

CHAPTER 9

"Arminian and Calvinistic Systems Compared"

from

LECTURES IN DIVINITY

by
George Hill

Section 1

"Three Difficulties of Arminianism"

The Arminian system appears, upon a general view, most satisfying to a pious and benevolent mind. It teaches pardon procured by the death of Christ for all who repent and believe when joined together with the administration of the means of grace sufficient to bring all men to faith and repentance. Thus it forms a remedy suited to the extent of the disease; and it is a remedy from which none are excluded by any circumstance foreign to themselves. If it does not in the end deliver all from the evils of sin, then it does not fail through any defect in its own nature or any partiality in the Being from whom it proceeded, but fails purely through the obstinacy and perverseness of those to whom it is offered.

But while this system appears to correspond with our ideas of the goodness and justice of God, it is found to labor under the following three difficulties. 1. The administration of the means of grace sufficient to bring all men to faith and repentance, upon which this system proceeds, appears to be contradicted by the fact that it is not available to all mankind. 2. While Arminianism in words ascribes all to the grace of God, it does in effect resolve our salvation into something independent of that grace. 3. Arminianism seems to imply a failure in the purpose of the Almighty, which is not easily reconciled with our notions of his sovereignty.

1. It does not appear to be true that there is an administration of the means of grace sufficient to bring all men to faith and repentance. Although there is nothing in the nature of the Gospel to prevent it from becoming a universal religion, yet the fact remains that the greatest part of the world does not enjoy the benefit of its instruction. The Arminians are obliged to resolve this manifest inequality in dispensing the advantages for attaining faith and repentance into the sovereignty of God, who imparts his free gifts to whom he will. Still, however, they do not abandon their principle; for they contend that

the grace of God accompanies the light of nature, and that all who improve this universal revelation are conducted by that grace to higher degrees of knowledge.

But here also the fact does not appear to accord with their system, for the light of nature, although universal, is most unequal. In many countries superstition is rendered so inveterate by education, custom, and example, and the state of society is so unfavorable to the improvement of the mind, that none of the inhabitants has the means of extricating himself from error. Even in those more enlightened parts of the world, where men have risen to more honorable conceptions of the Deity by the cultivation of the powers of reason or the advantages of foreign instruction, there does not appear any possibility of their attaining to the faith of Christ; for as the apostle says, "*Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. How shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard, and how shall they hear without a preacher?*" (Rom. 10:17).

The Socinians say that all men in every situation who rise up to the light afforded them may be saved without any regard to the merits of Christ. But this opinion is strongly disclaimed by the Arminians. They choose rather to say that those who improve the measure of knowledge derived from the works of nature and the grace of God that accompanies it, are in some extraordinary manner made acquainted with the doctrine of Christ so as to attain before they die that faith in him which the means afforded them could not produce. Thus they are obliged, with regard to the greater part of mankind, to give up their fundamental position that sufficient means of grace are administered to all; all do not have recourse to the production of faith by an immediate impression of the Spirit of God upon the mind.

Feeling the force of this difficulty, the Arminians piously and wisely leave the fate of that greater part of mankind who do not enjoy the Gospel to the mercy of God in Christ. In their confessions of faith they confine their doctrine concerning the universal application of the remedy to those who are called by the word. To this "call" they give the name of an "election to grace and to the means of salvation," which they distinguish from an "election to glory." Election to glory is eternal happiness for those who persevere in faith and good works, while election to grace is understood to be common to all who live in a Christian country. This implies giving that grace, which is sufficient to produce faith and to promote repentance to life, to everyone by the preaching of the word and the power of Spirit accompanying it.

But even after the Arminians have thus corrected and limited their doctrine with regard to the *sufficiency* of the means of grace, there remain two objections to it in point of fact. The first arises from the very unequal circumstances in which the inhabitants of different Christian countries are placed. In some countries the Scriptures are given to the people that they may search them; in others they are withheld. In some countries the Gospel is exhibited in a corrupt form, which tends to degrade the understanding and pervert the moral conduct; in others it is presented in its native simplicity as cherishing every exalted

affection and forming the mind to virtue. In the same countries there are infinite diversities among individuals as to their intellectual powers, the measure of their information, their employments, their pursuits, their education, their society, the inducements to act properly, or the temptations to sin that arise from their manner of life.

All these circumstances have an effect upon the moral character and therefore must be regarded in the Arminian system as a branch of the administration of the means of grace, because they are instruments which the Spirit of God may employ in that moral influence which he is considered as exerting over the mind of man. By means of these circumstances, some are placed in a more favorable situation for attaining faith than others. The same moral persuasion by which some are preserved from almost any approach to iniquity becomes insufficient to restrain others from gross transgression. And thus the Sovereign of the universe, who has ordained all these circumstances, appears to discriminate in respect of the means of salvation among those very persons who are said to be equally elected to grace.

