

## JACOB ARMINIUS AND THE DOCTRINE OF ORIGINAL SIN

by  
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As one writer has noted, most theologians regard Jacob Arminius (c. 1560–1609) either as a hero or a heretic.<sup>2</sup> Arminius is generally either vilified as an enemy or embraced as a friend; few theologians seem to view him from a neutral posture.<sup>3</sup> This tendency toward polarization is not without cause. Arminius stands among a limited number of figures in church history who have lent their names to a major theological school of thought. Furthermore, the debate between Arminianism and Calvinism has never wanted voices on either side. Yet, despite the familiarity of his name, Arminius's thought is frequently misunderstood, or at very least, is little understood by many.<sup>4</sup>

The term *Arminianism* is a slippery one. Many people who are in basic agreement with Arminius's views about predestination, humanity's condition, and God's role in salvation reject the label *Arminian*. On the other hand, at times Calvinists have had the tendency to apply the term to anything short of what John Calvin (1509–1564) himself taught. Unfortunately, the labels *Arminian* and *Arminianism* are used inconsistently and at times get thrown around carelessly. Perhaps this is the case because few people are familiar with what Arminius actually taught.

In light of the significant role Arminius has played in church history, relatively little has been written about his life. During the twentieth century, only one noteworthy biography of Arminius was published in English.<sup>5</sup> Since the turn of the century, a few more have been added to

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<sup>2</sup>Charles M. Cameron, "Arminius—Hero or Heretic?" *Evangelical Quarterly* 64 (July 1992): 213.

<sup>3</sup>A. W. Harrison described Arminius this way: "Zealously loved by his friends, mistrusted by his opponents because of his subtlety, his was a name for the falling and rising of many in Israel" (*The Beginnings of Arminianism to the Synod of Dort* [London: University of London Press, 1926], 130).

<sup>4</sup>Cameron lamented, "Arminius is a largely misunderstood theologian...frequently assessed according to superficial hearsay" ("Arminius," 213). Similarly, Carl Bangs wrote, "To many...he is an enigma" (*Arminius: A Study in the Dutch Reformation* [Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1998], 18).

<sup>5</sup>Prior to the twenty-first century, only three major biographies of Arminius had been published: Caspar Brandt, *The Life of James Arminius, D.D.*, trans. John Guthrie (Nashville: E. Stevenson & F. A. Owen, 1857) [This work was originally written in

this number, but compared to Calvin or even Theodore Beza (1519–1605), Arminius's thought has received significantly less attention.<sup>6</sup> The fact that the term *Arminianism* has been used to describe a very diverse set of movements has done nothing to improve the situation with regard to understanding Arminius and his views. Since the time of Arminius's death, many different groups and individuals have been identified as Arminian. As Bangs has pointed out,

The label of Arminianism has been applied to and often accepted by such diverse entities as the politics of William Laud, seventeenth century Anglican theology from high churchmanship to moderate Puritanism, the communal experiment at Little Gidding, the empiricism of John Locke, Latitudinarianism, the rational supernaturalism of Hugo Grotius and the early Remonstrants, early Unitarianism in England, the evangelicalism of the Wesleys, and the revivalism of the American frontier. In our time the term means for some the crowning of Reformation theology; for others it points merely to an anachronistic sub-species of fundamentalism; and for still others it means an easy-going American culture-Protestantism.<sup>7</sup>

As a result, Arminius has frequently been granted credit for views he never espoused. Bangs has correctly noted,

Most accounts of Arminius commit a technical error in linking him exclusively with the Remonstrants and other movements known as Arminian and, by an implication involving the *post hoc* fallacy, making him responsible for ideas and movements quite foreign to his intentions.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps adding to the confusion is the fact that Arminius did not always express his own ideas in clear, straightforward language. He frequently stated his opinions in exceptionally cautious terms.<sup>9</sup> This is no doubt due to the accusations of heresy that were being lodged against him on a regular basis during much of his career. For this reason, most

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Latin in 1725.]; J. H. Maronier, *Jacobus Arminius: een Biographie* (Amsterdam: Y. Rogge, 1905) [This work was written in Dutch and has never been translated into English.]; and Carl Bangs, *Arminius: A Study in the Dutch Reformation* (repr. of 1971 ed., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1998). Of the three, Bangs's work is by far the definitive treatment.

<sup>6</sup>A few of the most helpful recent works on Arminius include the following: William den Boer, *God's Twofold Love: The Theology of Jacob Arminius (1559–1609)*, trans. Albert Gootjes (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010); W. Stephen Gunter, *Arminius and His Declaration of Sentiments: An Annotated Translation with Introduction and Theological Commentary* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012); Keith D. Stanglin, *Arminius on the Assurance of Salvation: The Context, Roots, and Shape of the Leiden Debate, 1603–1609* (Leiden: Brill, 2007); and Keith D. Stanglin and Thomas H. McCall, *Jacob Arminius: Theologian of Grace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>7</sup>Carl Bangs, "Arminius and the Reformation," *Church History* 30 (1961): 155.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 156.

<sup>9</sup>As Augustus Hopkins Strong noted, "The expressions of Arminius himself are so guarded that Moses Stuart (Bib. Repos., 1831) found it possible to construct an argument to prove that Arminius was not an Arminian" (*Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. in 1 [Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press: 1907], 602).

discussions of Arminianism deal little with the writings of the man whose name characterizes the movement. Much work still remains to be done on the doctrinal views that were actually taught by Arminius himself.

The account of Arminius's life and immediate influence is an interesting paragraph in church history. After being orphaned as a teenager, Arminius was favored by a number of benefactors who enabled him to receive a thorough education at some of the finest academies in Europe.<sup>10</sup> Arminius had the opportunity to study under men of no little stature, several of whom were strongly Calvinistic.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, Arminius ended up being the figure most often associated with opposition to Calvinism. A detailed account of Arminius's theological pilgrimage is not possible here. However, the historical context in which he lived and developed will be noted when important to an understanding of his views.

The purpose of this article is to examine Arminius's view of original sin. Although Arminian scholars have set forth their own theories about original sin, relatively little has been written about what Arminius taught concerning this important doctrine. This article will focus on explaining Arminius's theology of original sin by looking first at what he wrote about Adam's first sin. Then, it will be helpful to examine what Arminius taught about original sin itself and original sin's relationship to actual sin. Finally, this article will consider Arminius's understanding of original sin and the justice of God.

### ADAM'S FIRST SIN

Any discussion of original sin must begin with Adam's first sin or what is often called "the Fall." If, as the apostle Paul declared, sin was introduced into the human race through the sin of one man (Rom 5:12), then an examination of this first sin is preliminary to a consideration of original sin.

#### The Nature of Adam's Sin

In the seventh of his *Public Disputations*, Arminius discussed the nature of man's first sin.<sup>12</sup> He believed that this sin is most accurately described by the words *disobedience* and *offense*. It is designated

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<sup>10</sup>Bangs, *Arminius*, 43–80; Stanglin and McCall, *Jacob Arminius*, 26–28.

