

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

Arminius's Understanding of Calvin

by F. Stuart Clarke

Mr. Clarke is a Methodist minister in Southwell who has made a special study of the works of Arminius. This paper was also given at the meeting of the Tyndale Fellowship Historical Theology Study Group in 1980.

This subject can be discussed only on the assumption that Arminius was a normally honest man and a Christian theologian who had a proper sense of his responsibility to tell the truth as he saw it. There has been an unfortunate traditional Calvinist view of him as 'a clever dissembler who secretly taught doctrines different from his published writings', as Bangs succinctly puts it.¹ This view has a long history, and seems to spring originally from the insinuations of Petrus Plancius, a Belgian Protestant émigré who was a pastor in Amsterdam while Arminius also ministered there from 1588 to 1603. It has been repeated by responsible Calvinist theologians like A. A. Hodge in his *Outlines of Theology*, and at least as recently as 1968 by the Rev. John R. de Witt in his article 'The Arminian Conflict and the Synod of Dort', a paper read at the Puritan and Reformed Studies Conference that year and published in *The Manifold Grace of God*. It is an accusation easy to make and hard to refute, because of the practice of theological professors of the time, including Arminius, of boarding students in their own homes and giving them private teaching, but if it is true, there is no point in studying Arminius's published view of Calvin or of anyone or anything else. My own opinion is that it would have been psychologically impossible to express the full-blooded views of grace etc. that Arminius did, while privately believing the wishy-washy Pelagianism that this view would attribute to him.

Three other considerations should also be mentioned before we discuss in detail Arminius's view of Calvin. The first is that Calvin and Arminius were not, except in the superficial sense, contemporaries. Calvin died on May 27, 1564. The date of Arminius's birth is unknown because of the sack of his home village Oudewater by the Spaniards in 1574, the massacre of its inhabitants and the destruction of its records. The traditional date, October 10, 1560, seems to be unsupported by evidence. Bangs prefers 1559, but in any case Arminius was only a small child when Calvin died. Calvin had contemporary critics who challenged him on points Arminius would later raise, like the Roman Catholic Pighius, the liberal Reformed theologian Castellio, mavericks like Bolsec and eventually, from 1560 onwards, Lutherans like Heshusen and Marbach, but Arminius belongs to a later generation.

Second, I would suggest that there is no evidence that Arminius deliberately singled out Calvin as the man against whom he would

¹ 'Arminius and the Reformation', *Church History*, 30:2, June 1961; reprint, 2.

react. Many theologians who have been unable to find an opponent of their own stature among their contemporaries, have selected some great name of the past, and have orientated their own theological position by criticising him. This is what Methodius and Epiphanius did with Origen, and so did Jerome in the intervals of looking round for another contemporary to have a row with; this is how Kierkegaard treated Luther, for all his Lutheranism; and at one period Barth did this with Schleiermacher. It is doubtful whether any of Arminius's Dutch Calvinist opponents were of quite his calibre, but none of his works were directed specifically against Calvin. The habit of contrasting 'Calvinism' and 'Arminianism' belongs to a later time than that of Arminius, if only slightly later. Arminius would presumably have been astonished if he had known that his name was soon to become, and to remain, synonymous with opposition to Calvinism in general.

26

This brings us to a third consideration. Calvin was succeeded at Geneva by Theodore Beza, who continued Calvin's ministry, in all its varied aspects, for over 40 years till his death in 1605, by which time Arminius himself was a professor at Leiden, where he was to die only four years later. Most pastors of the Dutch Reformed Church in the first decade of the 17th century had received part of their theological training at Geneva under Beza; this includes Arminius, for whom Beza had sent a reference to the burgomasters of Amsterdam in 1585 warmly commending him, though delicately admitting that he did not know him personally too well! The result was that until Beza's death Reformed pastors and theologians did not define sound Reformed doctrine, as we might, by reference to Calvin alone, as 'Calvinism'. It was always the doctrine of Calvin *and Beza*; hardly ever simply the doctrine of Calvin. Only after Beza's death did men gradually realise that the great theological, administrative and educational gifts of Theodore Beza were hardly on a par with the creative genius of his master.

The classic statement of Arminius's opinion of Calvin occurs in a private letter to the Amsterdam Burgomaster Sebastian Egbertszoon of May 3, 1607, of which the relevant passage needs to be quoted in full. The occasion of writing was a malicious rumour that Arminius had been advising his students to read the works of the Jesuits and also of the Dutch liberal theologian Dirck Volckertszoon Coornhert (1523-90), an opponent of Calvinism. As Bangs says, the two rumours should have cancelled each other out, they were so far apart. Arminius replies:-

So far from this, after the reading of Scripture, which I strenuously inculcate, and more than any other (as the whole university, indeed, the conscience of my colleagues will testify) I recommend that the *Commentaries of Calvin* be

read, whom I extol in higher terms than Helmichius² himself, as he owned to me, ever did. For I affirm that in the interpretation of the Scriptures Calvin is incomparable, and that his *Commentaries* are more to be valued than anything that is handed down to us in the writings of the Fathers — so much so that I concede to him a certain spirit of prophecy in which he stands distinguished above others, above most, indeed, above all. His *Institutes*, so far as respects Commonplaces (*loci communes*), I give out to be read after the Catechism (*i.e.* of Heidelberg) as a more extended explanation. But here I add — with discrimination, as the writings of all men ought to be read.

Arminius may seem to protest too much in his endeavour to clear himself of the charge. But there is no reason to suspect insincerity. Egbertszoon was a cousin of Arminius's wife and also a close personal friend who defended Arminius when he was being criticized, and the letter was not meant for publication.

