

PREVENIENT GRACE IN THE RISE OF ARMINIANISM

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INTRODUCTION

Beginning with the great battle between Augustine of Hippo (354-430) and Pelagius (360-420) at the Council of Ephesus (431), a mediating position has been sought by many in the Christian church regarding man's ability or inability to cooperate with God in salvation. Pelagius taught that man is not born a sinner, but merely has a tendency to follow bad examples, which for some reason he voluntarily does. People have the ability choose between good and evil, yet their will to do good is inhibited by the bad examples they follow. The gift of salvation from God is an "illuminating grace" that influences man's cooperation with God and ultimately salvation if man so chooses – a resistible grace.¹ Conversely, Augustine held that all men inherit sin through Adam, are totally depraved, and there is nothing man's will can do apart from the grace of God in Christ to bring about his salvation – an irresistible grace.² The mediating position, a semi-Pelagian position, holds that all men inherit sin through Adam, his will is only damaged, and God cooperates with man by providing grace that enables him to believe and be saved, though this grace does not guarantee that man will choose to be saved – again, a resistible grace.

The word *prevenient* comes from the Latin verb *praeveni*³ which is the basis for the English word *prevent*. Thus, "prevenient grace" literally means "preventing grace" – grace that

¹ John D. Hannah, *Our Legacy : History of Christian Doctrine* (NavPress, 2001), 212.

² Augustine further qualified his view holding that "irresistible grace" was only available to and efficacious for the elect. The concept of election is beyond the scope of this paper but it will be conceded that both Arminians and Calvinists hold to the doctrine of election. It is the means of election on which they would disagree.

³ *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. "praeveni," 12:444.

precedes or comes *before* salvation. Yet in the modern day, prevenient grace is most often identified with the views of Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609) and, especially, John Wesley (1703-1791) from whom modern-day Arminians and Wesleyans are represented.⁴ Prevenient grace, as used by Arminians, is “grace that enables depraved man to believe and be saved, but it does not guarantee such since it may be rejected. Prevenient grace is sufficient for salvation but not efficacious (irresistible).”⁵ What differentiates “irresistible grace” adherents, Calvinists, from “resistible grace” adherents, Arminians, is “that the former see electing grace as given only to some (the elect) and insist that this grace cannot ultimately be resisted. The latter argue that prevenient grace is given to all people and that it can be resisted.”⁶ To be sure, Calvinists could technically argue that prevenient grace does come before salvation for the elect, but they seldom do so due to the association of the concept with Arminianism.

So now that a basic understanding of the concept of prevenient grace has been presented, a look back to the origins of the modern concept of this typically Arminian view is in order. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to trace the rise of the prevenient grace view from Jacobus Arminius to modern-day Arminian adherents.

JACOBUS ARMINIUS

Jacob Arminius was born at Oudewalter in the Netherlands. He was educated at Marburg (1575), Leiden (1576-1581), Geneva (1582, 1584-1586), and Basel (1582-1583), and was a

⁴ For the purposes of this paper, the term “Arminian” will include Wesleyans.

⁵ William W. Combs, "Does the Bible Teach Prevenient Grace?," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 10, no. 1 (2005): 5.

⁶ Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware, *Still Sovereign ; Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge & Grace* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2000), 236.

pastor in Amsterdam.⁷ He briefly studied under Theodore Beza (1519–1605), Calvin’s son-in-law, and appears to have initially accepted Calvinistic doctrines. It was Arminius' studies on the Epistle to the Romans that led him to doubt the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination, and ultimately irresistible grace. Soon after, he was accused of Pelagianism and Socinianism and disloyalty to the Confessions of the Dutch Church. Following an unsuccessful attempt at mediation with other Calvinists, his opposition to Calvinistic doctrines became more pronounced. He was appointed professor at the University of Leiden in 1603 and was immediately drawn into a conflict with Francis Gomar, a zealous Dutch Calvinist leader who had taught at Leiden since 1594.

