it should not be set 'in contrast to the historical gospel'.³⁴ This phrase 'the good pleasure of God' is not to be understood in the sense of God doing anything he arbitrarily chooses to do. Rather, it is to be understood along these lines: the good pleasure of God is his gracious purpose to save.

Third, he speaks of the predestination of 'believers'.³⁵ This aspect of Arminius' view of predestination is closely related to his interpretation of Romans 9. Arminius comments thus on Romans 9,

I candidly confess that this chapter has always seemed to me to be involved in the greatest obscurity, and its explanation has appeared most difficult.³⁶

This does not, however, prevent him from boldly taking issue with the interpretation given by his opponents. He says that they 'misunderstand the chapter because they look in it for an answer to a question with which it is not dealing'.³⁷ He insists that Romans 9 does not speak about a hidden will of God. He points out that we are clearly taught the identity of those whom God wills to harden:

³⁰ 'Private Disputation, 44', in *Works*, I, 110-111. Cited by Bangs, *Op. cit.*, 342.

³¹ *Works*, I, 565. Cited by Bangs, *Op. cit.*, 262.

³² *Divine Election* (Grand Rapids, 1960), 143.

³³ *Works*, I, 565. Cited by Bangs, *Op. cit.*, 262.

³⁴ *Op. cit.*, 145, 151.

³⁵ *Works*, I, 565. Cited by Bangs, *Op. cit.*, 262.

³⁶ *Works*, III, 528. Cited by Bangs, *Op. cit.*, 194.

³⁷ Bangs, *Ibid.*, 195.

Nothing is more plain in Scripture that that sinners persevering in their sins against the longsuffering of God, who invites them to repentance, are those whom God wills to harden.³⁸

Arminius understands Romans 9 in terms of a 'predestination of classes'—'those who seek righteousness by works and those who seek it by faith': Esau is a type of those who seek righteousness by works while Jacob is a type of those who seek righteousness by faith.³⁹ Summing up Arminius' interpretation of Romans 9, Bangs writes,

What, then, is the message of Romans 9? It is the message of justification by faith. It is the message of the freedom of God's mercy, whereby he alone determines who shall be saved, namely, the believer. This is an affirmation of predestination. God has predestined to salvation all who believe in Christ.⁴⁰

A similar interpretation of Romans 9 has been presented by the modern interpreter, H. Ridderbos. He insists that Romans 9 is not concerned with 'irrevocable "eternal" decrees' but with 'the electing character of God's grace, not based on human merit or strength'.⁴¹ Ridderbos speaks of 'the fixed and unassailable character of divine redemption', emphasizing that it 'does not rest on the fact that the church belongs to a certain "number", but that it belongs to Christ'.⁴² He stresses that

the fixed and unassailable character of the divine work of redemption . . . does not lie in a hidden *decretum* . . . but in the corporate unity of the church with Christ, whom it has come to know in the gospel and has learned to embrace in faith.⁴³

Romans 9 need not be seen as an enigma at the heart of the great epistle of justification by faith. Rather, it can be seen as a chapter which emphasizes the doctrine of justification by faith no less than any other part of this great epistle. We do not need to think in terms of a paradox between a 'kerygmatic' trend in Paul's thinking and a 'predestinational' trend.⁴⁴ G. C. Berkouwer emphasizes the importance of this point when he writes,

To isolate election from the love of God in Christ is dangerous . . . because it is impossible afterwards to connect the two. The gospel can be

³⁸ *Works*, III, 548–549. Cited by Bangs, *Op. cit.*, 197.

³⁹ Bangs, *Ibid.*, 196.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 198.

⁴¹ *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids, 1975), 345.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 350.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 350–351.

⁴⁴ Cf. G. C. Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, 133.

preached with real urgency and challenge only when the mirror of election is a clearly reflecting mirror.⁴⁵

Fourth, Arminius maintains that predestination is 'from all eternity'.⁴⁶ It is at this point that I would suggest that Arminius runs into difficulties. Alongside his idea of the predestination of classes, he sets his view of the predestination of individuals—'predestination of classes is absolute or without qualification; predestination of individuals is with respect to foreseen faith'.⁴⁷ When Arminius speaks of the predestination in terms of this interpretation of the relationship between foreknowledge and predestination, he leaves himself open to criticism.⁴⁸

(a). It is doubtful whether the word 'foreknowledge' should be understood to mean knowledge of an event before it happens. It might be wiser to connect our interpretation of the word 'foreknowledge' with those biblical passages which tend to equate the word 'know' with the word 'love'.⁴⁹ The significance of the word 'foreknowledge' would then be that it reminds us that we have been loved by God long before we ever thought of loving him.