Arminius then considered himself a great admirer of Calvin generally, and regarded him as supreme in biblical exposition. He also esteemed him highly as a dogmatic theologian, but definitely less than as a commentator; he was more concerned to preserve his and others' right to criticise Calvin's dogmatic theology. In both respects there are many, then and now, who would echo Arminius's opinion.

27

In this letter, however, Arminius mentions no specific doctrines. To discover in detail where he agreed and disagreed with Calvin we have to turn to scattered references in his published works. There are not so many as one might expect.

Arminius's earliest extant work, the *Dissertation* on Romans 7, came out of his preaching through Romans in his early pastoral ministry in Amsterdam. He reached Romans 7 in 1591, and his teaching caused the first dissension in his career, encouraged primarily by Plancius. At some time during or after this period he wrote a lengthy treatment of the chapter, not published till after his death, in 1613. He quotes largely from theologians ancient and modern, including Calvin, to establish his thesis that Paul is speaking of a man under law, not a man under grace. This may seem an attack on Calvin's interpretation, and Arminius indeed speaks of 'the opinion of some of our modern divines' which he says was not approved by any ancient fathers, not even by Augustine. But he appeals to Calvin and Beza for at least partial support of his position. Calvin's doctrine of initial or servile fear, which may be God's preparation of the sinner to receive the knowledge of grace, had been used by Beza in his *Refutation* of Heshusen, Calvin's Lutheran oppo-

² Werner Helmichius (died 1608), fellow-pupil of Beza and fellow-pastor at Amsterdam. Not a thoroughgoing Calvinist but no friend to Arminius either.

ment. It was to serve Arminius well in his treatment of Romans 7, and he appealed to it again as late as 1608 in his *Apology Against* Article 16 of *the 31 Defamatory Articles*, which attributed to him the view that the works of the unregenerate are pleasing to God, and are the impulsive cause moving Him to communicate His saving grace. On the actual text, Romans 7:14, 'We know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin', Calvin had commented ambiguously, 'The apostle now begins to bring the law and the nature of man a little more closely into hostile contact', which suited Arminius well, though he acknowledges that Calvin regards the man mentioned in the next verse as already regenerate. Calvin is among theologians quoted by Arminius when he seeks to prove that the inward man of verse 23 'is not peculiar to the regenerate but also belongs to the unregenerate', though it is doubtful whether here he is seeking Calvin's support.

28

The interpretation of Romans 7 is important, but is not so much at the heart of the gospel as the doctrines of the Trinity and the person of Christ. In the *Dissertation* Arminius defends Calvin from the Lutheran charge of Arianism, because Calvin had said that 'many passages of scripture adduced by the ancient church . . . to establish a doctrine of the Trinity, do not conduce in the least to that purpose.' Later, in his letter to Hippolytus à Collibus, Arminius will quote Paraeus's defence of Calvin against the Lutheran Hunnius's *Calvinus Judaizans*.³ In the *Apology* against Article 21 of the Defamatory Articles, which alleges that Arminius had said 'It is a new, heretical and Sabellian mode of speaking, nay . . . blasphemous, to say that the Son is αὐτοθεός', Arminius argues that this word has two meanings, 'truly and in Himself God', which he accepts, and 'God from Himself' which he rejects as contrary to the orthodox view that the Son has his Divine essence from the Father. He appeals to Beza's criticism that Calvin himself had not observed the distinction between the two senses with sufficient strictness.

At least once Arminius appealed publicly to Calvin when his own orthodoxy was being impugned. In his *Declaration of Sentiments* delivered before the States of Holland at the Hague on October 30, 1608, at which he was in effect being tried for his theological views, he remarked on 'The Justification of Man before God', that he was not conscious of having taught or entertained any other sentiments than those held unanimously by the Reformed and Protestant churches, and refused to be involved in the recent Piscator controversy as to whether Christ's righteousness imputed to believers . . . was only his passive

³ *The Writings of Arminius*, translated by James Nichols and W. R. Bagnall, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1956, vol. 2, 462f.

obedience, or his active holiness also. He defended his interpretation of 'Faith is imputed for righteousness' in Romans 4, and put forward his view; that sinners are accounted righteous solely by the obedience of Christ, and that the righteousness of Christ is the only meritorious cause of man's forgiveness and justification, but as God imputes Christ's righteousness to believers only, he asserts:-

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, through faith in his blood.⁴

He claims that this agrees substantially with Calvin's definition, and offers to subscribe to what Calvin had said in the *Institutes*.⁵ Arminius, as Bangs says, is trying to guard against two errors; that our own righteousness contributes to our justification, and that Christ's righteousness is a mere cloak over our unrighteousness. He considers that Calvin rejected the latter in saying that we possess righteousness only as partakers in Christ, but that with him we possess *all its riches*.

Arminius makes other less important references to Calvin. For instance, he appeals to his opinion against Defamatory Article 10, that 'it cannot be proved from Scripture, that believers under the Old Testament, before the ascension of Christ, were in heaven.' This, says Arminius, is a matter unrevealed in Scripture about any departed souls, and unimportant for us to know, and Calvin thought so too. It would be outside the scope of this article to make a detailed comparison of Arminius's theology with that of Calvin, but Dr. Bangs has shown how on many points, where Arminius has not mentioned Calvin, his definitions are closely modelled on Calvin's — for example, his definition of a sacrament. One could argue that, on any matter which has not become a source of dispute, it can be assumed that there is no serious disagreement between the two theologians. Differences so far considered appear to have the nature of footnotes.

But as we know, disagreement has been so bitter that many Calvinists have classed Arminius with Arius and Pelagius as one of the great heresiarchs. Why? We may answer with another question. What was Arminius's great concern in theology?