Arminius defended his positions on predestination and resistible grace, among others, at The Hague on May 6, 1603, and was ultimately cleared of all Pelagian and Socinian charges.⁸ This confrontation, however, further strengthened his resolve and his tenure at Leiden provided him with broad opportunities for furthering his beliefs. He was engaged in controversy for the rest of his life and made one of his primary goals to obtain the revision of the two chief Calvinistic documents of the Dutch Church, the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism. He pushed for a National Synod to accomplish these purposes but was unsuccessful in obtaining a formal audience before his death.

Arminius never wrote a comprehensive systematic theology, such as did John Calvin, but he was a prolific writer while serving in his pastorate and while at Leiden. His views on “original

⁷ *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.; Carlisle, Cumbria, U.K.: Baker Academic; Paternoster Press, 2001), 98.

⁸ F. L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 108.

sin” seem to be the catalyst for much of his argumentation. In *The Apology or Defense of Jacob Arminius*, published posthumously from his theology class notes at Leiden, Arminius argued:

It may admit of discussion, whether God could be angry on account of original sin which was born with us, since it seemed to be inflicted on us by God as a punishment of the actual sin which had been committed by Adam and by us in Him.... I said, I did not deny that it was sin, but it was not actual sin.... We must distinguish between actual sin, and that which was the cause of other sins, and which, on this very account might be denominated "sin."⁹

This statement shows that Arminius held to a corporate view of original sin; that is, Adam’s original sin “produces sinful acts in Adam’s posterity because of the corrupt nature they receive from him, but it cannot be called the ‘actual’ sin of his posterity in the sense that they are in anyway culpable for Adamic sin.”¹⁰ By this, Arminius could counteract any charges that God was unfair and that mankind was free to make choices. He did not want to make God the author of sin, nor man an automaton.¹¹ From this Arminius would argue that God extends the same manner of grace to all; mankind is free to accept or reject it.¹²

THE REMONSTRANTS

Following Arminius’ death, his followers continued his efforts at revisions to the Calvinistic doctrines to which they abhorred. The Remonstrant party, as they were called, published a “Remonstrance” in 1610 that contained five articles: (1) election and reprobation are founded on foreseen faith or unbelief; (2) Christ’s death is for all, but only believers enjoy his

⁹ "The Apology or Defense of James Arminius", Wesley Center for Applied Theology <http://wesley.nnu.edu/arminianism/the-works-of-james-arminius/volume-1/the-apology-or-defense-of-james-arminius/> (accessed 9 July 2011).

¹⁰ Combs: 7.

¹¹ Earle Edwin Cairns, *Christianity through the Centuries : A History of the Christian Church*, Rev. and enl. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1981), 325.

¹² Hannah, 232.

forgiveness; (3) fallen man cannot do good or achieve saving faith without the regenerating power of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit; (4) grace is the beginning, continuation, and end of all good but is not irresistible; and (5) grace can preserve the faithful through every temptation, but Scripture does not clearly say that people may not fall from grace and be lost.

From these Articles it is clear that the Arminians viewed salvation to be by the grace of God alone, yet man can prevent the efficacy of God's grace by refusing to receive it. Article IV expounded describes God's prevenient grace thusly:

That this grace of God is the beginning, continuance, and accomplishment of all good, even to this extent, that the regenerate man himself, without prevenient or assisting, awakening, following and co-operative grace, can neither think, will, nor do good . . . so that all good deeds or movements, that can be conceived, must be ascribed to the grace of God in Christ.¹³

The Remonstrant party gave little if any direct scriptural support for prevenient grace, seeing it mainly as a theological necessity to support their views. Since man is depraved and unable by nature to respond to the gospel, and yet God demands faith in the gospel, God can only do so justly if he first provides prevenient grace to enable man to believe.¹⁴

The views of the Remonstrants were finally considered at the Synod of Dort (1618-1619), a majority Calvinistic assembly because eighty percent of those present were Calvinists.¹⁵ The Synod drew up five Calvinistic articles, the Canons of Dort, that opposed the Remonstrant views and the followers of the late Arminius were stripped of their positions. It was not until 1625 that the persecution of Arminians ceased and Arminianism was officially sanctioned.

