

A REFORMATION CONTROVERSY

Gary McDade

Part of the frustration encountered by dealing with religious division today may be checked by realizing that the various religious denominations did not emerge out of a vacuum. One particular Reformation controversy between the theological views of John Calvin (1509-1564) and Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609) demonstrates that the common denominational slogan “one church is as good as another” is not only biblically errant but is also historically presumptuous. The big picture of the chasm between the positions of Calvin and Arminius may be stated thusly, “Arminianism opposed the Calvinist belief that God decides irrevocably who is to be saved and who is not and that man is helpless to change the decision. Arminius and his followers contended that man, by his free will and assisted by God’s grace, may accept or reject God’s offer of salvation”¹ Protestant religious groups that began at this time period and continue today remain fundamentally divided over these two viewpoints although they have been modified.

Calvin’s theology was summarized by five headings: Total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and the perseverance of saints. (The mnemonically memorable TULIP). Arminius’ remonstrance to what had become accepted as Reformed orthodoxy was summarized by four headings: “Predestination according to foreknowledge, denial of irresistible grace, universal intention of the atonement, and uncertainty about perseverance.”² Philip Schaff in his voluminous work, *History Of The Christian Church*, touches on the differences between Calvinism and Arminianism. He wrote, “Calvinism emphasizes divine sovereignty and free grace; Arminianism emphasizes human responsibility. The one restricts the saving grace to the elect; the other extends it to all men on the condition of faith. Both are right in what they assert; both are wrong in what they deny. If one important truth is pressed to the exclusion of another truth of equal importance, it becomes error, and loses its hold upon the conscience.”³ The Dutch Reformed Church condemned Arminianism in 1619 at the Synod of Dort thereby indicating the insuperable division between followers of Calvin and Arminius.

“The Dutch Reformed Church in the United States still holds to the Canons of Dort.”⁴ Much of this theology is espoused by the Presbyterian Church. The perseverance of saints better known as “once saved always saved” is well known as a cardinal tenet of Baptist theology. On the other hand, the teachings of Arminius entered the Church of England under the Stuarts and were propagated by

the father of the Methodist Revival, John Wesley, who himself lived and died a member of the Anglican Church or Church Of England. Strands of the doctrines of Arminianism are incorporated into the Methodist Church in America today. A facade of unity between the two divergent camps of Baptists and Methodists is surprising, especially since there seems to be no grounds biblically or historically for such a unity. The unique plea of the New Testament is for all followers of Christ to observe and obey its teaching. Paul wrote, “Nevertheless, whereto we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us mind the same thing” (Phil. 3:16). And, to the Corinthians he said, “Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (I Cor. 1:10). Finally, this admirable goal may be accomplished by heeding Peter’s inspired declaration, “If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God . . .” (I Pet. 4:11).

ENDNOTES

1 *New Standard Encyclopedia*, Vol. 1, p. 602.

2 *The Encyclopedia Of Christianity*, ed. Edwin H. Palmer, p. 411.

3 Vol. 8, p. 815.

4 *Ibid.*