



CHRISTIAN EDUCATION: LESSON 160

Prevenient grace – The key doctrine which undergirds Arminian theology is known as the doctrine of prevenient grace, which is necessary for salvation. The word “prevenient” comes from Latin and is made up of the prefix “pre” which means “before,” and the verb “venio,” meaning “to come,” thus prevenient grace is grace which comes before and is necessary for salvation.

Arminius taught that prevenient grace is the beginning point of salvation. It provides sinners with everything needed for salvation, whereby their will is restored and they are enabled to choose God and be saved. This grace is dispensed by God to every human being that comes into the world, right from birth. Arminius even explained that man is “purely passive” in this act, and that “he can do no other than receive it and feel it.” So far it seems that the Arminian concept of prevenient grace is a monergistic and irresistible work of God. But then, Arminius goes to explain that, “when [man] feels grace affecting or inclining his mind and heart, he freely assents to it, so that he is able at the same time to withhold his assent.” So having been liberated from his enslavement to sin and spiritually dead state, man can now either cooperate with this grace and accept it, or not cooperate with it and reject it. Thus with respect to man’s response prevenient grace is synergistic and resistible, dependent on man’s cooperation and decision. Thus, in Arminianism prevenient grace is sufficient but not efficient for salvation. It is necessary, providing all that is needed for salvation, but it does not guarantee anyone’s salvation.

So just from this it is clear that there is a significant difference between Calvinism and Arminianism. The prevenient grace of Arminian theology is not the regeneration of Calvinism. Though in the articles of Remonstrance this prevenient grace is even referred to the Spirit’s work of regeneration, in reality this is the awakening or restoration of a sinner’s mind, will and ability in order for him to be able to believe in Christ. Nevertheless the sinner can still resist this grace. But if man cooperates with this grace and believes in Christ, then and only then will he be born again or spiritually made alive. Thus in Arminian theology the regeneration which the Bible talks about, being born again, is the fruit of man’s faith.

In Calvinism, however, regeneration is not merely the restoration of a sinner’s abilities, but it is the instantaneous radical changing of his nature, from spiritual death to spiritual life. This is a monergistic and irresistible work of God, where the Spirit enlightens the sinner’s mind, renews his will, and changes the disposition of his heart. This work of God is not only necessary and sufficient for salvation, it is also efficient for salvation. A regenerated person will most certainly, willingly and without exception believe in Christ. Thus, faith in Christ is the inevitable fruit of regeneration, for this divine work is irresistibly efficient (Ezekiel 36:26-27; Matthew 7:16-18; Ephesians 2:1-10).

Another major difference is the reality of man’s fallen nature, for although Arminian theology affirms the total depravity of all human beings, in reality by virtue of prevenient grace no human being exists in this state, for everyone comes into the world having received this supernatural grace of God, by which he is liberated from his state of total depravity, enabled to will and do that which is truly good. This is an imaginary state, where people are neither spiritually dead nor spiritually alive! In Ephesians 2:1-3 Paul describes people who not in theory but in actuality walked and lived as sons of disobedience and children of wrath, dead in their sins; and he lumps all unregenerate people in this state (Romans 3:10-18). The only grace which Paul knows is the grace of regeneration, by which God makes a spiritually dead person spiritually alive, not merely spiritually enabled. There is no in-between state (vv. 4-5).

Arminian theology points to a number of verses in order to prove that the Bible supports this notion of prevenient grace (such as John 1:9; 12:32; Titus 2:11), but proper exegesis shows that there is no evidence for such a view of “universal enablement” taught in the Bible; rather, it is a concept imposed upon or read into Scripture, in an attempt to uphold both the justice of God and the freedom of man.