

# From Augustine to Arminius: A Pilgrimage in Theology

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A theological shift is underway among evangelicals as well as other Christians away from determinism as regards the rule and salvation of God and in the direction of an orientation more favorable to a dynamic personal relationship between God, the world, and God's human creatures. The trend began, I believe, because of a fresh and faithful reading of the Bible in dialogue with modern culture, which places emphasis on autonomy, temporality, and historical change. In this chapter I want to tell the story of my pilgrimage and struggle to understand these matters and thus perhaps to give voice to what I suspect is the experience of many others. The account may also serve as a case study about systematic thinking in theology, how it changes and works itself out in a person's life.

## WHY A PILGRIMAGE?

The great majority of theologians change their minds quite often. We often refer to their early work and their later work, and sometimes also to the middle stages of their thought. Karl Barth, undoubtedly the greatest theologian of our century, illustrates this very well, and he was not ashamed of changing his mind. It is better to change one's mind than to continue on a wrong path. Of course there are some who do not follow this rule: they refuse to change. Theologians like Bultmann and Van Til, for example, seem to have thought they possessed all the "right" answers from graduate school on and never saw any reason to change them afterward, though many of their readers saw reason to change. But such theologians are the abnormal ones, and it is rather hard for ordinary mortals to identify with them. The reason for this is that in theology we are dealing with great mysteries and intellectually complex problems that can be excruciatingly difficult to sort out and to understand. So almost anyone who seriously tries to resolve them will experience struggles in doing so and changes in his or her understanding. Not only are individual topics like predestination and election remarkably challenging in themselves, but also the interconnections between such themes and other topics in the total grammar of the Christian faith are tricky to establish and maintain in a balanced way.

So I do not apologize for admitting to being on a pilgrimage in theology, as if it were in itself some kind of weakness of intelligence or character. Feeling our way toward the truth is the nature of theological work even with the help of Scripture, tradition, and the community. We are fallible and historically situated creatures, and our best thinking falls far short of the ideal of what our subject matter requires. A pilgrimage, therefore, far from being unusual or slightly dishonorable, is what we would expect theologians who are properly aware of their limitations to experience.

This is particularly true when it comes to our present set of topics: how God relates to his human creatures in history and in redemption. Here the human mind is stretched to its

limits and beyond when it dares to inquire how divine sovereignty and human freedom relate to each other. One is almost certain to change one's mind several times over a lifetime on mysteries as deep as these. In speaking of Augustine and Arminius in the title of this chapter, I am using the names of two famous theologians to symbolize two profound ways of structuring the answer--Augustine placing the emphasis on the sovereignty of God and Arminius putting it on significant human freedom. My pilgrimage can be described as a journey from Augustine to Arminius. But I could as easily have spoken of Calvin and Wesley, or Luther and Erasmus. Let us be aware too as I relate the story that it is not a one-way street. Many others, such as R. C. Sproul, will be able to write about their odyssey in the opposite direction. Well-meaning, thoughtful Christians can and do differ in their judgments on these important matters. Therefore, we need to listen to one another, hold back the recriminations, and see what we can learn from one another.

## **THE CALVINISTIC HEGEMONY IN EVANGELICALISM**

Brought up as I was in a liberal church and converted in my teens chiefly through the witness of my grandmother, I was introduced in a natural way during the 1950s to the institutions of what is inexactly called "evangelicalism" in North America, a quasi-denominational world furnished with its own publishers, magazines, conference centers, famous evangelists, youth organizations, and the like. Although there is a great and growing diversity theologically and otherwise in this coalition, the dominating theology is Reformed or Calvinian. Critics have not exaggerated much when they have wanted to call it "neo-Calvinism."

Certainly most of the authors I was introduced to in those early days as theologically "sound" were staunchly Calvinistic: John Murray, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Cornelius Van Til, Carl Henry, James Parker, Paul Jewett. Theirs were the books that were sold in the Inter-Varsity bookroom I frequented. They were the ones I was told to listen to; sound theology was what they would teach me. A simple fact, which I did not think much about at the time, was that Calvinian theology enjoyed an elitist position of dominance within postwar evangelicalism on both sides of the Atlantic. This was due in part to the fact that it was and is also a scholarly and historic system of evangelical theology. Therefore, it is no surprise that I began my theological life as a Calvinist who regarded alternate evangelical interpretations as suspect and at least mildly heretical. I accepted the view I was given that Calvinism was just scriptural evangelicalism in its purest expression, and I did not question it for a long time.

