Confessions of an Arminian Evangelical

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I remember well the first time I learned that the tiny denomination in which I was raised and spiritually nurtured was "Arminian." I was sitting in a religion class in the denomination's college when the professor informed all of us that he and the denomination were theologically Arminian and that we should all be Arminians as well. A young coed sitting near me quietly exclaimed to someone next to her, "Who would want to be Armenian?" I can't begin to count the number of times since then that I have heard even well-educated Christian people—including pastors and even theologians—refer to Arminianism or Arminian theology as "Armenianism." While that may be frustrating for those of us who know that the label derives from the name of the seventeenth-century Dutch theologian Jacob (or James) Arminius (d. 1609), it is hardly the most frustrating aspect of the confusion and controversy that continues to surround Arminianism and Arminian theology centuries after its founder died. I attended a Baptist seminary that was not Arminian and was told by

one of my beloved theology professors that Arminianism almost always leads to theological liberalism. Needless to say, I was shocked and disbelieving; I knew many fundamentalist Arminians. Later, as I entered the wide and sometimes wild world of American evangelical Christianity, I encountered many Reformed evangelical students, pastors, and theologians who firmly believed and let me know in no uncertain terms that Arminianism is at best defective Christianity and hardly evangelical at all.

The controversy surrounding Arminianism within evangelical Protestant Christianity in North America is both old and new. Puritans such as Jonathan Edwards argued against Arminianism and labeled it everything from Socinian to Pelagian to Unitarian. While those false identifications still occur at times, more sophisticated and subtle heirs of the Puritan opponents of Arminianism more cautiously identify it as latently humanistic and Semi-Pelagian (agreeing with Pelagians in disbelieving original sin and thus upholding mankind's freedom to choose). The seventeenth century witnessed vitriolic attacks by Calvinists against Arminians, and Arminians returned the favor. Hymn writer Augustus Toplady, most famous for his inspiring hymn "Rock of Ages," dismissed the Wesley brothers as unchristian because they were Arminians. Today, Toplady's more cautious theological counterparts such as evangelical theologian and apologist R. C. Sproul admit that Arminians are "barely Christian," and that only because of a "felicitous inconsistency" in their theology.[1]

The earliest Baptist division was over this issue. The first Baptists (John Smyth and Thomas Helwys), who founded their congregations in the early seventeenth century, were General Baptists—that is, Arminians. With other Arminian Protestants and Anabaptists they rejected at least three of the famous "Five Points of T.U.L.I.P.": unconditional election (absolute, unconditional predestination of some to salvation not based on divine foreknowledge but on divine decree), limited atonement (Christ died only for the sakes of the elect), and irresistible grace (that is, saving grace cannot be resisted and the elect are given regenerating grace and faith prior to their repentance). Particular Baptists embraced all the points of Calvinism. To this day, Baptists are divided over this issue. During the eighteenth and nine-

teenth centuries Calvinists, Reformed Baptists, and Methodists sparred over the question of predestination and had great difficulty cooperating with each other in the frontier revivals.

One would have thought that these old hostilities would have died down by now. In the twentieth century many Calvinists and Arminians put aside their differences and found their common ground in the type of Christianity that has come to be called "evangelicalism." Some of the great leaders of the early fundamentalist movement were Calvinists and some were Arminians. When the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) was formed in the 1940s, denominations of both theological orientations were admitted as equals. The great evangelistic ministry of Billy Graham transcended the difference between Reformed and Arminian evangelicals. Crucial evangelical ministries, organizations, and institutions such as Wheaton College and Fuller Theological Seminary, *Christianity Today*, the Evangelical Theological Society, and Wycliffe Bible Translators, included Reformed and Arminian leaders. They rubbed shoulders and accepted each other as equally God-fearing, Bible-believing, Jesus-loving Christians in spite of belonging to denominations that held firmly to confessional standards that were specifically Calvinistic or Arminian. For a while it seemed that the reconciliation between John Wesley and his evangelistic colleague George Whitefield, an ardent Calvinist, was being reduplicated on a broader scale. However, as the "Graham glue" that held this transdenominational coalition together began to dissolve in the 1980s and 1990s, the old cracks and fissures began to reappear.

The contemporary Reformed evangelical opposition to Arminianism ranges from mild to vitriolic. Whichever tone it takes, it is decidedly hostile to the perceived dominance of Arminian theology in the pews and pulpits of American evangelical Protestant churches. One Baptist seminary dean and church historian labeled the contemporary concerted Calvinist attack on Arminianism "the revenge of the Calvinists" and attributed it to dismay on the part of Reformed theologians and ministers over the nearly universal belief in free will in evangelical circles. The strong emphasis on "personal decision for Christ" and decreasing emphasis on divine sovereignty and irresistible grace in evangelicalism apparently sparked this Reformed protest.