(b). G. C. Berkouwer, citing H. Bavinck, stresses that while God's counsel may be described as 'an eternal act of God', it should not be described as 'an act of God in the past'.⁵⁰ J. Philip makes a similar point:

although the Bible speaks of predestination 'before all worlds', it does not necessarily mean any 'long-long-ago' kind of idea;⁵¹

We should perhaps think of eternity as something all round us and liable to break in at any moment;⁵²

The word 'decree' has a rather unhappy and unfortunate connotation in its use in the thought of election and predestination . . . The idea of a

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁴⁶ *Works*, I, 565. Cited by Bangs, *Op. cit.*, 262.

⁴⁷ Bangs, *Ibid.*, 219.

⁴⁸ Rom. 8:29—'For those whom he foreknew he also predestined . . .' (R.S.V.), 1 Peter 1:2—'Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father . . .' (A.V.). The point at issue concerns whether such phrases should be understood according to Arminius' interpretation of the relationship between foreknowledge and predestination.

⁴⁹ 'The word "know" is used often for God's gracious love in the Old Testament—cf. Gen. 18:19; Ex. 33:12; Jer. 1:5; Amos 3:3; Hos. 13:5; and in the New Testament, 1 Cor. 8:3; gal. 4:9.' C. Pinnock (ed.), *Grace Unlimited*, (Minneapolis, 1975), 186, n. 45.

⁵⁰ *Op. cit.*, 152.

⁵¹ *The Westminster Confession of Faith: An Exposition, Part 1, Chapters 1-8*, (Edinburgh, 1966), 27.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 27.

decree does tend to sweep our minds away in a rather precarious direction. It may be this is why the Scriptures do not use the word. This shows us how careful we must be, when speaking of spiritual realities, to speak of them in words which the Bible uses.⁵³

(c). When Arminius bases his view of predestination on a particular temporal order, we may ask how appropriate it is to apply a temporal order to eternity.⁵⁴ G. C. Berkouwer suggests that speaking of predestination in this way is 'a clear form of humanization of God'.⁵⁵ Here, we need to heed the advice of both I. H. Marshall:

*our language of predestination . . . applied to divine-human relationships . . . does break down.*⁵⁶

and G. C. Berkouwer:

he who speaks of God's counsel in terms of human categories will have to be aware of the inadequacy of his words.⁵⁷

Arminius may have run into difficulties with his view of the relationship between foreknowledge and predestination. Nonetheless, he has achieved a great deal in his doctrine of predestination, as Bangs points out:

Arminius had a high degree of success in meeting the criteria which he had established for an evangelical doctrine of predestination. It is Christological—based on Jesus Christ. It is evangelical—the good news of free salvation, God is not the author of sin, and man is not the author of salvation: the Reformation principle of *sola gratia, sola fidei* is maintained.⁵⁸

Limited Atonement

Here, we need to distinguish clearly between what Arminius does say and what he does not say. In emphasizing the universality of the atonement, Arminius teaches neither a universal election to salvation nor an ultimate universalism of salvation. He rejects the idea of 'a universal election to salvation' and affirms 'the particular election of

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 26, 28.

⁵⁴ G. C. Berkouwer, *Op. cit.*, citing L. Van der Zanden, *Praedestinatie in Christus*, 39.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 267.

⁵⁶ In C. Pinnock (ed.), *Op. cit.*, 135.

⁵⁷ *Op. cit.*, 152.

⁵⁸ *Op. cit.*, 354.

believers and the particular reprobation of unbelievers'.⁵⁹ In this, he echoes the reserve with which Scripture speaks of election in connection with the salvation which believers have received through faith in Jesus Christ. Arminius clearly dissociates himself from the teaching of universalism by insisting that 'saving grace is not universal'.⁶⁰ He maintains that 'saving grace is given only to those who are saved, and only those who believe are saved'.⁶¹

While Arminius does not teach a universal election to salvation, he does strongly emphasize the love of God for all sinners and the 'offering up of (the Saviour) . . . not for believers, but for men as sinners'.⁶² Here, we should note the importance of taking care in our use of words when we preach the gospel. It is one thing to say to sinners, 'You are loved'. It is quite another thing to say, 'You are elect'. The word 'loved' is used in Scripture with reference to the world for which God gave his Son as 'the Saviour of the world'.⁶³ The word 'elect' refers to those who have, in faith, received Jesus Christ as their own Saviour. There is no limitation of God's love for sinners. We dare not, however, speak of election in a way that isolates it from the experience of salvation through faith in Christ.