<sup>11</sup>Beza particularly, under whom Arminius sat at Geneva, was a strict Calvinist. Although some have speculated that Arminius temporarily adopted a firmly Calvinistic viewpoint during his years as a student, there is little evidence to favor such a theory (Bangs, *Arminius*, 71–75).

<sup>12</sup>The *Public Disputations* were first delivered as lectures on various topics which Arminius and his colleague Gomarus debated during Arminius's professorship at the University of Leiden (1603–1609). Arminius's clearest explanations of Adam's first sin are to be found in his *Public Disputations* VII and XXXI and his *Private Disputations* XXX (see Stanglin and McCall, *Jacob Arminius*, 142).

*disobedience* because

the law against which the sin was committed, was symbolical, having been given to testify that man was under a law to God, and to prove his obedience, and since the subsequent performance of it was to be a confession of devoted submission and due obedience; the transgression of it cannot, in fact, be denoted by a more commodious name than that of “disobedience,” which contains within itself the denial of subjection and the renunciation of obedience.<sup>13</sup>

Adam’s first sin may also be viewed as an offense or a fall. Arminius explained why the first sin takes on the nature of an offense when he wrote, “Because as man, having been previously [*constitutus*] placed in a state of integrity, walked [*inoffenso*] with unshaking feet in the way of God’s commandments; by this foul deed he impinged or offended against the law itself, and fell from his state of innocence.”<sup>14</sup> Man disobeyed the law of God, and in doing so he offended the law that had been designed to demonstrate his submission to God.

This sin can also be described as a transgression of God’s law. In eating of the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, man transgressed the boundary God had laid down for him.<sup>15</sup> Arminius frequently referred to sin, in general, as a transgression of God’s law.<sup>16</sup>

Arminius explained that Adam’s first sin was particularly heinous for four reasons.<sup>17</sup> First, he pointed out that the seriousness of Adam’s sin is seen in the fact that it was a transgression of a universal law that bore witness to mankind’s responsibility toward God. The command looked beyond Adam and was typical of the entire race’s obligation to submit to its Creator. Second, the fact that Adam committed this sin while in a state of innocence and while endowed with original holiness adds to the severity of the crime. The first sin was more grievous than subsequent sin because it occurred before mankind lost original holiness. Third, Adam sinned when numerous facilities existed to aid him in avoiding sin. Adam had many advantages that he could have utilized to evade the act of sin, but he did not make use of these. And fourth, the wickedness of Adam’s sin is compounded by the fact that he committed the sin “in a place that was sanctified as a type of the celestial Paradise.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>James Arminius, *The Writings of James Arminius*, 3 vols., trans. James Nichols and W. R. Bagnall (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), 1:480 [hereafter *Writings*].

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid. Arminius stated, “The form of this sin is *ανομία*, ‘the transgression of the law,’ (1 John iii, 4,) which belongs to this act in reference to its having been forbidden by the law” (*Writings*, 1:484).

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 3:398.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 1:484–85.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 1:485.

### The Cause of Adam's Sin

Arminius was very careful to avoid making God the cause of sin in any way.<sup>19</sup> He indicated that the efficient cause of Adam's sin was two-fold. Man himself was the immediate cause of his own sin. Arminius stated that Adam "of his own free will and without any necessity either internal or external...transgressed the law which had been proposed to him."<sup>20</sup> Adam's free will was the immediate and causative force behind his sin. Elsewhere, Arminius wrote, "The efficient cause of that transgression was man, determining his will to that forbidden object, and applying his power or capability to it."<sup>21</sup> Although man was the immediate cause of his own sin, the mediate or remote cause of Adam's sin was Satan, who enticed man to transgress the law of God.<sup>22</sup> However, Satan was not the effective cause of Adam's sin. For he only counseled or persuaded man to sin; he did not force man to sin.<sup>23</sup>

God was neither an efficient nor a deficient cause of Adam's sin. Arminius explained, "[God] neither perpetrated this crime through man, nor employed against man any action, either internal or external, by which he might incite him to sin.... He neither denied nor withdrew any thing that was necessary for avoiding this sin and fulfilling the law."<sup>24</sup>

Although God was in no way the cause of Adam's sin, he did make it possible for man, by his free will, to commit this sin. God, in a real sense, permitted Adam to sin, though he did not cause Adam to sin. Arminius defined this divine permission as "the suspension of some efficiency, which is possible to God both according to right and to capability, and which, if exerted, would prevent sin in its actual commission."<sup>25</sup> God gave Adam many reasons not to sin, but God did not choose to efficaciously hinder Adam from committing the act of sin.

### The Effects of Adam's Sin

The immediate effect of Adam's sin was that God was justly offended. Arminius argued that since sin is primarily a transgression of a law, sin's first effect is to offend the lawgiver.<sup>26</sup> The second effect of

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<sup>19</sup>Despite Arminius's efforts to avoid making God the author of sin, apparently he was accused of just that, much to his chagrin (*ibid.*, 1:347–54; see also Stanglin and McCall, *Jacob Arminius*, 142–45).

<sup>20</sup>*Writings*, 1:481.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 2:74.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 2:75.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 1:482.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 1:483.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 1:485.

Adam's sin was to cause God displeasure or anger.<sup>27</sup> This anger resulted in a twofold punishment:

(1.) [*Reatus*] A liability to two deaths....(2.) [*Privatio*] The withdrawing of that primitive righteousness and holiness, which, because they are effects of the Holy Spirit dwelling in man, ought not to have remained in him after he had fallen from the favor of God, and had incurred the Divine displeasure.<sup>28</sup>

This punishment, while severe, makes no mention of spiritual inability. Arminius speaks of the withdrawing of original righteousness, but he does not discuss any resulting depravity, either for Adam or his descendants. This emphasis has rightly led Bangs to conclude that "Arminius sees the result of Adam's sin more in privation than in depravation."<sup>29</sup>

In a document titled, *Nine Questions*, Arminius identified original sin as part of the punishment for Adam's sin.<sup>30</sup> He wrote, "It is perversely said, that 'original sin renders a man obnoxious to death,' since that sin is the punishment of Adam's actual sin."<sup>31</sup>

Arminius noted that the punishment due to Adam's sin extends to all his descendants. This is completely just, he argued, because all mankind was in Adam. He explained,

The whole of this sin, however, is not peculiar to our first parents, but is common to the entire race and to all their posterity, who, at the time this sin was committed, were in their loins, and who have since descended from them by the natural mode of propagation...in Adam "all have sinned." (Rom. v, 12.) Wherefore, whatever punishment was brought down upon our first parents, has likewise pervaded and yet pursues all their posterity.<sup>32</sup>

To Arminius, Adam sinned by his own free will. Yet, because all

<sup>27</sup>Adam's violation of God's command involved three causes of just anger:

- (1) The [*derogation*] disparagement of his power or right.
- (2) A denial of that towards which God [*afficiebatur*] had an inclination.
- (3) A contempt of the divine will intimated by the command (ibid., 2:77).

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 1:485. Elsewhere, Arminius identified these two deaths as temporal death (i.e., the separation of the soul from the body) and eternal death (i.e., the separation of the entire man from God) (ibid., 2:78).

<sup>29</sup>Bangs, *Arminius*, 339.