While rigorous theological dialogue and even debate is valuable and not to be strictly avoided, at times the new manifestation of the old Calvinist-Arminian controversy between evangelical Protestants has devolved into nasty polemics. One Calvinist Web site contains an essay by Steven Houck entitled "The Christ of Arminianism," which denounces Arminianism as preaching a "false Christ" and calls on Arminians to repent of this "horrible sin." The Southern Baptist Founders Conference promotes belief that Calvinism is "Baptist orthodoxy," and its executive director told this writer that he would not allow any Arminian to become a member of his large Southern Baptist Convention-related church. The Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals (ACE) promulgated the "Cambridge Declaration," signed by several leading evangelical theologians, which declared: "We confess that human beings are born spiritually dead and are incapable even of cooperating with regenerating grace." (Arminianism includes belief that human beings, inspired and liberated by prevenient grace, may cooperate with the regenerating grace of God through freely chosen repentance and trust in Christ.) *Modern Reformation* magazine, published by the ACE, has featured articles condemning Arminianism as incompatible with authentic evangelical Christian faith. The executive director of the ACE and editor of *Modern Reformation* wrote an article entitled "Arminian Evangelicals: Option or Oxymoron?" in which he declared that one can no more be both Arminian and evangelical than one can be evangelical and Roman Catholic. Several educational institutions that are multidenominational and evangelical have informally shunned Arminians from their theological faculties. The facile equating of Arminianism with Semi-Pelagianism has become commonplace within Reformed evangelical circles. All of this has led to a situation in which many evangelicals who are Arminian wish to avoid the Arminian label. I told a fellow evangelical theologian that his theology is distinctly Arminian, and he responded, "Don't tell anyone."

The context of this essay lies in this contemporary confusion and controversy about Arminianism among evangelical Protestant Christians in North America. Some evangelical Arminians have become so disgusted and frustrated that they have given up on evangelicalism. To them it appears hopelessly Reformed and hostile to Arminian beliefs.

Arminian evangelical church historian and theologian Donald W. Dayton developed the thesis that George Marsden, Reformed evangelical church historian, has created a false "Reformed paradigm" of evangelical history and theology that needs to be balanced with a "Pentecostal paradigm." (Dayton's "Pentecostal paradigm" of evangelicalism would not limit it to Pentecostalism; it simply points to the revivalistic and largely Arminian roots and flavor of evangelicalism.) My own concern is primarily to clear up confusion about Arminian theology and Arminianism in general. I believe that much of the controversy about them rests in confusion about their nature. Some of that confusion, I am convinced, is semipurposeful. That is, I think I know some Reformed evangelical critics of Arminianism who know how it differs from Semi-Pelagianism, but for polemical and political purposes engage in the demagoguery of continuing to call Arminians "Semi-Pelagians."

Most of the confusion and controversy, however, are unnecessary. They can be cleared up with a little solid historical information and goodwill. In this essay, then, I would like to elucidate Arminian theology in three steps. First, I will examine the phenomena of "evangelicalism" and "Arminianism" historically and theologically, with an eye toward defining them as accurately as possible. Much confusion and controversy can be settled with proper definitions. Second, I will present objections to Arminianism in order to present the "case against Arminianism" as fairly and objectively as possible. Finally, I will offer an argument in favor of "the Arminian option" within evangelical theology and attempt to show that "Arminian evangelical" is not oxymoronic because like evangelicals, true Arminians believe and confess that salvation is *in Christ and by His grace*.

Definitions of "Evangelical" and "Arminian"

When a critic of Arminianism declares that "Arminian evangelical" is an oxymoron, and when an Arminian resigns from evangelicalism because he or she agrees with the critic, both are assuming some particular definitions of these terms. The problem is, of course, that both "evangelical" and "Arminian" are essentially contested concepts. That

is, there are no universally accepted, normative definitions of either term, and no authority exists that can enforce agreement about what the labels mean. Of course, the situation is similar with many good terms and categories. What is "the New Age Movement?" Who is really a "new ager?" What is the charismatic movement, and who is a charismatic? It may be somewhat easier to define "Roman Catholicism" because of the existence of a magisterium, but in the absence of a magisterium (such as the Vatican represents for worldwide Roman Catholicism), religious movements and categories remain essentially contested. The only solution, then, if one really needs to establish a definition with some credibility, is to go back to the sources and examine how the movement or category began and to inspect its leading spokespersons and proponents then and since.

Defining evangelicalism. Evangelicalism is used to designate three or four somewhat overlapping religious movements. Especially in Europe but also in North America "evangelical" is often used as a synonym for "protestant" and sometimes especially for "Lutheran." Some critics of Arminianism who argue that it is incompatible with "evangelical theology" seem to mean that it is inconsistent with some of the basic theological commitments of the mainline protestant reformers of the sixteenth century and their orthodox heirs. Usually, however, these critics also believe that authentic evangelicalism in the narrower, more distinctly American sense, is an extension of that magisterial protestantism of Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, Cranmer and their disciples. The radical reformers, then, including the Anabaptists and their theological descendants, are not counted as truly, authentically "evangelical."

