

Arminian Theory of Redemption

by R.L. Dabney

The Arminian theory of redemption emphasizes human free will and the possibility of salvation through faith and good works, but is refuted by the doctrine of invincible grace and the sovereignty of God.

Scripture: Proverbs 23:26, John 1:13, John 3:36, Acts 4:12, Romans 2:12, Romans 9:16, Ephesians 1:4, Ephesians 1:19, Hebrews 11:6

Topics: "Calvinism Vs Arminianism", "Soteriology"

Description

R.L. Dabney delves into the debate between Calvinists and Arminians, focusing on the sources and tenets of Arminian Theology. He explores the logical progression of Arminian beliefs, from the doctrine of indifference of the will to views on original sin. The sermon also addresses the concept of common sufficient grace in Arminianism, highlighting the belief that God provides grace to enable individuals to fulfill conditions for redeeming grace. Additionally, the sermon discusses the Arminian perspective on justification, personal election, regeneration, and the salvability of heathens without the gospel.

Transcript

The subjects which are now brought under discussion introduce us to the very center of the points which are debated between us and Arminians. I propose, therefore, for their further illustration, and because no better occasion offers, to consider here their scheme.

Sources of the Arminian Theology

The sources of Arminian Theology would be best found in the apology of Episcopius, Limborch's Christian Theology, and Knapp's Christian Theology. Among the English may be consulted, as a low Arminian, Daniel Whitby's Five Points; as high Arminians, Wesley's Doctrinal Tracts, and Watson's Theological Institutes. For refutation of Arminianism, see Stapfer, Vol. 4; Turretin; Hill, bk. 4, ch. 9.

A connected view of the Arminian tenets:

Five points of Remonstrants Ambiguous

The five points handed in by the Arminians to the States General of Holland, in their celebrated Remonstrants, were so covertly worded as scarcely to disclose their true sentiments. The assertions concerning original Sin and Free will, were seemingly such as Calvinists could accept. The doctrine of common grace was but obscurely hinted; and the perseverance of Saints was only doubted. But their

system soon developed itself into semi-Pelagianism, well polished and knit together. Discarding the order of the five points, I will exhibit the theory in its logical connection.

Logical Source in Doctrine of Indifferency of the Will. View of Original Sin

Its starting point is the doctrine of indifference of the will, and a denial of total depravity, as held by Calvinists. According to the universal consent of Pelagians and Socinians, this self-determination of the will is held necessary to proper free agency and responsibility. Take Whitby as a type of the grosser Arminians. He thinks Adam was created liable, but not subject, to bodily death, and his immunity in Paradise was secured by his access to the Tree of Life. His sin made death and its attendant pains inevitable; and this his posterity inherit, according to the natural law, that like begets like. This has produced a set of circumstances, making all men so liable to sin, that, practically, none escape. But this results from no moral necessity or certainty of the will. Man has natural desires for natural good, but this concupiscentia is not sin till formed into a positive volition. But the sense of guilt and fear drives man from God, the pressure of earthly ills tends to earthly mindedness; man's pains make him querulous, envious, inordinate in desire; and above all, a general evil example misleads. So that all are, in fact, precipitated into sin, in virtue of untoward circumstances inherited from Adam. This is the only sense in which Adam is our federal head. This relation is not only illustrated by, but similar to that which exists between a bad parent and an unfortunate offspring now--in instance of the same natural law.

Wesleyan View of Original Sin

But Wesley and Watson repudiate this, as too low; and teach a fall in Adam, prior to its reparation by common grace, going as far as moderate Calvinists. Watson, for instance (Vol. 2, p. 53 &c.,) says that imputation is considered by theologians as mediate and immediate. Mediate imputation he says, is "our mortality of body and corruption of moral nature in virtue of our derivation from Adam." Immediate means "that Adam's sin is accounted ours in the sight of God, by virtue of our federal relation." This, the student will perceive, is a very different distinction from that drawn by the Reformed divines. Watson then repudiates the first statement as defective; and the latter as extreme. Here he evidently misunderstands us; for he proceeds to say, with Dr. Watts, that Adam did act as a public person; our federal head, and that the penal consequences of our sin (not the sin itself), are accounted to us, consisting of bodily ills and death, privation of God's indwelling, (which results in positive depravity) and eternal death. In this sense, says he, "we may safely contend for the imputation of Adam's sin."