As Dr. Bangs says, at the beginning of his last chapter, before the 'Epilogue': 'Predestination has been the recurring theme of this entire story.'⁶ Arminius said that he had given his most diligent attention to

⁴ *Writings*, vol. 1, 264.

⁵ *Institutes*, 3.11.23.

⁶ *Arminius: A Study in the Dutch Reformation*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, Tennessee, 1971, 350.

this head of doctrine. In conversation with me, however, Dr. Bangs expressed the opinion that Arminius specialised in this subject because it was the main point of contention in the Dutch Reformed Church of his day.

One hesitates to disagree with the greatest Arminius scholar since Arminius himself, the author of the definitive biography which is also the best study of his theology to date. Some of Arminius's controversies on predestination were forced upon, not sought by, him — for example, that over the 32 theses of Gomarus. But whenever Arminius felt free to choose his subject, as in his communication with Snecanus over Romans 9, his epistolary debate with Junius, or his reply to Perkins's treatise, it was predestination he chose. The *Declaration of Sentiments* exaggerates the extent to which previous disputes in the Dutch Reformed Church had centred upon predestination. He claims that it was at least an issue in the affair of Coolhaes at Leiden; Dr. Bangs confirms that it was not.⁷ In fact, Arminius himself was obsessed with the doctrine of predestination, more so than Calvin. He belongs to a small group of theologians, with Gottschalk in the 9th century, his older Spanish Roman Catholic contemporary Molina in the 16th, and perhaps Pierre Maury in the 20th, whose outlook is conditioned by their concern for predestination and whose theological reputation stands or falls by what they said about it.

30

The earliest work of Arminius which deals specifically with predestination is his *Analysis* of Romans 9. This, like the *Dissertation* on Romans 7, arose from his preaching through the Epistle in his Amsterdam ministry in 1593, but we have it in the form of a letter of 1596 to the Friesland minister Gellius Snecanus who had himself published works on predestination 'according to the sentiments of Melancthon', including an *Introduction* to Romans 9. Arminius recognised a kindred spirit and sent him his own thoughts. He argues that there is a predestination of two classes, those who seek righteousness by works and those who seek it by faith, preceding predestination of individuals, and God's choice of which Pauls speaks is to save the latter and condemn the former. This is not an original interpretation. Origen's *commentary on Romans*, from which the Cappadocians made extracts in the *Philocalia*, had said much the same. Here Arminius never mentions Calvin. His opponent is Beza, or vaguely, 'Beza and others'. The *Analysis* also was not published till after Arminius's death, in 1612.

Arminius's next major work on the subject has a complicated history. The *Conference with Junius* arose from Arminius meeting Franciscus

⁷ Contrast *Declaration, Writings* Vol. 1, 240 with Bangs, *op. cit.*, 55.

Junius, professor of theology at Leiden, at a family wedding on December 10, 1596. Their correspondence, intended to be confidential was begun by a short statement from Arminius which Junius divided into an introduction and 27 propositions and wrote to each a considerably longer reply. He then showed it to one of his students who copied it out and showed it to other students. Arminius was annoyed and replied in detail to each answer of Junius. The whole was not published till 1613. In this work 'Beza' has become regularly 'Calvin and Beza'. Arminius distinguishes between three different doctrines of predestination, that of 'Calvin to Beza', the Thomist and the Augustinian.

'They all agree in this, that they . . . hold that God, by an eternal and immutable decree, determined to bestow on certain men, the rest being passed by, supernatural and eternal life.'⁸

Calvin's view, according to Arminius, differs from the others in regarding predestination as taking place before the creation of man, which necessitates the ordination of the fall, to illustrate God's mercy in saving the elect, and justice in condemning the reprobate. Arminius objects, first that predestination is not so much a matter of mercy as of grace, which transcends mercy and deals specifically with man as a sinner; second that God is made the author of the fall of Adam and of sin. However, he subjects the Thomist doctrine to a much longer critique than that of Calvin. His own view is that 'Election is . . . made in Christ, ordained as mediator for sinners . . . predestinated, and we in Him and He before us.'⁹ At this stage he was still working out his own theory, and was more effective in criticising views he did not hold than in formulating one that he did.

By now Arminius was known, thanks to Junius's breach of confidentiality, as an opponent of Calvin's doctrine of predestination, but he made no frontal attack upon it. His next major work, the *Examination of Perkins's Treatise* (again not published till after Arminius's death) mentions Calvin little, though Perkins had referred to the truth in his introductory epistle as 'the *Calvinists'* doctrine, as they (opponents) call it'. Arminius confines himself to a defence of Calvin from the charge of Manichaeism, and to a comment on God's permission that 'the remarks of Calvin and Beza, let it be said with due respect to so eminent men, are hardly consistent with the truth'. But his known rejection of the Calvinist doctrine of predestination may well have contributed to the opposition to his appointment as Professor at Leiden in 1603, particularly from Gomarus, whose deliberately provocative *Theses on Pre-*

⁸ *Writings*, Vol. 3, Proposition 1, 13.

⁹ Proposition 11, 133.

destination (hyperCalvinist rather than simply Calvinist) were followed thus in his Corollary:-

Does that blasphemy follow from this doctrine, that God is the author of sin? For so Castellio, and his follower Coornhert, and the Lutherans, are accustomed to object to our churches, especially to Calvin and Beza, who have deserved very well of our church, and of the truth of predestination against the Pelagians . . . that having brought these illustrious restorers of the churches into odium, they may wound the truth through their sides, and the more easily sow the tares of their own errors in the minds of men. We, however, with the Reformed churches with justice deny that, and do not in the least doubt that the truth and sanctity of this opinion will endure, in spite of the gates of hell.

The quotation reveals much about the thought-processes of Arminius's Calvinist contemporaries.