The second definition of evangelicalism refers to the pietist and revivalist reforms of protestantism in the late seventeenth century and throughout the eighteenth century and their later heirs and descendants. In this sense the earliest evangelicals would be Philip Spener, August Francke, Ludwig von Zinzendorf, John Wesley, George Whitefield, and Jonathan Edwards. The key characteristic of this evangelicalism is the experience of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ that begins with and grows out of a conversion experience of being born again.

The third definition of evangelicalism is early fundamentalism as exemplified in the great conservative protestant theologians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who protested against liberal protestantism. J. Gresham Machen well represents this genre of evangelicalism. His disciples Cornelius Van Til and Francis Schaeffer carried the torch for fundamentalism after Machen died.

The fourth definition of evangelicalism builds on all the first three while going beyond them. In the 1940s a coalition of conservative protestants who valued conversion and evangelism but did not want to be considered "fundamentalists" emerged, led by New England minister Harold John Ockenga. This loose coalition and affiliation of "postfundamentalist evangelicals" led to the founding of the National Association of Evangelicals, *Christianity Today* magazine, the Evangelical Theological Society, and a host of other organizations. Everyone has always recognized Billy Graham as the leader of this evangelicalism.

In this paper I am using the fourth definition of evangelicalism; I identify with it very strongly. Scholars have identified several crucial, defining characteristics of this evangelicalism, which is neither simply synonymous with "protestantism" nor fundamentalistic. I find five of them most helpful: (1) biblicistic, (2) conversionist, (3) Christ and cross-centered, (4) evangelistic and socially reforming, and (5) multidenominational. This evangelicalism has no definite boundaries, but it does have a strong center of gravity formed by these five commitments. This evangelicalism has always—since its beginnings in the 1940s—declared itself theologically orthodox (trinitarian, affirming the deity and humanity of Jesus Christ, and so on) while avoiding identification with any one particular tradition or theological orientation within orthodox protestantism. Many of its leaders have been Reformed, but there have always also been Arminians within it. And, until recently, peace has prevailed between the Calvinists and the Arminians within this evangelicalism.

Defining Arminianism. Arminianism also has more than one definition. It is a multifaceted category. While all proffered definitions and descriptions hark back to Jacob Arminius as its founder, and while all also emphasize its disagreement with high Calvinism and especially the three points of Calvinism mentioned earlier, tremendous diversity

exists among the various attempts to define it. Some scholars of Arminianism point at its close association with Reformed theology and see it as a modification of Calvinism. That is the approach taken by noted Arminius scholar Carl Bangs, who is himself an Arminian.[2] Reformed Arminius scholar Richard A. Muller, on the other hand, highlights the differences between Arminius's theology and Calvinism and argues that Arminius worked out of an entirely different paradigm from Reformed theology—one more closely associated with and influenced by the scholastic theology of Thomas Aquinas.[3] Reformed theologian Alasdair I. C. Heron interprets Arminianism less in terms of Arminius's own theology and more in terms of anti-Calvinism. The final paragraph in his entry on "Arminianism" in the *Encyclopedia of Christianity* is interesting to anyone attempting to define Arminianism:

> In the later history of theology Arminianism became a negative or delimiting concept. For orthodox Calvinists it denoted a semi-Pelagian error, while those who called themselves Arminians thought of it primarily as an expression of their opposition to the Calvinist doctrine of grace or to Calvinism. High Anglican Arminians of the 17th century such as Archbishop W. Laud (1573–1645) fought against the Puritans and saw Arminianism in terms of a state church (Erastianism), which was totally alien to the views of Arminius. In the 18th century John Wesley (1703–1791) described his Methodist preaching of the goal of Christian perfection as Arminian. Here again the decisive factor was less a direct link to Arminius or the Remonstrants than it was rejection of a Calvinism that had become dry and rigid. The concern of Arminius to look afresh at a doctrine of predestination that had become much too abstract, viewing it in light of Christ and faith, was less well represented by such movements than by modern Reformed theology itself, though with considerable course corrections.[3]

Reformed theologian Alan P. F. Sell offered a distinction between "Arminianism of the head" and "Arminianism of the heart" in his fair and balanced treatment of the Calvinist-Arminian controversy entitled *The Great Debate: Calvinism, Arminianism, and Salvation*.[5] While both are anti-Calvinist and Protestant, the former is primarily intellectual

and associated with high church Anglicanism and even deism, and the latter is pietistic. The question then, of course, becomes which is the truer or more authentic Arminianism.