But in defending against Pelagians, &c., the justice of this arrangement of God, he says it must be viewed in connection with that purpose of redemption towards the human race which co-existed in the divine mind, by which God purposed to purchase and bestow common grace on every fallen man thus repairing his loss in Adam. (The fatal objection to such a justification is, that then God would have been under obligations to provide man a Savior; and Christ's mission would not have been of pure grace).

Common Sufficient Grace

This leads us to their next point: God having intended all along to repair the fall, and having immediately thereafter given a promise to our first parents, has ever since communicated to all mankind a common precedaneous sufficient grace, purchased for all by Christ's work. This is not sufficient to effect a complete redemption, but to enable, both naturally and morally, to fulfil the conditions for securing redeeming grace. This common grace consists in the indifference of man's will remaining notwithstanding his fall, the lights of natural conscience, good impulses enabling unregenerate men to do works of social virtue, the outward

call of mercy made, as some Arminians suppose, even to heathens through reason, and some lower forms of universal spiritual influence. The essential idea and argument of the Arminian is, that God could not punish man justly for unbelief, unless He conferred on him both natural and moral ability to believe or not. They quote such Scripture as Ps. 81:13; Isa. 5:4; Luke 19:42; Rev. 3:20; Rom. 2:14; Jn. 1:9. So here we have, by a different track, the old conclusion of the semi-Pelagian. Man, then, decides the whole remaining difference, as to believing or not believing, by his use of this precedent grace, according to his own free will. God's purpose to produce different results indifferent men is wholly conditioned on the use which, He foresees, they will make of their common grace. To those who improve it, God stands pledged to give the crowning graces of regeneration, justification, sanctification, and glorification. To the heathen even, who use their light aright, (unfavorable circumstance may make such instances rare), Christ will give gospel light and redeeming grace, in some inscrutable way.

Grace in Regeneration Vincible

Hence, the operations of grace are at every stage vincible by man's will; to be otherwise, they must violate the conditions of moral agency. Even after regeneration, grace may be so resisted by free will, as to be dethroned from the soul, which then again becomes unrenewed.

Redemption General

The redeeming work of Christ was equally for all and every man of the human race, to make his sins pardonable on the condition of faith, to purchase a common sufficient grace actually enjoyed by all, and the efficient graces of a complete redemption suspended on the proper improvement of common grace by free will. Christ's intention and provision are, therefore, the same to all. But as justice requires that the pardoned rebel shall believe and repent, to those who, of their own choice, refuse this, the provision remains forever ineffective.

Justification

In the doctrine of justification, again, the lower and higher Arminians differ somewhat. Both define justification as consisting simply of pardon. According to the lower, this justification is only purchased by Christ in this, that He procured from God the admission of a lower Covenant, admitting faith and the Evangelical obedience flowing out of it, as a righteousness, in place of the perfect obedience of the Covenant of works. According to the higher, our faith (without the works its fruits) is imputed to us for righteousness, according, as they suppose, to Rom. 4:5. Both deny the proper imputation of Christ's active (as distinguished from His passive) obedience, and deny any imputation, except of the believer's own faith; although the higher Arminians, in making this denial, seem to misunderstand imputation as a transference of moral character.

Personal Election Conditional

Hence, it will be easily seen, that their conception of election must be the following: The only absolute and unconditional decree which God has made from eternity, concerning man's salvation, is His resolve that unbelievers shall perish. This is not a predestinating of individuals, but the fixing of a General Principle. God does, indeed, (as they explain Rom. 9-11 chapters), providentially and sovereignly elect races to the enjoyment of certain privileges; but this is not an election to salvation; for free-will may in any or each man of the race, abuse the privileges, and be lost. So far as God has an external purpose toward individuals, it is founded on His foresight, which He had from eternity, of the use they would make of their common

grace. Some, He foresaw, would believe and repent, and therefore elected them to justification. Others, He foresaw, would not only believe and repent, but also persevere to the end; and these He elected to salvation.

A thoroughly-knit system, if its premises are granted.

The refutation of the Arminian theory must be deferred, on some points, till we pass to other heads of divinity, as Justification and Final Perseverance. On the extent of the atonement enough has already been said. On the remaining points we shall now attempt to treat.

Common Sufficient Grace Refuted

In opposition to the assertion of a common sufficient grace, we remark, 1st. That there is no sufficient evidence of it in Scripture. The passages quoted above do, indeed, prove that God has done for all men under the gospel all that is needed to effect their salvation, if their own wills are not depraved. But they only express the fact that God's general benevolence would save all to whom the gospel comes, if they would repent; and that the obstacles to that salvation are now only in the sinners. But whether it is God's secret purpose to overcome that internal obstacle, in their own perverse wills, these texts do not say. It will be found, on examination, that they all refer merely to the external call, which we have proved, comes short of the effectual call; or that they are addressed to persons who, though shortcoming, or even backsliding, are regarded as God's children already. Look and see.

