

# Reformed Theology and its Threat

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## I. Justification and faith and original sin:

### A. Justification is entirely the work of God!

1. In his Word God multiplies the ways in which he teaches us this doctrine to emphasize that our justification is entirely the result of God's activity; man is entirely passive.

II Corinthians 5:18-21 – God reconciles opposites/opponents when Christ trades places with the whole world.

Romans 5:15-20 – God changes the legal status of the condemned from one of guilt to one of righteousness.

Hebrews 9:11-21 – The guilty conscience must be washed, must be cleansed; the only cleansing possible is that which comes from the blood of Christ.

I John 2:2 – The blood of Christ on the Mercy Seat hides and covers up the transgressions of the whole world against the law, so that God's wrath is turned aside.

Ephesians 2:1-10 – Dead objects of wrath are transformed into living co-heirs with Christ.

2. *Kurz gefasst*: God, prompted only by his own grace (i.e., *favor Dei* – that unique love which has its cause solely and alone in the subject, not in the object) has declared the whole world *not guilty* because of the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ as the all-atoning payment for the sins of the world.

### B. Faith is entirely God's gift.

1. It's crucial that we understand what that word *faith* really means. It is not merely a feeling or sentiment; it is not just a pious opinion.

John 17:3-8, 20, 25-26; it is *knowledge, assent, confidence*

Romans 1:16-18; 3:21-28; God *reveals his righteousness*, i.e., he gives what he reveals!

Romans 10:17-21; the gift is most lovingly given.

Acts 16:29-31 and Romans 4:1-3; faith is *not* a doing; it is a *receiving*.

2. *Kurz gefasst*: Faith is the sighing of the heart which embraces the fact of John 1:29 and John 3:16 and trusts that since the work of redemption has the whole world as its object, it has me as its object too!

3. It is perhaps worth noting, if only in passing and briefly, that the faith of which we have been speaking is commonly called *saving faith*. It is *saving* because of Christ its content, Christ its source, Christ its goal, Christ its all in all. It is not *saving* because of its own merit. Nor is it a quantity to be measured as much or little, as weak or strong; though assaulted and threatened on every side, it nevertheless either is or is not – *tertium non datur!* When the Scriptures speak of weak/strong faith, they are talking about the *application* of some truth of the Scriptures to a particular situation in life; such faith is weak or strong depending on knowledge of God's promises and the ability to apply those promises to a particular situation in life; cf. Mark 4:35-41, Romans 14-15:1. Equating this weak/strong faith with saving faith can lead to disastrous consequences.

C. The doctrine of original sin underscores the vital necessity that justification be God's work and faith God's gift.

1. Any possibility of cooperation in justification is excluded by the dread reality of original sin.

Ephesians 2:1-5 – The dead by definition cannot help themselves, cannot bring themselves to life, cannot change their disgusting status of objects of wrath.

Romans 3:9-20 – Even knowledge of the law of God, yes even honest attempts to keep its outward demands avail nothing for righteousness.

2. The doctrine of original sin likewise precludes any possibility of an active role for the fallen will of man in coming to faith; saving faith must be, can only be, the gift of God through the gospel.

Romans 1:16-17 – No power is ascribed to the will of man, earlier described as dead. All of the power rests with the gospel revealed, the gospel which gives what it reveals, i.e., the righteousness of God.

Romans 10:17 – Hearing – not willing – is the path the gospel takes; by hearing the gospel calls forth the trust that it calls for.

Romans 7:14-8:8 – The gospel which creates faith creates with it a new will and new desires; the new will does not annihilate the old, but rather it struggles with the old, fed and strengthened in the struggle by the same gospel that created the new will.

3. It is important to note that the devastation of original sin destroys the heart and core of the image of God in man, but does not destroy altogether man's humanity. The shell of God's image, the ability to reason and a relative freedom to make choices *in those things subject to reason* remains, even after the kernel of God's image (i.e., innate holiness and righteousness) is gone. The loss of the kernel makes man incapable of a free will in spiritual things; the loss of the kernel severely impairs and damages the shell of reason and free will in those things subject to reason, but it does not destroy it.

All of these doctrines are inseparably linked to one another. To be in error in one is to be in error in all. Likewise to miss the doctrinal and practical implications of any one of them is to open oneself to error in all of them. It is therefore important to consider at least briefly some of the implications that flow from these sacred

truths and related truths, especially as these come to significance in the discussion of Reformed theology and its unwitting absorption by our members.

The matter of the will of man after the Fall is an especially fertile field for error in Reformed thought and, I fear, in the thinking of many of our people as well. Free will in spiritual things, e.g., coming to faith, obeying the First Table of the Law or any part of the Second Table out of a God-pleasing love for God, is impossible for the unregenerate. For they are, as we have already noted, by nature dead in trespasses and sins. But the unregenerate have a free will in those things subject to reason, e.g., whether to go here or there, to eat this or that, to marry or not to marry, whom to marry, what work to do or not do, what outward obedience to give externally to the Second Table of the law and/or to natural law. In spiritual things their will is enslaved but not in such a way that they are blameless when they reject the gospel. When they use their will to refuse the gospel, they must bear responsibility and blame for that (Matthew 23:37, Acts 7:51).

But what about the will of the regenerate, of Christians, after they have come to faith? That will is, again as already noted, renewed. They have a new will, a will that struggles against the old will (Romans 7) as long as they are in this life. That renewed will strives to submit to the will of God. And that's where the problems arise for many. What is the will of God for them in their daily lives? Does the will of God eliminate in the regenerate the freedom to make choices in those things subject to reason? Does God express his will in their prayers, in their decisions, in their choices, in their feelings? We cannot say it too emphatically: **WE CAN SAY NOTHING WITH CERTAINTY ABOUT THE WILL OF GOD APART FROM THE REVEALED WORD OF GOD!** If we want to know the will of God, let us marry the Scriptures! There God gives us, not a code book of rules or a canon law that eliminates freedom and choice, but principles to guide us in the making of decisions and choices, which choices, motivated by the gospel, will be pleasing to God, whether we choose this or that.

