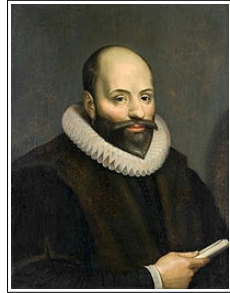


Arminius and Adventism

By Frank Zimmerman

JACOBUS Arminius (1560-1609) was a Dutch theologian who promoted some interpretations of Scripture that were contrary to the accepted Calvinist views.



What Arminius brought to the Reformed churches was a better understanding of God's character as it worked out in the plan of salvation.

Some of the accepted Calvinist interpretations tended to put the character of God in an uncertain or questionable light. Whether Calvin or his followers intended it that way or not is another issue, but the men who came after him definitely crystallized these views into a system of doctrine that could easily cast God's character into a wrong light.

The points of difference circled around two issues: how does God's will work in man's salvation, and what part does man's will play?

The stricter Calvinists saw God as a sovereign who did what He wanted, and none could resist Him. Therefore, everything, even the entrance of sin, must have been planned and executed by God. Likewise, those sinners who would turn to Christ only did so because God ordained it and caused it to happen. And those who did not believe were also ordained by God to not have faith.

The Arminian view also saw God as a sovereign, but One who ruled with the consent of His followers. The freedom of choice which God exercised was also reflected in man, for man was made "in the image of God." Therefore, while God foresaw the entrance of sin, He did not directly cause it; it was caused by the exercise of free choice in the wrong direction. And in the work of salvation, again man had a part to play. God did the convicting,

drawing, and attracting; but man had to surrender the old life before God could plant the new one within him.

After the Synod rejected Arminius' views, his followers were treated rather poorly: deportation, removal from office, and one case of beheading. While these actions were considered normal for that time, we should not ignore the fact that the view of God's character which is held determines the treatment of those who are in disagreement.

This is shown in Jesus' words to the apostles, when they thought to call down fire on the Samaritan village that refused to receive Him:

Luke 9

⁵⁵ But he turned, and rebuked them, and said, You know not what manner of spirit you are of.

⁵⁶ For the Son of man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them.

There is a direct connection between our view of God's character, and how we treat others. When Jesus warned the apostles that they would be persecuted and killed by professing followers of God, He made it clear that there was a link between this kind of persecuting behavior, and the knowledge of God's character:

John 16

² They shall put you out of the synagogues: yes, the time comes, that whoever kills you will think that he does God service.

³ And these things will they do unto you, because they have not known the Father, nor me.

The Calvinist view of God's "sovereignty" made it easier for them to act in the same way. God was arbitrary, His will was everything, and the individual will nothing. Therefore, the church, in acting like Him, could also make arbitrary decisions and ignore the will of it's members.

The Arminian view did not disappear, but grew and strengthened. One hundred years after the controversy between Arminius

and the Dutch Reformed leaders, John Wesley chose to call his church magazine *The Arminian* because he felt the Calvinist views tended to make God into “a tyrant.” He once wrote to some Calvinists, who wanted to argue about predestination, and were going to “prove it from the Bible”:

“What will you prove to me? That God is a tyrant? That can never be!”

It is interesting to note that both the Calvinist and Arminian theologies were represented in the Methodist movement: George Whitfield being a Calvinist, and John and Charles Wesley being Arminian. It would be foolish to say that God was not in this religious revival. Therefore, God’s message through these events was simply that these theological distinctions were not so important as men were making them out to be. There were other more important issues to concentrate on, such as the revival of genuine conversion, holiness and love; and the development of missions.

With the rise of Adventism in the mid-1800’s, again the same pattern was seen. Instead of answering the long-established debate between opposing theologies, God presented a different message altogether: one that would unite His followers. That message was the soon coming of Jesus Christ, preceded by His judgment of believers in the courts of heaven. There was an urgency to awake to spiritual things, to put away idolatry and sin, and to unite in proclaiming the Lord’s message. It was primarily a gospel message, but the prophecies gave that gospel urgency.

The growing light brought a deeper understanding of the issues at stake in the battle between sin and righteousness. Adventists developed the “great controversy” idea: that God’s character and Law were the issues in the fall and restoration. Sin would be ended when God had a people in whose hearts and minds His character and Law were fully developed and represented.

Since God’s kingdom was a kingdom of love, and love cannot be forced, therefore God’s kingdom would not be extended by the

use of force. Nor would God win the battle against Satan by the use of raw almighty power. It was a character battle, over the minds and hearts of men. Christ and Satan fight each other, not in heaven, and not directly, but upon the earth, and in the minds and hearts of mankind.

Jesus defeated Satan on the cross. But it was not done by the exercise of overwhelming power, but by the revelation of God's character at it's best, in contrast to the revelation of Satan's character at it's worst. This revelation unmasked Satan as a liar and murderer, at least to those who were open to seeing it.