¹³ The Five Remonstrants, Article IV. Quoted in *ibid.*, 233.

¹⁴ Combs: 7.

¹⁵ Cairns, 325.

JOHN WESLEY

Though initially rejected, Arminianism was to shortly gain acceptance in other places; however, the directions it took and the ideas associated with the movement were often far removed from the views of Arminius himself.¹⁶ Within less than a century the Anglican Church in England was reflecting Arminian views, a mantle placed upon John Wesley (1701-1791), an ardent champion of Arminian thought.

John Wesley was born in Epworth rectory, England, the fifteenth of nineteen children. His father was a preacher, and his mother was a remarkable woman in both wisdom and intelligence.¹⁷ Wesley was educated at Oxford and became a fellow at Lincoln College in 1726 where he served until 1751. He was ordained a priest in 1728. While at Lincoln, Wesley became the leading voice in the “Holy Club,” members of which were nicknamed Methodists by the other students due to their methodical Bible study and prayer habits.¹⁸ Wesley claims his own true conversion on May 24, 1738, while listening to the reading of Luther’s commentary on the Book of Romans.¹⁹ He formed a Methodist society in 1739 where he continuously affirmed the work of Arminius.²⁰ He resoundingly accepted the title Arminian and even founded the *Arminian Magazine*. Combs notes that, “Wesley is sometimes seen as adopting the more pure

¹⁶ Owen H. Alderfer, "Arminius and Arminianism," *Ashland Theological Journal* 1, no. (1968): 29.

¹⁷ John Foxe, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, [Rev. ed., Nelson's Royal Classics (Nashville, Tenn.: T. Nelson Publishers, 2000).], chap. 10.

¹⁸ Cairns, 383-83.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 383.

²⁰ Larry Dixon, "The Doctrine of Salvation," *Emmaus Journal* 10, no. 2 (2001): 205.

teaching of Arminius himself rather than his followers and/or making it more biblical so that it is sometimes called evangelical Arminianism.”²¹

Wesley, as with Arminius, held that primary purpose of prevenient grace is not to restrain sin and give good desires and blessings to man; rather, prevenient grace is given in order to lead men, cooperatively, to repentance and salvation.²² Wesley wrote:

Salvation begins with what is usually termed (and very properly) *preventing grace*: including the first wish to please God, the first dawn of light concerning His will, and the first transient conviction of having sinned against Him. All these imply some tendency towards life; some degree of salvation; the beginning of a deliverance from a blind, unfeeling heart, quite insensible of God and the things of God. Salvation carries on by convincing grace, usually in Scripture termed *repentance*: which brings a larger measure of self-knowledge, and a farther deliverance from the heart of stone. Afterwards we experience the proper Christian salvation; whereby “through grace” we “are saved by faith;” consisting of those grand branches, justification and sanctification.²³

Therefore, man's salvation is dependent upon man's cooperative response by prevenient grace to God's saving grace. The Wesleyan-Arminian view of prevenient grace is almost identical to the Calvinist view of common grace²⁴ but adds to it the restoration of man's free will so that he is now able to believe the gospel. Cox concludes that prevenient grace, then, leads on to saving grace, prepares for it, and enables a person to enter into it. The difference between

²¹ Combs. See also C. Gordon Olson, *Beyond Calvinism and Arminianism: An Inductive, Mediate Theology of Salvation*, 1st ed. (Cedar Knolls, NJ: Global Gospel Publishers, 2002), 409. Olson concurs that Wesley developed a more evangelical form of Arminianism, which retained much of the Augustinian view of sin.