I prefer to define Arminianism and Arminian theology using Jacob Arminius himself as the norm and touchstone of authenticity. That seems to be the only way to accomplish some degree of normativity for a definition. I take the same approach with Calvinism. I define it first in terms of Calvin and his theology as expressed in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* and only secondarily in terms of later Reformed theology. Some Reformed critics of Arminianism insist on defining it in terms of the post-Arminius Remonstrants such as Simon Episcopius, who led the Remonstrant Brotherhood after the Synod of Dort (1618–19) that condemned Arminianism. Episcopius, and other Remonstrants (the label given to Arminians in Holland after Arminius's death) seemed to deny original sin and total depravity and affirm essential human goodness and ability to cooperate with grace apart from supernatural assisting grace (prevenient grace). He and they *may* deserve the label Semi-Pelagian, whereas Arminius does not. Nor do the Wesleys and a host of Arminians since Arminius. Scholars generally agree that Arminius's most systematic and representative theological treatises from which we may and should mine his theology are his *Declaration of the Sentiments of Arminius* (1608) and his *Letter to Hippolytus A Collibus* (1608). These represent his mature thinking on a variety of subjects, especially election, predestination, free will, grace, and justification. He died less than one year after they were written.

I would like to suggest that the essence of Arminianism as revealed in these and other essays by the Dutch theologian is not so much anti-Calvinism, although Arminius spared no harshness of rhetoric in criticizing the supralapsarian variety of Calvinism, as *the universal love of God for humanity as shown in Jesus Christ and His cross*. Of course, alongside this is its twin theme that *grace enabled human freedom to accept or reject God's love and mercy in Jesus Christ*. Arminius was not one to dwell on the "love of God" in flowery, pietistic language. He would have been repulsed by Zinzendorf's and the Moravians' and possibly even by Wesley's romantic poetry exalting the love of God. Never-

theless, underlying everything Arminius wrote is a clear, firm conviction of God's universal goodness and loving concern for humanity. He objected repeatedly the belief that God has selected some to save and others to damn before and apart from any free decisions they make or acts they commit. Typical is his outburst, "This also is a horrible affirmation, 'some among men have been created unto life eternal, and others unto death eternal.'"[6] In explaining his theology and its deviation from Calvinism to a government official named Hippolytus A Collibus, Arminius expressed the two basic impulses stated above as the essence of Arminianism: "[I] most solicitously avoid two causes of offence,—that God be not proposed as the author of sin,—and that its liberty be not taken away from the human will: These are two points which if anyone knows how to avoid, he will think upon no act which I will not in that case most gladly allow to be ascribed to the Providence of God, provided a just regard be had to the Divine pre-eminence."[7]

Of course, we will need to go further in defining and describing Arminianism. Most of Arminius's writings have something to do with the problem of God's sovereignty in salvation and specifically with the doctrine of election. While constantly affirming the sovereignty of God over nature, history, and salvation, Arminius never tired of undermining strict *monergism* and developing an *evangelical synergism*. Monergism, of course, is belief in God as the sole causal agent. It includes belief in divine omnicausality, meticulous providence, and unconditional election or irresistible grace. Arminius believed that strict monergism such as was articulated by his supralapsarian colleague Franciscus Gomarus at the University of Leiden simply could not avoid making God the author of all sin and evil and taking away the freedom and responsibility of human beings. Against strict monergism, Arminius proposed what we might call an *evangelical synergism*. Synergism is any belief in cooperation between the human will and agency on the one hand, and God's will and agency on the other hand. Arminius's synergism was "evangelical" because it strictly avoided any hint of Pelagian works' righteousness and made God's supernatural, assisting grace an absolute necessity even for the *initium fidei*—the initiative of faith—to receive God's merciful, pardoning grace of salvation: "No

man believes in Christ except him who has been previously disposed and prepared by preventing or preceding grace to receive life eternal, on that condition on which God wills to bestow it, according to the following passage of Scripture, 'If any man will execute his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself'" (John 7:17).[8]

The essence of Arminianism, then, I believe, is *evangelical synergism* founded on firm belief in *God's universal goodness and love* and *grace-enabled human liberty freely to receive or reject God's grace*. Of course, this much could be said of Roman Catholic theology. So, there is one more point that must be exposed in order for Arminius's theology to count as truly *evangelical* in the sense of "classically Protestant." Contrary to what some Reformed critics seem to think, Arminius did affirm *salvation in Christ alone, by grace alone, through faith alone*, apart from any meritorious works achieved by human persons. During his own lifetime Arminius was viciously accused of being secretly Roman Catholic—in theological sympathy if not in ecclesiastical reality. At its best this vicious calumny resulted from his affirmation of synergism in salvation. Many of Arminius's opponents then and now believe that monergism is the only doctrine of God's sovereignty that protects and assures salvation as justification in Christ by grace through faith alone, and apart from merits earned by human striving or suffering. We will look more closely at this question later. Arminius did all that he could possibly do to affirm salvation as sheer, unmerited gift as imputed righteousness:

> For the present, I will only briefly say [to contradict the accusation that he denied the doctrine of justification by faith alone], "I believe that sinners are accounted righteous solely by the obedience of Christ; and that the righteousness of Christ is the only meritorious cause on account of which God pardons the sins of believers and reckons them as righteous as if they had perfectly fulfilled the law. But since God imputes the righteousness of Christ to none except believers, I conclude, that in this sense it may be well and properly said, *To a man who believes Faith is imputed for righteousness through grace*,—because God hath set forth his Son Jesus Christ to be a propitiation, a throne of grace, [or mercy-seat,] through faith in his blood,"—Whatever interpretation may

> be put upon these expressions, none of our divines [ministers] blames Calvin, or considers him to be heterodox on this point; yet my opinion is not so widely different from his as to prevent me from employing the signature of my own hand in subscribing to those things which he has delivered on this subject, in the Third Book of his *Institutes*; this I am prepared to do at any time, and to give them my full approval.[9]

Similarly, unequivocal affirmations of salvation in Christ alone, by grace alone, through faith alone, including imputation of Christ's righteousness apart from meritorious works on the basis of faith in Him alone, may be found in later "Arminians of the heart," including John Wesley.

Critics' Objections to Arminianism

One way to understand a particular theological orientation is to examine the objections raised by its critics. Why is it controversial? Are the objections valid? How does the theological orientation being criticized—in this case Arminianism—answer the objections? Such an exercise can shed much light on a theological option. Most of Arminianism's critics have been and are of a Reformed or Calvinist persuasion. Usually they are convinced, ardent, and even passionate Calvinists. Among them have been Puritans William Perkins, John Owen, and Jonathan Edwards. More contemporary Reformed critics of Arminianism include Michael Horton, R. C. Sproul, and J. I. Packer. A few of Arminianism's critics are Arminians themselves—that is, Arminians who have gone "beyond Arminianism" into something called "open theism," which denies God's unlimited, absolute foreknowledge. They include Clark Pinnock, John Sanders, and Gregory Boyd.

Four main lines of attack have been used against Arminian theology, especially by Reformed critics, Post-Arminian open theists agree with one of them. Many of these criticisms echo concerns raised against Erasmus's belief in freedom of the will by Martin Luther in his *De Servo Arbitrio* (1525). Almost all of them found expression in Jonathan Edwards's *Freedom of the Will*.

The first and perhaps most basic criticism of Arminianism raised by its critics is that it *undermines the majesty and sovereignty of God*; in

other words, it *limits God*. British evangelical philosopher of religion and theologian Paul Helm finds an intrinsic connection between divine omnicausality and meticulous providence on the one hand and classical Christian theism on the other hand.[10] Arminianism, Reformed critics allege, necessarily, even if only implicitly, limits God such that He is no longer really God. As one Reformed theologian puts it, "If there is even one maverick molecule in the universe, God is not sovereign. If God is not sovereign, God is not God."[11] Jonathan Edwards posited that atheism is the only logical alternative to belief in God's omnicausality. Luther accused Erasmus, who was in some ways an Arminian before Arminius, of diminishing God by positing human liberty. Of course, both Luther and Reformed theology, that is, Christian theological monergism, confess human liberty but only in the "compatibilist" sense. That is, they view human liberty as compatible with divine determination by defining "liberty" or "free will" as "ability to do what one wants to do." God, of course, being infinite and all-determining, turns the human will whichever way He wants it to go by giving it its driving, controlling motives. Most classical Reformed theologians view Arminian belief in libertarian (noncompatibilist) free will— "ability to do otherwise"—as limiting God such that God is not truly, sovereignly in charge of human affairs. As we will see, the only legitimate response Arminians have and should offer is that this is true. The God Arminians believe in is *limited* in certain ways. The only question is whether *divine self-limitation* necessarily diminishes God. Could it possibly be that denial of God's ability to limit Himself diminishes God? And can Reformed theology's belief in God as omnicausal and all-determining avoid making God the author of sin and evil and thus not perfectly good?

