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Arminianism and Adventism: Plenary Panel Discussion

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October 20, 2010

Arminianism and Adventism: Plenary Panel Discussion

The panel included George Knight, Angel Rodriguez, Keith Stanglin, Barry Callen, Roger Olson, Denis Fortin, and Woodrow Whidden. The moderator was Martin Hanna.

Is there not a danger that we may be making salvation too much a matter of the head instead of the heart? Are we saved by a correct understanding of salvation or by Jesus Christ in some mysterious way we can't understand anyhow? Are we some how better because we understand these differences between Calvinism and Arminianism?

WW: If you have a muddled head you'll have a messed up heart. Nevertheless, theology is not everything. And heresies are always going to produce nonsense, and all of us are saved with heresies.

DF: Arminianism and our roots in Arminianism have to do with how we understand the grace of God. Some things at this session have been very complicated, but it all relates to God's grace. Pelikan, for example, has called Wesleyanism "the theology of the heart."

RO: Salvation doesn't depend on theology, but God cares what we think about him.

KS: Prov 5 says, "let the wise add to their understanding." Peter says, "add to your faith goodness and to goodness knowledge." Also, you can't talk about salvation with out talking about practical issues and the doctrine of God as well.

AR: The answer to the question for an Adventist should not be difficult, because Ellen White has told us that the topic of atonement will be the one we will study for eternity. We should start here.

Why don't we just go to the Bible for ourselves and start over? Why corrupt ourselves with the mistakes of past Christians?

WW: Jesus said he would be with us until the end of the earth. Why should I turn my nose up at someone whom God has been with. Also it helps us to understand our DNA, where we came from.

KS: Christianity is not just between us and God. We have to live our faith together. So why should we limit this community of people only to those who are still alive. Studying history is like the democracy of the dead. It's giving voice to those who are most easily marginalized, because they aren't walking around anymore.

RO: Hebrews says that there is a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us. Why would we not want to learn by their history?

GK: There is no other field of study where people think they can ignore what people have thought before.

BC: I come from a tradition where it was considered that all history was a trail of compromise and sin but now we were approaching the perfect bride of Christ. But it doesn't take long to realize that we are deeply affected by them and are wandering into many of the same paths.

Tell us something good about Calvin. Did Arminius get it all right, and did Calvin get it all wrong?

RO: Last year was the 500th anniversary of Calvin, and *Christianity Today*, where I am a contributing editor, wanted me to write an article about what I disagree with about Calvin. So I did, and then they reversed themselves and wanted me to write something good about Calvin. So I wrote that Calvin was a theologian of the Holy spirit, unlike what we see with some Calvinists today.

BC: Calvin reminds experiential Arminians about the sovereignty of God.

DF: Calvin loved the Lord, and that's an example.

WW: I appreciate Calvin's concept of mystical union with Christ by faith in love. He took the third use of the law seriously. He was highly ordered, and he believed that the church had a real role to play

KS: Arminius also read and respected Calvin highly. He appreciated Calvin on justification and appreciated his commentaries. He also read more Calvin than any other author, according to the number of Calvin's books in his library. Calvin is theological but at the same time pastoral. He is undeservingly maligned in Christian history.

Why did Calvin and Arminius take different trajectories? How do you explain the diversity that takes place in Christian reflection of salvation?

RO: I teach that the history of Christian theology is a series of pendulum swings. A reaction is what motivates people to write. Luther was reacting against Catholicism. Arminius was also simply trying to bring about a balance.

Can someone comment on how that relates to Adventists?

GK: I've taught my students that the 11th commandment is that thou shalt not do theology against thy neighbor. But on the other hand, neighbor is always there. When I said that Adventist soteriology forms up around the polar extremes of Andreasen and Ford, I meant it. People don't just write books to write book. So when you read a book, ask where is this guy coming from, what is he trying to prove.

DF: Theology is always done in a particular context. In fact the books that sell the most are those that appeal the most directly to the context.

In order to understand the solution, we need to understand the problem, which is sin. Was there a fundamental difference between the way Calvin and Arminius understood original sin and total depravity, or did they agree?

RO: They agree

KS: I think so too.

BC: Their agreement is on the extent of the sin problem.

Can someone define total depravity?

KS: Total depravity simply means utter complete helplessness in spiritual matters.

Let me add a little twist to the question, now that I have been converted, should I really describe myself as being totally depraved?

WW: Before we go there, Wesley only really wrote one book, and that was against those who'd attacked total depravity and original sin. It was only Arminians of the head that disagreed. To the original question, if you're saved, I don't believe your totally depraved, but you're still depraved until the Lord comes.

KS: Unlike Calvin, Arminius taught that there was a difference between the guilt of original sin and the punishment of original sin. I'm still not exactly sure how that works out, but he believed that we were liable to the punishment but not the guilt.

GK: The difficulty in Adventism is not total depravity but the fallen will. We're ok with total depravity but we have a problem with the fall of the will.

How would Arminians and Calvinists answer differently the question of why Jesus had to die on the Cross?

AR: I think that the moment God decided to save the human race, the only option available was the incarnation and the death of the Son. If God was not going to allow us to take the full responsibility for our sin, there was a moral question within the Godhead that had to be address. It appears to me that the only way for God to remain who he is, was to do what he did. Of course, there is tremendous margin for disagreement on this, but it is the most important question of the atonement.

RO: We know that Arminius believed in the satisfaction theory of the atonement, but later one of his followers, Hogo Grotius, developed the governmental theory. For Grotius that cross was the only way for God to preserve his government. In the governmental theory, Jesus didn't suffer my punishment, but rather an equivalent punishment in order to uphold God's

moral government. This was in response to a criticism that if Jesus suffered my punishment and thereafter if I go to hell, my punishment is dolled out twice. Wesley rejected that and affirmed a penal substitution theory.

