

FROM: Life Under the Big Top, JAN/FEB 1995

Recovering God's Sovereign Grace

## **The Arminian Captivity of the Modern Evangelical Church**

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1995, 1998 Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals

It is sad to hear that today many evangelical theologians and Christians despise the notions of "God's sovereignty" and "the sovereign grace of God." Although the Holy Scripture proclaims clearly the lordship of God the Creator (Gn 1:1), it is almost impossible for a Christian to listen to a sermon emphasizing God's free and gracious work in Jesus Christ from today's pulpits.

About one hundred years ago, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, one of the most prominent Baptist-Calvinistic preachers, was deploring almost the same situation that we are facing today. "If anything is hated bitterly, it is the out-and-out Gospel of the grace of God, especially if that hateful word 'sovereignty' is mentioned with it" (The Sword & Trowel, January 1887).

Spurgeon concentrated his full energy on defending Calvinism against the Arminian doctrine of salvation. However, it is important to appreciate that Spurgeon wanted to defend the Calvinistic doctrine of redemption because it espoused God's sovereign grace and utter mercy upon totally depraved sinners so precisely and succinctly. He did not intend to worship the name 'Calvin' or the theological system 'Calvinism.' For it is not permissible for a Christian to exalt the Calvinistic system over the Bible--even though some people had done this in the past. Spurgeon wished to recover and re-emphasize the doctrine of God's sovereign grace, which the reformers including Luther and Calvin preached with the power of the Holy Spirit. "The doctrine which I preach to you is that of the Puritans: it is the doctrine of Calvin, the doctrine of Augustine, the doctrine of Paul, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit."

It is more urgent for modern evangelical churches to recover the doctrine of God's sovereign grace than it was for the churches in the nineteenth century, as modern evangelical churches have many more despisers of the grace of the sovereign God than the churches of the nineteenth

century. Many evangelical churches have been captivated by the extreme movement of Pentecostalism. A considerable number of evangelical churches have been made captive to either a Fundamentalist or Neo-Orthodox doctrine of salvation which emphasizes human 'decision.' The so-called "Born-againism" has been affecting many different sectors of the church and society. It is conspicuous that these phenomena have been based on the same theological arguments, that is, Arminianism.

We know that the Arminian doctrine of salvation emerged in the seventeenth century as a bitter challenge to the Reformation's doctrine of God's sovereign grace. James Arminius and his followers remonstrated against Calvinist theologians by presenting five theological arguments based on human autonomy and free will. First of all, they rejected the biblical teaching of the total depravity of human nature. Secondly, the doctrine of unconditional election, which both Luther and Calvin clearly espoused, was ruthlessly denounced. Next, the theory of human free will was approved and elevated to the status of biblical truth. They also rejected the limited application of the efficacy of Jesus Christ's all-sufficient redemption by asserting that the atonement merely made salvation possible. Finally, they argued that Christians could not possess any assurance of ultimate salvation.

It is important to appreciate that Arminianism is not merely a doctrine of redemption, but rather a system or world view based on belief in human sovereignty and autonomy. It may be possible to say that Arminianism as a world view came into being immediately after Adam's fall. This Arminian world view became deeply embedded in the center of people's hearts since Adam's transgression against God's Law and it exalts the autonomous power and sovereign will of human beings by denying God's absolute sovereignty and his free will. Arminianism also regards man as the center of the universe and the purpose of all things. Thus, God is regarded as instrumental for human self-realization and self-glorification by the Arminian world view. In other words, people are lords, and God is a mere servant in the Arminian approach to religion.

It is also important to understand that Arminianism is a typical expression of the way that mankind, in its depravity, typically viewed its relationship with God. The Arminian world view

completely reverses the relationship between God and man. As Luther sharply pointed out, "Man is by nature unable to want God to be God. Indeed he himself wants to be God, and does not want God to be God" (Martin Luther, "Disputation Against Scholastic Theology," art. 17). God is demoted to the status of a mere creature by Arminianism. Arminianism is ultimately dependent on a delusion that man is the center, the glory, and the goal of all things--including God!