To put it another way, many of the decisions that Christians make are choices between good and good. They are not all choices between good and bad. And those choices are real. God has not foreordained them, even though he knows how and what we will decide. He does not expect us to climb up into heaven and find out what God knows in the secret of his essence. He does not expect us to guess at his hidden will. He offers us choices and is pleased to accept them and to take them into account as he carries out his promise to make all things work together for our good (Romans 8:28).

Consider a few examples. God gave David choices in the consequence for his sin of numbering the people (2 Samuel 24). Paul decided to remain unmarried and he decided to forego his right to live from his work as an apostle (1 Cor. 9). He instructed the Corinthians to join in the collection for the poor in Jerusalem. But he did not tell them how much each should give or decide for them the mechanism of the collection. Rather he gave them a broad principle which he left them to apply as best they could (1 Cor. 16). In the same chapter he speaks of decisions that he has yet to make about his future travel plans.

To sum up the matter, St. Paul in the passage already cited a number of times, reminds us that God has renewed us and brought us to faith so that we could live lives filled with good works. He declares that these are works which God *prepared in advance for us to do* (Eph. 2:10 NIV). What are those works? They are the works prescribed in his Word, works that accord with the law and are done out of love and gratitude to God for the gift of salvation. Should I spend an hour today in my devotions or a half hour? Should I make evangelism calls today or discipline calls? Should I visit members or non-members? Should I spend more time studying or less? More time with my family or less? More time relaxing or less? Should I buy this car or that? This house or that? This suit or that? Should I remain in this call or take that call to a new field of service? All of these things are subject to reason. All of these choices may very well be between good and good, assuming we are making use of our reason as best we know how to the glory of God. We do not torment ourselves over which choice God wants us to make. We apply the principles of Romans 12 as best we can, offer our choices and actions to God as fitting thank offerings, trust his grace to pardon what is amiss and receive with pleasure for the sake of Christ what remains (Psalm 147:11). Indeed the Apostle assumes we are making choices between good and good when he bids us do all to the glory of God, no matter what we are doing, whether eating or drinking (1 Cor. 10:31). On the Last Day those choices and the actions that followed receive the praise of the Lord when they flowed

from a desire to serve him out of faith and gratitude; there is not a word of praise for having guessed right what he had in mind (Matthew 25:14-40).

But don't we pray for his guidance when we have to make choices? Of course we do. But we do not pray for him to make the decision for us. We do not ask him to reveal to our innermost being his hidden will. Nor do we expect him to blow in our ear. We ask for his guidance and for his blessing on OUR decision, that it may be made and the work done to his glory and for the benefit of our neighbor. And then we listen to his Word for the principles which guide us in our decision. Then we make our decisions and choices. That's the essence of what Luther is saying as well in his explanation to the Third Petition. We should not be so arrogant as to claim that our choices are the same thing as the will of God because that's what we decided. For again, we can say nothing with certainty about the will of God apart from the Word of God.

Our decision may be *according to* the will of God, if it is not contrary to his revealed Word or taken with a motivation contrary to his revealed Word. But that is not the same thing as saying it *is* the will of God; the reverse might also have been according to his will – again a matter of a choice between good and good. Should I spend an extra hour working on the sermon, or should I make that extra call? Either would be a good thing to do; neither is a sin. Either might well be according to the will of God. To insist that the one I decided to do must be the will of God is to make the other a sin. It is to turn each day into a torment of guessing at God's will or arrogantly congratulating myself that I am so cleverly tuned into the mind of the Incomprehensible. We need to remember this principle as individuals and as a church body too. Too many people run off at the mouth about synodical resolutions that must be the will of God or they would not have passed. If the subject of the resolution was a matter not decided by the Word of God, then the decision may have been wise or unwise, good or not so good. But the same could be said, had the decision gone the other way. Again, if it is a matter not decided by God's Word, it may have been according to the will of God and not contrary to it. But to equate such decision with the will of God is an arrogant claim to mastery over the hidden mind of God, something which only a *Schwärmer* unabashedly lays claim to.

But doesn't God rule over all things so that his will is done? Here we need to remember that many truths of the Scriptures are like great marble pillars that stand next to one another but can never be meshed with one another in a way that will altogether satisfy our fallen reason. Such for example are the truths of God's Word concerning the age-old question: Why are some saved and not others? The Bible clearly teaches that those who are saved have only God to thank for it, and that those who are lost have themselves to blame for it. Any attempt to mesh these two great truths will do violence to both of them. They must be allowed to stand side by side as the Scriptures teach them. God is not interested in any advice from us on how to reconcile them.

The matter of the will of God and human freedom in those things subject to reason is another case of two great pillars of truth that must be allowed to stand beside each other. On the one hand God rules over all things. On the other hand man has freedom in those things subject to reason. God remains God and man remains man. God retains ultimate control, but man is not just a mere puppet without responsibility for his choices and actions. We understand the mystery in part when we distinguish between those things that are necessary in history and those things that are contingent. God himself tells us things that are necessary. It is necessary that the church endure until the end of time. It is necessary that the elect hear the gospel – and God rules over all of history to see to it that they will both hear it and die in saving faith. But most things in history are contingent, that is, as far as we know they could have happened differently than they did. They are the result of human choices for which man is responsible. The church will never perish; but there is no promise that it will also be here in this place. That is contingent. We by our own choices could destroy the church in this place. How clearly that point is made by the Old Testament prophets over and over again and then summarized with scathing accuracy in 2 Kings 17, 2 Chronicles 36:15-21, and Daniel 9.