By speaking of the universality of the atonement, Arminius seeks to point sinners to the Saviour whose grace is freely available to them. From the cross, the message comes to all sinners:

'None need perish, none need perish. All may live, for Christ has died'.⁶⁴ In denying the idea of a universal election to salvation, Arminius intends to emphasize that the Christ who died 'for the sins of the whole world' must be received in faith if the blessings of his salvation are to be enjoyed.⁶⁵ G. Philip, in a sermon on 'Judgment', comments on the words, 'None need perish, none need perish, All may live, for Christ has died':

None need perish because Christ has died. Judgment need not be, because Christ has died. But the corollary to that is simply that judgment must be, when the Christ who died is refused.⁶⁶

By emphasizing the universality of the atonement without teaching the notion of universal salvation, Arminius teaches us that we must

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 212.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 212.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 212.

⁶² *The Works of James Arminius, D.D.*, (London edition of 1825, 1828, and 1875), III, 336. Cited by Bangs, *Op. cit.*, 214.

⁶³ Cf. Jn. 3:16; 4:42.

⁶⁴ G. M. Philip, *The School of Discipleship*, (Aberdeen, 1971), 81.

⁶⁵ The phrase, 'for the sins of the whole world' is taken from 1 Jn. 2:2.

⁶⁶ *Op. cit.*, 81.

take care in our use of the word 'forgiven'. It is one thing to say to sinners, 'You are loved by God'. It is quite another thing to say, 'You have been forgiven by God'. The gospel does not come to us, saying, 'Christ died in your place, all your sins are . . . forgiven'.⁶⁷ The gospel comes to us as a call to faith, a call to receive the forgiveness of our sins through faith in Christ. In our preaching of the gospel, we joyfully proclaim that 'the atonement originates in the love of God'.⁶⁸ We must, however, take care not to preach the message of God's love in a manner which might devalue the call for the response of faith through which forgiveness is received.⁶⁹

Irresistible Grace

Arminius is outspoken in his opposition to the concept of irresistible grace. He says that 'to deny that man can resist grace is to go against Scripture'.⁷⁰ He expresses himself even more forthrightly when he writes,

I am fully persuaded that the doctrine of irresistible grace is repugnant to the sacred Scriptures.⁷¹

It should not, however, be supposed that Arminius has a man-centred emphasis which directs our attention away from the grace of God. He emphasizes that

men are not saved because they will to be saved; they are saved because they are those whom God has predestined to save—that is, believers.⁷²

⁶⁷ G. C. Berkouwer, *Op. cit.*, 233, citing H. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, IV, 709.

⁶⁸ G. M. Tuttle, *So Rich A Soil: John McLeod Campbell on Christian Atonement*, (Edinburgh, 1986), 79.

⁶⁹ While agreeing with Tuttle's statement, 'the atonement originates in the love of God', we may call in question another phrase he uses, 'forgiveness . . . precedes the atonement' (*Ibid.*, 79). In my review of Tuttle's book, I wrote, 'I do not agree with Tuttle that "forgiveness . . . precedes the atonement" (p.79). Rather, we should say: prior to the atonement, God wills forgiveness; through the atonement, God offers forgiveness; through faith, humanity receives forgiveness; to all, the gospel says, "You are loved"; to the believer, the gospels says, "You are forgiven".' This review appears—rather surprisingly!—in two separate editions of the same theological journal—*Reformed Review*, (Holland, Michigan, autumn 1988 and spring 1989), Vol. 42, No. 1, 85 and Vol. 42, No. 3, 262–263.

⁷⁰ Bangs, *Op. cit.*, 216.