## **A HOLE IN THE DIKE**

I held onto this view until about 1970, when one of the links in the chain of the tight Calvinian logic broke. It had to do with the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, likely the weakest link in Calvinian logic, scripturally speaking. I was teaching at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School at the time and attending to the doctrine particularly in the book of Hebrews. If in fact believers enjoy the kind of absolute security Calvinism had taught me they do, I found I could not make very good sense of the vigorous exhortations

to persevere (e.g., 3:12) or the awesome warnings not to fall away from Christ (e.g., 10:26), which the book addresses to Christians. It began to dawn on me that my security in God was linked to my faith-union with Christ and that God is teaching us here the extreme importance of maintaining and not forsaking this relationship. The exhortations and the warnings could only signify that continuing in the grace of God was something that depended at least in part on the human partner. And once I saw that, the logic of Calvinism was broken in principle, and it was only a matter of time before the larger implications of its breaking would dawn on me. The thread was pulled, and the garment must begin to unravel, as indeed it did.

What had dawned on me was what I had known experientially all along in my walk with the Lord, that there is a profound mutuality in our dealings with God. What happens between us is not simply the product of a set of divine decrees that, written on an everlasting and unchangeable scroll, determine all that takes place in the world. I began to doubt the existence of an all-determining fatalistic blueprint for history and to think of God's having made us significantly free creatures able to accept or reject his purposes for us (Luke 7:30). Even the good news of the grace of God will not benefit us, as Hebrews says, unless "mixed with faith in the hearers." (Heb. 4:2) For the first time I realized theologically that the dimension of reciprocity and conditionality had to be brought into the picture of God's relations with us in creation and redemption and that, once it is brought in, the theological landscape would have to change significantly. The determinist model cannot survive once a person starts down this road, as scripturally I came to see I must.

As a Calvinist of course I had professed to believe in a kind of human freedom, a compatibilist kind that claims that our actions can be both free and determined at the same time. Sometimes I would try to explain it, other times I would give up and call it an antinomy, but deep down I knew there was something amiss. I was faintly aware that an action forever predetermined to be what it will be, however necessitated, whether by external factors or internal motives, did not deserve to be called a "free" action. Now, given my new discovery, I was able to move away from that construction and see the biblical view of human freedom in a different way. God made us "responsible" beings able to respond freely to his word and call. Of the essence of this creature that bears God's own image, marking it off from all the others in this world, is this wonderful capacity to relate or decline to relate to God, to love or not to love him. It was now open to me to regard people not as the product of a timeless decree but as God's covenant partners and real players in the flow and the tapestry of history. I hardly need to add that my reaction to this discovery was one of considerable relief.

## **THE WIDENING IMPLICATIONS**

Driven by Scripture itself as I reflected on it, and not out of rationalist motives as some might unkindly suggest, I found myself having to push ahead and do more rethinking in several other areas of doctrine adjacent to this one in the years that followed during the 1970s. Just as one cannot change the pitch of a single string on the violin without adjusting the others, so one cannot introduce a major new insight into a coherent system

like Calvinian theology without having to reconsider many other issues. Let me explain five of the doctrinal moves that logic required and I believed Scripture permitted me to make during this period.

1. The first and the best discovery I made was that there was no "horrible decree" at all. Calvin had used this expression in connection with his belief that God in his sovereign good pleasure had predestined some people to be eternally lost for no fault of theirs (Institutes, 3.23). Calvin was compelled to say that because, if one thinks that God determines all that happens in the world (his Augustinian premise) and not all are to be saved in the end (as he believed the Bible taught), there was no way around it. Calvin's logic was impeccable as usual: God wills whatever happens, so if there are to be lost people, God must have willed it. It was as logically necessary as it was morally intolerable.