To be sure, God can and sometimes does intervene to limit what man does. For example, he saves the church again and again from the evil devices of the devil and wicked men who would destroy her. He may intervene in our lives and in history at times and in ways that we will never know until we get to heaven. But ordinarily he does not altogether prevent people from making choices and carrying out their own will. The bullet of the murderer leaves the gun in accord with the laws of physics and may reach its target and do its dread

damage. God does not morally cooperate in the evil deed or morally consent to it. (The reader may recall that this is the distinction between God's material and his moral cooperation in evil.) The drunk driver acted with his free will when he got drunk and is responsible for the damage he does when he gets behind the wheel. It was not God's good and gracious will that he should inflict unspeakable misery on those he struck with his car.

That in no way contradicts the promises of God in Romans 8. God who knows all things and sees the end of things from their beginning has promised it: All things are governed by his might in such a way that they serve the best interest of the elect. That he does such a thing is a tribute to his wisdom and providence. How he does it without damage either to man's freedom or his own omnipotence is a profound mystery. Consider the greatest example of all. Judas betrayed Jesus. It was not the will of the Savior of all that Judas commit this monstrous crime. Over and over again Jesus tried to call Judas back from his crime. Even in the Garden Jesus' words to Judas are a call to repentance. But Judas exercised his free will. God did not prevent it. Judas acted contrary to the will of God. God did not stop him. Nevertheless God turned the wickedness of Judas, and every other human will involved in our Lord's Passion, to our eternal and inestimable good. He did that without removing responsibility from men. He did it without damage to his own holiness and omnipotence.

In our own fragile and stumbling way we daily acknowledge this distinction between the contingent and the necessary, between that which is the will of God revealed in his Word and that which is according to the will of God, but could have been otherwise. We give thanks at the table for what we are about to receive. We call God the giver of the food and ourselves his grateful children who receive this specific meal alone by his bounty and grace. We give thanks to God for our spouse and our house, our friends and our possessions. But in none of those proper and thankful prayers do we imagine that God picked the Sauerbraten over the tacos or Miss Semi Perfect A over Miss Semi Perfect B for our spouse. No, those were all choices that we made. To have chosen otherwise or opposite may well have been just as good (except in the choice of tacos over Sauerbraten!), or in any case not wrong and a sin. They were contingent, not necessary. They were choices according to the will of God, not identical with the will of God. In either choice or course of action God's providence would have worked all to our good.

Then why should we pray? If all the contingent choices that we make can be used by God for our good and for our best, why ask his guidance, why think or plan at all? Because God invites us to pray and promises that he will hear. Because prayer does make a difference. Because he wants us to plan and commit our plans in prayer to his providence and blessing. Again, we have two great marble pillars that stand next to one another. God does not ask us to reconcile them, or to deny one in favor of the other. His providence over our contingent choices stands and so do his promises concerning prayer. His omnipotent rule over all history stands and so does his grant of humanity to fallen mankind, a grant, that is, of freedom to make choices in those things that are subject to reason.

Hopefully the above sets a solid Scriptural foundation on the basis of which we may judge correctly when we examine Reformed teaching. Hopefully such a foundation will as well remind us of those truths of God's Word that are undermined also in our own people's thinking as a result of the popularity of Reformed teachings. What then are the popular currents of Reformed rationalism that easily make inroads in the hearts and minds of our people?

## **THREATENING CURRENTS IN REFORMED THOUGHT**

Reformed teaching can be divided into two main streams, the one as damaging as the other. The particularly perverse fact of the matter is that both streams, though mutually exclusive, are found running together in the minds of many.

### **Calvinism**

Classical Calvinism has fallen on hard times in English speaking Protestantism. The only genuine Calvinists left in this country are some in Dutch Reformed churches and a smattering of old style Presbyterians.

Down but not out of the religious picture, a recent book has gained some popularity as a modern defense of classical Calvinism. It is entitled, *The Pleasures of God*, by John Piper (Multnomah Publishers, Inc., 2000).

Piper defends the proposition that all that God does he does with pleasure for the glory of his sovereign will. That includes the damnation of those chosen for damnation. He declares that there is no contradiction in God's Word that he desires the salvation of all and that he takes pleasure in the damnation of the damned. For God's will cannot be contradicted or resisted by man; if God really willed that all be saved, then all would be saved. That some are not saved is because above and beyond the desire to save all is the desire that his sovereignty be expressed and recognized and then praised by all. Thus God, in the Calvinist mind, has two wills which only appear to be mutually exclusive. One will is revealed in his Word. The other will is secret. He says, for example, that (p. 330) "... the new covenant promise is that God will not let his purposes for a holy people shipwreck on the weakness of human will. Instead he promises *to do what needs to be done to make us what we ought to be*" (emphasis added). He disposes of the problem of apparently contradictory wills in God by declaring that it all depends on the ultimate goal of God's absolute sovereignty: (p. 333) "What does God will more than saving all? ... The answer given by Calvinists is that the greater value is the manifestation of the full range of God's glory in wrath and mercy (Romans 9:22-23) and the humbling of man so that he enjoys giving all credit to God for his salvation (1 Corinthians 1:29)."

He speaks (pp. 325-327) of God's delight in the death of the sons of Eli (1 Samuel 2:22-25) and in the judgment and destruction of Israel. But in his consideration of these and similar passages he fails altogether to distinguish between the antecedent and consequent will of God. All of the passages in the Bible, as already noted, which speak of his saving activity find that activity rooted and grounded in God's own grace and mercy. But the passages which speak of his judgment and his wrath, yes of his desire to exercise that judgment and wrath, lay the blame not in the eternal will of God, but in the perversity of man. Consider exactly those passages referred to earlier that place all the blame for Israel's destruction on their stubborn and persistent rejection of God's Word. Consider as well Jesus' plaintive lament over Jerusalem; what he willed is absolutely clear, that is, the salvation of Jerusalem. What happened was the result, not of some secret will in God, but of the blatant rejection of his will by man (Matthew 23:37). Consider as well the address of St. Stephen before the Sanhedrin (Acts 7:51-53). Where is the secret in all of this? There is no secret at all; the Scriptures state plainly the reason for the judgment of God. That's what we mean by the consequent will of God; God acts in consequence of man's (at least in the cited instances) exercise of his freedom to reject the gospel.

