



CHRISTIAN EDUCATION: LESSON 161

Arminianism today – Since the 17th century, Arminian doctrines persisted and greatly impacted many Protestant denominations and churches throughout Europe and later in America. John Wesley, the 18th century English pastor and theologian, was the greatest advocate and defender of Arminian theology, especially the doctrine of prevenient grace. John Wesley and his younger brother Charles, along with the Anglican preacher George Whitefield, were the founders of the Methodist movement in Britain, which later spread to colonial America during the First Great Awakening. While Whitefield was influenced by Calvinistic theology, the Wesley brothers were influenced by Arminian theology. After Whitefield's death, the Methodist movement in America became fully Arminian or Wesleyan in theology. Today, besides the Methodist Church, many Protestant churches trace their roots back to the Wesleyan revival movement, such as the Holiness, Pentecostal and Charismatic denominations, also the Church of the Nazarene, which all subscribe to Arminian theology. In addition to these, other Christian denominations, such as Free Will Baptist churches, and many non-denominational churches also hold to Arminian theology. Presently, a minority of Protestant denominations and churches hold to Calvinistic doctrines.

Though Arminianism teaches the total depravity of man, in reality this is only a hypothetical depravity, for by virtue of prevenient grace no one exists or lives in such a condition. This directly contradicts the abundant and explicit teaching of Scripture. The idea of prevenient grace diminishes the severity of the fall, and consequently leads to a salvation which is less gracious. Total depravity correctly understood would logically lead to the Calvinistic doctrines of predestination and monergistic regeneration. The doctrine of prevenient grace or universal enablement is absent from the Bible, but is brought forth to advance humanistic views of justice and salvation, softening concepts of the Bible which we, humanly speaking, find difficult to swallow. Arminian theology hinges on the doctrine of prevenient grace, and as Arminian theologian Robert Chiles admits, “without it, the Calvinist logic is irrefutable.”

Ironically, one of the criticisms constantly brought against Calvinism is that such doctrines lead to pride. But in reality there could be nothing more humbling than the notion that we were at one point in this wretched state of spiritual death and enemies of God, but God, because of His great grace, effectually and irresistibly called us, regenerated us and brought us to Christ, and will thus keep us in Him for all eternity (Ephesians 2:1-5). So what is the difference between us and those not saved? The answer is not in man or his life circumstances; rather, the answer is in God, based on the good pleasure of His will (Isaiah 42:8; Romans 4:2; 1 Corinthians 4:7; Ephesians 2:8-9).

Though Arminianism repudiates Pelagianism, and though it rejects the Semi-Pelagian notion of man initiating the first step of salvation, nevertheless there are similarities between Semi-Pelagianism and Arminianism. Both systems teach a synergistic process of salvation, where man must cooperate with God's grace in order to be saved. Ultimately, if God has dispensed sufficient grace to all people, then the determining factor in salvation depends on the will or final decision of man. This is an extremely perilous position to hold if taken to its logical end, for as Robert Godfrey puts it, “Either salvation is entirely the work of God or it is partially the work of man. There is no way to “transcend” this reality.”

Despite their faulty theology, Arminians are Christians, for they emphatically profess that salvation is all of God, all of grace, all of Christ, where even their faith is not considered as a meritorious work. As J.I. Packer exhorts, “Calvinists should therefore approach professed Arminians as brother evangelicals trapped in weakening theological mistakes, and seek to help them to a better mind.” This happens by a better understanding of what the Bible teaches about God, His grace and the nature of fallen man. Calvinistic soteriology is God-centered biblical soteriology, affirming that salvation is all of grace, thus eliminating all boasting in man, resulting in true humility, joy and peace. This leads us to love, praise and worship God, giving Him all the glory (Romans 11:33; 1 Corinthians 1:28-31; 10:31; 1 John 3:1).