It may be said, indeed, that the secret operation of divine grace counterbalances the diversity of outward circumstances, so that taking the internal assistance and the external means together, all who live in a Christian country are upon the same footing. This is the method adopted by Grotius and other able defenders of Arminianism for answering the objection. But it is a departure from the principles of that system: for in the place of an administration of the means of grace sufficient for all, it is substituting an administration in many instances defective; and in place of an internal grace common and equal to all, it is substituting an internal grace imparted differently to different persons according to circumstances.

Now a second objection must be brought out regarding the supposition that in every Christian country there is such an administration of the means of grace as is sufficient to bring all men to faith, and it arises from this undeniable truth: not all believe the Gospel. In other words, among those to whom the Gospel is preached there are some who believe and some who do not, even when there is no diversity that can account for the difference. Some men, with all the outward advantages that the preaching of the Gospel affords, continue the servants of sin, while others with the same advantages come to salvation and eternal life.

From this fact, Calvinists infer the reality of an inward discriminating grace that accounts for the different fruits that proceed from the same external advantages. But the Arminians, rather than admitting this inference, readily answer that the grace which is sufficient for all proves ineffectual with many because it is opposed. Men choose to resist, and this prevents the grace of God from producing in them the effect which it was intended to produce in all.

Now this answer gives a reason why the Gospel proves ineffectual with regard to many, but

it raises more objections than it answers. And here we enter upon the second difficulty for the Arminian doctrine.

2. **While Arminianism in words ascribes all to the grace of God, it does in effect resolve our salvation into something independent of that grace.** It was the principle of the Pelagians that the grace of God respects only the remission of sin and was not given to keep men from transgressing. In other words, the grace of Christ is for knowledge, not for charity or moral qualities. Arminius and his followers were most anxious to guard their system from even the appearance of accepting these principles. They acknowledged that man in his present state is not able to think or do anything truly good by himself, that he must be renewed in all his faculties by the spirit of God. They acknowledge that all our good works are to be ascribed to the grace of God in Christ.

Also, they renounced even the modifications of the Pelagian principles, which were soon introduced after they were first published and became known by the name of Semi-Pelagianism. These principles hold (1) that although man is unable to bring any good work to perfection, yet the first motions toward a good life, sorrow for sin, desire of pardon, purposes of obedience, and the first acts of faith in Christ are the natural exercise of human powers proceeding from the constitution and circumstances of man without any supernatural grace; (2) to all in whom God observes these preparatory dispositions he gives, for the sake of Christ, his Holy Spirit; (3) that by the influence of this Spirit continually assisting their powers, they are enabled to make progress and persevere in the life of faith and obedience which they had begun.

But the Arminians wished to accurately distinguish their position from that of the Semi-Pelagians by mentioning a "preventing grace"--one that comes not only *before our works* but comes *before our purposes and desires* of doing good. They say that the grace of God is *the beginning as well as the progress and perfection of all good*, acknowledging that without his grace man cannot understand, think, or will anything that is good.

All these words, however, are accompanied with a clause that very much destroys their force, for the conclusion of the fourth article runs thus: "With regard to the manner of the operation of that grace, *it is not irresistible*; for it is said, in the seventh chapter of the book of Acts, and in many other places of Scripture, that they resisted the Holy Spirit." And in place of the doubt expressed in the fifth article as to whether those who have been united to Christ by true faith may not by their own negligence fall from grace, the Arminians in their subsequent confessions speak without hesitation of Christians who fall through their own fault from the faith which had been produced in them by the Spirit of God. Thus all the actions of the Spirit of God cease because they have not fulfilled the conditions required on their part.

It is to be observed that by the "grace which may be resisted" the Arminians do not mean merely that grace which calls men to the knowledge of the Gospel and furnishes them with

the outward means of salvation. Rather, they mean that *influence* exerted by the Spirit of God upon the mind. And what they mean by calling this grace "irresistible" is not merely that opposition is made to it; for those who hold the corruption of human nature in the highest degree are the most ready to admit this opposition. (This is a matter of experience, and none can deny that it is often mentioned in Scripture.) But the Arminians, by calling the grace of God resistible, mean that it may be defeated. In other words, the resistance given by a person whom the Spirit of God calls to faith and obedience may be such as to render him unfit for believing and for obeying the divine will. Either he will remain unconverted after all the operations of grace upon his soul, or he returns to the state in which he was before his temporary conversion.

Thus the grace of God is assumed to be unable to attain its effect by itself; rather, that effect is assumed to depend upon the concurrence of man. While it is conceded by the Arminians that none can be saved without the grace of God, it is not conceded that the reason why some are saved and others are not is to be found in that grace. The grace of God and the will of man are conceived to be partial causes, both joining in the production of the same effect. It is also acknowledged that the grace of God is only a remote cause of salvation--a cause operating indifferently upon all; sufficient, indeed, but often ineffectual. The direct and specific cause of salvation is to be found in the qualities of the subject who receives the grace of God, since it depends upon these qualities whether this grace shall overcome or shall be counteracted.