32 This, in a sense, exhausts our subject. There is a collection, probably by Arminius, of 'Certain Articles to be Diligently Weighed and Examined', appended to the first printing of his *Letter to Hippolytus à Collibus*, which makes three quotations from Calvin, one attributing the fall to God's will, one stating that by the will of God the reprobate cannot escape the necessity of sinning, and finally one described as a 'horrible affirmation', that 'men are predestinated to eternal death by the naked will or choice of God, without any demerit on their part'.¹⁰ However, as Arminius made certain marks by each article, showing whether he denied or affirmed them, and whether decisively or tentatively, and as these marks are missing in printed editions, they must, as Dr. Bangs says, be used with care in interpreting Arminius's position. We must finally turn to the definitive statement of his own theology, the *Declaration of Sentiments*.

In this work, Arminius makes no mention of Calvin except, as has been said, to invoke his support for his doctrine of justification. But the first of the ten subjects with which Arminius deals, and the one which takes up almost half of the entire work, is predestination. The pattern he adopts is to describe three views of predestination which he claims are current in the Dutch Reformed church of his day; not the Calvinist, Thomist and Augustinian as in the *Conference with Junius*, but views which reflect the development of thought in the intervening decade. To use terms which came into use soon after the Synod of Dort, the first view is supralapsarian, the second a modified supralapsarianism and the third is sublapsarian. Arminius makes no personal attributions, but we know from the *Conference* that he interpreted Calvin along 'supra-

¹⁰ *Institutes*, 1.2.3.

lapsarian' lines, a view with which modern scholars on the whole concur, as far as any man can be labelled on a subject which has not become an issue in his time. Most of Arminius's fire this time is directed against a high Supralapsarianism.

The emphasis of the criticisms has become significantly different. Earlier criticisms, like those that predestination has reference to man as a sinner, and that the Calvinist view makes God the author of sin and denies human free-will, reappear, but in positions which indicate that they are now regarded as secondary. In general, Arminius's standpoint has become less logical and anthropocentric and more theological and Christocentric.

He describes the supralapsarian form of the Calvinist doctrine, and adds:-

I reject this predestination for the following reasons:-

1. Because it is not the foundation of Christianity . . . For (it) is not that decree of God by which Christ is appointed by God to be the Saviour, the Head and the Foundation of those who will be made heirs of salvation. Yet that decree is the only foundation of Christianity.

That is, the primary object of God's predestination is Christ, and only secondarily individual believers who are predestinated only in Him. This criticism would certainly hold against many popular expressions of so-called 'Calvinism', but does it touch Calvin himself? In his *Commentary on Ephesians* Calvin calls Christ the material cause of eternal election and of God's love, but the material is one of four causes and subordinate to the efficient cause, the good-pleasure of the will of God. This would seem to satisfy Arminius's criterion, but after other objections he returns to the attack:-

XV. This doctrine is highly dishonourable to Jesus Christ our Saviour. For:-

1. It entirely excludes him from that decree of predestination which predestinates the end: and it affirms, that men were predestinated to be saved, before Christ was predestinated to save them; and thus it argues, that he is not the foundation of election.

2. It denies, that Christ is the meritorious cause, that again obtained for us the salvation . . . we had lost, by placing him as only a subordinate cause of that salvation which had already been foreordained, and thus only a minister and instrument to apply that salvation to us.

Presumably Arminius intended objection 15 to mark an advance in thought upon the first objection, but how? His phrase 'meritorious cause' suggests that he would not be satisfied with Calvin's doctrine of Christ as the material cause. Does Arminius think of Christ as simply the primary *object* of God's predestinating will, or also as its *subject*? In

Barth's phrase, as electing God as well as elected man? Arminius seems to have been moving in this direction. In his *Private Disputations* (a sort of systematic theology) he says:-

The love with which God loves men absolutely to salvation, and according to which he absolutely intends to bestow on them eternal life . . . has no existence except in Jesus Christ, the Son of his love, who, both by his efficacious communication and by his most worthy merits, is the cause of salvation, and not only the dispenser of recovered salvation, but . . . the solicitor, obtainer and restorer of that salvation which was lost.¹¹

Arminius's statement of his own belief in the *Declaration*, without quite making it clear that Christ is subject as well as object of predestination, otherwise maintains the Christocentric emphasis in the first three decrees. However, he was under pressure from his opponents to produce a completely rounded-off statement which would include the predestination of individuals.

34 Already in the *Declaration* he had spoken of this pressure, which had been building up since the visit of the Deputies of the Synod of South Holland to him in June 1605, to obtain from him 'an open profession of his sentiments on the matter of Religion'.¹² He mentions three such approaches between then and 1607, including another from the Synod and one from the Leiden Presbytery, as well as an approach from the Synod to his University of Leiden. And these 'sentiments' had to be doctrinally watertight. Agnosticism about the smallest detail was unacceptable. In the Conclusion to the *Apology against 31 Defamatory Articles*, written earlier in 1608, we read:-

Some persons will perhaps reproach me with 'appearing sometimes to answer with doubt and hesitation, when it is the duty of a Divine and a Professor of Theology to be fully persuaded about those things which he will teach to others . . .'¹³

Arminius replies, first that the man most learned in the Scriptures is a mere scholar in Christ's school, still ignorant of many things; therefore he cannot be expected to give an unhesitating answer to everything to which his adversaries may choose to require him to reply: second, that not all controversial points are of equal importance, some being of the essence of Christian truth, whereas on others believers may agree to differ without a breach of Christian peace: third, that he did not feel obliged to express all his thoughts to any and every challenger, but was prepared to do so at a lawfully instituted conference.

¹¹ *Writings*, Vol. 2, Disputation XL, para. IV, 100.

¹² *Writings*, vol. 1, 194.