²² Leo G. Cox, "Prevenient Grace - a Wesleyan View," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 12, no. 3 (1969): 145.

²³ *The Works of John Wesley*, photo offset ed., 14 vols., Authorized Edition Published by the Wesleyan Conference, London, 1872, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958), 509. Quoted in Cox: 146-147.

²⁴ For a well-reasoned explanation of the Calvinistic view of common grace, see Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House, 1994), 657-65.

common grace and prevenient grace for Wesleyan-Arminians would be in degree and not in kind.²⁵

SPREAD TO THE NEW WORLD

Evidence of the spread of Arminian sentiments across the Atlantic is visible in the writings of Jonathan Edwards, pastor at Northampton in 1724. Edwards was apparently encountering “Arminian” views related to prevenient grace, but more specifically trust in human ability and a libertarianism which led to self-confidence.²⁶ In his treatise on the Freedom of the Will, Edwards writes:

So it clearly follows . . . that God has no hand in any man's virtue, nor does at all promote it, either by a physical or moral influence; that none of the moral methods he uses with men to promote virtue in the world, have any tendency to the attainment of that end; that all the instructions he has given men, from the beginning of the world to this day, by prophets or apostles, or by his Son Jesus Christ; that all his counsels, invitations, promises, threatenings, warnings, and exhortations; that all means he has used with men, in ordinances, or providences; yea, all influences of his Spirit, ordinary and extraordinary, have had no tendency at all to excite any one virtuous act of the mind, or to promote any thing morally good and commendable, in any respect.²⁷

Edwards was, then, countering the Arminian libertarian view of free will, albeit in terms of Western man's growing confidence in his own abilities, which in turn negates the efficacy of prevenient grace as prescribed by Arminius and Wesley. That Edwards felt compelled to write on this issue is evidence enough of the wide-spread adoption of Arminian views in North America in his day. As Alderfer explains:

The climate of opinion was, however, against Edwards and in favor of “Arminianism.” Even by Edwards' time, for the most part, Arminianism was a prevailing mood. . . The Arminianism which Edwards feared developed and expanded in the century and one-half

²⁵ Cox: 144.

²⁶ Alderfer: 30.

²⁷ Jonathan Edwards, "Freedom of the Will: Section VII - Arminian Notions of Moral Agency Inconsistent with All Influence of Motive and Inducement, in Either Virtuous or Vicious Actions", *The Reformed Reader* <http://www.reformedreader.org/rbb/edwards/fowp03s07.htm> (accessed 10 July 2011).

after his time. By the twentieth century men had forgotten Arminius, but the spirit and views he represented, as conveyed by those called Arminians, were a part of the mental furniture of the majority of men in the Western world.²⁸

NORMAN GIESLER

A modern-day representative of the Arminian view of prevenient grace is the eminent theologian Norman Geisler, President of Southern Evangelical Seminary. Geisler writes:

Although no one can believe unto salvation without the aid of God's saving grace, the gracious action by which we are saved is not monergistic (an act of God alone) but synergistic (an act of God and our free choice). Salvation comes from God, but it is completed by our cooperation . . . His grace is not exercised on a passive object but on an active agent.²⁹

Writing on man's free will Geisler proposes:

God's grace works synergistically on free will. That is, it must be received to be effective. There are no conditions for giving grace, but there is one condition for receiving it – faith. Put in other terms, God's justifying condition for receiving God's gift of salvation . . . Faith is logically prior to regeneration, since we are saved "through faith" (Eph. 2:8-9) and "justified by faith" (Rom. 5:1 NASB).³⁰

He agrees with Arminius and Wesley on the Adamic effects of sin on fallen human beings that, according to Geisler, "are so great that without God's common grace (i.e., His nonsaving grace that is available to all persons), society would be unlivable and salvation unattainable."³¹

²⁸ Alderfer: 30.

