

## The Meaning of Jacobus Arminius for Today

(Matthew 13:52)

Keith Stanglin

Arminiuskerk, Rotterdam, May 7, 2023

“Genade zij u en vrede van God, onzen Vader, en den Heere Jezus Christus.” (2 Cor. 1:2).

When I first came to the Netherlands 19 years ago to conduct research in Leiden on Arminius, I met the Remonstrant professor Marius van Leeuwen, who lamented the lack of study of Arminius among Remonstrants, and he said to me, “Arminius is our most important theologian.” An earlier Remonstrant professor of theology shared that sentiment. In 1645, Étienne de Courcelles wrote:

*In our Arminius you have a living representation of that scribe who was instructed in the kingdom of heaven, concerning whom the Lord Jesus mentions in Matthew [13:52], who as the opulent head of the household, brings forth from his treasury things new and old.*

Jacob Harmenszoon (1559–1609), or Jacobus Arminius, was a Dutch theologian who was active in the early part of the post-Reformation. He was educated in Reformed theology at Leiden, Marburg, Basel, and Geneva, where he was a student of John Calvin’s successor, Theodore Beza. After his theological training, he was a minister at the Oude Kerk (Old Church) in Amsterdam for fifteen years. He then spent the final six years of his life as a full professor at the theological college at Leiden University.

Arminius is best known for his opposition to some aspects of Reformed theology, especially the Reformed or Calvinist doctrines of unconditional predestination and irresistible grace. Against the predominant Reformed view, Arminius taught that God gives everyone grace that is resistible, and he elects believers, that is, the people who don’t refuse God’s saving grace and faith. Although

his thought and writings were prolific and wide ranging, he is best remembered for his teachings on these controversial matters related to predestination and grace.

Arminius' thought has been profoundly influential among non- and anti-Calvinist Protestants, from the Dutch Remonstrants to Wesleyan Methodists to the American Second Great Awakening and global Pentecostalism. So let me expand on three points about his theology.

1) Divine love for creation- God created and loves all people for the purpose of salvation.

First of all, with Arminius there is an emphasis on the theology of creation. Arminius stresses that God's act of creation is the communication of good only, intended for the creature's good. The act of creating was God's first demonstration of free grace. Arminius's Reformed colleagues could not express God's purpose so plainly. In some Reformed accounts, a great part of humanity was created for the purpose of destruction. But for Arminius, God's desire for the salvation of "all people" (1 Tim. 2:4) means each individual person. In addition, in giving freedom to creation, God limits his actions toward creation. Arminius would stress the divine self-limitation toward creation.

2) Conditional/-ed election- God elects (chooses) to save believers. The condition of salvation is penitent faith, and the condition of condemnation is impenitent unbelief. The difference between unconditional and conditional election can be summed up with this question: Do you believe because you're elect (Reformed), or are you elect because you believe (Arminian)?

3) Resistible grace- Salvation by grace alone, but humans can resist the Holy Spirit.

The grace which is necessary for salvation can be refused. Saving faith is a gift from God. Grace is necessary every step of the way. For Arminius, grace does

everything it does for the Reformed, but it's just resistible. For the Reformed, God always gets whom he elects, but his saving love is selective. For Arminius, God may not get everyone he wants, but his saving love is universal. For Arminius, salvation, from the human perspective, is basically the refusal to resist God's grace.

There are many aspects of Arminius' legacy that have endured through the centuries. Despite the development, discontinuity, and diversity in the history of Arminianism, there are a few fundamental themes that are shared by nearly all Arminian or Arminian-leaning fellowships and theologians over the last four centuries. These points were not invented by Arminius; their roots run deep in the history of Christian thought. The topics themselves are not peculiar to Arminianism. Rather, it is the interpretation and emphasis that they receive that make them stand out as Arminian. At least in Protestant theology, these elements combine to form a distinct theological tradition. The ones I will mention all continue in some form or another in the variety of Arminian traditions—whether in the liberal Protestant trajectory (eg, Remonstrants, and some parts of the Anglican Church and UMC) or in the trajectory of more conservative Wesleyan and evangelical expressions.