<sup>30</sup>Due to the controversy that was raging between Gomarus and Arminius at the University of Leiden, the Synod of South Holland was asked to address the problem. In November 1605, they responded by asking the curators of the university to require their theological professors to answer nine questions. The curators refused, but Arminius managed to acquire a copy of the questions. He decided to answer the questions and proceeded to ask nine counter questions. The original questions, Arminius's replies, and his counter questions comprise the *Nine Questions* (ibid., 270–71).

<sup>31</sup>*Writings*, 1:382.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 1:486.

mankind has descended from Adam, all humans have inherited the punishment that Adam's sin deserved. This punishment involves a liability to both physical and eternal death. It also includes the deprivation of the original holiness that Adam possessed before the Fall.

### ORIGINAL SIN ITSELF

Adam's first sin was a point of no return for the entire human race. Ever since that initial act of rebellion, all mankind has been born with the taint of original sin.<sup>33</sup>

### The Transmission of Original Sin

Arminius said very little about the transmission of original sin from one generation to the next. The effects of Adam's sin rest upon all his descendants because they were in his loins, but Arminius did not speculate about how original sin is actually transmitted. He wrote, "The discussion, whether original sin be propagated by the soul or by the body, appears to us to be useless; and therefore the other, whether or not the soul be through traduction, seems also scarcely to be necessary to this matter."<sup>34</sup> Although he did not propose a theory about how original sin is transmitted, Arminius did teach that it has been passed on to all mankind.<sup>35</sup>

### The Nature of Original Sin

According to Arminius, original sin is a punishment for Adam's first transgression. As a result of Adam's sin, God's anger was excited against Adam and a punishment was meted out. He wrote, "It may admit of discussion, whether God could be angry on account of original sin which was born with us, since it seemed to be inflicted on us by God as a punishment of the actual sin which had been committed by Adam and by us in Him."<sup>36</sup> This punishment extends to the entire

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<sup>33</sup>As Bangs has correctly noted, Arminius generally avoided using the term *original sin* (Bangs, *Arminius*, 339). Unfortunately, this habit makes it difficult, at times, to discern exactly what he believed about original sin.

<sup>34</sup>*Writings*, 2:79.

<sup>35</sup>Arminius explained why original sin has passed to the entire race: "Because the condition of the covenant into which God entered with our first parents was this, that, if they continued in the favor and grace of God by an observance of this command and of others, the gifts conferred on them should be transmitted to their posterity, by the same divine grace which they had, themselves, received; but that, if by disobedience they rendered themselves unworthy of those blessings, their posterity, likewise, [carerent] should not possess them, and should be [obnoxii] liable to the contrary evils.... This was the reason why all men, who were to be propagated from them in a natural way, became obnoxious to death temporal and death eternal, and [vacui] devoid of this gift of the Holy Spirit or original righteousness. This punishment usually receives the appellation of 'a privation of the image of God,' and 'original sin'" (ibid., 2:78–79).

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 1:374–5.

human race. Because original sin is a punishment or a just consequence of Adam's sin, Arminius believed it would not be proper for God to punish people for it. If God were to punish people for original sin, he would essentially be punishing them for being the recipients of his punishment.<sup>37</sup>

Although infants are born with original sin, the sin of Adam is not imputed to them. Arminius saw the imputation of foreign sin as extremely unjust. He held that if God were to impute Adam's sin to infants before they could possibly sin by their own choice, God would be treating them much more severely than he has dealt with the fallen angels.<sup>38</sup>

Arminius, of course, did not develop his position on original sin in a historical vacuum. He built on the work of others and endeavored to refine their theories about original sin. Arminius owned numerous works by the church fathers,<sup>39</sup> and he demonstrated a definite familiarity with the works of various scholastic writers.<sup>40</sup> Concerning the doctrine of original sin, Arminius stood particularly on the shoulders of three men who lived in different eras and wrote at some length on the topic, namely, Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin.

#### *Augustine's Definition of Original Sin*

Augustine (354–430) was one of the most important early voices to speak out in defense of the doctrine of original sin.<sup>41</sup> His discussions of original sin were written primarily in response to the heretical teachings of Pelagius. Pelagius denied that there is any such thing as original sin and claimed that people are born completely innocent.<sup>42</sup> This is so because, according to Pelagius, souls are created by an immediate act of

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<sup>37</sup>Arminius argued, "For, in that case, the progress would be infinite, if God, angry on account of the actual sin of Adam, were to punish us with this *original* sin; were He again to be angry with us for this original sin, and inflict on us another punishment; and, for a similar cause were He a third time to be angry on account of that second punishment which had been inflicted, *guilt* and *punishment* thus mutually and frequently succeeding each other, without the intervention of any actual sin" (ibid., 1:375).

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 1:319.

<sup>39</sup>*The Auction Catalogue of the Library of J. Arminius*, a facsimile edition with an introduction by C. O. Bangs (Utrecht: HES Publishers, 1985), 3–4, cited in Richard A. Muller, "Arminius and the Scholastic Tradition," *Calvin Theological Journal* 24 (November 1989): 265, n. 12.

<sup>40</sup>Muller, "Scholastic Tradition," 264–66.

<sup>41</sup>Parker identified Augustine as the first to formulate a systematic doctrine of original sin (D. Parker, "Original Sin: A Study in Evangelical Theory," *Evangelical Quarterly* 61 [January 1989]: 52).

<sup>42</sup>G. F. Wiggers, *An Historical Presentation of Augustinism and Pelagianism From the Original Sources*, trans. Ralph Emerson (Andover, NY: Gould, Newman & Saxton, 1840), 83–88.

God.<sup>43</sup> While he admitted that all people sin, he denied that they inherit a sinful nature.<sup>44</sup> Rather, they appear to have a sin nature due to the fact that they have developed a habit of sinning. This habit of sinning can make them look as if they are dominated by sin when in reality they are not.<sup>45</sup>

On the contrary, argued Augustine, people sin because they are born with original sin. The corruption that followed Adam's sin has been passed on to all his descendants. Original sin necessarily involves a positive corruption of human nature.<sup>46</sup> Augustine explained that God

created man with such a nature that the members of the race should not have died, had not the two first (of whom the one was created out of nothing, and the other out of him) merited this by their disobedience; for by them so great a sin was committed, that by it the human nature was altered for the worse, and was transmitted also to their posterity, liable to sin and subject to death.<sup>47</sup>

Augustine taught that while original sin is a punishment of Adam's sin, people are still culpable for the original sin that they inherit.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, no one is born in a state of innocence.

Arminius did not follow Augustine's view of original sin as involving corruption of the human nature. However, he was quite familiar with Augustine's understanding of original sin. In his extended discussion with Francis Junius, Arminius quoted Augustine in support of his own theory that original sin consists of privation:

Augustine, (*De Trinitate*, lib. 14, cap. 16,) says, "Man, by sinning, lost righteousness and true holiness, on which account, this image became deformed and discolored; he receives them again when he is reformed and renewed." Again, (*De civit. Dei*, lib. 14, cap. 11,) he affirms that "free-will was lost." To conclude this part of the discussion, I ask what were those spiritual qualities, which were renewed or lost, if not the knowledge of God, righteousness and holiness.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>43</sup>*Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed., s.v. "Pelagius, Pelagianism," by B. L. Shelley, 897.