²⁹ Norman L. Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, 4 vols., vol. 3 (Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany House, 2002), 136.

³⁰ Norman L. Geisler, *Chosen but Free* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany House Publishers, 1999), 233-34. Quoted by James R. White, *The Potter's Freedom: A Defense of the Reformation and a Rebuttal of Norman Geisler's Chosen but Free* (Amityville, NY: Calvary Press Publishing, 2000), 91.

³¹ Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, 130.

Geisler is clearly in Arminius' camp doctrinally on the concepts of prevenient grace and free will. From his widespread writings, however, Geisler is clearly evangelical in nearly every other cardinal doctrine of the Christian faith. As such, it is of some interest that these particular views of Arminius have held sway for so many years over an ever-diverse number of Christian thinkers.

THE MODERN METHODIST CHURCH

It should go without saying that the modern Methodist Church follows quite closely the teachings of Wesley on prevenient grace. So closely are they aligned doctrinally that *The Articles of Religion of the Methodist Church* are taken from the *Discipline* of 1808, collated against Wesley's original text in *The Sunday Service of the Methodists* (1784).³² As an example of their adoption of Wesley's view on prevenient grace, Article VII reads:

The condition of man after the fall of Adam is such that he cannot turn and prepare himself, by his own natural strength and works, to faith, and calling upon God; wherefore we have no power to do good works, pleasant and acceptable to God, without the grace of God by Christ preventing us, that we may have a good will, and working with us, when we have that good will.³³

Thus as with Wesley, man's salvation is dependent upon man's cooperative response by prevenient, or "preventing" grace to God's saving grace.

It would be improper to conclude that modern Methodism holds exclusivity to the doctrine of prevenient grace if for no other reason than its apparent decline as a Christian denomination. As a congregational body, the American Methodists were the largest Christian

³² "The Articles of Religion of the Methodist Church", The United Methodist Church <http://archives.umc.org/interior.asp?mid=1648> (accessed 10 July 2011).

³³ "The Articles of Religion of the Methodist Church: Article VII - on Free Will", The United Methodist Church <http://archives.umc.org/interior.asp?ptid=1&mid=1649> (accessed 10 July 2011).

denomination in the 18th and 19th centuries. Yet a recent survey by the Pew Research Center concluded that less than 0.3% of U.S. adults claim an association with the evangelical Methodist church.³⁴ Nevertheless, church affinity does not necessarily signify one's acceptance of the prevenient grace view (cf. Geisler).

CONCLUSIONS

The objective of this discussion was to trace the concept of prevenient grace through the rise of Arminianism. It has been shown that the foundations for this doctrine were laid by Jacobus Arminius in the 17th century in England, were adopted by John Wesley in the 18th century, were spread to North America in the 19th century, and have appeared in both Methodist and non-Methodist evangelical traditions in the 20th and 21st centuries. The longevity and strength of the doctrine of prevenient grace should not come as a surprise since its true basis is rooted in man's view of fairness, from his own perspective, and his own abilities in the face of a fully-sovereign, fully-just God.

Were it truly the case that all men are completely unable to freely accept or reject the Gospel of Christ (the Calvinist position), even with prevenient grace, Arminians would respond as Wesley did in his famous sermon on *Free Grace* stating, "It represents our blessed Lord as a hypocrite, a deceiver of the people, a man void of common sincerity, as mocking his helpless creatures by offering what he never intends to give, by saying one thing and meaning another."³⁵ If, on the other hand, only those specifically chosen by God (the elect versus the "willing") are able to choose salvation due to God's *elective* (saving) grace, then the Arminian position clearly

³⁴ "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey", The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life <http://religions.pewforum.org/affiliations> (accessed 10 July 2011).

³⁵ Philip Schaff, "History of the Reformation," in *History of the Christian Church*(A P & A, unk.), 113:265.

elevates man's ability beyond the sovereignty of God. The final arbiter on this issue will, of course, always be God's Word.

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