### 1. Goodness of God

Arminians have always stressed goodness as one of the fundamental attributes of God. If, as Reformed theology seems to indicate, God has decreed the fall of mankind in such a way that it was not possible for it not to occur, if he has created individual humans to whom he will never bestow saving grace (though he could), and if he has created reprobates in order for them to sin and thus be eternally destroyed, then it seems to Arminians that God is directly culpable for evil. (This is perhaps one factor that led to modern atheism. When people say, I don't believe in God, I sometimes ask what they mean by God. If it's something like that, then I tell them I don't believe in that God either.)

For Arminius, because God is the source of all good, God's act of creation is the communication of good only, intended for the creature's good. According to Arminius, holding fast to a proper vision of God's goodness is necessary for sound theology.

The same themes are present in later Arminians. In the words of the great Wesleyan hymn, "Love divine, all loves excelling, joy of heaven to earth come down."

## 2. Divine Grace and Human Freedom

As a corollary to the Arminian emphasis on the goodness of God, Arminians also affirm the compatibility between divine grace and human freedom. For Arminians, human freedom does not threaten God's sovereignty.

In matters pertaining to salvation, humans retain the freedom to receive or resist grace that leads to saving faith. Remonstrants and Arminians like Wesley and later Methodists affirm freedom of choice in general and with regard to salvation.

Grace and freedom go hand in hand, but Arminians are much more interested in protecting the sovereignty and priority of grace than in exalting an allegedly autonomous human freedom.

## 3. Sanctification and Good Works

Another characteristic of Arminianism is its distinct emphasis on sanctification and the necessity of continuing in good works of faith and love. For Arminius, the "original righteousness" that was lost in the fall into sin is replaced in the regenerate with a "renewed righteousness."

Sanctification is what God works in his people, making them holy and righteous. For John Wesley, the goal of that growth is entire sanctification, Christian perfection. Later Methodists agree that good works inevitably follow from

regeneration. This emphasis on good works, of course, implies the avoidance of, and victory over, sin, through the help of God's Holy Spirit.

#### 4. Toleration and Ecumenism

Arminian groups have often been at the forefront of religious toleration and Christian ecumenism. Theologically: God's salvific will is universal in scope, so the acknowledgment of truth in other denominations and, indeed, in other religions tends toward inclusiveness. Sociologically: Arminian groups, inasmuch as they have arisen in contexts dominated by Reformed theology, have often been on the receiving end of marginalization and persecution, a circumstance that causes them to think more deeply about and advocate toleration.

The Dutch Arminians' (Remonstrants') experience of intolerance and finally expulsion from their Church (and their land) in 1619 helped motivate the Remonstrants to proclaim a broad orthodoxy and to become, as a group, the most outspoken and influential champions of ecumenism, unity, and toleration in the early modern West. Although the context was quite different, the Wesleyan movement also began with an emphasis on toleration. John Wesley preached love and respect toward other Christians.

[Conclusion:] Like the well-instructed scribe in Matthew 13, Arminius brought out things old and new. As a pastor and theologian, he was a recipient of a long and venerable Christian tradition, and he applied that old wisdom to new situations. He brought new insights that were consistent with that tradition.

What does it mean for us to bring forth things old and new from the treasury? Perhaps many things. But I believe it includes the responsibility, that we each have as followers of Jesus, to understand the Christian faith that we profess, which means engaging the past, the powerful words of Scripture, the great tradition of the church, summed up in its creeds and expressed by its greatest minds. We labor to build that

treasury, that storehouse. These are the things old, that we must continue to learn from and appropriate for ourselves. We are in continuity with our past, members of a historic faith.

At the same time, while we learn from that wisdom of the past, we apply that hard-earned wisdom to the present day, we read our lives through the lens of Scripture and tradition, and we address the greatest challenges of our day. Like those before us, we prioritize worship of the one true God, and we engage the world as the body of Christ, to be Christ to the world for its healing—physical, emotional, and spiritual. We identify the needs of the world, and what weakens and troubles people—sin and brokenness, the isolation and loneliness, the addictions and bad habits that separate people from God and from each other. These are the things new that the wise person brings out of the treasury.

Arminius' emphasis on grace that cooperates with human free will, his doctrine of providence, his insistence on God's holy love for all creation, his desire to return to the basics of mere Christianity as a foundation for Christian unity—these are all messages that we still need to hear today. And above all, the love divine, all loves excelling, joy of heaven to earth come down. That love is demonstrated in God incarnate, Jesus Christ, whom we adore.

...In den Naam des Vaders, en des Zoons, en des Heiligen Geestes. Amen.