Of course I had always known how morally loathsome the doctrine of double predestination is and how contradictory it is to the universal biblical texts, but I had not known previously how to avoid it. But now with the insight of reciprocity in hand, which had just surfaced for me in rethinking the doctrine of perseverance, it became possible for me to accept the scriptural teaching of the universal salvific will of God and not feel duty-bound to deny it as before. I was now in a position to rejoice in the truth that God's will is for all to be saved (I Tim. 2:4), and that God's grace has appeared for the salvation of all people (Titus 2:11).

The dark shadow was lifting; the logic of Calvinism could no longer blind me to these lines of biblical teaching. All mankind has been included in the saving plan of God and in the redemption of Jesus Christ. By the obedience of the Son, there is acquittal and life for all people (Rom. 5:18). Thus the invitation can go out to all sinners, sincerely urging them to repent and believe the good news that offers salvation to everyone without hedging. The banquet of salvation has been set for all people. God has provided plenteous redemption in the work of Christ, sufficient for the salvation of the entire race of sinners. All that remains for any individual to benefit from what was accomplished for him is to respond to the good news and enter into the new relationship with God that has been opened up for all persons.

2. I was then driven back to the Scriptures to reconsider what divine election might mean, if in fact God desires all to be saved and cannot be thought of any longer as selecting some to be saved and placing the others under wrath and reprobation, as in high Calvinism. How shall I understand those texts that I had always assumed said and meant exactly that?

One possibility that presented itself was to think of election as being based on the foreknowledge of God (Rom. 8:29); I Peter 1:2). This was the standard Arminian position--one favored by early Greek fathers--and it would deviate least from the Calvinian idea of the selection of a certain number of specific individuals from before the creation of the world to be saved. It would simply introduce, on the basis of divine omniscience, the element of conditionality into the idea of divine election and thus appear

to rescue it from arbitrariness. Although at this time I had not yet come to reconsider the nature of the divine omniscience presupposed in this account, even then I found myself attracted to a second possibility--that election is a corporate category and not oriented to the choice of individuals for salvation. I knew that everyone admitted this to be the case in the Old Testament where the election of Israel is one of a people to be God's servant in a special way. Was it possible that the New Testament texts too could be interpreted along these same lines? Upon reflection I decided that they could indeed be read corporately, election then speaking of a class of people rather than specific individuals. God has chosen a people for his Son, and we are joined and belong to the elect body by faith in Christ (Eph. 1:3-24).

Viewed in this way, election, far from arbitrarily excluding anybody, encompasses them all potentially. As a corporate symbol, election is no longer a dark mystery, but a joyous cause of praise and thanksgiving. Not only so but this model has the distinct advantage of construing election as a divine decision and not the pale notion of God's ratifying our choices as in the standard Arminian interpretation. If election is understood as a corporate category, then it would be God's unconditional decision and be potentially universal as regards all individuals. All are invited to become part of the elect people by personal faith. In addition the idea of corporate election would have had the further advantage of not requiring absolute divine omniscience, which became an issue for me later on.

3. Predestination proved to be less of a problem, surprisingly enough. Familiarity with the dynamic character of God's dealing with human beings according to the biblical narrative had prepared me to see predestination in terms of God's setting goals for people rather than forcing them to enact the preprogrammed decrees. God predestines us to be conformed to the image of his Son (Rom. 8:29). That is his plan for us, whether or not we choose to go down that path. God's plan for the world and for ourselves does not suppress but rather sustains and includes the spontaneity of significant human decisions. We are co-workers with God, participating with him in what shall be hereafter. The future is not stored up on heavenly video tape, but is the realm of possibilities, many of which have yet to be decided and actualized. Peter gives us a nice illustration of this when he explains the delay of Christ's return as being due to God's desire to see more sinners saved--God actually postponing the near return of Christ for their sakes (2 Peter 3:9).

Previously I had to swallow hard and accept the Calvinian antinomy that required me to believe both that God determines all things and that creaturely freedom is real. I made a valiant effort to believe this seeming contradiction on the strength of biblical infallibility, being assured that the Bible actually taught it. So I was relieved to discover that the Bible does not actually teach such an incoherence, and this particular paradox was a result of Calvinian logic, not scriptural dictates. Having created human beings with relative autonomy alongside himself, God voluntarily limits his power to enable them to exist and to share in the divine creativity. God invites humans to share in deciding what the future will be. God does not take it all onto his own shoulders. Does this compromise God's power? No, surely not, for to create such a world in fact requires a divine power of a kind higher than merely coercive.