One of the striking peculiarities of the Arminian world view is that it emphasizes the value and worth of human morality. The Arminian world view is the basis on which all the doctrines valuing human moral works rest. In this sense, Pelagianism can be regarded as an ancient representative of Arminianism. A difference between the two is that Pelagianism is more explicit than Arminianism in sanctioning the value of moral works for man's obtaining salvation.

Pelagians contended that human beings are not depraved and sinful, and that man can complete his moral perfection by his own power. Although Arminianism affirms the necessity of grace in some sense, it is like Pelagianism in regarding faith as a purely human decision to receive Jesus Christ, not as a merciful gift of God. The Pelagians believed that the voluntary determination to believe in Jesus Christ can be seen as a moral work, and justifying grace should be given according to its merit.

As Augustine attacked the Pelagian doctrine of salvation, Martin Luther encountered another representative of the moral doctrine of redemption, Erasmus. Luther wrote *The Bondage of the Will* as a reply to Erasmus' treatise, *The Freedom of the Will* in which Erasmus was critical of Luther. Luther felt that lurking behind Erasmus' arguments for freedom, merit, and good works was human pride. He stated that Erasmus' doctrine of the freedom of the will was the product of the pride of human self-centeredness. Such pride of self is the enemy of the Gospel of God's sovereign grace, which calls all to receive humbly and without conditions what God graciously offers in Christ. Luther argued that the apostle Paul's teaching of universal sinfulness nullifies human free choice and he also emphasized that since human beings are captive to original sin and total depravity, they need God's sovereign and eternal grace in Jesus Christ in order to be saved.

Calvin was another champion of the Reformation who sought to defend the concept of God's absolute sovereignty in redemption. We can see Calvin battling against Cardinal Sadoletto, who attacked the Reformation's doctrines of God's sovereign grace and justification through faith by grace alone: "Assuredly we do deny that for justifying a man works are worth a single straw. For Scripture everywhere cries aloud that all are lost; ... The same Scripture teaches that no hope is left but in the sheer goodness of God, by which sin is pardoned and righteousness imputed to us" (Reply to Sadoletto). In his Articles Concerning Predestination, Calvin strongly defended God's absolute sovereignty in saving the elect.

While the reprobate are the vessels of the just wrath of God, and the elect vessels of his compassion, the ground of the distinction is to be sought in the pure will of God alone, which is the supreme rule of justice... While the will of God is the supreme and primary cause of all things, and God holds the devil and the godless subject to His will, nevertheless God cannot be called the cause of sin, nor the author of evil, nor subject of any guilt.

Both Luther and Calvin wanted to be faithful to the Word of God. Both of them also enjoyed the happiness and the blessings which the Gospel of God's sovereign and eternal grace brought to them, and the followers of Luther and Calvin endeavored to reform the church along the line of the doctrine of God's sovereign grace. We have inherited many precious statements and confessions as a result of their efforts to articulate their faith in God's sovereign grace and to hand this heritage down to subsequent generations of Christians. However, despite the efforts of Luther, Calvin, and the other reformers to revive the Gospel of God's sovereign and everlasting grace, it seems that most modern Protestant churches have become captive to Arminianism and its world view since the second half of the eighteenth century.

Several factors have had an influence on the decline of the Reformation's doctrine of God's sovereign grace. First of all, since the end of the religious wars, many European intellectuals cried out for tolerance between different theological groups. This fostered the atmosphere in which many unbiblical doctrines and teachings were defended, articulated, and spread. Secondly,

the seventeenth century's scientific revolution, chiefly launched by orthodox Protestants, was used by Enlightenment architects to foster human pride and confidence in man's ability and power. With the help of this confidence, philosophers such as Rene Descartes and Spinoza began to place man rather than God in the center of universe and champion the power of human reason in discovering and pursuing the truth. Some theologians who were intrigued by Newtonian physics attempted to reinterpret Christianity with deistic tendencies.