<sup>44</sup>In his commentary on Romans, Pelagius reasoned that if Adam's sin affected those who were not sinners, then Christ's righteousness assists those who are not believers (Theodore de Bruyn, trans., *Pelagius's Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993], 94). See also Augustine, "On the Grace of Christ and On Original Sin," trans. P. Holmes, in *Basic Writings of Saint Augustine*, 2 vols., ed. Whitney J. Oates (New York: Random House, 1948), 1:635.

<sup>45</sup>Wiggers, *Historical Presentation*, 87.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>47</sup>Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: Random House, 1950), 441 (14.1).

<sup>48</sup>Wiggers, *Historical Presentation*, 88.

<sup>49</sup>*Writings*, 3:125. Ellis offers a brief discussion of how Arminius appealed to Augustine against his Calvinist opponents on several occasions (Mark A. Ellis, *Simon Episcopus' Doctrine of Original Sin* [New York: Peter Lang, 2006], 72).

While Augustine certainly taught that Adam's sin resulted in a loss of original holiness that was then transmitted to the entire race, Augustine also argued that original sin left mankind completely corrupt and with an active bent toward evil.<sup>50</sup> To Augustine, original sin must involve inherited concupiscence and guilt.<sup>51</sup>

Although Arminius had an understanding of Augustine's view of original sin, he did not fully agree with Augustine's description of original sin. Like Augustine, he taught that original sin involves a privation of original righteousness, but he rejected Augustine's theory that original sin also includes positive corruption.

#### *Aquinas's Definition of Original Sin*

During his relatively brief career, Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) produced nearly one hundred works, the most significant of which is his *Summa Theologica*.<sup>52</sup> Although Aquinas did not place as much emphasis on original sin as Augustine, he stands as an important figure in the development of the doctrine because of the dominating influence his ideas commanded over the next few centuries.

Arminius owned copies of Aquinas's *Summa contra Gentiles* and his *Summa Theologica*.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, what is more important is the fact that he clearly assimilated and built upon the work of Aquinas.

Somewhat interestingly, in his *Examination of Perkin's Pamphlet*, Arminius argued,

I very much wish that you would cite Scripture for the confirmation of your sentiments and the overthrow of those allegations. The writings of the Schoolmen, ought not to have weight and authority, especially among us; for our Doctors of Theology with one voice affirm of them, "that they have changed true Theology into Philosophy, and the art of wrangling, and that they endeavor to establish their opinions, by the authority, not so much of the Sacred Scriptures, as of Aristotle."<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup>Wiggers noted, "According to Augustine's theory, therefore, the nature of man, both in a physical and a moral view, is totally corrupted by Adam's sin. In the last respect, it is so deeply corrupted, that he can do no otherwise than sin. This inherited corruption, or original sin, is such a quality of the nature of man, that in his natural state, he can will and do evil only" (*Historical Presentation*, 98).

<sup>51</sup>*Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Original Sin," by Paul Rigby, 608–9. Admittedly, there has been significant debate over the proper interpretation of some of Augustine's statements about original sin. This article mentions only the aspects of his thought that are fairly well established.

<sup>52</sup>*Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed., s.v. "Thomas Aquinas," by N. L. Geisler, 1197.

<sup>53</sup>*Auction Catalogue*, 3, 4, 5, 7, cited in Muller, "Scholastic Tradition," 266, n. 15. Arminius owned the 1585 Antwerp edition of *Summa Theologica*, published by Christopher Plantin (Muller, "Scholastic Tradition," 267).

<sup>54</sup>*Writings*, 3:383. The full title of Arminius's work is *An Examination of the Treatise of William Perkins Concerning the Order and Mode of Predestination*. This review, written by Arminius in 1602, is an extended critique of a Calvinistic pamphlet

Arminius, however, did not follow his own advice. As Shepherd has pointed out, “Aquinas is the most frequently quoted thinker in Arminius’s works, and the only scholastic whom he names as an influence.”<sup>55</sup> Just how strongly Arminius was influenced by Aquinas is described by Muller:

The arguments and models employed by Arminius in constructing his theological system...reveal a far deeper reading of Aquinas than can be inferred from the citations. Indeed, Arminius seems to have based much of his thought on a close reading not merely of one but of both *summas*.<sup>56</sup>

Following Augustine, Aquinas taught that original sin involves an aptitude for concupiscence. This aptitude can rightly be called a habit.<sup>57</sup> In a certain sense, Aquinas was willing to identify original sin as a habit or even an inordinate disposition to sin. However, he did not see this habit as a positive force that inclines an individual’s will to act in a sinful manner.<sup>58</sup> Instead, it is a condition of man’s nature due to the privation of original justice.

According to Aquinas, original sin can be largely described as a privation of original justice. Drawing an analogy, Aquinas wrote,

As bodily sickness is partly a privation, in so far as it denotes the destruction of the equilibrium of health, and partly something positive...so too original sin denotes the privation of original justice, and besides this the inordinate disposition of the parts of the soul. Consequently it is not a pure privation, but a corrupt habit.<sup>59</sup>

To Aquinas, original sin is a “corrupt habit” which results from the privation of original justice. Yet, he did not want to attribute to original sin any kind of direct causative influence. Rather, original sin only indirectly leads to actual sins through the removal of an obstacle, namely original justice.<sup>60</sup> Aquinas saw original sin as the privation of original

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written by William Perkins of Christ’s College, Cambridge. Many consider this document to be Arminius’s most important work.

<sup>55</sup>*Biographical Dictionary of Evangelicals*, s.v. “Jacobus Arminius,” by Victor Shepherd, 20.

<sup>56</sup>“Scholastic Tradition,” 268. E.g., Aquinas frequently spoke of four causes: efficient, final, formal, and material. Arminius likewise described the origin of sin in very similar categories (Norman L. Geisler, *Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Appraisal* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991], 155; *Writings*, 481–84). See also Richard A. Muller, *God, Creation, and Providence in the Thought of Jacob Arminius: Sources and Directions of Scholastic Protestantism in the Era of Early Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 37–43.

<sup>57</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, in *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, 2 vols., ed. Anton C. Pegis (New York: Random House, 1945), 2:673 (82.1).

<sup>58</sup>Aquinas suggested that original sin is neither an *infused* habit nor an *acquired* habit. Instead, “it is an *inborn* habit due to our corrupt origin” (ibid., 2:674 [82.1]).

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 2:674 (82.1).

<sup>60</sup>Ibid. According to Aquinas, original justice hindered inordinate actions. When original justice was removed, mankind lost the principle that prevented him from sinful

justice that leaves man in a state of disharmony. In this state of disharmony, man's mind is freed from subjection to God. It is deprived of the original justice or harmony with which man was created. Nevertheless, although Aquinas saw man as deprived, he stopped short of declaring that mankind is actually deprived.

Aquinas's emphasis on privation of original justice is a theme that Arminius picked up and refined in his formulation of the doctrine of original sin.<sup>61</sup> Arminius did not speak of original sin as a habit or a disposition, but he frequently described it in terms of privation.