Doctrine False, in Fact

The doctrine is false in fact; for how can grace be sufficient, where the essential outward call, even, is lacking? Rom. 10:14. God declares, in Scripture, He has given up many to evil. Acts 14:16; Rom. 1:21, 28; 9:18. Again: the doctrine is contradicted by the whole doctrine of God, concerning the final desertion of those who have grieved away the Holy Ghost. See Hos. 4:17; Gen.6:3; Heb. 6:1-6. Here is a class so deserted of grace, that their damnation becomes a certainty. Are they, therefore, no longer free, responsible and blameable ?

If we take the Arminian description of common sufficient grace, then many who have its elements most largely, an enlightened conscience, frequent compunctions, competent religious knowledge, amiability, and natural virtues, good impulses and resolutions, are lost; and some, who seem before to have very little of these, are saved. How is this? Again: the doctrine does not commend itself to experience; for this tells us that, among men, good intentions are more rare than good opportunities.

We see that some men have vastly more opportunity vouchsafed them by God's providence than others. It would be strange if, contrary to the fact just stated, all those who have less opportunity should have better intentions than opportunities. Common Grace, if Sufficient, Saves We have sometimes illustrated the Wesleyan doctrine of grace thus: "All men in the 'slough of despond' in consequence of the fall. There is a platform, say Arminians, elevated an inch or two above the surface of this slough, but yet firm, to which men must struggle in the exercise of their common sufficient grace alone, the platform of repentance and faith.

Now, it is true, that from this platform man could no more climb to heaven without divine grace, than his feet could scale the moon. But God's grace is pledged to lift up to heaven all those who will so employ their free- agency, as to climb to that platform, and stay there." Now, we say, with the Arminian, that a

common sufficient grace, which does not work faith and repentance, is in no sense sufficient; for until these graces are exercised, nothing is done. Heb. 11:6; Jn. 3:36.

But he who has these graces, we further assert, has made the whole passage from death to life. That platform is the platform of eternal life. The whole difference between elect and non-elect is already constituted. See John 3:36; 1 John 5:1; Acts 13:48; 2 Cor. 5:17, with Eph. 3:17. If then there is sufficient grace, it is none other than the grace which effectuates redemption; and the Arminian should say, if consistent with his false premises, not that God by it puts it in every man's free will to fulfill the conditions on which further saving communications depend; but that He puts it in every man's free will to save himself.

Or else, it is either not Common, or not Sufficient If the doctrine is true, it is every man's own uninfluenced, and not the purpose of God, which determines his eternal destiny. Either the common grace effects its saving work in those who truly believe, in virtue of some essential addition made to its influences by God, or it does not. If the former, then it was not "common," nor "sufficient," in those who failed to receive that addition. If the latter, then the whole difference in its success must have been made by the man's own free will resisting less--i. e., the essential opposition to grace in some souls, differs from that in others.

But see Rom. 3:12, 27; Eccl. 8:11; Eph. 2:8, 9; 1 Cor. 4:7; Rom. 9:16; and the whole tenor of that multitude of texts, in which believers ascribe their redemption, not to their own superior docility or penitence, but to distinguishing grace. To attain the proper point of view for the rational refutation of the doctrine of "common " sufficient grace, it is only necessary to ask this question: What is the nature of the obstacle grace is needed to remove? Scripture answers in substance, that it is inability of will, which has its rudiments in an ungodly habitus of soul.

That is to say: the thing grace has to remove is the soul's own evil disposition. Now, the idea that any cause, natural or supernatural, half rectifies this, so as to bring this disposition to an equipoise, is absurd. It is the nature of disposition to be disposed: this is almost a truism. It is impossible to think a moral agent devoid of any and all disposition. If God did produce in a sinful soul, for one instant, the state which common sufficient grace is supposed to realize, it would be an absurd tertium quid, in a state of moral neutrality.

As we argued against the Pelagian, that state, if possible, would be immoral, in that it implied an indifferent equipoise as to positive obligations. And the initial volitions arising out of that state would not be morally right, because they would not spring out of positive right motives; and such acts, being worthless, could not foster any holy principles or habits. The dream of common grace is suggested obviously, by the Pelagian confusion of inability of will with compulsion.

