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Arminius and the Deity of Christ

One wonders if there is some small revival of interest in the Dutch theologian Jacobus Arminius,¹ perhaps even a desire to 'rehabilitate' this one who was posthumously judged a heretic by the Synod of Dort? If so — and I am not seriously suggesting this — then recent articles by A. Skevington Wood² and Charles M. Cameron³ may be examples. The latter characterizes Arminius as 'a largely misunderstood theologian' and recalls the observation of Carl Bangs, that 'Some Calvinists, finding that [Arminius's] writings do not produce the heresies they expected, have charged him with teaching secret heresy, unpublished.'⁴

Whether or not, the name is still synonymous, in many quarters, with all sorts of heresy, ranging from salvation by works to Pelagianism to Arianism. It is my purpose, in this paper, to speak specifically to the last of these. I was prompted by a footnote written by Paul Jewett: namely,

Though the debate with the Remonstrants principally concerned these doctrines related to predestination, other items in Arminius's thought were also discussed and rejected. Though generally forgotten long since, some of these items anticipated the subsequent radical departure of his followers from Protestant orthodoxy. Arminius, for example, defended the thesis that 'It is a new, heretical and Sabellian mode of speaking, nay, it is blasphemous to say that the Son of God is *homoousios* (very God), for the Father alone is very God, not the Son or the Spirit'. . . . (see Arminius, *Writings*, I:339).⁵

This is a common and persistent accusation against Arminius, or at least against Arminianism. Platt provides a good example, observing that the tendencies of Arminianism were often suspected of affinity

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- 1 He is best known by this latinized, academic version of his true name, Jacob Harmenszoon.
 - 2 A. Skevington Wood, 'The Declaration of Sentiments: The Theological Testament of Arminius,' *EQ* 65, 1993, 111-129.
 - 3 Charles M. Cameron, 'Arminius — Hero or Heretic?' *EQ* 64, 1992, 213-227.
 - 4 *Ibid.*, 213. See Carl Bangs, *Arminius: A Study in the Dutch Reformation* (Grand Rapids, 1985), 18.
 - 5 Paul K. Jewett, *Election & Predestination* (Grand Rapids, 1985), 15.

with Pelagian and Socinian views. 'It is well known,' he said, 'that the exaggeration of Subordinationism by the Remonstrant⁶ divines, especially by those of the later age of Arminianism, glided by subtle degrees into the Socinian position.'⁷

But if Arminius himself is credited with this tendency, it is manifestly unfair. Whatever else Arminius may have been guilty of, and regardless of the direction of those who followed him, he did not compromise the deity of Christ. In this, as in other 'important respects' (to borrow Sell's words) 'Arminius was not an Arminian.'⁸ I trust that some careful attention to his own writings on the subject — including the passage Jewett refers to — will show that Jewett's reading of his views will not stand up under closer scrutiny.

1. The Accuracy of Jewett's Accusation

We begin, then, with Jewett's accusation that Arminius 'defended' the thesis that to describe Christ as 'very God' (*homoousios*) is heretical, and that the Father alone is 'very God,' not the Son or the Spirit. There are two important errors of fact in this accusation.

First, it is not correct to say that Arminius *defended* this thesis. Instead, this 'thesis' was an accusation lodged against him by his critics, one which he *defended himself against*. There is such a difference between these two stances, and the document in question is so clearly the latter, that one can not say the former without seriously misreading the man.

The defense Jewett speaks of is found in a document entitled 'The Apology or Defence of James Arminius,' apparently published in 1609. The title of the document itself continues: 'against certain theological articles extensively distributed, and currently circulated at least through the hands of some persons in the low countries and beyond their confines; in which both Arminius, and Adrian Borrius, a minister of Leyden, are rendered suspected of novelty and heterodoxy, of error and heresy, on the subject of religion.'⁹ The editor (apparently W. R. Bagnall) has inserted, after this title, his own comment that this apology was 'an answer to certain articles which had been invented and secretly circulated by certain enemies of Arminius.'¹⁰

6 The 'Remonstrants' were followers of Arminius, named from the *Remonstrance* which they presented in 1610 to the civil authorities of the united Dutch provinces.

