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October 16, 2010

Arminianism and Adventism: Arminian Theology as Evangelical Theology

Roger Olson brought an object lesson for Sabbath School—a tee-shirt his students made him with a picture of Arminius that said "Arminius Is My Homeboy." He says he plans to wear it to the next Calvinist conference goes to, if he ever gets invited.

His paper, "Arminian Theology as Evangelical Theology" is a response to the accusation that Arminianism is not evangelical theology. Olson asks, why do many evangelicals exclude Arminianism? They see evangelicalism as having historical roots in the Reformation, where evangelical came to mean those who have a high view of scripture, a low view of man, affirm the priesthood of all believers, and believe in redemption in Christ. Ultimately they claim that those who do not affirm monergism and Christians being simultaneously just and sinner are not evangelical. But that others such as Wesleyans and Anabaptists have defined things differently, means nothing to them. For example, Mark Noll and other historians do not define evangelicalism this way at all.

They also equate Arminianism with semi-Pelagianism, because faith is said to be the deciding factor in salvation, as opposed to faith being a gift. They reveal two things by these statements:

1. Define evangelicalism their way to exclude ideas they don't like
2. They clearly haven't read Arminius, but rather his critics. If they had, they would know that classical Arminians believe that salvation is all of grace and by faith alone.

Olson intends to show that faithful Arminians have always embraced salvation by grace alone, faith alone, and without merit. Of course, he cannot show that Arminians conform to the arbitrary standard of strict monergism the critics claim Arminianism does not meet. However, Arminians do believe the core evangelical tenet that those who accept Jesus death on the cross for their sins will be saved.

What did Arminius himself say about salvation? Olson quoted Arminius, demonstrating that he went out of his way as far as possible to affirm salvation as a sheer gift. Arminius strongly affirmed that regeneration occurs before anything good occurs in man. Arminius said that only when man has been regenerated, he is capable of doing anything good, but not without continued grace. He ascribed to grace the commencement, continuance, and consummation of all good. He intended by this statement to put to rest any notion that he ascribed too much to works. Of course, he then went on to reject irresistible grace.

Olson believes it may surprise many Arminians to learn the Arminians believe regeneration precedes one's choice for God. But this is his doctrine of prevenient grace, which is necessary for salvation. Arminius clearly stated that belief in this grace placed him in a different camp than Pelagius.

"That teacher obtains my highest approbation who ascribes as much as possible to Divine Grace; provided he so pleads the cause of Grace, as not to inflict an injury on the Justice of God, and not to take away the free will to that which is evil" (*Works*, vol 2.).

According to Arminius, all a human being does in salvation is not resist the grace of God. This nonresistance can hardly be meritorious. Of course, critics allege that this decision not to resist God is the key factor in salvation. For Olson, it boggles the mind how receiving a gift somehow makes the recipient effectual cause of the gift.

With regard to merit, Arminius said that salvation is not based on any individual's merit, but rather on grace alone. In this he believed he was in full harmony with the Reformed churches.

What about faith? Arminius had a motto that was frequently repeated by his followers: "To a man who believes faith is

imputed for righteousness through grace." Some critics have accused Arminius and his followers of turning faith into a good work, a substitute for righteousness. It is demonstrated by the context of the statement above, that, for Arminius, faith was not a substitute for righteousness but the means by which Christ's righteousness is imputed to us.

Olson emphasized that Arminius believed faith to be both a gift and an act of man. A gift, to exclude any hint of meritorious faith. An act, to avoid the perception that the God-human relationship is mechanical or impersonal. Olson suggests that this paradox can be relieved by understanding Arminius to mean that under prevenient grace God offers the sinner the gift of salvation and under the same grace the sinner is able to accept the gift.

Arminius always believed that faith would be accompanied by works, but that works have no saving merit. Echoing Arminius, the Arminian confession states that faith, good works, and saving actions are to be solely attributed to the grace of God. For the Arminians, justification was a remission of all guilt because of Jesus Christ, for in the judgment of God we cannot attain to it except by the grace of God.

What more do the critics of Arminianism want? Olson supposes that they want a clear affirmation of monergistic grace. But the evangel simply requires affirmation of justification by faith.

Of course, Calvinists could say that Arminianism took a wrong path following Phillip Limborch. Arminians would say that rather Arminianism took two paths: Arminianism of the head and Arminianism of the heart. But Olson argues that even the worst Arminians, Limborch, was still not semi-Pelagian.

John Wesley was even called by one Reformed theologian, a confused Calvinist. Wesley expressly rejected semi-Pelagian synergism, saying he did not mean that men can of themselves turn to God. By synergism, he said he meant that human freedom is enabled by God in accordance with his saving plan. This grace, for Wesley, did not rely on any good works of man, but rather humans are enabled by grace.