A second major Reformed objection to Arminianism is that it is tantamount to Semi-Pelagianism (if not Pelagianism) in that it denies total depravity and implies some element of human merit as the basis of salvation. In that case, Reformed critics urge, Arminianism denies the cornerstone Christian doctrine—affirmed even by the classical Catholic tradition—of salvation in Christ through grace alone. The Second Council (or Synod) of Orange (AD 529) condemned as heresy even the idea that fallen human persons can initiate repentance and

faith. The magisterial Protestant reformers asserted the absolute necessity of grace for the *initium fidei*. Reformed critics argue that Arminianism's synergistic soteriology necessarily implies, even if it does not explicitly state, that human persons contribute something meritorious to their own salvation and thus salvation is not all of grace. Beings who can contribute something to their own salvation—even if only a decision to exercise a goodwill toward God in repentance and faith—cannot really be "dead in trespasses and sins" and absolutely dependent on the grace and mercy of God for every good thing in them. Reformed critics of Arminianism hardly ever include the crucial Arminian concept of prevenient grace in their descriptions of Arminianism. This is very frustrating to Arminians because prevenient (assisting, preceding, resistible) grace is, according to Arminian theology, the protection against Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism. Most Reformed critics of Arminianism simply refuse to engage the subject unless forced to do so.

The third major Reformed criticism of Arminianism is that it necessarily undermines the key Protestant doctrine of *sola fides*—salvation by faith alone apart from good works. Of course, this objection is closely related to the previous one, but it goes a little further into the question of Arminianism's Protestant credentials. That is, even if Arminians believe in salvation by grace alone, as they claim on the basis of their appeal to prevenient grace, can they really confess that salvation is "through faith alone" as the Protestant tradition does? Inextricably connected with this is the issue of *justification as imputed righteousness*. Reformed critics often argue that Arminianism undermines the entire Protestant reformation recovery of the gospel and the notion that salvation is God's work in Christ on humanity's behalf. Salvation is not at all an achievement that takes place within persons through their spiritual decisions and transformations. In this case the critics of Arminianism are usually assuming Luther's doctrine (with which Calvin no doubt agreed) of *simul justus et peccator* (always righteous and sinner at the same time) as normative for Protestanism. That is, according to the critics, one is only really Protestant theologically (as opposed to sociologically) to the extent that he affirms a strongly *objectivist view of justification* in which the

believer's right relationship with God is a *sheer gift of God's grace in the form of imputation of Christ's "alien righteousness" apart from any free, contingent receptivity or activity on the part of the believer that is not also part of the "gift."*

Of course, one obvious response to this objection is that it assumes too much. The radical reformers such as the Anabaptists certainly did not affirm or promote such a strongly objectivist doctrine of salvation. Were they not part of the Protestant reformation? Many Protestant theologians who are neither Arminian nor theologically liberal have questioned the doctrine of "alien righteousness" imputed and not imparted to believers. And who says one cannot believe in salvation by grace through faith alone without embracing the imputationist scheme of justification? Arminians claim that they do affirm justification by grace through faith alone, but they readily admit that they do not affirm that faith is a gift imposed by God. At least some part of it is free human receptivity of grace.

The fourth common criticism of Arminianism is that it is logically inconsistent. That is, not only Reformed critics but also post-Arminian open theists claim that Arminianism inconsistently affirms two mutually exclusive propositions: (1) God foreknows the future exhaustively and infallibly (and that is the basis of election), and (2) human beings have libertarian, noncompatibilist free will. Critics argue that these two crucial Arminian affirmations defeat each other and cannot even be held together in paradoxical tension because they are strictly logically incompatible. If human beings (or any beings, for that matter) have the ability to do otherwise it is strictly logically impossible for anyone—including God—to know what decision they will make (until they make it, of course, in which case they no longer have the ability to decide otherwise). Reformed theologians believe this alleged inconsistency forces Arminians either to accept foreordination as the basis for foreknowledge or deny absolute divine foreknowledge. Open theists agree and have opted to deny absolute divine foreknowledge. Arminians choose to live with the tension and wait and hope for rescue from philosophy. Ironically, that rescue may be coming or have already come from a Reformed philosopher, Alvin C. Plantinga, who presents a very detailed and subtle argument using modal logic to resolve the

apparent inconsistency. In *God, Freedom, and Evil* the Calvinist philosopher attempts to show that absolute foreknowledge can be based on future, free, contingent decisions.[12]

Obviously, Arminianism faces a formidable challenge from its critics. Can it rise to the occasion? I think so. I believe that any theological position or system can be strengthened by meeting and wrestling with the legitimate criticisms of its opponents. Some of the criticisms of Arminianism mentioned above are not entirely legitimate in that they are based on untenable or at least highly questionable assumptions. Some of them are largely based on misunderstandings of Arminianism. Some of them seem aimed more at certain degraded forms of Arminians than historical, classical Arminianism and especially "Arminianism of the heart." It is not unusual, for example, to find Simon Episcopius or nineteenth-century American revivalist Charles Finney used by Reformed critics as prime examples of Arminianism. Many, if not most, Arminians would not claim either of those figures as the best and brightest in Arminianism's hall of fame. In the rest of this paper I would like to present the case for Arminianism by presenting its responses to the four main challenges raised by its critics.