WW: I affirm the different models, and find that what people deny is where they go wrong. I don't believe you can get anywhere without the penalty substitution model. But that model doesn't exclude others.

How human did Christ become, and how important is it for us to get that right?

RO: He was like us except without sin

GK: Jesus was human, but he was unique. Not one of you out there was called "that holy thing" from the beginning.

AR: Christ was fully divine. He was fully human. He was without sin. The moment you say he was without sin, you have to say "unique." I don't know any other human being about whom you can say that. It's the mystery of the incarnation. There are some things you can affirm, and the rest we say, "Unique."

DF: I have appreciated very much Woody's contribution to this, from his study on Ellen White, where he looks at similarities and uniquenesses. There's something about the salvation Jesus brings and the atonement he made on calvary none of us could ever do with the human nature we have.

Is synergism the same as compromise?

BC: The truth doesn't always lie in the middle. On the other hand, Jesus was fully divine and fully human. We're caught between that, having to affirm both while realizing they are illogical. Same thing with the Bible, it's both a human and divine product. That doesn't preach as well, but it's how is is.

How sanctified do I have to be before I am qualified for glorification?

KS: I think there's a distinction between the point at which a person is forgiven and the process of becoming more and more like Christ. A lot of this has to do with the already-not yet eschatological reality. Sanctification is a process that starts maybe even before justification with regenerative work of the Holy Spirit in prevenient grace.

GK: You can separate them for the purposes of discussion, as Paul does in Romans, but practically they come together.

DF: It's important to maintain the differences theologically in order to be clear in our understanding of salvation.

GK: There's varieties of insights that we can gain through the precise use of words. Ignorance is not the result of sanctification.

Calvin and Arminius were very precise in their definition of saving faith. Are there differences in their definitions? What essentially is saving faith? Are some parts of faith not associated with saving faith?

RO: I don't see Calvin or Arminius disagreeing about what faith is. For them it was essentially trust.

KS: I agree. Both denied that believing *that* Jesus was the Son of God was saving faith, for even the devils have this. They also denied that the implicit faith of the Catholic laity was saving faith. But the followers of Calvin taught that assurance has to be there when saving faith is there. Arminius disagreed with this and taught that assurance follows saving faith.

Any thoughts about faith that works? Is that saving faith?

BC: Truly saving faith inspires the works

Let's open up for a few questions from the floor.

Is the Holy Spirit the father of Jesus or was the Father the father of Jesus?

GK: The Spirit overshadowed Mary in my reading.

What practical applications can we take home for our own personal journeys and for those to whom we minister?

DF: Take home with you that fact that the Holy Spirit works on all of our hearts before we realize it. Take home with you that when you do evangelism that Holy Spirit is already working of their hearts, drawing them to be saved. Take home the fact that our response to God is something that God has already put in our hearts, that when we say, Yes, it is something God has

already given us. Remember this when you are doing Bible studies and call for a response. Take home that true assurance comes through knowing that when you say, Yes, to God, God is already with you.

GK: It is important to realize that the initiative with salvation is always with God. We need a better understanding of human inability so that we can know that salvation is all of grace. And when we understand that, we might just be a little kinder to other people who aren't as sanctified as we are.

RO: I read a story by the author of *Young, Restless and Reformed* about a young Seventh-day Adventist who came to one of his Calvinist conferences, dissatisfied and wanting to know more about Calvinism. And I thought, if I can stop that...
[applause]

I picked up that Arminius wanted to protect God's goodness, doesn't this assume that there is some standard of God outside himself by which he can be judged? And doesn't that represent a movement away from Lutheran nominalism to Catholic realism?

RO: God himself is the standard by which he must be good.

BC: For us to say God's goodness is his standard does not denigrate his power. He is full in all his qualities.

RO: The Bible never says God is power. The Bible says God is love.


Are we theologically redundant by splitting grace into parts? Isn't grace grace?

GK: I ran into somebody who didn't like grace because he thought it denigrated the law. I said haven't you ever heard of regenerating grace. The flavors of grace of many, and once you taste one you want them all.

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Roger Olson had the right answer to the question of the nature of Christ--he said, "He was fully divine, and he was fully human--like us in everything except for sin." That's the Biblical answer. Funny that it was some Adventists on the panel that were nervous about leaving it there.

The question about who was the Father of Jesus doesn't quite come across in the summary. Knight had said, "Mary was Jesus' mother and the Holy Spirit was his father." That led the questioner to ask, "Which is it? Was the Father the Father of Jesus or was the Spirit the Father?" And Knight defended his statement based on the Holy Spirit overshadowing Mary. Well, that's very sloppy Trinitarianism. Stop, George, and think! Jesus' called the Father, "Father," for a reason. He didn't call the Holy Spirit, "Father." Yes, the Holy Spirit was involved, as the basic formula of Trinitarian theology states, "Omnia opera Trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa." That is, all the outwardly directed actions of the Trinity are indivisible--all the actions separate from their relationships with one another. Thus, you can't say the Father was the Creator, the Son the Redeemer, the Spirit the Sanctifier--that's modalism. All are involved in each of those activities, according to their proper role. So all three were involved in the incarnation--the Father sent the Son, the Son was sent, and the Spirit was the instrumentality by which the Father sent the Son.

It seems to me that Adventists really aren't yet comfortable with Trinitarian language. Oh, we've fled from Arianism, realizing that's not an option. But some flirt with Tritheism (envisioning God as a committee of interchangeable members--seen, I think, in the denial by some theologians of the eternal generation of the Son).

Posted by: [Bill Cork](#) | [October 21, 2010 at 08:46 AM](#)

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