But Satan's kingdom is not finished yet, and so this victory must be repeated again, for "the seed of the woman must bruise the serpent's head". Christ was the Seed, but so are His followers. As the apostle Paul wrote:

Romans 16

²⁰ And the God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly.

Calvinists have difficulty with this view of God, because they think of His sovereignty in terms of power. God can do what He wants, so why should He have to meet Satan on his terms? Why should He put Himself on trial before men? They think this is a weak view of God. But Peter had the same problem when Jesus wanted to wash his feet. He didn't want Christ to humble Himself; he wanted a God of power and authority, not a condescending servant. But Jesus served the disciples because that was God's character. There was infinite power combined with infinite humility. Humanity has a hard time understanding this mysterious blend, since power among men is associated with rulership, not servant-hood.

The Arminian views brought in the thought that God respects the will and choice of His creatures, and it is not superior power that endears Him to them, but the revelation of the justness, goodness and rightness of His ways, and His willingness to step down and serve them. The Adventist ideas of the "great contro-

versy” naturally fit better to the Arminian view, and so although Adventists didn’t usually think of themselves in terms such as Arminian or Calvinist, their views of the character of God, and the Law of God, were more compatible with the Arminian view, and tended more in that direction. It would probably be more accurate to say that they went beyond these old labels.

In many ways, the Adventist emphasis on the Law of God as a reflection of God’s character and will, answers many of the controversies raised by Calvinism.

For example, the idea that God “wills some men to be saved and others to be lost.” But what is the “will” of God? It is His law (*Psalms* 40:8). Therefore, those who keep the Law are predestined to be saved, and those who break the Law are predestined to be lost. Calvinists today would probably not accept this, but it is a very simple and sufficient answer to the problem, and puts God’s character in a clear light.

Ellen White wrote these comments regarding election, and in them she clearly links it to obedience to the law:

Patriarchs and Prophets, p. 207

There was no arbitrary choice on the part of God by which Esau was shut out from the blessings of salvation. The gifts of His grace through Christ are free to all. There is no election but one’s own by which any may perish. God has set forth in His word the conditions upon which every soul will be elected to eternal life—obedience to His commandments, through faith in Christ. God has elected a character in harmony with His law, and anyone who shall reach the standard of His requirement will have an entrance into the kingdom of glory.

The Adventist message is one that exalts the Law of God as a transcript of His divine character. The battle over the Law of God goes back before the creation of man. Man’s salvation is only part of the demonstration of God’s character and Law. Therefore, the Arminian/Calvinist controversy fails to take in the broader picture.

The battle is not just about whether God has the power to do what He wills and to save whom He wills, it is about the righteousness of His law and ways. God has sovereign power, but He only ever exercises it according to the principles of His holy Law.

Satan challenged that Law, and promoted the lie that it was a curse and hindrance to us. He did this very plainly in the garden of Eden.

God claimed that His Law was the way of life and blessing. Since it is a transcript of His character, God supports His claim by first of all never transgressing the principles of that Law in His actions and dealings with sin, and secondly by finding witnesses from among men who will cling to His ways and be His witnesses.

This is the larger, over-riding picture that God gave through the Adventist message. The final battle in the book of *Revelation* involves those who have the seal of God, and those who have the mark of the beast. These signs are said to be “in the forehead”. This symbol was first used after the giving of the Law:

Deuteronomy 6

⁸ And you shall bind them for a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes.

This shows that the battle between the “mark of the beast” and the “seal of God” is all about God’s Law. Those who are sealed in their foreheads are obedient to that Law. Through the grace of God and their own diligent effort, their characters have been shaped into holiness. Those who have the “mark of the beast” are confirmed in their rejection of God’s Law. They might not reject all of it, but their way is to reject part of it. This is the same as rejecting all of it:

James 2

¹⁰ For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.

Why is this so? Because the Law is a whole. It expresses the way of self-sacrificing love. While we know it in the form of ten commandments, these are all different expressions of the same principle. To allow the breaking of the principle in one area would open the door to breaking it in all areas.

Lucifer didn't want to change everything in heaven, he just wanted to be given a higher place than what God had appointed him. This was the first attempt to change or break God's Law, for the moment he sought to find another place, he was taking himself out of the place of service that the Lord had given, which was a place of love. Love to God would have kept him submissive and trustful; love to his fellows would have meant staying where he had been put, to continue ministering the love of God to those under his charge.

Therefore, the last battle will be simply a final attempt by Satan to establish his deviations to God's Law, across the whole world. God's followers will fight against this deviation by simply clinging to God, and obeying His Law. Satan will try to break them by persecution, just as he tried to break Christ. This will eventually lead to the withdrawal of God's protection from the entire world, plunging it into the scenes described in the seven last plagues.

Since the "seal of God" which the saints then have represents His character formed within them, it would not be possible to have that character in them unless they understood it. Therefore, growth in knowledge about God, and about His principles, is essential to the final battle. The Arminian teachings set the character of God in a better light, and so it was a step along the way to this full knowledge of God.