The irresistibility of God's sovereign will in Piper's Calvinism, however, is not limited to the matter of what we customarily refer to as Calvinist double predestination. The sovereign will of God extends to every act of man in history. While most of our people may be ignorant of or indifferent to double predestination, the notion that God's will must always be done, that whatever happens only happens because it's God's will, is a very common one. Piper cites the favorite passages of Calvinist determinism, passages like the following in Proverbs 16:

Vs. 1 To man belong the plans of the heart, but from the Lord comes the reply of the tongue.

Vs. 9 In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps.

Vs. 33 The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.

Add to these passages like:

Proverbs 19:21 – Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails.

Jeremiah 10:23 – I know, O Lord, that a man's life is not his own; it is not for man to direct his steps.

We do not have time here to consider all of the passages that Piper considers in defense of his proposition that God's sovereign will is irresistible and must be carried out in all things great and small. But Piper's use of all of them has this in common: He effectively, if not expressly, denies any real humanity to man. For if man has no free will at all, then even the shell of God's image has been annihilated, man is left altogether a puppet, and even his praise of God is inevitable and compelled. The passages cited speak not of a destruction of human freedom, but of God's ultimate control as he accomplishes his purposes for our good and his glory. Again, it is a matter of finding the narrow Lutheran middle road between two false alternatives; the one is to make man sovereign (of which more later), and the other to deny man's humanity and thus his responsibility for choices that he makes in those things subject to reason.

## SO WHAT?

What danger is there for our people when they unwittingly absorb Calvinist errors? The first and greatest danger in Calvinism is that, if carried out to its logical conclusion, it drives either to despair or to self-righteousness. For if both salvation and damnation have been decreed in eternity what hope is there for me, when I ponder my sins, when I consider the pain of my existence. I must be one who is damned. There is nothing for it but despair. I cast about looking for some evidence that I have come down on the right side of God's eternal decree, and my conscience declares with the Scriptures that my righteousness is as filthy rags. If conscience and the law do their proper work, that is all that is left to me – despair. On the other hand, what if I can look at my life and see it as well ordered, prosperous, truly blessed. Is that not a clear indication that I have been predestined to eternal life, that I enjoy the favor of the Sovereign Lord? Yes, and if I labor to bring about a truly Christian society, one fit for the saints, is that not also a clear indication that I am one of the blessed? The inherent rationalism of Calvinism makes it all the easier for one to pursue the fundamental error of Calvinism to its logical conclusion.

It is no accident that Calvinist societies in Holland, in Geneva, and to some extent in pre-Restoration England and in the Puritan colonies were rigorously upright on the outside. Why? They had something vital to prove, namely that they were indeed the elect. How else can it be proven except by an examination of one's works?

The whole focus of salvation shifts from God to man in the Calvinist scenario, even though that is the opposite of the Calvinist's stated intent. He has to prove his elect state or perish in despair. The only way to prove it is by his own works. Thus while loudly proclaiming that salvation is entirely the work of God, it is not on the work of God that the Calvinist typically fixes his gaze. It is on his own works. Thus: despair or self-righteousness. To seek surety in Christ the book of life, as the Formula of Concord urges in Article XI, sounds foreign indeed in the Calvinist's ear.

What of the rest of it? What of this notion that not just salvation and damnation but everything else as well has been predetermined by the will of God? That everything that happens must be his will or else it wouldn't have happened? Such a perverse notion does the same thing in daily life that double election does in the realm of salvation. It turns the gaze away from Christ and his Word. Earlier we emphasized that faith is knowledge, assent, and confidence. But faith for the determinist is mindless. Everything has been decreed, and what will be, that will be. No point in examining the Scriptures carefully. No point in applying the Bible as I make decisions and plan. It's all been decreed already, and whatever we do is the will of God therefore; otherwise we wouldn't have done it and it couldn't have happened. No longer is it necessary to live by faith; we already live by sight. For now we know the will of God without the Word, and without the hunger that wants, as the old Collect put it, "to hear, learn and inwardly digest" the Word.

Do we mean that all Calvinists think in the way just described? Of course not. Do we wish to suggest that such an extreme infects all of our members? Certainly not. But permit me to suggest that such thinking is not at all uncommon to one degree or another. For again, Calvinism is rationalistic at its core. And such conclusion are utterly rational and consistent with the Calvinist premise.

Perhaps just a couple of examples may serve to make the point that Calvinist thinking about the will of God is not at all uncommon in our circles. Recently (Dec., 2000) a student wrote the following lines in a student publication at MLC.

Why are you here anyway? ... Well, I can tell you right now, that no matter the case, God called you here in some way or the other.... The Lord calls you to where you are suppose (sic) to be.

“What if I don’t want to be here?” If you feel as though you do not want to be a minister of the gospel through teaching or pastoral duties, then by all means, go wear (sic) the Lord is calling you in another field. ... “How am I supposed to know that I’m not supposed to be a teacher/pastor? How do I know that I’m making the right decision?” A good one-word answer for that is pray. Dear Christian friend, if you pray about it, you (sic) decision can’t be wrong. In Proverbs 16:9 we read, “in his heart, a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps.” Your decision can’t be wrong, because you are going where your savior calls you.