Wesley preached two sermons on justification, and in one of them he declared good works unholy and sinful. Of course, by this he referred to good works as a way to gain merit.

Wesley departed from Arminius in that he did not believe justification was imputation of righteousness, which he believed to be legal fiction. Rather he considered it to be pardon. But he did not consider it to be, as in Catholic theology, God making us righteous. For Wesley, justification was God treating us as if we are righteous while knowing we are not. Olson thinks that Wesley could have affirmed the doctrine of imputation of righteousness, if he had not been afraid of antinomianism, and of the notion of God deceiving himself.

So what more could critics of Arminianism want? Apparently, what Calvinist theologians want is an affirmation of monergistic grace, because they believe it is logically necessary for salvation by grace. They also want imputation of Christ's righteousness, something many Arminians are reluctant to offer, because of the tendency to antinomianism. They also want the affirmation of being simultaneously a sinner and just, something Arminians are also reluctant to offer because it makes salvation static and ignores the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. Olson suspects that the real reason critics of Arminianism are unwilling to admit they are truly evangelical is due to an overreaction against Roman Catholicism.

Questions

If prevenient grace can be resisted, is it really prevenient grace, since the will is apparently strong enough to resist it?

There is an element of prevenient grace that is not able to be resisted, and that is its coming to us. So can it really be grace and be resistable? To me, grace that's not resistable is not grace. Somehow the prevenient grace in the heart allows the person to resist, and I don't understand the mechanisms of that.

How do you distinguish between evangelical synergism, semi-Pelagian synergism, and Roman Catholic synergism?

Synergism is a blanket term for cooperation between grace and free will in bringing about salvation. Although some have accused him of being a monergist on the human side, Pelagius himself seemed to teach that there was a universal grace of revelation that we cooperate with. Evangelical synergism says that it is the grace of restoring our free will that cooperates with saving grace. Semi-Pelagianism says that we go as far as we can toward God and then he meets us by coming the rest of the

way.

Where are Adventists in terms of God's active and passive obedience being imputed through the sinner?

Robert Olson: I can't answer that.

Jerry Moon: Ellen White is very clear that faith itself does not earn anything, it is simply the reception of God's gift. It is not of itself a good work, or the basis of salvation.

Woodrow Whidden: To me this is a quibble, a serious quibble. But when you forgive somebody, you have put them in a new legal standing.

Olson: There's a debate among baptists about this. If you say that forgiveness is the imputation of Christ's active obedience, that could be interpreted as antinomianism. If you say that it is just forgiveness for everything I've done up until now, then you have a start with a clean slate.

Whidden: Speaking of Ellen White, she speaks of Jesus making up for the Christian's deficiencies moment by moment.

Olson: When you talk about imputation, you have to be clear with what you mean by imputation. For some it means once saved always saved, for others it does not.

Can you talk about the fact that prevenient grace has a history back to Trent, which is how the council escaped the charge of semi-Pelagianism?

The reason Arminians don't want to talk about prevenient grace is because they're already fighting Catholic associations. But the difference is merit, that Catholics still think justification meritorius.

Adventists also have a history of dividing one another, and putting each other in little categories. We have to make sure that our mission with regard to the Advent of Jesus Christ, because we get distracted by controversies that were more vial in history.

I agree with you some of that. Before people discuss these issues they need to clearly define the terms. An informed thinking Christian on the Arminian side can't attend a Calvinist church, and vice versa, because we need to go to a church where truth is being taught from the pulpit. In the Baptist church we're learning to work together despite our differences.

Can you clarify passive reception?

Imagine three pits. Each represents our fallen condition. We're lying at the bottom. The first pit is semi-Pelagianism. God throws a rope down, you grab the rope, hold on, and God pulls you out. The second pit is monergism. God comes down, ties the rope around you, and then pulls you out. The third pit is Arminian passive reception. God pours water in the pit, and you have two choices. You can fight against the water, or you can let it float you out. The same grace can provoke two different reactions, and so I think this is actually a good picture of God's wrath.

What differentiates pervenient grace from common grace?

The difference is supernatural. In semi-Pelagian theology, the ability to exercise good will toward God is natural and universal. Arminian prevenient grace is supernatural. The question is whether it is universal or limited. Unfortunately not all have an opportunity to hear the gospel. God has limited himself to spreading the gospel through our evangelism. What happens to the others is God's business.

What would be the difference between God preserving our will at the fall, versus restoring our will later?

According to the Bible, God did not preserve natural ability after the fall, because the Bible talks about no one seeking God. Romans 1 also clarifies this.