### *Calvin's Definition of Original Sin*

John Calvin (1509–1564) unquestionably stands as one of the brightest figures in the Protestant Reformation. In March 1536, Calvin's famed *Institutes of the Christian Religion* was published, and its appearance set a high standard for future Reformed theologians to follow.

It has been demonstrated that Arminius owned a copy of Calvin's *Institutes*, and his esteem for Calvin is well known.<sup>62</sup> In May 1607, Arminius wrote to his friend Burgomaster Sebastian Egbertsz, praising Calvin's commentaries and indicating his respect for the *Institutes*:

After the reading of Scripture, which I strenuously inculcate, and more than any other...I recommend that the *Commentaries* of Calvin be read, whom I extol... 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 as a more extended explanation. But here I add—with discrimination, as the writings of all men ought to be read.<sup>63</sup>

Arminius appears to have had a sincere respect for the revered leader of the Reformation in Switzerland.<sup>64</sup> However, Calvin and Arminius

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movements.

<sup>61</sup>Leon O. Hynson, "Original Sin as Privation: An Inquiry into a Theology of Sin and Sanctification," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 22 (Fall 1987): 68.

<sup>62</sup>Apparently Arminius owned both the 1536 and 1559 editions of the *Institutes* along with nearly all of Calvin's commentaries (*Auction Catalogue*, 3, 4, 5, 12, 17, cited in Muller, "Scholastic Tradition," 265, n. 10). The 1559 edition of the *Institutes* is a considerably larger work than Calvin's first effort, and it is regarded as the definitive edition encompassing Calvin's settled conclusions.

<sup>63</sup>Philip van Limborch and Christian Hartsoeker, eds., *Praestantium ac eruditorum virorum epistolae ecclesiasticae et theologicae*, 3rd ed. (Amsterdam: n.p., 1704), no. 101, quoted in Bangs, *Arminius*, 287, 289.

<sup>64</sup>Clarke suggests that "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" (F. Stuart Clarke, "Arminius's Understanding of Calvin," *Evangelical Quarterly* 54 [January–March 1982]: 26).

differed significantly on the issue of original sin. Calvin defined original sin as “a hereditary depravity and corruption of our nature, diffused into all parts of the soul, which first makes us liable to God’s wrath, then also brings forth in us those works which Scripture calls ‘works of the flesh.’”<sup>65</sup>

While Arminius emphasized the fact that mankind lost something when Adam fell, Calvin saw original sin as much more than a mere privation of holiness. To Calvin original sin involves a genuine corruption of man’s nature and is, in fact, the source of all wickedness.<sup>66</sup>

Calvin taught that because of original sin every person is born totally depraved and under the righteous condemnation of God. Original sin renders all mankind genuinely guilty before God. He stated,

By this great corruption we stand justly condemned and convicted before God, to whom nothing is acceptable but righteousness, innocence, and purity. And this is not liability for another’s transgression. For, since it is said that we became subject to God’s judgment through Adam’s sin, we are to understand it not as if we, guiltless and undeserving, bore the guilt of his offense but in the sense that, since we through his transgression have become entangled in the curse, he is said to have made us guilty. Yet not only has punishment fallen upon us from Adam, but a contagion imparted by him resides in us, which justly deserves punishment.<sup>67</sup>

Calvin taught that original sin affects the entire race and that it pervades the total person. Original sin is not confined to an individual’s flesh or mind; it has overturned the whole man. He wrote,

For this reason, I have said that all parts of the soul were possessed by sin after Adam deserted the fountain of righteousness. For not only did a lower appetite seduce him, but unspeakable impiety occupied the very citadel of his mind, and pride penetrated to the depths of his heart. Thus it is pointless and foolish to restrict the corruption that arises thence only to what are called the impulses of the senses...Paul removes all doubt when he teaches that corruption subsists not in one part only, but that none of the soul remains pure or untouched by that mortal disease. For in his discussion of a corrupt nature Paul not only condemns the inordinate impulses of the appetites that are seen, but especially contends the mind is given over to blindness and the heart to depravity.<sup>68</sup>

So Calvin did not confine original sin to deprivation of original righteousness.<sup>69</sup> To him, it involved a pervasive corruption of the entire

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<sup>65</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1:251 [2.1.8]. Calvin also taught that “we are so vitiated and perverted in every part of our nature that by this great corruption we stand justly condemned and convicted before God” (ibid.).

<sup>66</sup>Calvin wrote, “For our nature is not only destitute and empty of good, but so fertile and fruitful of every evil that it cannot be idle” (ibid., 1:252 [2.1.8]).

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., 1:251 (2.1.8).

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 1:252–53 (2.1.9).

<sup>69</sup>Calvin specifically addressed “those who have defined original sin as ‘the lack of

person. Original sin is corruption and depravity, and it causes all mankind to be born guilty before God.

Arminius agreed with Calvin, against Pelagius, that “all who are born in the ordinary way from Adam, contract from him original sin and the penalty of death eternal.”<sup>70</sup> Like Calvin, he believed that original sin extends to the entire human race as a punishment of Adam’s sin. Arminius was not at all comfortable, on the other hand, identifying original sin with actual corruption or guilt.

#### *Arminius’s Definition of Original Sin*

During his lifetime, Arminius was accused by many of teaching Pelagianism.<sup>71</sup> However, Arminius vehemently denied such charges and referred to Pelagianism as a heresy.<sup>72</sup> Nevertheless, this charge has been often repeated and can still be heard today.<sup>73</sup>

Pelagius denied that there is any such thing as original sin. Instead, he taught that people are born innocent and only sin by following bad examples. People are sinners, then, because they imitate those who came before them, who in turn ultimately imitate Adam’s first offense.<sup>74</sup> As Hoeksema explained, according to Pelagianism,

the human nature is never depraved, the heart is never corrupt, the will is never in bondage; sin remains a matter of the *act* only; the will, therefore, must always be free to choose in favor of good or evil. The nature may be weakened by the sinful deed once performed, by the temptation to which one has yielded; the will may be hampered by an evil environment, so that it would be easier for it to yield to the seductions of evil than to that which is good, but it always remains free: man is inherently good.<sup>75</sup>

Although Arminius has been identified with Pelagianism, his position is

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the original righteousness, which ought to reside in us.” He believed that “although they comprehend in this definition the whole meaning of the term, have still not expressed effectively enough its power and energy” (ibid., 1:252 [2.1.8]).

<sup>70</sup> *Writings*, 2:390.

<sup>71</sup> Brandt, *Life of Arminius*, 89; Bangs, *Arminius*, 140–41; Stanglin and McCall, *Jacob Arminius*, 157–64.

<sup>72</sup> *Writings*, 1:323, 2:390–94, 472.

<sup>73</sup> Harrison, *Beginnings of Arminianism*, 58; Mark Herzer, “Arminianism Exposed: Part One,” *CRN Journal* 12 (Summer 2001): 4.