When predestination is viewed in this light, there is immense relief also in the area of theodicy. The logic of consistent Calvinism makes God the author of evil and casts serious doubt on his goodness. One is compelled to think of God's planning such horrors as Auschwitz, even though none but the most rigorous Calvinians can bring themselves to admit it. But if predestination is thought of as an all-inclusive set of goals and not an all-determining plan, then the difficulty for theodicy is greatly eased. Later, I was to conclude that rethinking the divine omniscience would ease it still more.

Obviously what is happening here is a paradigm shift in my biblical hermeneutics. I am in the process of learning to read the Bible from a new point of view, one that I believe is more truly evangelical and less rationalistic. Looking at it from the vantage point of God's universal salvific will and of significant human freedom, I find that many new verses leap up from the page, while many old familiar ones take on new meaning. In the past I would slip into my reading of the Bible dark assumptions about the nature of God's decrees and intentions. What a relief to be done with them!

4. The depth of human sinfulness was another matter that demanded my attention. Calvinists, like Augustine himself, if the reader will excuse the anachronism, wanting to leave no room at all to permit any recognition of human freedom in the salvation event, so defined human depravity as total that it would be impossible to imagine any sinner calling upon God to save him. Thus they prevented anyone from thinking about salvation in the Arminian way. Leaving aside the fact that Augustinians themselves often and suspiciously qualify their notion of "total" depravity very considerably and invent the notion of common grace to tone it down, I knew I had to consider how to understand the free will of the sinner in relation to God.

Again, I had a choice of paths to follow. I knew that Wesley had opted for a doctrine of universal prevenient grace by which God enabled the spiritually dead sinner to respond to him in faith. The Fourth Gospel speaks of a universal drawing action of God (John 12:32). This move allowed him to retain his belief in total depravity and still avoid the Calvinistic consequences in terms of particularist election and limited grace. But I also knew that the Bible has no developed doctrine of universal prevenient grace, however convenient it would be for us if it did. Hence, I was drawn instead to question total depravity itself as a possible ambush designed to cut off non-Augustinians at the pass. Was there any evidence that Jesus, for example, regarded people as totally depraved? Does the Bible generally not leave us with the impression that one can progress in sin as in holiness, and that how total one's depravity is varies from person to person and is not a constant? Surely "total" depravity biblically would be the point beyond which it is not possible to go in realizing the full possibilities of sinfulness and not the actual condition of all sinners at the present time. In any case, what became decisive for me was the simple fact that Scripture appeals to people as those who are able and responsible to answer to God (however we explain it) and not as those incapable of doing so, as Calvinian logic would suggest. The gospel addresses them as free and responsible agents, and I must suppose it does so because that is what they are.

5. I also found I had to think about the atoning work of Christ. The easy part was

accepting the obvious fact that contrary to Calvinian logic Jesus died for the sins of the whole world according to the New Testament. Exegesis stands strongly against the system on this point. I had no difficulty with the verses that asserted Christ's death on behalf of the whole race because they fitted so obviously into the doctrine of God's universal salvific will, which I had already come to accept. Even Calvin himself, if not all of his followers, was prepared to concede the universal extent of the atonement and view it as sufficient for the sins of the whole world.

The difficulty arose at the point of the theory that would explain this universal atonement for me. Assuming, as any evangelical would, that the Cross involved some kind of substitution in which Christ bore the guilt of human sin, where then does the human response fit into that? One might easily suppose that all those who were substituted for in the death of Christ would necessarily be saved and have the guilt of their sins automatically removed without any action of theirs entering into it. So if Christ really took away the guilt of the sins of the race, is the whole race then not now justified by virtue of that fact? Has not Christ actually achieved their salvation for them? And would this not lead inexorably either to universal salvation or to the doctrine of limited or particular atonement (neither of which are biblically supported)? What kind of substitution, if unlimited in scope, does not entail absolute universalism in salvation?