Did Arminius talk at all about God having faith and relate that to prevenient grace?

No, Arminius hadn't read N. T. Wright or Richard Hays. But I think the emphasis God's faithfulness tends toward Arminianism. That's why John Piper doesn't like where N. T. Wright is going.

What would you say to the Calvinist who says that the person who is passive and lets the water raise him can take some

credit for his rescue?

Once he gets out of the pit, if he were to take the credit for saving his life, he would be scoffed.

How would classical Arminianism explain the parable of the prodigal son?

Let me think about that. I would ask how would the Calvinist explain the parable of the prodigal son. It seems easier to explain from the Arminian perspective. It could be argued that the parable is easier to explain from a semi-Pelagian perspective. But no parable makes every point. That parable is not about what caused the son to return home. It's about the grace of his father and the reaction of the elder brother.

In lay usage, when you use the word total depravity you mean someone on the level of Hitler or Idi Amin.

Total depravity does not mean being as evil as you could be. It means every aspect of you was affected by the fall. So it doesn't mean being totally evil, it means being totally helpless.

Is the second birth physical? Does something really happen? How would an Arminian explain what really happens?

I don't think an Arminian would differ from a Calvinist on what happens at the new birth. We both agree that there is an ontological change, the reception of a new affection. In the Arminian system, the born again experience happens after prevenient grace has enabled trust in Jesus Christ.

If I was to tell someone that our only hope in this life is to reach out the hand of faith and grasp the hand outstretched to save, would that be semi-Pelagianism? Is it heresy?

I don't call most American Christians heretics. I would rather say that this is an error. I think it's important in a class after evangelism to make it clear that when they reach out their hand to God's, it was because God made them able to do that. It's important that they know they didn't make this decision alone.

Posted by [David Hamstra](#) on October 16, 2010 in [Arminianism and Adventism Symposium](#), [Historical Theology](#) | [Permalink](#)

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A couple of points. First, I don't understand how one can be evangelical and deny that justification is an imputation of the righteousness of Christ. This is basic to Luther's understanding ("The first is alien righteousness, that is the righteousness of another, instilled from without. This is the righteousness of Christ by which he justifies though faith, as it is written in I Cor. 1:30: 'whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption.'") and to Ellen White ("The righteousness by which we are justified is imputed; the righteousness by which we are sanctified is imparted. The first is our title to heaven, the second is our fitness for heaven.").

Second point. I asked Olson in the Q&A about the history of the term "prevenient grace" prior to Arminius. Through this conference, it was as if this term was invented by Arminius. It wasn't. It goes back to the Synod of Orange (529 AD)

<http://www.crivoice.org/creedorange.html> -- it was also fundamental to Trent's understanding of justification.

<http://history.hanover.edu/texts/trent/ct06d1.htm>

The Council of Trent put it this way:

The Synod furthermore declares, that in adults, the beginning of the said Justification is to be derived from the prevenient grace of God, through Jesus Christ, that is to say, from His vocation, whereby, without any merits existing on their parts, they are called; that so they, who by sins were alienated from God, may be disposed through His quickening and assisting grace, to convert themselves to their own justification, by freely assenting to and co-operating with that said grace: in such sort that, while God touches the heart of man by the illumination of the Holy Ghost, neither is man himself utterly without doing anything while he receives that inspiration, forasmuch as he is also able to reject it; yet is he not able, by his own free will, without the grace of God, to move himself unto justice in His sight. Whence, when it is said in the sacred writings: Turn ye to me, and I will turn to you, we are admonished of our liberty; and when we answer; Convert us, O Lord, to thee, and we shall be converted, we confess that we are prevented by the grace of God.

Olson didn't want to get into this. He acknowledged that this was one of the reasons the Reformed had a problem with Arminius--he sounded to them like he was preaching the Tridentine dogma. Olson noted that he thinks that merit was a more critical difference between evangelical and Catholic positions. I agree. It still is. Still, I'm a historian, and I like more context.

I ran this by Keith Stanglin later in the day, and he agreed that indeed, there is a long history for the idea of prevenient grace. He acknowledged also that this is one of the reasons that Arminius' opponents were suspicious of him, and thought he might be a closet Jesuit (!). He also went into some of the other historical issues--this was the period of the Dutch War of Independence, in which the Netherlands were struggling for liberation from Spain. Religious issues could indicate which political side you were on--someone spouting Jesuit ideas would be suspected of being a Spanish agent. This is fascinating background, and I wish we would have had a broader historical survey. I appreciated Stanglin's paper, then, because he rooted Arminius' teachings on assurance of salvation in the issues he confronted as a pastor in his churches.

Posted by: Bill Cork | [October 17, 2010 at 05:10 PM](#)

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