The above is an appalling mish-mash of all that is wrong with Calvinism with a good dose of all that is wrong with Arminianism thrown in for good measure! What are you “supposed to do”? Guess and torment yourself that you may have guessed wrong and thus thwarted or threatened some cosmic plan for your life? When in doubt, pray. Prayer will give you the answer. Prayer as a means of grace is a common characteristic of Arminianism. But it isn’t Scriptural. In point of fact, if prayer is a substitute for the means of grace, what need then do we have of the means of grace?

I can’t tell you how many students I have had over the years who have tormented themselves trying to climb into the hidden will of God. I can’t tell you how much grief they have inflicted on themselves trying to guess God’s cosmic, foreordained plan for their vocational future, for marriage, for just about anything else that you might think of. One young man wrestled with the problem of which young lady he should marry. He wanted to know how to find out which one God had picked for him. Another decided that there was no point in thinking about the future of the school or of the synod or of his own course of study, because whatever God had decided is how it would all come out anyway.

How sad! The simple truth of the Scripture is beautiful and comforting. Under the cross I am consoled that even and already in eternity God thought of me, God knew me. And now in time God has so ruled over history that I should hear the voice of the Good Shepherd in the gospel and by its power come to trust in him as my Savior. When tempest tossed and tormented by doubt, I can look to him and listen to his Word. I can call to mind his promises and gifts in the sacraments as seals and pledges of the promises in his Word. I can as a redeemed child of God offer up to him MY decisions and choices and courses of action out of love and gratitude. And in the midst of all life’s changes and turmoil, I can trust that he works all to his glory and my good! I sometimes tell students who are wrestling with “vocational indecision” that for God it is like Christmas every day. Though he knows all things, he still waits to see how you will respond to the choices he has given you to make, how you will decide to serve him in response to the gospel. Then he may say, “Ah, see how this one loves me! He gives back to me what I gave to him; he has chosen to serve me and his neighbor as a \_\_\_\_\_!” And the choice is not between bad and good. The choice is between good and good; you make the decision on the basis of gifts that God gave you and interests that God gave you. So generous is God that you no doubt can make a choice between many “goods.” Then in whatever choice you make, do it all to the glory of God.

## **ARMINIANISM**

If Calvinism is bad and its inroads on our people are dangerous, then Arminianism is worse and its inroads more pervasive and perverse. Arminianism in its origins is a reaction against Calvinism. The Arminians were appalled at the notion that God willed and was responsible for the damnation of those not elected to



salvation. Thus where the Calvinist denies universal/objective justification, the Arminian teaches that salvation is *possible* or *available* for all. But he denies original sin and makes salvation a cooperative effort between God and man. Like Calvinism, Arminianism is essentially rationalistic. The Calvinist in his brand of rationalism decides that if God is sovereign and has elected some to salvation, then it follows that he must will the damnation of those not elected. The Arminian goes in the opposite direction. He reasons that if God is not to be held responsible for the damnation of the damned, then man must play a role in his own salvation; he must choose between heaven and hell. The key for the Arminian is the will of man. It must be free to choose God, to make a decision for Christ. But if man's will is free to make a decision for Christ, then he must not be "dead in trespasses and sins." At the very least we must come into the world neutral – but probably basically good.

Most of American Protestantism is awash in Arminianism to one degree or another. Indeed one may say that though the roots of Arminianism are in Holland, its trunk and branches are utterly American. Arminianism exalts the individual, the subjective, the emotional, the anti-intellectual and anti-clerical streak that is so much a part of American culture: Don't follow your head! Follow your heart! Don't think too much and don't read anything very deep; just *feel the Spirit!* Away with any kind of authority! Tocqueville noted that about Americans and American religion and commented on it extensively in his famous book *Democracy in America* in the 1830s. The addiction to entertainment and the superficial, the mind as an ad hoc committee addressed to the moment, those are hallmarks of American culture. Arminianism in its Methodist and Baptist forms is ideally suited to that kind of mentality. We and our people are by no means immune to it.

Tune in to the local religious radio station. Catch some evening something on Trinity Broadcasting Network on cable. The best of Arminianism will be evident in some who have a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures and even exalt the work of Christ as Savior of the world. But even these best always end up with an emotional appeal that is no better than the sum of theology in the Middle Ages: *Facere quod in te est!* Now do your part; invite Jesus into your heart; turn your life over to him and make him King Jesus!

What becomes of faith in this best case Arminian scenario? Faith is MY decision, MY choice, MY part in salvation. But what if I don't really *feel* the Spirit? What if I'm not sure that I *really* believe? Yes, what if I find that I am still plagued with the same old temptations and plagued even worse than before? Then read the Bible some more! Pray and pray and pray for the Spirit! When you feel it, then you've got it!

Oh, how dreadful! Once again we have a recipe either for despair or self-righteousness, a recipe even more likely to get cooked in the Arminian heart than the Calvinist recipe in the Calvinist heart. For notice how everything turns back to man. Faith is man's work. Its assurance is in man's feelings. It should be prayed for, even when the one praying thinks himself an unbeliever! Objective justification is turned on its head, and so is faith. Loudly proclaiming that Christ died for the sins of the world, the best of Arminians nevertheless makes Christ's death merely that which made salvation possible. "It is finished!" must change into "It is possible, if only you make your decision for Christ!" Faith does not receive the accomplished fact of redemption. In the Arminian equation *faith establishes the fact of redemption* – it isn't true until and unless I believe it. What then should the Arminian do in doubt and despair? Look to himself and struggle to conjure up the feeling. What should he do when he feels all is right with God and the world? He need look no further; what he believes to be true is true because he believes it.