Obviously it required me to reduce the precision in which I understood the substitution to take place. Christ's death on behalf of the race evidently did not automatically secure for anyone an actual reconciled relationship with God, but made it possible for people to enter into such a relationship by faith. Gospel invitations in the New Testament alone make this clear. It caused me to look again first at the theory of Anselm and later of Hugo Grotius, both of whom encourage us to view the atonement as an act of judicial demonstration rather than a strict or quantitative substitution as such. Paul's word in Romans 3:25-26 then became more important for me where the apostle himself declares that the cross was a demonstration of the righteousness of God, proving God's holiness even in the merciful justification of sinners.

Later on I became impressed with Barth's version of substitution in terms of a great exchange in which the last Adam proved victorious over sin and Satan by standing in place of the whole human race, bearing the wrath of God against all our sin, and achieving the reconciliation of mankind objectively. My main hesitation lay in the need to place greater stress on the human appropriation of this saving act, because Barth leans too far in the objective direction and needs to be better balanced. Faith, after all, is the condition for the concrete realization of this salvation in anyone able to respond.

### **FREE-WILL THEISM**

More recently the course of my theological pilgrimage has taken me onto the territory of Christian theism itself. Although I had already come to a fresh understanding of the goodness and power of God, I realized in the early 1980s that there were still more implications to be drawn in the area of the divine attributes. It is understandable that they would dawn on me last rather than first because God who is the mystery of human life is

also theology's greatest and most demanding subject. But I could not finally escape rethinking the doctrine of God, however difficult.

The basic problem I had to cope with here is the fact that the classical model of Christian theism, shaped so decisively by Augustine under the influence of Greek philosophy, located the biblical picture of a dynamic personal God in the context of a way of thinking about God that placed high value on the Deity's being timeless, changeless, passionless, unmoved, and unmovable. The resulting synthesis more than subtly altered the biblical picture of God and tended to suppress some important aspects of it. In particular it resisted hearing the Bible's witness to a God who genuinely interacts with the world, responds passionately to what happens in it, and even changes his own plans to fit changing historical circumstances. Augustine's idea that God knows and determines all things in advance and never has to adjust his planning is one that stands in obvious tension with the Bible and yet is deeply fixed in historic Christian thinking. It is due to the accommodation made in classical theism to the Hellenistic culture.

Although the Bible itself presents a very dynamic picture of God and the world, the Greek world in which Christianity moved in the early centuries had a very negative view of historical change and the passage of time and therefore preferred to conceptualize the Deity in terms of pure actuality, changelessness, timelessness, and the like--ideas that negate the value of history and historical change. Curiously, in this respect at least, modern culture, which values history so much, is closer to the biblical view than classical theism.

I soon realized something would have to be done about the received doctrine of God. I knew I would have to deal with the fact that God has made creatures with relative autonomy alongside himself and that I would have to consider what that implies for the nature and attributes of God.

1. First of all I knew we had to clarify what we meant by the divine immutability. I saw that we have been far too influenced by Plato's idea that a perfect being would not change because, being perfect, it would not need to change--any change would be for the worse. The effect of this piece of Greek natural theology on Christian thinking had been to picture God as virtually incapable of responsiveness. Creatures can relate to God, all right, but God cannot really relate to them. Christian piety has always assumed a reciprocity between God and ourselves of course, but the official theology had tended to undercut the assumption by declaring God to be unconditioned in every aspect of his being.

The way forward, I found, was to speak of specific ways in which the God of the Bible is unchangeable, for example, in his being as God and in his character as personal agent--and also of ways in which God is able to change, as in his personal relationships with us and with the creation. It is not a question of God's changing in the sense of becoming better or worse, but of his pursuing covenant relationship and partnership with his people out of love for them flexibly and creatively. Immutable in his self-existence, the God of the Bible is relational and changeable in his interaction with his creatures. The Word

"became" flesh--praise God for his changing unchangeability!

2. Although thinking of God as timeless has some apparently positive advantages, I came to believe that it also posed a threat to the basic biblical category of God's personal agency. How could a timeless being deliberate, remember, or anticipate? How could it plan an action and undertake it? How could it even respond to something that had happened? What kind of a person would a timeless being be? I had known of these philosophical objections to a timeless deity for some time but had not previously given much thought to possible biblical objections. What I came to realize at this stage was how strongly the Bible itself speaks of God as operating from within time and history. He is always presented in the Bible as One who can look back to the past, relate to the present as present, and make plans for what is yet to happen. The alleged timelessness of God does not make a lot of sense to this way of portraying the deity. Of course I do not think God is threatened by time. He is the everlasting God, and his years have no end. But the Bible presents him as operating from within time. God is able to be inside time, and not only outside of it. If he were not able to be within time, he would not be able to be with us on our journey or freely relate to what goes on or make plans and carry them out or experience the joy of victory or the anguish of defeat, as Scripture says God does. Everything would be completely fixed and settled, and novelty would be mere appearance and unreal.