7 Frederic Platt, 'Arminianism,' *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, James Hastings, ed. (New York, n.d.), I, 814.

8 Alan P. F. Sell, *The Great Debate: Calvinism, Arminianism, and Salvation* (Grand Rapids, 1983), 97.

9 James Arminius, *The Writings of James Arminius*, tr. Nichols and Bagnall (Grand Rapids, 1956), I, 276.

10 *Ibid.*

But one needs only Arminius's own introductory words to understand the nature of the articles: 'Those persons by whom they were first disseminated, attempt in them to render us suspected of having introduced . . . novelties and heretical instructions, and to accuse us of error and heresy.'¹¹ He goes on to speak of them as a 'strange intermixture of truth and falsehood' and promises in answering them to 'confess and defend' what he knows to be true and to 'deny and refute' whatever is false in them.¹²

The 'thesis' which Jewett cites was article 21 of the 'thirty-one defamatory articles' (as identified in the table of contents). To begin with, then, it is *a priori* obvious that we are not justified in saying that Arminius 'defended' the article. A careful reading confirms that he did not — as I will return to below.

The second error in Jewett's accusation is even more difficult to understand. He cites the thesis (and so Arminius) as denying that 'the Son of God is *homoousios* (very God).' In fact, the thesis at issue accused Arminius of claiming that it is heretical to say that 'the Son of God is *autotheos* (very God).' There is a vast difference between the two words. As will soon become clear, Arminius affirmed only that *autotheos* can mean either of two things: namely, (1) 'one who is truly and in himself God' or (2) 'one who is God from himself.' The former meaning he affirmed, the latter he denied — in the interest of preserving the orthodox doctrine of the generation of the Son by the Father.¹³ (It seems reasonably obvious, from Jewett's page references, that he was using the same edition of Arminius's works that I am.)

2. Arminius's Teaching in the Article at Issue

Given the importance of the issue in question, we should do more than point out the errors of fact in Jewett's accusation.¹⁴ A careful reading of the five page answer of Arminius to this accusation reveals in greater detail how wrong it is to accuse him of denigrating the full deity of Christ.

First, Arminius indicated just how this term came to be involved in discussion. One combatant had so insisted on a careless use of the term *autotheos* that he had felt compelled to give his sentiments about it. He had said, first, that the word itself is not found in the Scriptures; and, second, that since it had been used by orthodox divines he did not reject it *if correctly understood*.

11 *Ibid.*

12 *Ibid.*, I, 276,277.

13 *Ibid.*, I, 339,340.

14 *Ibid.*, I, 339–343.

At this point, then, Arminius proceeded to explain that *autotheos* may be used to indicate either that one is God truly and in himself, or that one is God from himself. Only in the latter sense did he deny that the word is acceptable. His combatant had affirmed both senses of the word and had insisted that the Son has a divine essence both in common with the Father and *not communicated by the Father*. Arminius had responded that the latter phrase might lead either to the heresy of Sabellius, that the Father and Son are one person called by two names, or to the opposite error, that the Father and Son are both two persons and two collateral gods, which is blasphemous.

Arminius then proceeded, in positive fashion, to defend what he understood the church had always insisted on: namely, 'the unity of the Divine essence in three distinct persons, and . . . that the Son has the same essence directly, which is communicated to him by the Father; but that the Holy Spirit has the very same essence from the Father and the Son.'¹⁵ Consequently he chastised his opponents for their distortion of his position to lead others to 'suppose that I denied the Son to be . . . very and true God.'¹⁶ This sentence alone is enough to show that Arminius affirmed that Christ is very God.