And that's Arminianism at its best! At its best is not how we will most often encounter it. The denial of original sin and the exaltation of the fallen will is a vipers brood. Once faith is the cause of truth rather than the result of truth, anything can pass as faith. And these days just about anything does. "Pastor, how can I go to hell? I don't believe in hell!" "Well, Pastor, that's all fine for you; but I just don't believe that God would judge somebody just because they \_\_\_\_\_." "But isn't the most important thing that we just believe?" – note that faith in these kinds of statements has no source, no content, no goal; it is the mindless musing and sentiment of the moment. The closest it will ever come to content is: Jesus loves me; this I know and this is all I want to know! We need constantly to remember and emphasize the truth that faith is *knowledge, assent, and confidence*. Faith without knowledge is not faith; it is superstition!

So with Arminianism justification is turned upside down, faith is reduced to sentiment, and original sin is blatantly denied. Want more? The very subjectivism of faith drives inexorably to a host of "Spirit-led

ministries” that exalt the role of the Holy Spirit at the expense of Christ. Search the Scriptures for a theology of the Holy Spirit and what will you find? You will find that the work of the Holy Spirit and his greatest joy is to lead us to Christ, to exalt the work of Christ, to bring Christ to us. A work of the Holy Spirit independent of or neglecting Christ is the work of a very different spirit, one not from above but from below. Nevertheless Oral Roberts is “led by the Spirit” to ask for millions to build a hospital. And no one blushes! I chanced upon TBN for five minutes a few weeks ago to hear one of their leading program hosts declare: “I got up this morning, and instantly felt led by the Spirit to pray for..., and this is the message he gave me for you today!” No reference to the Bible. No mention of Jesus.

So prayer becomes THE means of grace for many Arminians. It is the key that unlocks the hidden mind of God. It becomes the way in which God speaks through his Spirit to the decisions and tasks of the day. “Just leave yourself open to his speaking” is the common mantra of these latter-day *Rottengeister*, these *Schwärmer*, who have, to borrow Luther’s expression, “swallowed the Holy Ghost, tail feathers and all.” What need is there then for searching the Scriptures, not to mention marrying them? What need for careful study of a sacred text? What need for that matter for a trained clergy who can help us do that on the basis of the original texts? It is enough “to have the Spirit, to be in the Spirit!”

Want any more? Arminianism is inherently a theology of glory rather than a theology of the cross. The theology of glory shows itself in its forms of worship and in its underlying legalism.

From the beginning Arminian worship has placed a high premium on emotionalism. After all, we are trying to get people to make a decision for Christ. They can’t do that unless they feel like it. They are more likely to feel like it if we sing upbeat songs and downplay confession of sins. They are more likely to feel like it if we do not trouble their minds with doctrines beyond those likely to make them feel good; talk a lot about the millennium or about heaven or about the warm glow that comes from surrender to and then union with Jesus or with the Spirit. They are more likely to feel like it if they can be passive and entertained than if we bother them with liturgical responses that they may find boring. They are more likely to feel like it if the emphasis in preaching and in singing is on the pronouns “I” and “me” than on the pronouns “He” and “Him.” Not facts, but how I feel is important. So let the praise music begin. Sing and talk a lot about rejoicing in the Lord; but don’t mention that the reason for such repeated encouragements in the Scriptures is the simple fact that often there is little outward reason to rejoice – Paul rejoices in prison (Philippians 3:1, 4:4), not because everything is going well and he is winning, but because even though everything is terrible, the Lord has won the victory whether we see it or not. Let the pastor and/or others give heart-wrenching testimonials of how the Spirit has changed their lives. Do not proclaim. Share. Share especially yourself. See what wonderful things God has done and is doing through our Spirit-filled ministry; that can all be yours, if you just invite Jesus to come into your heart.

There goes justification. In comes despair for those who do not triumph over their temptations, or whose life is plagued with problems that cannot be solved but only endured, or whose “faith” is beset with doubts and fears. In comes self-righteousness for those who feel it and now have faith in faith, who triumph over adversity and see that as the just reward of their “faith,” who unlike the perverse have at least had the virtue of making the right decision for Jesus. Let’s raise our hands and sway tearfully back and forth in wordless (- and therefore doctrine- and content-less) faith; surely the Spirit is fully present in such an outpouring of zeal and harmony and joy! Whether one despairs or is transported into raptures of joy, the focus is on self and on one’s feelings. For despair makes sin greater than the Savior; mindless emotionalism raises feelings over facts and indeed makes feelings the cause of facts rather than the other way around. It is anthropocentric to the core, not Christo-centric.

When Christ is not the center, when he and his Word cease to be the source, the content, and the goal of faith, then legalism and the *opinio legis* are bound to take the place of the gospel. The second table of the law, self-help and self-improvement become dominant topics in preaching. Moralizing is the norm. Luther’s insightful and incisive *We should fear and love God* as the all-important connecting rod between the First and Second Table of the Law is nowhere to be found. Check the ever popular and in some respects useful materials produced by Dobson for helping families. Gospel motivation will be in short supply; a true appreciation of the law as a mirror with the First Commandment the sum of all will not be found. Left to itself such materials contain yet another recipe for either despair or self righteousness!

We have attempted here to cover a broad range of Arminian phenomena. But whether we are considering the less egregious examples of Arminianism or the more extreme examples, the bottom line remains the same: justification is perverted, faith is a decision that accomplishes salvation rather than a trust which receives it; original sin is denied; man's feelings triumph over God's Word. Throw in prayer as the means by which God's Spirit comes and directs the urges and choices man makes from day to day and the picture is reasonably complete. Let those beware who thoughtlessly declare that the only difference between us and some conservative Calvinists/Arminians is on the matter of the sacraments! Wrong on the sacraments is wrong on the gospel. Reformed errors on the sacraments are not just an aberration; rather they echo fundamental errors on the whole of the law and the gospel.