<sup>74</sup> Peter Movlin, *The Anatomy of Arminianism: or the Opening of the Controversies Lately Handled in the Low-Countryes, Concerning the Doctrine of Providence, of Predestination, of the Death of Christ, of Nature and Grace* (London: n.p., 1620), 54; Wiggers, *Historical Presentation*, 83–88. Pelagianism was condemned at several early church councils including the Sixteenth Council of Carthage (418) and the Council of Ephesus (431).

<sup>75</sup> Herman Hoeksema, *The Triple Knowledge: An Exposition of the Heidelberg Catechism*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1970–1972), 1:152.

actually quite distinct from Pelagius's theory of sin.<sup>76</sup>

At times, Arminius made assertions that can sound quite Calvinistic. He described man's will, subsequent to the Fall, as not only wounded or weakened but also imprisoned, destroyed, and lost.<sup>77</sup> Arminius explained man's fallen condition in detail when he wrote,

- (1) *The mind* of man, in this state, is dark, destitute of the saving knowledge of God, and, according to the Apostle, incapable of those things which belong to the Spirit of God.
- (2) To the darkness of the mind succeeds *the perverseness of the affections and of the heart*, according to which it hates and has an aversion to that which is truly good and pleasing to God; but it loves and pursues what is evil.
- (3) Exactly correspondent to this darkness of the mind, and perverseness of the heart, is [*impotentia*] *the utter weakness of all the powers* to perform that which is truly good, and to omit the perpetration of that which is evil.
- (4) To these let the consideration of *the whole of the life of man* who is [*constituti*] placed under sin, be added, of which the Scriptures exhibit to us the most luminous description; and it will be evident, that nothing can be spoken more truly concerning man in this state, than that he is altogether dead in sin.<sup>78</sup>

These statements almost sound like they could have been taken from Calvin's *Institutes*, yet they come from Arminius's *Public Disputations*. This is not to say that Arminius was a Calvinist. Still, it must be confessed that Arminius was not a true Pelagian either.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup>Arminius has also been charged with semi-Pelagianism, a view that affirms original sin but denies that it prevents man from approaching God. According to this modified form of Pelagianism, man can come to God completely apart from grace. Semi-Pelagian teachings were condemned by the Council of Orange in 529. The actual term *semi-Pelagianism* was first introduced in the debates between Dominicans and the Jesuit Luis de Molina during the late sixteenth century. The Dominicans accused Molina of following a "semi-Pelagian" tradition that they traced to the fifth century (*Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Semi-Pelagianism," by Conrad Leyser, 761–62). Furthermore, Dekker and Muller have argued that Arminius was significantly influenced by the ideas of Molina (Eef Dekker, "Was Arminius a Molinist?" *Sixteenth Century Journal* 27 [Spring–Fall 1996]: 337; Muller, *God, Creation, and Providence*, 29, 43). However, Arminius's views do not really fit the description of semi-Pelagianism. Reymond more accurately, though somewhat awkwardly, identifies Arminius's position as "semi-semi-Pelagianism" (Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998], 469).

<sup>77</sup>*Writings*, 1:526; see also Boer, *God's Twofold Love*, 188.

<sup>78</sup>*Writings*, 1:526–28. Concerning some of Arminius's more Calvinistic statements, Bangs commented, "Some Calvinists, finding that his writings do not produce the heresies they expected, have charged him with teaching secret heresy, unpublished. Many Arminians, finding him too Calvinistic, have written him off as a transitional thinker, a 'forerunner'" (*Arminius*, 18).

<sup>79</sup>Some scholars believe that even many of those identified as early "semi-Pelagians" explicitly rejected the work of Pelagius (*Augustine Through the Ages*, s.v. "Semi-Pelagianism," 762).

Unlike Calvin, Arminius taught that original sin itself does not render mankind guilty.<sup>80</sup> Because he saw original sin as part of the punishment for Adam's sin, he was unwilling to regard it as something that could cause people to be worthy of condemnation.

Arminius furthermore taught that original sin is primarily, if not exclusively, the privation of original righteousness. He wrote,

Must some contrary quality, beside [*causam*] the absence of original righteousness, be constituted as another part of original sin? though [*sic*] we think it much more probable, that this *absence of original righteousness*, only, is *original sin itself*; as being that which alone is sufficient to commit and produce any actual sins whatsoever.<sup>81</sup>

In his view, original sin means that the human race lost something—original holiness—not that mankind was plunged into corruption or gained a depraved nature.

### THE RELATIONSHIP OF ORIGINAL SIN TO “ACTUAL SIN”

Arminius placed great emphasis on the “event” of sin. In his view, sin consists in action.<sup>82</sup> It is an event much more than it is a state or condition. Arminius therefore drew a sharp distinction between original sin and “actual sins” which people commit at a specific point in time.<sup>83</sup> Actual sin is “that sin which man commits, through the corruption of his nature, from the time when he knows how to use reason.”<sup>84</sup> People are born with original sin, but they commit actual sins when they choose to transgress God's law.

While original sin or the privation of original holiness is indirectly a cause of actual sins, actual sins lead to all the conflicts and calamities of this world. The commission of actual sins is the cause of *physical* death. Furthermore, actual sins also produce *eternal* death.<sup>85</sup> According to Arminius, physical and eternal death are not the effects of original sin but rather of actual sins.<sup>86</sup> Therefore, people die and face the eternal consequences of their sin due to the actual sins they commit, not the original sin which they inherit.

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<sup>80</sup> *Writings*, 1:382.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:79. See also 1:486.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:385.

<sup>83</sup> Boer, *God's Twofold Love*, 198.

<sup>84</sup> *Writings*, 1:486. Arminius described actual sin as involving both commission and omission. He also divided actual sin into venial and mortal sins. All sin by its very nature is mortal, for it merits death, but not all sin is venial. Venial sins are such because they are capable of being forgiven. God is unwilling to impute sin to believers, and the sins that God determines to forgive are those that are venial (1:487–90).

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:492.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:382.

According to Arminius, Adam's sin is not imputed to infants; people only become guilty when they commit sin themselves.<sup>87</sup> Individuals are not so much born sinners as they become sinners by sinning. They are born with original sin, but God is not angry with them on account of it alone. God only hates sinners on account of their own sins.<sup>88</sup>

In light of the fact that Arminius taught that physical death is a result of actual sin, it would seem he would have a difficult time explaining why infants are liable to physical death before they are able to commit actual sins. This problem also plagued the theory of Pelagius.<sup>89</sup> Unfortunately, Arminius does not appear to have ever dealt with this difficulty.

In Arminius's opinion, original sin cannot make the commission of actual sin inevitable. If man must sin, then he cannot sin. He explained, "The necessity and inevitability of sinning excuses from sin, and frees from punishment, him who commits the act. I say *act*, and not *sin*, because an *act*, which one necessarily and inevitably commits, can not be called *sin*."<sup>90</sup> If a person is born with a truly depraved nature which will inevitably lead to sin, then he is unable to sin because actual sin can only be committed when one is completely free to choose whether to sin or not.