¹³ *Writings*, vol. 1, 377f.

So in his fourth and final decree, for the first and only time, he says that God decrees to save and damn particular persons according to his foreknowledge of their faith or lack of it. As Bangs remarks,¹⁴ there is a speculative element here which is absent from the other three decrees and not typical of Arminius's theology (including his doctrine of predestination) up to that time. It derives ultimately from Clement of Alexandria's and Origen's interpretation of the relationship between foreknowledge and predestination in Romans 8:29, an interpretation which remains controversial.

This doctrine, since miscalled 'Arminianism' by both friend and foe, was placed by the Remonstrants at the beginning, not the end of their statement. The Remonstrance thus gives a false impression of the position of Arminius himself, whose final objection to Calvin was that his doctrine of predestination was just not sufficiently Christocentric.

Was this judgment also unfair? Professor J. K. S. Reid has drawn attention to the following passage in the *Institutes*:¹⁵

Christ makes himself the author of election . . . Though (He) introduces himself in his mediatorial capacity, yet he claims to himself the right of election in common with the Father . . .

35

If Calvin had regularly expressed himself in this way, and drawn out the conclusions from it, he could have confounded the criticisms not only of Arminius but of Maury, Barth and other 20th century critics. But one swallow does not make a summer, and it seems that we search in vain for anything like this elsewhere in his writings. Unhappily, after the death of Arminius, both Calvinists and so-called Arminians reverted to seeing Christ as merely an agent who carried out a predetermined decree of the Father. Their dispute was over whether this decree was to be understood along Augustinian or Origenist lines.

But, as Arminius was to reply to Gomarus's corollary, men like Calvin and Beza may be illustrious restorers of the church, and in general deserve well of her, and yet be in error on certain points.

This, I submit, remains a tenable view of Calvin's theological achievement.

¹⁴ *Op. cit.*, 354.

¹⁵ *Institutes*, 3.22.7.

An Introduction to the Anabaptists

by Robert Rodgers

Although there is an increasing recognition among scholars of the contribution of the Anabaptists to the Reformation, their image still tends to be somewhat tarnished as a result of the activities of some extremist groups who were far from typical of them. Mr. Rodgers' contribution will help to set the record straight.

Authentic Anabaptist history has only recently begun to emerge. Hitherto, it has been the custom of historians to cull their information from the movement's enemies and the result has been a caricature of the worst kind. Happily, the Anabaptist cause is now enjoying the fruits of unbiased historical research and the story now being unfolded bears scant relation to that which had formerly been presented to us in the name of history. Says H. L. Ellison:

Until recently, their history has been known to us mainly through the vilifications of their opponents, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, who regarded them as enemies of God and emissaries of Satan; a garbled version of the tragedy of Münster was held to serve as a picture of all. Indeed, the first comprehensive survey of the movement in English, G. H. Williams' *The Radical Reformation*, was not published till 1962. In all the story of zeal, suffering, persecution and martyr-death during the Reformation, the palm must be awarded to these outcasts.¹

36

This is no exaggeration for it is certain that Anabaptists who died for their faith must be numbered, not in hundreds, but in tens of thousands. These were people who suffered at the hands of both Roman Catholic and Protestant alike and 'even John Calvin, though he did not persecute them, could see little good in them'.²

The gentle Melanchthon opposed them to such an extent that, in 1531 he drew up a memorandum on Anabaptism in which the death penalty was prescribed for recalcitrant Anabaptists³ and at Zurich many were executed, often by drowning.⁴

In calling for the death penalty, Melanchthon was following the lead of Luther who, though opposed at first to persecution, became so alarmed at the spread of Anabaptism, that he urged the use of the sword against them by right of law (1530).⁵

The Anabaptists were the radical left-wing of the Reformation which felt that the Magisterial Reformers (to use Williams' term) had not gone

¹ H. L. Ellison, Foreword to *The Reformers and their Stepchildren*, by Leonard Verduin, 6.

² A. M. Renwick, *The Story of the Church*, 117.

³ D. P. Kingdon, *The Anabaptists*, 15.

⁴ B. F. C. Atkinson, *Valiant in Fight*, 162.

⁵ James McKinnon, *Luther and the Reformation*, 64.

far enough in the matter of reform. They therefore drew upon themselves the opposition of the mainstream reformers and the misrepresentation in history which followed as a result. Paterson is therefore right when he says:

It has been made clear that the Protestant tradition judged this movement by its worst examples, ignored the ethical idealism which entered into their dreams and passed an anathema on all which was merited only by a few. It is indeed one of the tragedies of history that men like Hubmaier and Denck and a great company of victims who followed them to the slaughter, should have been involved in the same condemnation with Munzer and John of Leyden.⁶

That this has been the case must be attributed in some measure to the fact that historians generally have been much too willing to accept uncritically the unfounded accusations of the movement's enemies and, at the same time, too insistent upon treating the movement as a united body. It was far from being that. Its teachings were diverse just as the movement itself was fragmented. 'In view of the variations in teaching and practice which existed among the different Anabaptist groups, it is difficult to give a description which would cover all.'⁷ To speak in general terms, therefore, is to spawn all manner of error.

37

The diverse nature of the Anabaptist movement has been underlined by various writers among whom is D. P. Kingdon who says:

The radical reformation . . . was a complex movement composed of heterogeneous elements. It included not only Anabaptists of various types but also groups which exalted alleged revelations of the Spirit above the written Word of Scripture, spiritualisers of varying tendencies and what G. H. Williams calls Evangelical Rationalists. Grouped under the Radical Reformation one may find both political revolutionaries like Thomas Munzer and pacifistic communitarians like Jacob Hutter. One may discover legalists and anti-nomians, wild fanatics and sober pietists. The radical reformation was, to use the vivid image of Rufus Jones, a veritable banyan tree.⁸

Different attempts to group the Anabaptists have been made with varying degrees of success. It is possible to deal with them according to geographical location and to speak therefore of the Anabaptists of Switzerland, South Germany or the Netherlands, each group being more or less represented by an outstanding leader. Others have divided them into three major groups which are The Evangelical, The Revolutionary and The Contemplative, though with the acknowledgement that 'these class-

⁶ W. P. Paterson, *The Rule of Faith*, 89.