⁷¹ This statement is recorded in a letter from Adrian Borrius to Simon Episcopius, July 30, 1609, *Praestantium ac eruditorum virorum epistolae ecclesiasticae et theologicae*. It is quoted in part in *The Works of James Arminius, D.D.* (London edition of 1825, 1828, and 1875), I, 301–302; II, 230–231; and also in Caspar Brandt, *The Life of James Arminius, D.D.*, (American edition, 1857), 351–352. Cited by Bangs, *Op. cit.*, 325.

⁷² Bangs, *Ibid.*, 212.

While Arminius resists any suggestion that faith is the result of a deterministic necessity, he is most concerned to stress that the foundation is not man's good works but God's grace. In his lecture, 'On the Vocation of Men to Salvation', he draws attention to the activity of divine grace in bringing men to faith.

Vocation is God's gracious act in Christ whereby he calls 'sinful men who are liable to condemnation' . . . The man who is the subject of vocation is 'unworthy to be called, and unfit to answer the call' . . . External vocation is by the ministry of men; internal vocation is the inward illumination of the Holy Spirit.⁷³

In his refusal to accept the idea of irresistible grace, Arminius is seeking to make two points. First, the man who responds to divine grace does make a real choice when he chooses Christ. Second, the man who refuses Christ is seriously and sincerely called to receive salvation through faith in Christ.

The believer gratefully acknowledges the activity of divine grace in bringing him to faith—'He drew me and I followed on, Charmed to confess the voice divine'—without drawing attention away from his own choice—'O happy day! that fixed my choice on Thee, my Saviour and my God'.⁷⁴ When the believer is led by grace to know the love of Christ, it is—as though—he could hardly resist such grace. Nevertheless, the possibility of resisting the divine grace is a real one, and the choice of Christ is a real choice. The unbeliever cannot find an excuse for his unbelief in any distinction between God's revealed will and his secret will. Both secretly and openly, God does want all men to be saved. This is the good news which Arminius seeks to proclaim.

When we speak about the believer's response of faith, we must not lose sight of the activity of divine grace. Commenting on this aspect of Arminius' thought, Bangs writes,

Who then can believe? It is too simple to say for Arminius that everyone can believe. Only he who does believe can believe. One is reminded of Karl Barth's statement: 'The possibility of faith becomes manifest in its actuality'. The possibility and the act cannot be separated . . . the possibility . . . is a possibility of grace . . . in the act of believing, man's

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 323–324, citing *Works*, I, 570–574.

⁷⁴ This hymn—'O happy day, that fixed my choice'—written by Philip Doddridge (1702–51), is contained in a number of hymnbooks, e.g. *The Believers Hymn Book* (188), *Christian Worship* (365), *The Church Hymnary (Revised Edition)* (499), *Hymns For Today's Church* (442)—slightly altered wording, *Mission Praise* (169), *Redemption Hymnal* (619), *Sacred Songs and Solos* (866), *Songs of God's People* (83).

will is liberated, and his liberated will concurs in its gracious liberation.⁷⁵

When we speak of the unbeliever's refusal of Christ, we must not lose sight of the nature of divine grace. Arminius stresses that the grace of God is not 'a certain irresistible force . . . it is a Person, the Holy Spirit, and in personal relationships there cannot be the sheer overpowering of one person by another'.⁷⁶ Arminius insists that 'many persons resist the Holy Spirit and reject the grace that is offered'.⁷⁷ The believer glories in the grace through which he has been brought to salvation. The unbeliever stands under judgment because of his refusal to receive the saving grace which has been freely offered to him in Jesus Christ.

Perseverance of the Saints

Arminius could be presented as an avowed enemy of the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. In support of this interpretation of Arminius, one might cite the following passage:

In the beginning of faith in Christ . . . the believer becomes a living member of Christ; and, if persevering in the faith of Christ . . . remains a living member. But if it happens that this member grows slothful, is not careful over itself, gives place to sin, by little and little, it becomes half-dead; and so at length, proceeding still further, dies altogether, and ceases to be a member.⁷⁸

'This would seem to be emphatic evidence that Arminius takes a 'falling from grace' stance over against a 'once saved—always saved' position. If, however, we take account of some other statements made by Arminius, we find that his position is not quite so simple. Of particular relevance are the following two statements. First, Arminius states that he 'should not readily dare to say that true and saving faith may finally and totally fall away'.⁷⁹ Second, Arminius says that he had never affirmed 'that a true believer can either totally or finally fall away from the faith and perish'.⁸⁰

In an attempt to draw together these two apparently contradictory sides of Arminius' thought, we may observe that, for Arminius, 'the

⁷⁵ Bangs, *Op. cit.*, 343.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 343.