Arminius held that the efficient cause of actual sin is man exercising his own free will.<sup>91</sup> Man has a free will, but it is an instrument whereby he is able to commit sin. What Arminius called the "inwardly working" cause of actual sin is "the original propensity of our nature towards that which is contrary to the divine law, which propensity we have contracted from our first parents, through carnal generation."<sup>92</sup> Every person is born with this propensity to transgress God's commands. The "outwardly working" causes of sins are the objects and occasions that tempt people to sin.<sup>93</sup>

When Arminius spoke about the original propensity of man's nature to desire what God's law forbids, it may seem as if he was referring to original sin, but this is probably not the case. Instead, it seems that

<sup>87</sup>Ibid., 1:319.

<sup>88</sup>Ibid., 3:498.

<sup>89</sup>John Murray, *The Imputation of Adam's Sin* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1959), 10. As Russell explained, "Were suffering and death confined to adults, it might be supposed that they entirely proceeded from personal offences, and not from the sin of Adam. But how can the suffering and death of infants, be accounted for, seeing they have been guilty of no actual offence" (David Russell, *An Essay on the Salvation of All Dying in Infancy* [Edinburgh: Waugh and Innes, 1823], 14).

<sup>90</sup>Ibid., 3:380.

<sup>91</sup>*Writings*, 1:492. Elsewhere, Arminius almost seems to deny that fallen man has a free will when he approvingly quotes Augustine's statement that "free-will was lost" in the Fall (3:125; cf. *City of God*, 14.11).

<sup>92</sup>*Writings*, 1:492.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid.

by “original propensity” he meant the same propensity that resulted in Adam’s first sin.<sup>94</sup> If Adam, while in possession of original holiness could be moved to transgress God’s law, then those who lack original holiness are all the more prone to cooperate with the same propensity which led to the first transgression in Eden.

On the other hand, Arminius stated that “*absence of original righteousness*, only, is *original sin itself*...which alone is sufficient to commit and produce any actual sins whatsoever.”<sup>95</sup> This appears to be a contradiction in his thought that he made no effort to harmonize.

### ORIGINAL SIN AND THE JUSTICE OF GOD

The idea that God must be fair to mankind is a central theme in Arminius’s theology. In Arminius’s mind, the justice of God places important limits on God’s freedom and his relationship to his creation. God’s justice only permits him to do certain things, and it requires him to do other things for the creatures he has made.

#### The Permission of Sin

Arminius was very quick to accuse Calvin and others of making God the author of sin. He believed that by admitting that the Fall occurred within the predetermined ordination of God, Calvin and Beza necessarily made God the author of sin.<sup>96</sup>

Arminius argued that sin, by definition, must be voluntary. It cannot be decreed by God in any way. In his *Review of Perkin’s Pamphlet*, Arminius wrote, “If a man is ordained to commit sin, then he cannot sin. For sin is a voluntary act, and the decree of God in reference to sin introduces the necessity of sinning.”<sup>97</sup> He reasoned that if sin is part of the decree of God, it is no longer voluntary, and therefore it is no longer sin.<sup>98</sup>

In Arminius’s view, because God foreknows potential opportunities to sin, he can and does hinder its commission in this world. Arminius identified three main ways in which God can hinder the accomplishment of sin. First, God can place an impediment on the power of a rational creature. Through various means, God is able to remove the act

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<sup>94</sup>Compare his statements about the “inwardly moving” causes of Adam’s sin (ibid., 1:481–82). Arminius seems to be saying that man was originally created with a propensity toward what God forbids.

<sup>95</sup>Ibid., 2:79.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid., 3:77.

<sup>97</sup>Ibid., 3:378.

<sup>98</sup>Arminius avoided the lapsarian controversy altogether by placing the Fall and all subsequent sin outside of the decree of God. He stated, “Adam did not fall through the decree of God, neither through being ordained to fall nor through desertion” (ibid., 2:491).

of sin from the power of the one who desires to sin.<sup>99</sup> Second, God can impede the capability of his creatures. He does this by depriving a creature of life, by weakening a person's capabilities, by opposing an individual's abilities with a greater force, or by removing the object of sin.<sup>100</sup> Third, God is able to place an impediment on a creature's will. He does this by presenting arguments to a person's mind that may persuade the person not to sin.<sup>101</sup>

Although God often hinders sin, Arminius confessed that he also permits it. Arminius defined God's permission of sin as

the suspension, not of one impediment or two, which may be presented to the capability or the will, but of all impediments at once, which, God knows, if they were all employed, would [*reipsa*] effectually hinder sin. Such [*necesse est*] necessarily would be the result, because sin might be hindered by a single impediment.<sup>102</sup>

Therefore, God effectively permits sin, by not placing in man's way impediments to the commission of sin. In a certain sense, God wills sin by not preventing it, but in doing so God's will is inactive.<sup>103</sup>

One might wonder, in Arminius's view, why God does not impede sin more often. Concerning the reason for God's permission of sin, Arminius explained,

The foundation of this permission is (1.) The liberty [*arbitrii*] of choosing, with which God formed his rational creature, and which his constancy does not suffer to be abolished, lest He should be accused of mutability. (2.) The infinite wisdom and power of God, by which He knows and is able out of darkness to bring light, and to produce good out of evil.<sup>104</sup>

According to Arminius, part of the reason why God permits sin is because he has no other choice in light of the fact that he created people with the liberty of choosing. God is able to prevent sin, but only in certain ways. God's options are apparently limited by the freedom that he has given to his creatures. For instance Arminius asserted,

God is free to prevent sin, but in a way not at variance with the freedom of the will. Any other method of prevention would be absolutely contrary to the good of the universe, inasmuch as one good of the universe consists even in this, that there should be a creature endued with free will, and that the use of his own free will should be conceded to the creature

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<sup>99</sup>Ibid., 1:496.

<sup>100</sup>Ibid., 1:496–97.

<sup>101</sup>Ibid., 1:497.

<sup>102</sup>Ibid., 1:498. Arminius elsewhere defined permission as “a cessation of the act of hindrance, but that cessation is to be so explained that it may not be reduced to an efficient cause of sin, either directly, or by way of the denial or removal of that, without which sin can not be avoided” (ibid., 3:301).

<sup>103</sup>Ibid., 3:300–302.

<sup>104</sup>Ibid., 1:499.

without any divine interference.<sup>105</sup>

God's ability to prevent sin is hindered by the free will that he has given to his creatures. This limitation raises questions about the genuineness of God's providence.

### The Providence of God

[The providence of God] may be defined the solicitous, everywhere powerful, and continued [*intuitus*] inspection and oversight of God, according to which he exercises a general care over the whole world, and over each of the creatures and their actions and passions, in a manner that is befitting himself, and suitable for his creatures, for their benefit.<sup>106</sup>

So Arminius defined the providence of God. Perhaps especially important is the fact that he spoke about God's providence as "everywhere powerful" but did not indicate that God's providence is actually all-powerful. He also referred to God's providence being exercised in a manner that is "suitable for his creatures." This statement seems to point out the direction that Arminius's understanding of providence will take. In this brief definition, Arminius's picture of God's providence seems to be shaped by the creation rather than the will of the Creator.