The inventor has his mind full of some evil necessity which places an external obstruction between the sinner and salvation; hence this dream of an aid, sufficient but not efficacious, which lifts away the obstruction, and yet leaves the sinner undetermined, though free, to embrace Christ. Remember that the obstruction is in the will; and the dream perishes. The aid which removes it can be nothing short of that, which determines the will to Christ. The peculiar inconsistency of the Wesleyan is seen in this: that, when the Pelagian advances this idea of Adam's creation in a slate of moral neutrality, the Wesleyan (see Wesley's Orig. sin. or Watson, ch. 18th), refutes it by the same irrefragable logic with the Calvinists.

He proves the very state of soul to be preposterous and impossible. Yet, when he comes to effectual calling, he imagines a common grace, which results, at least for a time, in the same impossible state of the

soul! It is a reversion to Pelagius.

Grace in Regeneration Invincible

The views of regeneration which Calvinists present, in calling the grace of God therein invincible, and in denying the synergism (*sunergeia*) of man's will therein, necessarily flow from their view of original sin. We do not deny that the common call is successfully resisted by all non-elect gospel sinners; it is because God never communicates renewing grace, as He never intended in His secret purpose. Nor do we deny that the elect, while under preliminary conviction, struggle against grace, with as much obstinacy as they dare; this is ensured by their depraved nature. But on all those whom God purposes to save, He exerts a power, renewing and persuading the will, so as infallibly to ensure their final and voluntary submission to Christ. Hence we prefer the word invincible to irresistible. This doctrine we prove, by all those texts which speak of God's power in regeneration as a new creation, birth, resurrection; for the idea of successful resistance to these processes, on the part of the dead matter, or corpse, or foetus, is preposterous. Conviction may be resisted; regeneration is invincible. We prove it again from all those passages which exalt the divine and mighty power exerted in the work. See Eph. 1:19,20; Ps.110:3. Another emphatic proof is found in this, that otherwise, God could not be sure of the conversion of all those He purposed to convert; yea, not of a single one of them; and Christ would have no assurance that He should ever "see of the travail of His soul" (Isa. 53) in a single case! For, in order for God to be sure of the result, He must put forth power adequate to overcome all opposing resistances. But see all those passages, in which the security and immutability of God's purposes of grace are asserted. Rom. 9:21, 23; Eph. 1:4; John xv; 16, &c., &c. Eph. 2:10.

Mere Foreknowledge Inadequate

Here, the Arminian rejoins, that God's *scientia media*, or foreknowledge of the contingent acts of free agents (arising not from His purpose of control over those acts, but from His infinite insight into their character, and the way it will act under foreseen circumstances), enables Him to foreknow certainly who willing prove their common grace, and that some will. His eternal purposes are not crossed, therefore, they say, because He only purposed from eternity to save those latter. The fatal answer is, that if the acts of free agents are certainly foreseen, even with this *scientia media*, they are no longer contingent, but certain; and worse than this: Man's will being in bondage, all the foreknowledge which God has, from His infinite insight into human character, will be only a foreknowledge of obdurate acts of resistance on man's part, as long as that will is unsubdued. God's foreknowledge, in that case, would have been a foreknowledge that every son of Adam would resist and be lost. The only foreknowledge God could have, of any cases of submission, was one founded on His own decisive purpose to make some submit, by invincible grace.

Grace Does not Destroy Free Agency

The Arminian objects again, that our doctrine represents man as dragged reluctantly into a state of grace, like an angry wild beast into a cage; whereas, freedom of will, and hearty concurrence are essential elements of all service acceptable to God. The answer is, that the sinner's will is the very subject of this invincible grace. God so renews it that it neither can resist, nor longer wishes to resist. But this objection virtually reappears in the next part of the question.

The Soul Passive in its Quickening. Proof

Calvinists are accustomed also to say, in opposition to all Synergistic views, that the will of man is not active, but only passive in regeneration. In this proposition, it is only meant that man's will is the subject, and not the agent, nor one of the agents of the distinctive change. In that renovating touch, which revolutionizes the active powers of the soul, it is acted on and not agent. Yet, activity is the inalienable attribute of an intelligent being; and in the process of conversion, which begins instantaneously with regeneration, the soul is active in all its exercises towards sin, holiness, God, its Savior, the law, &c., &c.