The Arminian's attempt to remove this objection is as follows: Although God is omnipotent, he cannot put forth his irresistible power in communicating his grace to the mind of man because he must govern his creatures according to their natures; and a grace which cannot be resisted would destroy the morality of human actions, and instead of improving the character of a reasonable agent would leave no room for anything that deserves the name of virtue. It follows, therefore, from the nature of man and the purpose for which grace is bestowed upon him, that it must be left in his power and in his choice whether he will comply with it or not. In other words, the grace of God must be resistible in this sense and to this extent so that its efficacy may arise from the concurrence of the being on whom it is exerted.

The Arminians have adopted a doctrine of the grace of God wherein men's minds are either disposed to receive it or reject it *before* it begins its operations. So in whatever words they choose to magnify the grace of God, they cannot regard it as the *cause* of this difference. Consider John and Judas as examples. God's grace is given indifferently to them both, and is sufficient for both and may also be resisted by both. It is not resisted by John and therefore conducts him to salvation, but it is resisted by Judas and thus proves ineffectual to bring him to salvation. And the true cause of the efficacy of grace in John and the inefficacy of the grace in Judas lies in the minds of these two men. "You gave to my neighbor as you gave to me," one may say. "But my will has improved what you gave while my neighbor's will has resisted all your operations."

This language, an Arminian implies, can be directed to the Almighty by anyone who is saved. Man has something independent of the grace of God whereof he may boast and whereby he may distinguish himself from other men in the sight of God. Yet such language clearly contradicts the doctrine of original sin and those lessons of humility that the Gospel uniformly teaches. It also involves the Arminian himself in contradiction, for while he says that no man is able by his own power to understand, think, or will what is good, it assumes that only some men retain that carnal mind called enmity to God by which the grace of God is defeated, but that others are always ready by their own power to yield to the influences of the Spirit by which they are saved. And thus, while in words they ascribe all good works to the grace of God, they attach the beginning, the progress, and the continuance of these good works upon the will of man.

3. Arminianism seems to imply a failure in the purpose of the Almighty, which is not easily reconciled with our notions of his sovereignty. In this system, the Almighty is conceived to have a purpose of bringing all men to salvation by Christ and, in execution of this purpose, to furnish all men with sufficient means of salvation. Yet notwithstanding this purpose, and the execution of it by the grace of God, many continue in sin.

Dr. Clarke has stated the difficulty and has given the Arminian solution of it in one of his sermons upon the grace of God; and as it is manifest from all his writings that he is speaking his own convictions, I shall quote him verbatim.

The design of God in the gracious declarations of the Gospel is to bring all men, by the promise of pardon, to repentance and amendment here, and thereby to eternal salvation hereafter. The only difficulty here is, that which arises, and indeed very obviously, from comparing the actual event of things with the declarations of God's gracious intention and design. If God designed, by the gracious terms of the Gospel, to bring all men to salvation, how comes the extent of it to be confined within so narrow a compass, and the effect of it to be in experience so inconsiderable, even where in profession it seems to have universally prevailed? The answer to this is, that, in all moral matters, the intention or design of God never signifies (as it does always in natural things) an intention of the event actually and necessarily to be accomplished; but (which alone is consistent with the nature of moral things) an intention of all the means necessary on his part to the putting that event into the power of the proper and immediate agents.¹

The Arminian is obliged to embrace one of two choices: deny that there is in God an intention to bring all men to salvation, or admit that a great part of what is done in his creation is independent of his will. According to the Arminian system, all the actions of

1 Sermon XII. vol. II

wicked men in this present world, and their everlasting condition hereafter, are foreseen by God; and being foreseen by God, they may be connected in the great plan of his providence with other events which are under his power. Yet they are foreseen as arising from a cause over which he has no control, namely, the will of man. Man may after all choose the very opposite of that which God intended and endeavored to make him choose.

If this freedom of man to cast aside the direction of the Creator is an unavoidable consequence of the character of reasonable beings, then we are obliged to consent to what appears to us an imperfection in the divine government. But the Arminian has not proved this; and until this inconsistency between God's providential determination and the freedom of reasonable creatures is clearly established, we choose to be led by the views of the sovereignty of the Creator which Scripture gives us--that no part of the universe is withdrawn from his control.

Lectures in Divinity by George Hill. Edited from his manuscript by his son, Alexander Hill. Fourth edition, Vol. 11. William Blackwood and Sons, Edinburgh, 1837. **Note:** Lightly paraphrased for clarity.