According to Arminius, God has a twofold right over his rational creature. The first right belongs to God through creation, and the second through contract.<sup>107</sup> If the creature sins against this twofold right, "he gives to God, his Lord, King and Father, the right of treating him as a sinning creature, and of inflicting on him due punishment; and this is a third right, which rests on the wicked act of the creature against God."<sup>108</sup>

In Arminius's view, God cannot do whatever he pleases. God essentially is in the position of one who must respond to the actions of his creatures. Arminius held that people must of their own free will choose to commit actual sins before God can regard them with displeasure. He argued,

Man is indeed as "clay in the hands of the potter," but it does not follow from this that God can justly make of that clay whatever it might be possible for Him to make by an act of His omnipotence. He can reduce to nothing the clay formed by Himself and made man,—for this belongs to Him by supreme right: but He can not hate the same clay, or be angry with it, or condemn it forever, unless that lump has become sinful by its own fault, and been made a lump of corruption.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>105</sup>Ibid., 3:302.

<sup>106</sup>Ibid., 2:68.

<sup>107</sup>Ibid., 2:67.

<sup>108</sup>Ibid., 2:68.

<sup>109</sup>Ibid., 3:366.

Because Arminius did not believe that original sin makes people guilty before God, he taught that God can only condemn a person who has chosen to become sinful by committing actual sin.

Muller has correctly noted that the theme of creation plays a significant role in Arminius's theology.<sup>110</sup> Arminius seems to have viewed God's decision to create rational creatures with free will as an act of divine self-limitation. As Muller explained,

Arminius assumes that creatures have a certain integrity and independence as causal agents. Whereas he recognizes that all finite things are contingent and, therefore, in need of divine ontological support, he defines that support in such a way as to leave the will of the creature free and, indeed, independent of divine willing....

Understood in this way, the doctrine of creation has an almost principal status in Arminius' theology.<sup>111</sup>

To Arminius, now that God has created rational beings with the ability to make spontaneous choices, he may place impediments in their way and may exercise some degree of influence. However, God ultimately cannot interfere with the creature's right to make free choices. For God to genuinely interfere with the free will of another rational being would be inconsistent with the created order of things.<sup>112</sup>

### The Grace of God

Arminius held that people are born with original sin, that is, a lack of original righteousness. They are also born with a propensity to transgress God's law. They tend toward that which God has forbidden. This propensity does not produce a necessity to sin, but it does leave mankind inclined to sin. Therefore, man's fallen condition could be described, by Arminius, as one where the powers of man's will are "useless unless they be assisted by grace." For man's free will "has no powers whatever except such as are excited by Divine grace."<sup>113</sup>

Arminius taught that apart from grace fallen man would never come to God of his own accord. He also believed that humans are helplessly prone to disobey God apart from grace. Yet, he recognized that God commands people to submit to his authority by obeying his law, and Arminius firmly believed that God cannot justly require of people

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<sup>110</sup>Richard A. Muller, "God, Predestination, and the Integrity of the Created Order: A Note on Patterns in Arminius' Theology," in *Later Calvinism: International Perspectives*, ed. W. Fred Graham (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1994), 438–41.

<sup>111</sup>Ibid., 439. Muller traces Arminius's understanding of creation to "his acceptance of a Thomistic conception of creation as an emanation of the divine potency for being and of the existence of the created order by participation in the goodness of divine being" (440). Arminius saw the "impelling cause" of creation as "the goodness of God, according to which he is [*affectus*] inclined to communicate his good" (*Writings*, 2:54).

<sup>112</sup>*Writings*, 3:302.

<sup>113</sup>Ibid., 1:526.

what is not in their power to do.<sup>114</sup> For this reason, God must grant to humans grace that will enable them to please God. Arminius reasoned, "If, indeed, sufficient grace should be withheld, they, who do not believe and are not converted, are deservedly excused, for the reason that, without it, they could neither believe nor be converted."<sup>115</sup> So Arminius saw this sufficient grace as more a matter of justice than the will or pleasure of God. Wiley, a Nazarene theologian, explained this concept and contrasted Arminius's view with that of John Wesley. Wiley wrote,

Arminius regarded the ability bestowed upon our depraved nature which enabled it to cooperate with God, as flowing from the justice of God, without which man could not be held accountable for his sins. Wesley on the other hand, regarded this ability as solely a matter of grace, an ability conferred through the free gift of prevenient grace, given to all men as a first benefit of the universal atonement made by Christ for all men.<sup>116</sup>

It would seem that Arminius's theory of sufficient grace means that the bestowment of grace is no longer a matter of grace. God essentially "owes" people sufficient grace to enable them to overcome their inclination toward sin and turn to Christ. Because God cannot require of people things that they are unable to do, he must give them enabling or sufficient grace.<sup>117</sup>

According to Arminius, God gives enabling grace to every person. However, this grace is not necessarily effectual. Although God in his justice gives people the opportunity to accept his grace, they may choose to reject it through their free will. Arminius asserted, "It always remains within the power of free will to reject grace bestowed, and to refuse subsequent grace; because grace is not an omnipotent action of God, which cannot be resisted by man's free will."<sup>118</sup> In order for a person to be saved, then, his own fallen free will must choose to cooperate with the sufficient grace that God supplies. In the final analysis, sinful people choose whether they want God's grace or not. This is so because, in Arminius's system, they have a free will with which God may not justly interfere. To Arminius, God is only just if sinful people have the final say in their eternal destiny.

### CONCLUSION

Arminius stands as a pivotal figure in the history of Christianity, and Arminius's understanding of original sin is one of the keys to interpreting his theology. His view of original sin builds upon the writings of

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<sup>114</sup>Ibid., 2:66.

<sup>115</sup>Ibid., 3:336.

<sup>116</sup>H. Orton Wiley, *Christian Theology*, 3 vols. (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, n.d.), 2:108.

<sup>117</sup>Arminius did not use the term *prevenient grace*, but his concept of enabling or sufficient grace is in effect the same idea.

<sup>118</sup>*Writings*, 3:509.

earlier theologians, including Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin.

Arminius saw Adam's first sin as the source of original sin which has since been passed on to his descendants through natural means. All people are now born with the taint of original sin. Arminius understood original sin as primarily the privation of the original holiness that Adam possessed prior to the Fall. When Adam sinned, he destined his descendants to enter the world without the original righteousness he once enjoyed. According to Arminius, original sin itself does not render people guilty before their Creator. Because sin consists in action, people become guilty only when they commit actual sin.

In Arminius's view, God frequently hinders sin, but he ultimately cannot prevent it by interfering with a rational creature's free will. Due to the creation order, people possess a free will that is essentially beyond the interference of God.

God in his justice must give enabling grace to every person. If God did not give sufficient grace to people, he could not justly hold them accountable for their sins. This grace enables people to obey God's demands, but it cannot effectually do anything because people can always resist it. As Arminius saw it, people must of their own free will choose to accept God's grace. God cannot force rational creatures to do anything against their free will.

Although this article is not meant to be a critique of Arminius's theology, it has endeavored to lay some groundwork for a more critical analysis of Arminius's view of original sin. His understanding of original sin represents a significant departure from traditional Reformed theology, and it could be argued a departure from biblical teaching on original sin as well.