Is it any wonder that Arminianism leads to theological relativism? Oliver Cromwell at the end of his life could not understand why everything had ended so badly; after all, the Spirit of God was speaking and working through him, or so he imagined. He could not understand why the Spirit of God didn't say the same thing to everyone else that he thought the Spirit of God was saying to him. Nevertheless that did not turn him from his conviction that the individual has direct access to God, even apart from the Word of God. And so he died in despair, floundering in a sea of contradictory and mutually exclusive truths, all supposedly revealed by the Spirit. If Arminianism fit in well in Cromwell's England, it fits better still with a post-Enlightenment, not to mention post-Modern educational systems, awash in existential relativism, a culture that exalts naval gazing as the best means for finding the truth of the moment, and all that within the framework of a secular society addicted to entertainment.

Is it any wonder that Arminian sects not only multiply but prosper? Just look at their churches, whether on a television set or in the Crystal Cathedral! People beat down the doors to get into these places. They are successful. They are growing. The best of them are fundamentalist, which means they have pared down their doctrinal requirements to no more than five or six. The worst of them are barely Christian at all, have no doctrines, just spirit. Their success should in no way surprise us. Legalism and *Schwärmerei*, whether that of the Pharisees, the Pope, or the sectarians have always been and always will be popular. Our country and culture more than most offer Arminianism fertile soil indeed!

## SO WHAT?

It may well be obvious to you that Arminian attitudes are in the air we breathe. Arminianism pervades just about every religious or quasi-religious expression among people on the street or in the religious programming on the radio and on television. Nor have we escaped that air. I refer you back to the citation earlier from a recent student publication at MLC.

You may have caught a whiff of Arminianism in a recent WELS video. One of our congregations has sponsored a pre-school program open to the neighborhood. No doubt the effort is a good one in and of itself. But when the woman promoting it discussed its evolution, what did she say? Something like this: "We had planned it for our members and expected it to be small. ... But sometimes the Holy Spirit speaks to us and leads us in an altogether different direction. We have to follow where his speaking leads us!" Why couldn't she just have said: "We decided to invite the neighbors. God blessed our efforts beyond our fondest expectations, so that now ..." Why this speaking of the Holy Spirit apart from his Word?

I had a student in my office who was failing every course. We had stretched his program to five years in the hope that he could make it that way. We got him a tutor for every subject. Still he was failing. Finally I asked him, "Why are you still here?" His answer: "I'm still praying and waiting for the Lord to tell me what I should do!"

Nor are we pastors immune. We wear a robe on Sunday morning. Why? To hide our person and in order to emphasize the truth that we are Christ's spokesmen, God's ambassadors. We are there to proclaim his Word. But have you noticed how over the last few years the pronoun "I" has become increasingly important in sermons, how much sharing edges out proclaiming? There is a time and place for sharing; I'm not so sure that it's in the pulpit.

How many pastors sometimes, maybe often, go home from pastoral conference depressed? I hear that lament from younger pastors fairly often. I don't recall that that happened 30 years ago. What's changed? Our pastors are bombarded by exhortations to be this and do that, and to make sure that their mission is self-supporting by such and such a date. All of these things may be defensible and proper to a point and in their place. But then they hear of Super-Rev. at Big Bucks Lutheran and how wonderful his work is. They read about the exciting mission and wonderful accomplishments of Pastor Hot Shot at St. Euphoria's. But instead of being encouraged by such examples, they are depressed. They don't dare raise a question during the questions of casuistry period at the end of conference for fear that everyone will discover by their questions what failures they are. For their ministry is marked by problems with catechumens who don't want to learn, young people whose lives are a disgrace, parents who defend the sinful behavior of their children, weddings where they have to fight every step of the way to keep it Christian, and now increasingly even funerals where everyone wants to have his say. Throw in a few battles over closed communion and a struggle with a feminist and a few divorces and the picture is almost complete.

Do the exhortations and deadlines, the programs and the examples of success sometimes go overboard to the point of triumphalism? Is it possible that we also fall for a theology of glory? If I do all these things, if I am all these things, if I become like Super-Rev. and Pastor Hot Shot, then I too will be successful. If I just get the right program, if I just become the perfect pastor ...

The simple fact of the matter is that we are not in heaven yet. We live under the cross. Truth to tell, a lot of the stories about Super-Rev. and Pastor Hot Shot are stories that catch him in a moment when the gospel triumphed; they are not indicative of his whole ministry and his day to day struggle with the same problems that the rest of us have. After all, if you were asked to write a story or give a talk about your ministry, you would pick out events in which the gospel triumphed – not the day-to-day struggle with your own sinful flesh and that of your people.

The triumphs of the gospel are always aberrations, not the norm, that is, it is never a triumph emanating from any natural force or native ability in man, but also the result of the supernatural power of the gospel itself. Even then, most reject the gracious and effective call of the gospel. And many of those who receive the gospel in faith are plagued with weakness in their understanding or with errors in doctrine that they have not overcome. Opposition to pure doctrine and practice is what we should expect. It is not of itself evidence of failure. In fact Jesus warns us to watch out when everything is going well and all speak well of us; that was the experience of the false prophets, not of the true (Matthew 5:11-12, 23:34, Luke 6:26). He promises us not glory in this life, but the imitation of his state of humiliation. In a word, he promises us the cross (Matthew 16:24), opposition from false prophets, persecution, apostasy (Matthew 23:4-13). And Jesus has kept his Word! Which one of the prophets had a comfortable life? How many of the apostles lived in ease? Which of the great church fathers ended his days with the cry: "No, not yet! More, more!"