⁷ Renwick, *op. cit.*, 116.

⁸ D. P. Kingdon, *op. cit.*, 14.

ifications must not be too rigidly applied because there are some individuals who could be placed in more than one group'.⁹

Undoubtedly, the group that has received a disproportionate amount of attention and has been instrumental in bringing the entire movement into disrepute, is the faction known as the Munster Revolutionaries. Led by Thomas Munzer, the Revolutionaries took over the city and attempted to set up their version of the Kingdom of God on earth.

Theologically and politically the Revolutionaries were far removed from the other various kinds of Anabaptism and ought never to be regarded as the norm.

They preached a wild millenarianism and insisted that God's Day of Wrath was about to break and that the Saints would dominate the governments of the world. They appealed strongly to the power of the sword to impose their views and during their brief control of the City there were many excesses.¹⁰

Among those excesses one might mention that of polygamy which appears to have been introduced during a siege of the city initiated by the Roman Catholic Bishop of Munster. The city, it seems, had four times as many women as it had men and Bockelson, who had assumed control upon the death of Matthys, proposed that polygamy be practised.¹¹

This highlights for us a point of the greatest importance relating to the difference between the Revolutionaries and the other representatives of Anabaptism. In increasing measure, the former appealed to the Old Testament in support of their views and practices so that it became normative for their theology and especially for the constitution of the Church.¹²

There can be no doubt at all that the happenings at Munster 'decided the reputation of Anabaptists for many years to come'¹³ though, happily, the Presbyterian Church Historian A. M. Renwick had the candour to write: 'In the past most historians have represented these wild fanatics as being the founders of the Anabaptist movement. Research has shown that this view is undoubtedly erroneous.'¹⁴

To understand the Anabaptist movement as a whole, one must turn aside from the abnormal events of Munster and base one's judgment upon the total picture. Only then may one be in a position to appreciate the view of the Mennonite historian, H. S. Bender who has described the Anabaptists as

⁹ William Klassen, *Covenant and Community*, 91.

¹⁰ Renwick, *op. cit.*, 115.

¹¹ S. M. Houghton, *The Anabaptists*, 166.

¹² Kingdon, *op. cit.*, 17.

¹³ Houghton, *op. cit.*, 166.

¹⁴ Renwick, *op. cit.*, 116.

essentially a peaceful, evangelical and creative religious movement of great power, conceiving itself as reproducing New Testament Christianity and as completing the arrested Reformation begun by Luther and Zwingli.¹⁵

In a treatise on the '*Incarnation of Christ*' published in 1549, the great English bishop, John Hooper, opposed what he took to be the standard Anabaptist position on the subject. He asserted that they denied that the Lord Jesus received his humanity and manhood from Mary and that they supposed that he brought with him a pre-existent manhood from heaven.¹⁶

This, however, refers not to the teaching of the Anabaptists in general but to Melchior Hoffmann in particular. His peculiar Christology, whilst embraced by quite a few, was certainly not representative of the entire movement. He taught that Christ was born 'out of' but not 'of' Mary.

As the heavenly dew falls into the shell of a mussel and changes there into a pearl without taking anything over from the shell, so the Holy Spirit, the Word of God, fell into Mary's womb and there of itself became the spiritual pearl, namely, Jesus Christ.¹⁷

39

In other words, Hoffmann viewed the Virgin Mary as a pipe or conduit through which Christ merely passed. This, of course, was a revival of the ancient heresy, Docetism, which advanced the view that Christ's body was either a phantom lacking material substance or else of celestial, not earthly, origin.¹⁸

There were also the Anti-Trinitarian Anabaptists, particularly the Transylvanian Unitarians under their leader, Francis David, whose views cannot be regarded as representative of the entire movement. When Faustus Socinus advanced his heresies in Poland, David was instrumental in leading Racovian Anabaptism in the direction of Socinianism.¹⁹

Furthest removed from the fanaticism of the Munster debacle were men of the calibre of John Denck who may be placed in the Contemplative category. Their position was somewhat akin to the Quaker ideas of today since they spoke of following the 'inner light' or the 'inner word' though they did, in fact, administer the ordinance of baptism whereas the Quakers do not.²⁰

¹⁵ H. S. Bender, *The Anabaptists and Religious Liberty in the Sixteenth Century*, 87.

¹⁶ Hooper, *The Incarnation of Christ*, 80.

¹⁷ Houghton, *op. cit.*, 168.

¹⁸ Cf. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, 400.

¹⁹ G. H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, xxxi.

²⁰ Klassen, *op. cit.*, 30.

Sometimes the 'spirituality' of some groups was carried to an unwarranted extreme and issued in an asceticism completely foreign to the teaching of the Word of God. Such ascetics lived in desert places, denied themselves the usual foods, drinks and clothing and hoped thereby to follow the example of John the Baptist.²¹

Clemens Ziegler is another leader whose vagaries, though more or less confined to his immediate following, have been treated as though normative for the whole movement. He propagated the belief that the body is evil and the spirit alone is good and to him must be apportioned the blame for the Anabaptist reputation of believing in universal salvation.²²

We need to remind ourselves, however, that the existence of fanatical revolutionaries on the one hand and mild, meditative pacifists on the other, the emergence of Docetic tendencies in Christology or Unitarianism in the Doctrine of God, in no way precluded the possibility of the movement's having within its ranks many who were both evangelical and orthodox. Time and again the voices of orthodox Anabaptists were raised and their pens employed against the heresies springing up in their midst.

