

Five Facts About Arminius the Man, and Not the Theology Debate

Jacobus Arminius was born either in 1559 or 1560 in Oudewater, Holland and died about 50 years later. During that half a century he lived a fascinating life in a lot of ways, yet it seems the only thing many people associate him with centuries after his death is a systematic theology argument. The 16th and 17th centuries were a time of significant theological and denominational divisions in Christianity and Arminius's teachings were so impactful that he gathered a fierce, loyal following in his day. And people continue to adhere to and teach them in our day.

I have written about Arminianism many times for this site and you can see those articles below. Today, though, I want to remind everyone who reads REO that Arminius was a human soul, not a mere set of beliefs. I'm sure he experienced pain and disappointment. I'm sure he experienced joy. I'm sure he felt compassion for people. His sermons on Romans 7 and Romans 9 have been well known from his time until ours. But by comparison very little is known about his character and personality.

So today I submit five things about Arminius the man, that have little to nothing to do with his teachings on Christian salvation:

1. After the bubonic plague invaded Amsterdam in 1601 and claimed 20,000 victims, Arminius took water into homes of the sick that no one else would enter[1. Robert Picirilli, *Grace,*

Faith, Free Will, 8].

I believe the willingness of a Christian to get their hands dirty serving people who are in desperate need is a significant mark of a disciple of Christ. Arminius, at least at this time in his life, was this kind of disciple. I find this convicting.

2. His father died when he was an infant. When he was about 15 and a newly registered student at Marburg University in Germany, his mother and brothers were all killed when Spaniards burned his hometown[2. Gerald McCulloh, *Man's Faith and Freedom; the Theological Influence of Jacobus Arminius*, 12].

Growing up fatherless (in a strict sense, note that he did have male mentors as Theodorus Aemilius and Rudolph Snellius) and losing all of his immediate family when he was a teenager had to be a tough blow. But he did not let it derail his education and got a degree from the University of Leiden.

3. He strongly complimented and encouraged people to read John Calvin's commentaries[3. Mark A. Ellis, Introduction to *The Arminian Confession of 1621*, vii.].

Arminius was a mere five years old when Calvin died, so the two men were not true contemporaries. In fact, Arminius's chief theological rival was Fransiscus Gomarus, a Calvinist and fellow faculty member when Arminius went back to teach at Leiden. It was Gomarus who opposed Arminius's teachings and not the other way around. My understanding, especially noted in the bolded statement above, is that Arminius was not a vicious debater and respected those whose interpretations differed from his. But anyone who teaches the Bible stands to receive opposition. Arminius often did throughout his life.

It was Arminius's followers after his death who facilitated a bigger divide between the teachings of Calvin and Arminius, notably in their publications the year after he died and later in 1621. It is a divide that exists to this day. I do not necessarily fault them for staking claim to key theological ground; my point is that Arminius was not a fire-breathing, Calvin-bashing preacher. He wrote in 1607:

"I encourage the reading of the commentaries of Calvin, which I extol with the greatest praise...For I say that he is incomparable in the interpretation of Scripture, and his comments are better than anything which the Fathers give us."[4. Jacobus Arminius to Sebastian Egbert, 3 May, 1607, Christiaan Hartsocker and Philippus van Limborch, eds., 236-37; cited by Ellis, vii.]

4. He had a wife and nine children, though very little is written about them[5. Kasper Brant, *The Life of James Arminius*, 38, 299.].

His wife's name was Lijsbet Reael, who was from an affluent Amsterdam family, and they were married in 1590. He lost two children in infancy but eventually were blessed with seven sons and two daughters by the early 1600s. Beyond this, very little is mentioned about his family in the works I have read. I find it humanizing, however, that this man who taught things so significant that people bear his name on their theological system over 400 years after his death, dealt with the trivial, menial, daily aspects of marriage and parenting. And with the horrifying tragedy of losing children to death.

5. He drew big crowds whenever he preached[6. Donald M. Lake, *Jacobus Arminius' Contribution to a Theology of Grace*, Grace

Unlimited, ed. Charles H. Pinnock, 226; cited by Picirilli, 6].

Arminius was a pastor, preacher and a professor. My experience tells me it is hard to be exceptional at all three. Yet by all accounts, it appears he was. The time and culture he lived in were different than mine, but I wonder if it wasn't as prevalent back then that educated young pastors often preached from ivory towers where common parishioners either could not understand or were turned off by it. Either way, it is encouraging to me that Arminius knew how to preach well enough to reach a lot of people. Preaching should neither be boring or prudish.

Perhaps one day I will do a similar list for John Calvin. In the meantime, I encourage us all to see people as people and not merely as a set of beliefs or opinions, though those can matter. Our humanity demands treating other people like humans. Just as Arminius did.