This doctrine is proved by the natural condition of the active powers of the soul. Man's propensities are wholly and certainly directed to some form of ungodliness, and to impenitency. How, then, can the will, prompted by these propensities, persuade itself to anything spiritually good and penitent? It is expecting a cause to operate in a direction just the opposite to its nature--as well expect gravity to raise masses flung into the air, when its nature is to bring them down. And this is agreeable to the whole Bible representation. Does the foetus procure its own birth? the dead body its own resurrection? the matter of creation its own organization? See, especially, John 1:13. Yet this will, thus renewed, chooses God, and acts holiness, freely, just as Lazarus, when resuscitated, put forth the activities of a living man.

The objections of the Arminian may all be summed up in this: that sinners are commanded, not only to put forth all the actings of the renewed nature, such as believing, turning from sin, loving God, &c., but are commanded to perform the very act of giving their hearts to God, which seems to contain the very article of regeneration. See Prov. 23:26; Is. 1:16; Ezek. 18:31; Deut. 10:16.

Objections Answered

The answer is, 1st. That God's precepts are no test of the extent of our ability of will, but only of our duty. When our Creator has given to us capacities to know and love Him, and the thing which prevents is our depraved wills, this is no reason why He should or ought to cease demanding that which is His due. If the moral opposition of nature into which God's creatures may sink themselves by their own fault, were a reason why He should cease to urge His natural rights on them, He would soon have no right left. Again: the will of man, when renovated by grace, needs a rule by which to put forth its renewed activity, just as the eye, relieved of its darkness by the surgeon needs light to see. Hence, we provide light for the renovated eye; not that light alone could make the blind eye see. And hence, God applies His precepts to the renovated will, in order that it may have a law by which to act out its newly bestowed, spiritual free-agency. But 3d, and chiefly: These objections are all removed, by making a sound distinction between regeneration and conversion. In the latter the soul is active; and the acts required by all the above passages, are the soul's (now regenerate) turning to God.

Bible Promises No Salvation to Heathen

The salvability of any heathen without the gospel is introduced here, because the question illustrate these views concerning the extent of the grace of redemption, and the discussions between us and the Arminians. We must hold that Revelation gives us no evidence that Pagans can find salvation, without Scriptural means. They are sinners. The means in their reach appear to contain no salvation. a.) One argument is this: All of them are self-convicted of some sin (against the light of nature). "Without the shedding of blood is no remission." But the gospel is the only proposal of atonement to man. b.) Paganism provides nothing to meet the other great want of human nature, an agency for moral renovation. Is any man more spiritually minded than decent children of the Church are, because he is a Pagan? Do they need the new birth less than our own beloved offspring? Then it must be at least as true of the heathen,

that except they be born again, they shall not see the kingdom. But their religions present no agencies for regeneration. They do not even know the Word. So far are their theologies from any sanctifying influence, their morals are immoral, their deities criminals, and the heaven to which they aspire a pandemonium of sensual sin immortalized.

God no more Unjust to them than to Non- Elect under the Gospel

Now, the Arminians reject this conclusion, thinking God cannot justly condemn any man, who is not furnished with such means of knowing and as put his destiny in every sense within his own choice. These means the heathen do not fully possess, where their ignorance is invincible. The principle asserted is, that God cannot justly hold any man responsible, who is not blessed with both " natural and moral ability." I answer, that our doctrine concerning the heathen puts them in the same condition with those unhappy men in Christian lands, who have the outward word, but experience no effectual calling of the Spirit. God requires the latter to obey that Law and Gospel, of which they enjoy the clearer lights; and the obstacle which ensures their failure to obey is, indeed, not any physical constraint, but an inability of will. Of the heathen, God would require no more than perfect obedience to the light of nature; and it is the same inability of will which ensures their failure to do this. Hence, as you see, the doctrine of a common sufficient grace, and of the salvability of the heathens, are parts of the same system. So, the consistent Calvinist is able to justify God in the condemnation of adult heathens, according to the principles of Paul. Rom. 2:12. On the awful question, whether all heathens, except those to whom the Church carries the gospel, are certainly lost, it does not become us to speak. One thing is certain: that "there is none other Name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved." Acts 4:12. Guilt must be expiated; and depravity must be cleansed, before the Pagan (or the nominal Christian) can see God. Whether God makes Christ savingly known to some, by means unknown to the Church, we need not determine. We are sure that the soul which "feels after Him if haply he may find Him," will not be cast off of God, because it happens to be outside of Christendom. But are there such ? This question it is not ours to answer. We only know, that God in the Scriptures always enjoins on His Church that energy and effort in spreading the gospel, which would be appropriate, were there no other instrumentality but ours. Here is the measure of our duty concerning foreign missions.

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