3. Finally I had to rethink the divine omniscience and reluctantly ask whether we ought to think of it as an exhaustive foreknowledge of everything that will ever happen, as even most Arminians do. I found I could not shake off the intuition that such a total omniscience would necessarily mean that everything we will ever choose in the future will have been already spelled out in the divine knowledge register, and consequently the belief that we have truly significant choices to make would seem to be mistaken. I knew the Calvinist argument that exhaustive foreknowledge was tantamount to predestination because it implies the fixity of all things from "eternity past," and I could not shake off its logical force. I feared that, if we view God as timeless and omniscient, we will land back in the camp of theological determinism where these notions naturally belong. It makes no sense to espouse conditionality and then threaten it by other assumptions that we make.

Therefore, I had to ask myself if it was biblically possible to hold that God knows everything that can be known, but that free choices would not be something that can be known even by God because they are not yet settled in reality. Decisions not yet made do not exist anywhere to be known even by God. They are potential--yet to be realized but not yet actual. God can predict a great deal of what we will choose to do, but not all of it, because some of it remains hidden in the mystery of human freedom. Can this conjecture be scriptural?

When I went to the Scriptures with this question in mind, I found more support than I had expected. Evidently the logic of Calvinism had worked effectively to silence some of the biblical data even for me. I began to notice how the prophets in the Old Testament would present God as considering the future as something he did not already know fully. God is presented as saying, "Perhaps they will understand," or "Perhaps they will repent,"

making it sound as if God is not altogether sure about the future and what he may have to do when it reveals itself (Jer. 3:7; Ezek. 12:3). I also detected a strong conditional element in God's speech; for example, "If you change your ways, I will let you dwell in this place, but if not..." (Jer. 7:5-7). These are future possibilities that are seen to hang upon the people's amendment of their ways, and what God will do (and therefore knows) depends on these outcomes. God too faces possibilities in the future, and not only certainties. God too moves into a future not wholly known because not yet fixed. At times God even asks himself questions like "What shall I do with you?" (Hosea 6:4).

Most Bible readers simply pass over this evidence and do not take it seriously. They assume the traditional notion of exhaustive omniscience supported more by the old logic than by the biblical text. Of course the Bible praises God for his detailed knowledge of what will happen and what he himself will do. But it does not teach limitless foreknowledge, because the future will include as-yet-undecided human choices and as-yet-unselected divine responses to them. The God of the Bible displays an openness to the future that the traditional view of omniscience simply cannot accommodate.

Thus it has become increasingly clear to me that we need a "free will" theism, a doctrine of God that treads the middle path between classical theism, which exaggerates God's transcendence of the world, and process theism, which presses for radical immanence.

## **THE LARGER MOVEMENT**

Relating my pilgrimage would not be of much importance if it did not represent the experience of other evangelicals also, but I think it does. It is my strong impression, confirmed to me even by those not pleased by it, that Augustinian thinking is losing its hold on present-day Christians. All the evangelists seem to herald the universal salvific will of God without hedging. The believing masses appear to take for granted a belief in human free will. It is hard to find a Calvinist theologian willing to defend Reformed theology, including the views of both Calvin and Luther, in all its rigorous particulars now that Gordon Clark is no longer with us and John Gerstner is retired. Few have the stomach to tolerate Calvinian theology in its logical purity. The laity seem to gravitate happily to Arminians like C. S. Lewis for their intellectual understanding. So I do not think I stand alone. The drift away from theological determinism is definitely on.