The biblical belief in a universe with God at the center-creating, ruling, preserving, saving, judging, was overthrown and in its place stood the belief in man's centrality: Man is basically good and the Age of Enlightenment will demonstrate the sufficiency of human morality and reason. For example, an English empiricist, David Hume, denied the existence of a transcendent and supernatural being and rejected relentlessly the possibility of miracles. French Enlightenment thinkers also denounced belief in a personal God and affirmed materialism by denying God's creation of the universe. One of the foremost synthesizers of the Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant, tried to transform the Christianity of the Gospel of God's sovereign grace into a moralistic religion based on human autonomous power and free will. In many points Kant reiterated the previous arguments of Pelagianism, Erasmianism, and Arminianism.

In the meantime, Arminianism was exerting more and more influence on modern Protestant preaching, theology, and Christian life. Although the Synod of Dort (1618-19) condemned Arminianism as heretical and affirmed the Gospel of God's sovereign grace, Arminian teachings did not lose their influence, but rather played an essential role in the development of new theological movements. For instance, German Pietism was heavily influenced by the Arminian tendency and although there were many Calvinistic Methodists in the movement at the beginning, the Arminian doctrine of salvation championed by John Wesley had a great influence on British and American Methodism. The nineteenth century German liberal theology emerged from the Arminian background of Pietism and the changes brought about in the Enlightenment and Romanticism. Most British churches, including the Church of England, were made captive to Arminian theology. Against this situation, J. C. Ryle (a Church of England bishop) and C. H.

Spurgeon (a Baptist pastor) endeavored to defend and revive the Gospel of God's sovereign grace.

The Arminian captivity of modern Protestant churches was made complete in the nineteenth century with the rise and success of liberal theology. German liberal theologians, such as Albrecht Ritschl (1822-89) and Adolf Harnack (1851-1930), not only based their theologies on Arminianism, but also transformed Christianity into a moralistic and outright Pelagian religion. In the United States, liberalism permeated theological education in the major universities, including such renowned institutions as Harvard, Yale, and the University of Chicago. This made possible the Arminian and "modernist" captivity of the theology of mainline denominations in America. Especially after the severe controversy between Modernism and Fundamentalism in the 1920s, American Evangelicalism has increasingly become captive to Arminianism.

Modern Protestant and Evangelical churches are currently in a crisis. This is because the Gospel of God's sovereign and eternal grace is undergoing an inexorable decline in modern Evangelical churches. Although many Evangelical Christians are proud of the rapid growth of their churches, this growth has not been based on the recovery and revival of God's sovereign grace. Ironically, today's rapid growth of Evangelicalism is playing a major role in destroying and annihilating the Gospel of God's sovereign and eternal grace.

It is imperative that modern Evangelical churches recover, revive, and reemphasize the glorious Gospel of God's sovereign grace in Jesus Christ (2 Cor 4:4; 1 Tim 1:11). In this sense, we badly need a "modern Reformation" according to the biblical principles of the sixteenth century Reformation: Let God be God! If modern Evangelical churches do not recover the Gospel of God's sovereign and eternal grace, they will wander endlessly and miserably in a deep darkness of deception and delusion. As W. F. Bell trenchantly states, "Few preachers really thunder forth the deep truths of God. Few churches really take an uncompromising stand for Christ and His Gospel." Where do you stand? "Who is on the Lord's side? Let him come unto me" (Ex 32:26).

Soli Deo Gloria!

### Suggested Reading

Calvin, John, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Vol. 20, 21, trans. by F.L. Battles (Westminster, 1960).

Horton, Michael, *Putting Amazing Back into Grace: An Introduction to Reformed Theology* (Baker, 1994).

Luther, Martin, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. by J.I. Packer and O.R. Johnston (J. Clarke, 1957).

Pink, Arthur W., *The Sovereignty of God* (Baker, 1984).

Spurgeon, Charles H., *The Sword and the Trowel* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1865).

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