And if we are sometimes infected with Arminian triumphalism, should we be surprised when our members are infected with the same virus? Many of them want worship to be entertaining, and an entertaining sermon will always win lots of praise. Many of them want easy answers to life's great problems. They come for advice too late and leave too early when they hear about repentance and endurance. Some want a cheap forgiveness for an unscriptural divorce or life style. Some want an easy conscience about a relative who died in obvious unbelief. To put it another way, some want what the Arminians have, the free and easy assurance that whatever they believe is true because they believe it, and whatever they decide to do must be the will of God, or they would have chosen and acted otherwise. Besides all that, who are you to judge! The important thing is that we just believe and love one another. Consequences for sin in this life? Hell in the next? We want none of that. Ours is a God of love, who would never send anyone to hell.

So let's sing praise music, and if we have a children's choir, make sure they sing it loud. They're so cute. If we must have a children's sermon, make sure that that's cute too and clever. People love that sort of thing. Keep doctrine in sermons to a minimum. It only makes people think and gives them something else to argue about or be upset about. When the pericope for the Sunday is 20 verses long, make sure you cover it in 15 minutes; a text study will only frustrate you; be generic; it's a lot less work. Yes, become a religious

professional, who knows how to meet people, who can raise enough money to meet the budget, who is always agreeable, always amusing, always understanding about sin, who stands for everything and stands for nothing – who, given enough time, may finally hear those words of dread from his Master: “Depart from me; I never knew you!”

We do not intend to suggest that we should work hard to be obnoxious, so that we will always have opposition. It is not our intention to encourage contempt for everything that is “people friendly.” Rather we would merely like to suggest that in our day and age, we need to be on guard, lest the methods of the Arminians and even their goals, overtake us. There is a narrow Lutheran middle road between being indifferent to the affect our bad habits have on people on the one hand and pandering to the crowd on the other. We need to work at finding that middle road. If we endure opposition, hostility and frustration it should not be because we ourselves provoke it by misanthropic attitudes and behavior. Indeed it is precisely because of our love for Christ and for the people that he has entrusted to our care that we want to serve them faithfully and (which is to say the same thing) in accord with the Scriptures and in harmony with the Lutheran Confessions. The shepherd who does not warn against and protect the flock from the wolf is little better than the shepherd who is friends with the wolf, who is himself the wolf!

What then is the cure for the taint of Arminianism in ourselves? What medicine is there against it for our people, when the virus of the *opinio legis* loves it and when what’s left of a “Christian” culture so heartily encourages it?

St. Paul says, *Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!* (Philippians 4:4). As mentioned earlier, he says this, not because everything is going well. He rejoices and urges us to join him in rejoicing because God ultimately wins the triumph, because the Word of God is still effective for the salvation of all in whom it creates faith, because there are still those who love that Word in its truth and purity and live lives that give evidence of their love, evidence not least in their support for the apostle in his imprisonment and by implication in their support of those who follow him in faithfully proclaiming that Word. Yes, rejoice! Christ has kept his promise. Those who are faithful to the Word will suffer opposition, hostility and frustration. Since Christ has kept that promise, rejoice! For that is evidence that he will keep his other promises too. *Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of heaven, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever* (Daniel 12:3), and *Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life* (Revelation 2:10).

Yes, and the beautiful promises he makes about his Word faithfully and purely proclaimed he will also keep (Isaiah 55). The Word will still accomplish its saving purposes. It will still give wine and milk without cost and yet priceless. It will still bring the Lord, the Savior to us and us to him. It will still be that gentle rain which comes down from heaven to water the seed sown. It will still bring us to trust him whose thoughts are so high above ours that rationalism in man is foolishness. The only cure for the plague of Arminianism is still that Word. Cling to it yourself. Be aware of the allure that Arminianism has both for you and for your members. In the process don’t sell your members short. Sometimes I think that we either underestimate the power of the Word to accomplish its purposes, or we underestimate the capacity, even the desire, of our people to learn from it. You have received the best training in the world for the study of that Word and for communicating it. Don’t sell that Word short or the training you received for proclaiming and sharing it. Do solid text study for the sermon; you will benefit and so will those Christ has entrusted to your care. Have some Bible classes at times that treat chapters exhaustively. Enjoy and let your people enjoy the rich imagery of the language of the Bible.

As you make use of that Word for yourself and your members, keep your eyes open for ways of warning against the danger and showing the incomparable superiority of the Word over its counterfeit. For, again, the greatest danger posed by Arminianism is in its inexorable drive towards either despair or self-righteousness. If we instill such a love for the truth of justification in our people that their faith is rooted and grounded in Christ, his Word and his work, then we can work on giving them a dread of anything which offends against that central truth. Yes, then we can move them closer to the goal of understanding that God speaks in his Word and makes no promise to speak to us apart from that Word. We can, beginning with ourselves, concentrate and focus our attention on this sublime truth: What God has to say in his Word and in the sacraments is so vastly superior to

anything that I could imagine within the cellar of my own heart that I will be content to live in his Word and by his Word alone. Isn't it a shame that people are so quick to trade in the tinsel of their own fallen imagination for the purest gold and silver of God's inspired Scriptures?

Justification is the crown jewel of the Bible and therefore of Lutheran orthodoxy. The doctrine concerning faith is the crown in which that jewel is set. Separate the correct understanding of justification from the correct understanding of the nature, content, source and goal of faith and both will be lost. The doctrine of original sin impresses on us the desperate need we have for justification and the incomprehensible beauty of God's grace and Christ's merit that it should all be ours through faith alone. Yes, and the doctrine of original sin is what makes it possible for us to understand ourselves and those around us, even to understand why faith is so difficult that it requires a miracle for its creation and preservation. Knowing these things, which are always new, always needed, never to be taken for granted, who would not cry out to God day and night in earnest prayer for the preservation of the gospel, for faithful pastors to proclaim it, for a church that still holds high the light of the Word in a world more wedded than ever to the darkness of unbelief and superstition. The day is far spent and gone. The night is falling. He stands at the door and knocks. May we be found faithful at his coming!