At the same time, however, the Calvinists continue to be major players in the evangelical coalition, even though their dominance has lessened. They pretty well control the teaching of theology in the large evangelical seminaries; they own and operate the largest book-publishing houses; and in large part they manage the inerrancy movement. This means they are strong where it counts--in the area of intellectual leadership and property. Thus one comes to expect evangelical systematic theology to be Reformed as it usually is. The key theological articles in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (1984) are Calvinian, for example. Although there are many Arminian thinkers in apologetics, missiology, and the practice of ministry, there are only a few evangelical theologians ready to go to bat for non-Augustinian opinions. The Reformed impulse continues to carry great weight in the leadership of the evangelical denominations, though less than it

did in the 50s.

Therefore, it was in part a sense of frustration that prompted me initially to edit *Grace Unlimited* in 1975 and the present volume now. I wanted to do something, however modest, to give a louder voice to the silent majority of Arminian evangelicals, to help them understand the theological route they are traveling, and to encourage others to speak up theologically.

### **WHY IS IT HAPPENING?**

Every generation reads the Bible in dialogue with its own vision and cultural presuppositions and has to come to terms with the world view of its day. Augustine did this when he sought to interpret the biblical symbols in terms of the Hellenistic culture and became the first predestinarian in Christian theology. The church fathers before him had denied fatalism, but Augustine out of his experience and intellect devised the system I have been struggling with. Today, like Augustine, we are reading the Bible afresh but in the twentieth-century context and finding new insights we had not noticed before. Just as Augustine came to terms with ancient Greek thinking, so we are making peace with the culture of modernity. Influenced by modern culture, we are experiencing reality as something dynamic and historical and are consequently seeing things in the Bible we never saw before. The time is past when we can be naive realists in hermeneutics; who we are influences what we see. It is no different now than it was before in this respect. And the rich diversity of biblical doctrine means that changes in orientation are always going to be possible, enabling us to communicate in fresh tones to our contemporary hearers.

I do not think we should feel we have lost something of absolute value when we find ourselves at variance with some of the old so-called orthodox interpretations. There is no need to ruminate darkly about the cause of Arminian thinking being satanic malice or the natural darkness of the human mind. Rather, it is a day of great opportunity for the gospel to be heard in exciting new ways and to become effective as never before. Of course there will be some nostalgia when we leave behind the logically and beautifully tight system of determinist theology. But that will be more than matched and made up for by a sense of liberation from its darker side, which (to be honest) makes hell as much the divine purpose as heaven and the fall into sin as much God's work as salvation is. It is in fact an opportunity to be faithful to the Bible in new ways and to state the truth of the Christian message creatively for the modern generation.

One thing I am asking people to give up is the myth that evangelicals often hold--that there is such a thing as an orthodox systematic theology, equated with what Calvin, for example, taught and which is said to be in full agreement with the Bible. As if theology itself were an immutable system of concepts not relative at all to the historical context in which they are conceived and framed! Granted, the idea holds great appeal for us, not because it is our experience, but because it delivers such a delicious sense of security and gives us such a great platform from which to assail those dreadful liberals who are such historicists. By this means we can try to insulate ourselves from the dizziness one feels

when too many concepts are being questioned and called in for review and revision. I guess it is time for evangelicals to grow up and recognize that evangelical theology is not an uncontested body of timeless truth. There are various accounts of it. Augustine got some things right, but not everything. How many evangelicals follow him on the matter of the infallible church or the miraculous sacraments? Like it or not, we are embarked on a pilgrimage in theology and cannot determine exactly where will it lead and how it will end.

I have no remedy for those who wish to walk by sight because they find the way of faith too unnerving, or for those who wish to freeze theological development at some arbitrary point in past history. I have no comfort for those who, afraid of missing eternal truth, choose to identify it with some previous theological work and try to impose it unchanged on the present generation or desire to speak out of the past and not to come into contact with the modern situation. I have no answer for those who are frightened to think God may have more light to break forth from his holy Word.

But there is true comfort in the gospel and in the promise of our Lord to preserve his church through time and give to her the Spirit of truth to guide her in the midst of her struggles. Jesus assured us that the Paraclete would be with us forever and would be guiding us into all the truth. God's people will persist in the truth in spite of all our errors. If an Augustine had the courage to deal with the culture of his day and come up with some dazzling new insights, then we can do the same in our own setting. Just repeating what he said isn't good enough anymore. We have better news to tell than his rendition of the Christian message.