Menno Simons, founding father of the Mennonites, and described as 'a man of integrity, mild, accommodating, patient of injuries and so ardent in his piety as to exemplify in his own life the precepts he gave to others', was utterly repelled by the views of the Munster revolutionaries and went into print against them. He describes his own position thus:

No-one can truly charge me with agreeing with the Munster teaching. On the contrary, for seventeen years until the present day, I have opposed and striven against it, privately and publicly, by voice and pen. Those who, like the Munster people, refuse the Cross of Christ, despise the Lord's Word and practise earthly lusts under the pretence of right-doing, we will never acknowledge as our brethren and sisters.²³

The views of Clemens Ziegler were repeatedly rejected by Pilgram Marpeck, an outstanding engineer who was renowned for his work in building water-conduits for the city of Strassburg. The views of the extreme ascetics were opposed by Cornelium Veh 'since John's asceticism was meant as an object lesson to the Pharisees and has no relation to us'.²⁴ Hoffmann's Valentinian Christology was rejected by Scharn-

²¹ *Ibid.*, 94.

²² *Ibid.*, 30.

²³ S. M. Houghton, *op. cit.*, 168.

²⁴ Klassen, *op. cit.*, 94.

schlager and others and the term 'inner light' never appears, for example, in the writings of Marpeck.²⁵

Again, very many were stoutly Trinitarian in their doctrine of God and defended the biblical concept against the Unitarians. In their *Verantwortung* Leopold Scharnschlager and Pilgram Marpeck assert

that in order to maintain the true almighty God in Christ in (or with) His two united natures, we contended for several years against certain spirits which denied that some time ago.²⁶

This probably refers principally to Scharnschlager's opposition to Hoffmann's Christology in 1532.

The doctrine of God and Christology naturally leads one to a consideration of the Holy Spirit and in this area too, Marpeck sought to make himself abundantly clear.

For Marpeck, the Holy Spirit is not some pantheistic spirit that floats around the universe, or an inner light, but is specifically given to us and related to us. He has been sent to lead Christians into all truth. His work is not some ecstatic phenomenon unpredictably and unrelatedly laying hold of the individual in a spectacular way, but related to the Scriptures.²⁷

41

Thus we see that the fiery fanaticism of Munster and the doctrinal deviations of individuals or groups, cannot with propriety be deemed descriptive of the entire Anabaptist movement. We may now also appreciate the tremendous danger in passing upon them a collective anathema. Anabaptism was one of two fronts against which classical Protestantism sought to establish its position. To its right was the Roman Catholic Church which it regarded as Antichrist and to its left was the Anabaptist movement which it regarded as 'a three-headed Cerberus and called the monster abusively, without their wonted theological precision, almost interchangeably, libertinism, Anabaptism, fanaticism'.²⁸

We are now in a position to consider the positive stance of the majority of Anabaptists. There can be little doubt that the fundamental difference between them and the Magisterial Reformers was their view of Holy Scripture and, arising from that, their view of the Church.

The Evangelical Anabaptist doctrine of Scripture differed radically from the Munsterite practice of appealing almost exclusively to the Old Testament. If anything, they laid the greater emphasis upon the New

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 70 (footnote).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 38, 39.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 70.

²⁸ Williams, *op. cit.*, xxx.

Testament and in this were opposed by the Reformers who sought to treat both Old and New Testaments as equally authoritative. Bullinger, indeed, went so far as to liken the Anabaptists to Marcion who has the doubtful distinction of having been the first to cast aspersions upon the Canon of Scripture.²⁹

Klassen states that this accusation was made because the Anabaptists rejected categorically the analogous position of circumcision and Baptism that Zwingli, Bucer, Bullinger, Calvin and Peter Martyr used to prove the necessity of infant baptism.³⁰ Whilst this is undoubtedly correct as far as it goes, it is more accurate to assert that the Doctrine of Scripture determined the Anabaptist view of the Church which, in turn, regulated their view of baptism.

One authority cautions us against the idea that the Anabaptists rejected the Old Testament as Scripture since no evidence to the effect has yet been adduced. He does concede, however, that 'some leaders cautioned their readers to read primarily the New Testament'.³¹

42 Of course, the Anabaptists rejected the ethics of the Old Testament as no longer valid for the Christian. They insisted that the means of eliminating enemies and heretics used in the Old Testament economy could not be employed by the Christian under the new economy. They were wont to compare the attitude of Christ towards his enemies and the treatment meted out by Elijah to those who opposed him. In this context they often spoke of a 'covenant of servitude' over against a 'covenant of sonship'.³²

The Radicals utterly rejected the concept of a sacral society which the Magisterial Reformers had inherited from the Roman Catholic Church. It will readily be appreciated that this affected a multiplicity of doctrines and practices such as baptism, oath-taking, bearing arms, war, usury and worship.³³

The Magisterial Reformers regarded the Church as a viable society existing in correlation with the state. The magistrate was seen as an officer of the church with the duty of suppressing heresy even by violent means. Zwingli, in the preface to his commentary on Jeremiah, says: 'The Christian is none other than the good and faithful citizen and the Christian city none other than a Christian Church.'³⁴ Therefore, as far as the mainline Reformers were concerned, any child born within the

²⁹ Klassen, *op. cit.*, 105, footnote.

³⁰ *Loc. cit.*

³¹ *Loc. cit.*

³² Klassen, *op. cit.*, 105.

³³ Cf. Verduin, *op. cit.*, 68ff.