From this point, Arminius went on to explain himself in a typically philosophical discussion. He concluded by defining 'God' as 'having the Divine essence.' The Father is God and has the essence from himself — or, as he prefers, from no one. The Son is God and has the essence from the Father. Clearly, he was defending nothing more than what Reformed theologians have traditionally called the eternal generation of the Son from the Father.

3. Arminius's Teaching in Other Writings

To be sure about what Arminius taught respecting the deity of Christ, one should consult all his writings.

A. *Twenty-five Public Disputations*. From 1603 to 1609, these 'Disputations on Some of the Principal Subjects of the Christian Religion by James Arminius, D. D.' were discussed before the classes in divinity at Leyden. They were published after his death by 'his nine orphan children.'¹⁷ Disputation Five concerns the Person of the Father and the Son.

First, describing the Father, Arminius says, 'He is the First Person in the Sacred Trinity, who from all eternity of himself begat his Word, which is his Son, by communicating to Him his own Divinity.'¹⁸ Then,

15 *Ibid.*, I, 341.

16 *Ibid.*

17 *Ibid.*, I, 465.

18 *Ibid.*, I, 465.

turning his attention to the Son, Arminius states, 'The Son is the second person in the Holy Trinity, the Word of the Father, begotten of the Father from all eternity, and proceeding from Him by the communication of the same Deity which the Father possesses without origination.'¹⁹ He goes on to emphasize that the second person is not the Son by creation or by adoption, but 'by generation, and, as the Son, he is by nature a partaker of the whole divinity of his Father.'²⁰

Arminius proceeds then to prove, in traditional fashion, that the Son is 'a Divine person and God.' In doing so he presents four lines of argument: (1) the names he is called in Scripture, (2) the divine attributes ascribed him in Scripture, (3) his works, and (4) things said in the Old Testament about the Father that in the New are appropriated to the Son.²¹ In discussing the first of these he is at pains to emphasize that the same names are ascribed to him that in the Old Testament are ascribed to Jehovah. On the second he speaks of the Son as possessing the 'essential attributes of the Deity.'²²

Concluding the discussion, Arminius observes that there is both an agreement and a distinction between the Father and the Son. The agreement is 'in reference to one and the same nature and essence . . . according to the decree of the Nicene Council to be *homoousios*, "consubstantial with the Father," not *homoiousios*, "of like substance".²³ The distinction lies simply in the fact that the Father's divinity is from no one, whereas the Son's divinity is communicated to him by the Father.²⁴ Thus Arminius affirms of Christ the very word which Jewett erroneously accused him of denying.

B. *Seventy-nine Private Disputations*. These articles were unfinished at Arminius's death. They were published in 1610 under the subheading 'On the principal articles of the Christian religion. Commenced by the author chiefly for the purpose of forming a system of divinity.'²⁵ Disputation 34 is 'On the person of our Lord Jesus Christ.' The primary concern of this brief article is not the deity of Christ; instead Arminius carefully affirms the 'hypostatical' union of 'two natures, the divine and the human, inseparably united without mixture or confusion.'²⁶ But he does observe, in passing, that the Son 'has the same nature with the Father, by internal and external communication'; and he appends a short note, 'The word *autotheos*, 'very God,' so far as it signifies that

19 *Ibid.*, I, 467.

20 *Ibid.*.

21 *Ibid.*, I, 468-470.

22 *Ibid.*, I, 468, 469.

23 *Ibid.*, I, 472.

24 *Ibid.*.

25 *Ibid.*, II, 83.

26 *Ibid.*, II, 84.

the Son of God has the divine essence from himself, cannot be ascribed to the Son of God, according to the Scriptures and the sentiments of the Greek and Latin churches.²⁷ Thus he states again the one thing he had denied: namely, that 'very God' must not be taken to mean that the Son has his Deity without receiving it by the eternal generation of the Father.

C. *A Letter to Hippolytus*. In 1608 Arminius, as professor at Leyden, wrote this lengthy letter (to the ambassador of the Palatinate of the seven united Dutch provinces) in response to 'reports' which 'had been circulated' about his 'heterodoxy in certain articles of our faith.'²⁸ The lengthiest of his treatments concerns the divinity of the Son of God.