⁷⁷ *Works*, I, 253–254. Cited by Bangs, *Op. cit.*, 343.

⁷⁸ *The Works of James Arminius, D.D.*, (London edition of 1825, 1828 and 1875), III, 470. Cited by Bangs, *Op. cit.*, 219.

⁷⁹ Arminius, *Ibid.*, III, 454. Cited by Bangs, *Ibid.*, 217.

⁸⁰ *Works*, I, 254. cited by Bangs, *Op. cit.*, 348–349.

term "believer" is not exactly equivalent to the term "elect".⁸¹ He writes,

Since election to salvation comprehends within its limits not only faith but likewise perseverance in faith . . . *believers* and *the elect* are not taken for the same person.⁸²

Commenting on these aspects of Arminius' theology, Bangs writes,

He tried to construct a doctrine of assurance that would avoid the twin errors (of unwarranted security and unwarranted despair).⁸³

Arminius seeks to strengthen the true believer's assurance of salvation without giving any encouragement to a false assurance.

Anyone who has wrestled with the notoriously difficult question—'once saved, always saved' or 'falling from grace'—will appreciate the complexity of the issues involved in presenting a truly biblical doctrine of assurance. This is not merely a matter of theological theory. It is a matter of the greatest practical importance?—How can I, in the day-by-day life of faith,—enjoy an ongoing experience of salvation? The twentieth-century Dutch theologian, G. C. Berkouwer has written perceptively on the subject, *Faith and Perseverance*.⁸⁴ He maintains that 'the living preaching of the Scriptures . . . offers no metaphysical and theoretical views about . . . "permanency"' as a theme in itself.⁸⁵ He insists that Scripture does nothing to encourage 'a continuity which is . . . opposed in any way to the living nature of faith'.⁸⁶ Berkouwer stresses this point:

The perseverance of the saints is not primarily a theoretical problem but a confession of faith.⁸⁷

The perseverance of the saints is unbreakably connected with the assurance of faith.⁸⁸

L. B. Smedes has provided us with a helpful summary of Berkouwer's doctrines of perseverance:

The doctrine of perseverance is an assurance gained only in faith, in the faith that finds its way to assurance through doubt and temptation, in the faith that is directed only to Christ. The faith that looks to Christ realizes that grace has priority over his doubts and weakness. Our duty to

⁸¹ Bangs, *Ibid.*, 349.

⁸² *Works*, I, 385. Cited by Bangs, *Op. cit.*, 349.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 347.

⁸⁴ Grand Rapids, 1958.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

persevere is oriented to God's preservation. And we find confidence in God's preservation of us only when we see His powerful grace at the Cross. Assurance is not the prerogative of the person who can reason inferentially from a doctrine of election. Assurance is the gift that everyone finds who finds God at the Cross. The admonitions of Scripture to persevere lest we fall, the temptation to disbelieve, and the weakness of the human will, are the ways along which faith comes to rest in the reliability of grace. For these, within the Christian life of faith, are goads to drive us to the Cross, the only place where the faith-certainty of perseverance is found.⁸⁹

In our theology of salvation, we must take care to preserve the dual emphasis of Scripture on both grace and faith: 'By grace you have been saved through faith' (Eph. 2:8). It is not 'grace without faith', and it is not 'faith apart from grace'. Salvation is 'by grace without faith', and it is not 'faith apart from grace'. Salvation is 'by grace through faith'. We are 'kept by the power of God through faith' (1 Pet. 1:5). It is not 'the power of God apart from faith', and it is not 'faith independently of the power of God'. We are 'kept by the power of God through faith'. In seeking to maintain the biblical balance between grace and faith, we may—perhaps surprisingly—find in Arminius, a theologian from whom we can learn much. He does not fit easily into the Calvinist—Arminian patterns of theological pigeonholing. He challenges us to think more deeply about the gospel, which is greater than all our systems. He invites us to have confidence in the gospel of Jesus Christ without becoming overconfident in any particular interpretation, such as inflexible 'Calvinism' or superficial 'Arminianism'.

⁸⁹ In P. E. Hughes (ed.), *Creative Minds in Contemporary Theology*, (Grand Rapids, 1969), 91.