³⁴ Zwingli, *Commentary on Jeremiah*, Preface.

territory of this sacral society could hardly be refused the rite of baptism.

All this teaching was decisively rejected by the Anabaptists who sought the complete separation of Church and State, regarded the Church as a 'gathered community' and saw believers as the only legitimate candidates for baptism. The 'conversion' of the Emperor Constantine in 31 A.D. they regarded with suspicion and saw the consequent merger between Church and State as the greatest calamity that ever befell the Church.³⁵

Having recovered what they believed to be the biblical concept of the Church and having regained a Scriptural practice with regard to the ordinance of Baptism, the Anabaptists proceeded to establish a vigorous discipline within their ranks. As far as Menno Simons was concerned, 'a church without the practice of a genuine apostolic excommunication would be like a town without ramparts or barriers, a field without enclosure, a house without doors or walls'.³⁶

This excommunication (the ban) was held to have come in place of the Old Testament sword. Referring to the Church as 'the perfection of Christ', the Anabaptists held that

The sword is an ordinance of God outside the perfection of Christ; the princes and rulers of the world are ordained for the punishment of evil-doers and for putting them to death. But within the perfection of Christ, excommunication is the ultimate in the way of punishment, physical death being not included.³⁷

The Anabaptists emphasised the importance of the Christian community in a practical way in the sharing of goods and production. This was based upon the communitarian passage in Acts 2:44,45 and though implemented by the radicals in Canton Zurich and 'built into their abortive New Jerusalem' by Rothmann and John Beukels of Leyden, it is really the distinguishing feature of the Moravian Anabaptists under Jacob Hutter, founding father of the Hutterites.³⁸

It now remains to notice briefly the manner in which their doctrine affected their every-day lives. For example, as we have seen, the Anabaptists were largely a pacifist movement which refused to bear arms under any circumstances. Indeed, rather than carry a sword, many Anabaptists simply carried a cane or staff and thereby earned the derisive description of 'stabler'.³⁹ Says Verduin:

³⁵ Cf. Kik, *Church and State*, 39ff.

³⁶ Kingdon, *op. cit.*, 21.

³⁷ Cf. Klassen, *op. cit.*, 75, 96.

³⁸ Walker, *op. cit.*, 331.

³⁹ Verduin, *op. cit.*, 63ff.

So widely was the carrying of such a harmless cane thought of as a mark of heresy that we find this feature mentioned in the sixteenth century as *prima facie* evidence of addiction to the heresy that characterised the Second Front.⁴⁰

Common to both the Germanic Anabaptist and Italian anti-trinitarian impulses was the radical pacificism which they saw as an imitation of Christ and the early Church. The German Evangelical Anabaptists, the Protestant Waldensians, the conservatives and radicals within their camps were alike opposed to war, capital punishment and coercion in the realm of conscience. Hence their refusal to bear arms impaired the military potential of the Protestant against the Catholic Cantons.

Usury was anathema to the Anabaptists since they, with others, had been the victims of professing Christians who had exploited the economically under-privileged.⁴¹ Oath-taking was far from being acceptable to the majority of the Radical Reformers though Hans Hut, for example, felt it was permissible in 'community, state and civic matters'.⁴² Kessler describes the Anabaptists as those 'who swore not, not even to the authorities, the civic oath'.

44 Participation in public office was suspect too. As Christ had refused the office of king (John 6:15) and also of judge (Luke 12:13), so, too, must the Christian refuse to be involved in earthly government.⁴³ The *Schleitheim Confession*, quoting 1 Peter 2:21, declared that in suffering and not in ruling, Christ left an example for His disciples to follow. It therefore concluded that 'the regime of magistracy is according to the flesh but that of Christians according to the Spirit'.⁴⁴

In many ways the Anabaptists were ahead of their time. Professor Renwick says that they 'stood for religious liberty at a time when neither Protestants nor Catholics fully appreciated the importance of freedom of conscience'. He further describes them as those who 'have always been pacific, earnest and industrious Christians'.⁴⁵

Ellison goes much further. Speaking of the scriptural riches lost by the Reformation churches by their repudiation of the Anabaptists he proceeds to suggest that, had the Reformers acted otherwise, we would not today be facing a world problem of Communism.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁴¹ Williams, *op. cit.*, 448.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 133.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 185.

⁴⁴ Williams, *op. cit.*, 185.

⁴⁵ Renwick, *op. cit.*, 116.

⁴⁶ H. L. Ellison, Foreword to *The Reformers and their Stepchildren*, by Leonard Verduin, 7.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Atkinson, B. F. C., *Valiant in Fight*, I.V.F., 1950
Atkinson, James, *Martin Luther*, Penguin, 1968
Bender, H. S., *The Anabaptists*, Mennonite Quarterly Review, XXIX, 1955
Chadwick, Owen, *The Reformation*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1965
Hodge, Charles, *Systematic Theology*, 3 Vols., Jas. Clarke, 1960
Houghton, S. M., *The Gospel Magazine*, April, 1966
Kik, Marcellus, *Church & State*, Thos. Nelson, 1963
Kingdon, D. P., *The Anabaptists*, Puritan Papers, 1968
Klassen, Wm., *Covenant and Community*, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1967
Kreider, A. F., *The Anabaptists*, Puritan Papers, 1975
Lindsay, T. M., *The Reformation*, T. & T. Clark, 1913
Renwick, A. M., *The Story of the Church*, I.V.F., 1958
Verduin, Leonard, *The Anatomy of a Hybrid*, Eerdmans, 1976
Verduin, Leonard, *The Reformers and their Stepchildren*, Paternoster, 1964
Walker, Williston, *A History of the Christian Church*, T. & T. Clark, 1968
Williams, G. H., *The Radical Reformation*, Westminster Press, 1962