The Arminian Option within Evangelical Theology

My burden is to elucidate true Arminianism in such a way that it will be apparent to as many people as possible—including Reformed evangelicals—that Arminian theology is a legitimate option within evangelical theology. In other words, I wish to make the case that "Arminian evangelical" is not an oxymoron. The best way to do this is to address those arguments aimed at excluding Arminianism from the circle of authentic evangelicalism. I agree with those critics of Arminianism who are concerned to protect the doctrine of God's transcendence from injury. I have no sympathy with panentheistic theologies that portray God as essentially limited such that He is dependent on the world for His being. It does seem to me that evangelical theology in all of its historical senses has always proclaimed and still does proclaim a transcendent, holy, majestic God who is free from limitations imposed on Him from outside Himself. Does classical Arminianism preserve and protect God's transcendence and majesty?

I believe it does. Arminius himself was not particularly concerned with delineating a full-blown, systematic theological account of God's being and attributes, but scattered throughout his writings one finds clear affirmations of God's greatness. In fact, one of his main arguments against supralapsarianism (and no doubt against classical Calvinism in general) was that it is injurious to the glory of God. In that case, of course, he was not thinking so much of God's glory in terms of His power and freedom from limitation as in terms of His character. In his "Certain Articles to be Diligently Examined and Weighed" Arminius expressed a high view of God's transcendence as His *self-sufficiency*: "God is blessed in himself and in the knowledge of his own perfection. He is, therefore, in want of nothing, neither does He require the demonstration of any of his properties by external operations: Yet if he do this, it is evident that he does it of his pure and free will."[13]

But what of the objections that if anything happens in nature or history that is not decreed and foreordained by God and that if any part of God's knowledge is determined by contingent decisions and actions of creatures God is not supreme, infinite, self-sufficient, and so on? Arminius dealt with this objection in terms of *divine self-limitation*, which he called "God's self-binding." In his response to Puritan theologian William Perkins, Arminius wrote: "It is evident that God, when he had conceded to man liberty of will, and indeed in order that he might use it, ought not, nay could not prevent the fall in that way which would have infringed upon the use of liberty; and hence that He was not bound to hinder it in any other way than by the bestowment of the strength necessary and sufficient to avoid a fall."[14] Arminians follow Arminius in affirming that God is so great that He can limit Himself or "bind himself" in order to extend real (libertarian) freedom to creatures. The standard objection to this—that divine nature cannot be limited in any way, including self-limitation—seems to fall on its own sword by limiting God to being unlimited.

Everyone already knows that Arminians, following Arminius, most emphatically reject the crucial Calvinist doctrines of unconditional election (absolute predestination to salvation) and irresistible grace (God's supernatural grace of salvation as always efficient). In place of these Arminius posited conditional election (predestination

based on foreseen faith) and prevenient grace (assisting but resistible grace). Does the Arminian *ordo salutis* necessarily undermine the crucial Christian doctrine of salvation in Christ by grace alone? Does it necessarily conflict with the critical Protestant principles of salvation through faith alone? I do not think so. Arminius rejected what he called "the whole troop of Pelagians and Semi-Pelagians."[15] He could hardly have stated his opposition to them or his affirmation of salvation by grace alone and apart from works more fervently:

> Concerning Grace and Free Will, this is what I teach according to the Scriptures and orthodox consent:—Free Will is unable to begin or to perfect any true and spiritual good, without Grace. That I may not be said, like Pelagius, to practice a delusion with regard to the word "Grace," I mean by it that which is the Grace of Christ and which belongs to regeneration: I affirm, therefore, that this grace is simply and absolutely necessary for the illumination of the mind, the due ordering of the affections, and the inclination of the will to that which is good. It is the grace which . . . bends the will to carry into execution good thoughts and good desires. This grace [*praevenit*] goes before, accompanies, and follows; it excites, assists, operates that we will, co-operates lest we will in vain. It averts temptations, assists and grants succour in the midst of temptations, sustains man against the flesh, the world, and Satan, and in this great contest grants to man the enjoyment of the victory. It raises up again those who are conquered and have fallen, establishes and supplies them with new strength, and renders them more cautious. This grace commences salvation, promotes it, and perfects and consummates it. I confess that the mind of [*animalis*] a natural and carnal man is obscure and dark, that his affections are corrupt and inordinate, that his will is stubborn and disobedient, and that the man himself is dead in sins. And I add this, That teacher obtains my highest approbation who ascribes as much as possible to Divine Grace; provided he so pleads the cause of Grace, as not to inflict an injury on the Justice of God, and not to take away *the free will to do that which is evil*.[16]

Clearly, then, Arminius (and all his faithful followers, including John Wesley, who exalted grace just as highly) was no Pelagian, or Semi-Pelagian and he did believe in and teach the absolute necessity

of the supernatural grace of Christ for even the first stirrings of desire for salvation. But did he (and do Arminians) affirm justification by faith alone? Once again, Arminius can speak for himself:

> The last article [of the letter to Hippolytus A Collibus] is on Justification, about which these are my sentiments: —Faith, and faith only, (although there is no faith alone without works,) is imputed for righteousness. By this alone are we justified before God, absolved from our sins, and are accounted, pronounced and declared RIGHTEOUS [*sic*] by God, who delivers his righteousness from the throne of grace. . . . The word "*to impute*" signifies, that faith is not righteousness itself, but is graciously accounted for righteousness; by which circumstance all worthiness is taken away from faith, except that which is through the gracious [*dignatio*] condescending estimation of God. But this gracious condescension and estimation is not without Christ, but in reference to Christ, in Christ, and on account of Christ; whom God hath appointed as the propitiation through faith in his blood.[17]

What more could he say? And the same sentiments about salvation in Christ by His grace through faith alone can be found in the writings of John Wesley and other classical Arminians. That this never seems to satisfy some Reformed critics is surely evidence that they are working out of an incorrigible assumption that justification by grace alone through faith alone is inseparable from strict monergism. It is not. All classical Arminians have always confessed it apart from strict monergism. That is the essence of "evangelical synergism."

The fourth objection to Arminianism is brought against it not only by certain Reformed critics but also by post-Arminian open theists. It is the claim that classical Arminianism is logically inconsistent as explained in the previous section of this paper. One response to this line of attack is simply the old *tu quoque* response—"you too!" In other words, from an Arminian perspective, both classical Calvinism and open theism contain logical inconsistencies just as great, if not greater, than the one alleged to be the Achilles' heel of Arminianism. However, Arminians believe that the claim of logical inconsistency between exhaustive, infallible divine foreknowledge and libertarian creaturely free will is not as conclusive as some critics pretend. As mentioned earlier, some philosophers, including Reformed thinker

Alvin Plantinga and Arminian philosopher Bruce Reichenbach, claim to have resolved the logical conflict. Of course, Arminius himself resolved it by positing timelessness of divine knowledge such that God's foreknowledge is not really simple prescience but eternal knowing. This will not satisfy either Reformed critics or open theists, however, as the same problem seems still to remain: How can God know exhaustively and infallibly what creatures possessed of truly libertarian free will do without His knowledge falling into conflict with their ability to do otherwise? This is a logical conundrum, and Arminians should (and often do) simply admit it. All theological systems logically come up against problems at some points. At times we have to accept that system of theology that contains the fewest tensions and conflicts and the ones easiest to live with.

My confession is that I am a *frustrated* Arminian evangelical. I am frustrated because so many of my fellow evangelical Christians seem so unreasonably biased against Arminian theology and so closed-minded to correction about what Arminian theology truly is. When confronted with some of the excesses or extremes of Reformed scholastic orthodoxy (such as Theodore Beza's declaration that those who find themselves in hell can at least take comfort in the knowledge that they are there for the greater glory of God), they often appeal to Calvin, who was more moderate, measured, and subtle. But they are seldom willing to allow me or other Arminians to appeal to Arminius when they describe Arminianism using Episcopius or Finney or even popular decisionistic folk religion as the paradigm. My confession is also that I am a *happy, proud, and content* Arminian evangelical. While I am more than willing to consider the objections and criticisms raised by Arminianism's critics, I see no need to apologize for or hide the fact that I am theologically Arminian.

Notes

1. R. C. Sproul, *Willing to Believe: The Controversy over Free Will* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002), 140.

2. See Carl Bangs, *Arminius: A Study in the Dutch Reformation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Francis Asbury Press, 1985).

3. See Richard A. Muller, *God, Creation, and Providence in the Thought of Jacob Arminius* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991).

4. *The Encyclopedia of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 128–29.

5. See Alan P. F. Sell, *The Great Debate: Calvinism, Arminianism, and Salvation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1982).

6. Jacob Arminius, "Certain Articles to be Diligently Examined and Weighed" in *The Works of James Arminius*, trans. Nichols and Nichols (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1986), 2:710.

7. Jacob Arminius, "A Letter Addressed to Hippolytus A Collibus" in *The Works of James Arminius*, 2:697–98.

8. Arminius, "Certain Articles," 724.

9. Jacob Arminius, "A Declaration of the Sentiments of Arminius" in *The Works of James Arminius*, 1:700.

10. See Paul Helm, *The Providence of God* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994).

11. R. C. Sproul, *Now That's a Good Question* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 1996), 25–26.

12. See Alvin C. Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1974).

13. Arminius, "Certain Articles," 707.

14. Jacob Arminius, "Examination of Dr. Perkin's Pamphlet on Predestination" in *The Works of James Arminius*, 3:284.

15. Arminius, "Examination," 273.

16. Arminius, "A Letter Addressed to Hippolytus A Collibus," 700–701.

17. Arminius, "A Letter Addressed to Hippolytus," 701–02.