He begins by positing that the Son is from the Father 'by a most wonderful and inexplicable *internal emanation* . . . which . . . the ancient church called *generation*.'²⁹ After rehearsing the manner in which calumny against him began, he returns to the discussion whether it is proper to affirm that the Son is *autotheos*. His opponents, he says, suggest that the Son may be considered in two respects, as the Son and as God. As the Son, he is from the Father and has his essence from the Father. But as God he has his essence from himself or from no one. Arminius replies by admitting the distinction but insisting that his opponents take it too far. As God, he says, the Son has the divine essence; as the Son, he has it from the Father. In other words, if the word *God* is considered by itself it does not indicate how divine essence is possessed but simply the fact of possession. The word *Son*, however, signifies the mode by which he has the divine essence: namely, 'through communication from the Father, that is, through generation.'³⁰

By way of explication, Arminius indicates that both the Son and the Father 'have Deity.' The Son has Deity from the Father. The Father has Deity from no one.

With respect to origin, he who is the first in this order has his origin from no one; he who is the second, has his origin from the first; he who is the third has his origin from the first and the second, or from the first through the second. Were not this the real state of the matter, there would be a COLLATERALITY, which would make as many Gods as there were collateral persons laid down; since *the unity of the Deity in the trinity* is defended against the Anti-trinitarians solely by the relation of origin and of order according to origin.³¹

27 *Ibid.*

28 *Ibid.*, II, 459.

29 *Ibid.*, II, 461.

30 *Ibid.*, II, 463, 464.

31 *Ibid.*, II, 464.

Having explained his reasons for this tight distinction between two ways of taking *autotheos*, one of which he denies, Arminius proceeds to give lengthy citations from a number of the Greek and Latin church fathers. Since it is not their view that is the subject of this paper, I content myself simply to say that the quotations from Basil the Great, Gregory Nazianzen, Ambrose, Augustine, and Hilary seem clearly to support Arminius's fine distinction. Arminius himself concludes this portion of the letter by observing, 'It is apparent from these passages, according to the sentiments of the ancient church, that the Son, even as he is God, is from the Father, because he has received his Deity, according to which he is called 'God,' by being born of the Father.'³²

D. *Certain Articles to be Diligently Examined and Weighed*. The precise date of these 29 articles is not known. Regardless, the third is 'On God, considered according to the relation between the persons in the Trinity.' Once more Arminius returns to the nice problem of *autotheos* and makes the same points as before. He affirms, 'The Son of God is correctly called *autotheos*, 'very God,' as this word is received for that which is God himself, truly God. But he is erroneously designated by that epithet, so far as it signifies that he has an essence not communicated by the Father, yet has one in common with the Father.'³³

4. The Declaration of Sentiments

Wood characterizes this document as Arminius's 'mature conclusions . . . in response to those who doubted whether his interpretations were compatible with the doctrinal standards of the Dutch Church.'³⁴ It was the final writing of Arminius in his defense, delivered October 1608 before the Dutch States Assembly at the Hague. He died in October 1609.

Article VIII deals with the divinity of the Son of God. Arminius begins, once more, by rehearsing how the dispute over *autotheos* had arisen. One of his students, during an afternoon 'disputation,' had objected that the Son was *autotheos* and therefore had his essence from himself and not from the Father. Arminius had replied, 'that the word *autotheos* was capable of two different acceptations, since it might signify either 'one who is truly God,' or 'one who is God of himself'; and that it was with great propriety and correctness attributed to the Son of God according to the former signification, but not according to the latter.'³⁵

32 *Ibid.*, II, 467.

33 *Ibid.*, II, 481.

34 Wood, *op. cit.*, 111,112.

35 Arminius, *op. cit.*, I, 258.

The six page article adds little to what has already been said. Among other things Arminius insists on a unanimous testimony of the ancient Greek and Latin church that 'the Son had his Deity from the Father by eternal generation.'³⁶ He further observes that if this were not true one would be driven either to the heresy of the Tritheists, with three Gods possessing the divine essence collaterally and independently of their relationships, or to that of the Sabellians, with the Son deriving the divine essence from no one and being therefore the same as the Father.³⁷

Arminius rehearses, also, that he had been accused of differing with one Trelcatius in this regard. He had understood Trelcatius to say that the Son, in respect to being God, has his Deity from himself or no one; and in respect to being the Son has his Deity from the Father. This, Arminius allows, is a new mode of speaking and a novel opinion. To be God and to be the Son do not contradict each other; to derive his essence from no one and to derive it from the Father do contradict each other and can not be allowed.³⁸ That the Son is called God 'signifies, that He has the true Divine Essence'; that he is called the Son 'signifies, that He has the Divine Essence from the Father. On this account, he is correctly denominated both God and the Son of God.'³⁹ This is no contradiction.

5. Conclusion

Arminius did not in any manner deny the Deity of Christ or that Christ is very God. The brief summary of Wood, of this section of *The Declaration of Sentiments*, is in full harmony with the lengthier treatment of this paper.⁴⁰ So is that of Alan Sell: 'As to the divinity of the Son of God, Arminius defines [*autotheos*] in two senses: (a) 'one who is truly God', and (b) 'one who is God of himself'. He accepts the former but not the latter.'⁴¹

Louis Berkhof observes that 'The Arminians, Episcopius, Curcellaeus, and Limborgh, revived the doctrine of subordination, chiefly again, so it seems, to maintain the unity of the Godhead.'⁴² But he does not explain this and he does not lay the accusation at Arminius's feet. His own position on the matter is as follows: 'The Father generates the personal subsistence of the Son, but thereby also communicates to

36 *Ibid.*

37 *Ibid.*, I, 258, 259.

38 *Ibid.*, I, 260, 261.

39 *Ibid.*, I, 261.

40 Wood, *op. cit.*, 126, 127.

41 Sell, *op. cit.*, 12.

42 Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, 1949), 83.

Him the divine essence in its entirety,' and he concludes by defining the eternal generation of the Son thus: 'It is that eternal and necessary act of the first person in the Trinity, whereby He, within the divine Being, is the ground of a second personal subsistence like His own, and puts this second person in possession of the whole divine essence, without any division, alienation, or change.'⁴³ I can detect no difference between this and the view of Arminius himself.⁴⁴

In the final analysis, the very worst thing Arminius ever said on this subject was, 'Therefore, in no way whatever can this phrase, 'the Son of God is *autotheos*,' be excused as a correct one, or as having been happily expressed. Nor can that be called a proper form of speech which says, 'the Essence of God is common to three persons'; but it is *improper*, since the Divine Essence is declared to be *communicated* by one of them to another.'⁴⁵ If that one sentence paved the way for later Arminians to make the Son subordinate in essence to the Father, it can only be because they did not read Arminius in light of his extensive treatment of the subject and clear defense of the full deity of Christ. Nor should contemporary theologians who read him carefully have any excuse for preserving the calumny that his teaching on the deity of Christ was anything less than fully Reformed.

Abstract

The misunderstanding that Arminius paved the way for a denial of the deity of Christ persists, as seen in a recent note by Paul Jewett to the effect that he defended the thesis that the Father alone is 'very God.' But Jewett confuses defense *against* an accusation with defense *of* it, and in doing so cites the wrong word at issue. A careful reading of the article and of the rest of Arminius's writings clears him of this charge. He faithfully defended the Reformed view that Jesus is very God, eternally generated by the Father.

43 *Ibid.*, 93,94.

44 A reading of a previous version of this paper during a regional meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society led, unexpectedly, to a number of questions that appeared to imply objections to the traditional, Reformed doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son. Dealing with those issues is beyond the scope of this paper.

45 Arminius, *op. cit.*, I, 262.