

There are Two Kinds of People in the World
Which Kind are You?

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A teenage girl, one time, was speaking at a rally. She was really speaking to the girls in the audience, and she said ... “Girls, I want to ask you something. When there’s a fashion magazine ... have you noticed that you’ll take the first issue, the issue that’s up front on the newsstand, and you’ll flip through it to see does have good things in it ... [but then] You always reach to the back and you take a fresh copy: That’s what you take to the cash register.” She said, “Girls, here’s the deal. The boys can flip around on the front all they want to, but when they get ready to get married, they’re reaching for the back. And when they reach for the back, that’s where I’m going to be.”¹

This anecdote comes from an interview with Richard Ross in the 2015 documentary *Give Me Sex, Jesus*, which tells stories of people who lived through the Evangelical Purity Movement that began in the 1980s and continues today, albeit with waning enthusiasm. Ross is co-founder of True Love Waits, a subsidiary of LifeWay Ministries that promotes virginity before marriage through various products including events, pledge cards, purity rings, and Bible study curriculum. “I just thought that was wonderful,” Ross continues in his interview, “and she said, ‘I’ve had girls walk up to me with sadness in their eyes saying, ‘I would give anything if I could be like you, but of course, now, it’s impossible.’”²

The Purity Movement thrives on distinction: who is in and who is out. Virgins and non-virgins. The pure and the impure. As Ross explains, from the point of view of the rally speaker talking to a non-virgin, “I could become like you in thirty minutes. But you can never become like me, because this most precious part of who you are is gone. It’s gone forever.” The movement touts a distorted version of Arminian soteriology, in which all

¹ *Give Me Sex, Jesus*, directed by Matt Barber (2015; Los Angeles, CA: SideHug Films, LLC), DVD.

² Ibid.

people fall into two classes—those who respond to God’s grace and opt into salvation, and those who choose the path of destruction. Arminian theology requires only belief in God and a renunciation of sin; it does not require virginity or any other form of sexual purity as a prerequisite for salvation. This paper will demonstrate the connection between the two movements and the distortions embraced by the modern faction. The Purity Movement is a cousin to Arminianism that gained ground by convincing would-be followers that the eternal security of their soul is within reach, if they would only make better choices for themselves—as defined by the leaders of the movement. It capitalizes on the belief of salvation by class while distorting the high value Arminianism places on human agency to keep adherents in line and performing their faith per a specific code of conduct.

Jacobus Arminius was a preacher and professor in Amsterdam at the turn of the seventeenth century tasked with refuting the opinions of Dirck Koornhert, a theologian who disagreed with some aspects of Calvinist doctrine. In the process of reading Koornhert in light of scripture and several major reformers, Arminius found he ultimately agreed with him.³ Thus Arminianism was born out of a critique of Calvinism and was developed and articulated throughout a number of defenses, debates, and synods from 1603, past Arminius’s death in 1609, until it was finally recognized as a legitimate theology within the reformed movement in 1631.⁴

Following his death, Arminius’s successor at the University of Leiden, Simon Episcopus, continued to champion his convictions. In 1610, under the leadership of Episcopus and pastor Hans Uytenbogaert, 46 pastors, theologians, and laypeople known as

³ Justo L. Gonzales, *The Story of Christianity* (Sydney, Australia: HarperCollins e-books, 2010), Kindle edition, chap. 21.

⁴ Ibid.

the Remonstrants met in Gouda and drafted *The Remonstrance* in response to charges of heresy brought against them.⁵ This statement of belief contains five central points:

1. Conditional election
2. Universal atonement
3. Total depravity/prevenient grace
4. Resistible grace
5. Conditional perseverance⁶

Each of these doctrinal values is present in some form in the literature of the Purity Movement, most often in the form of calls to personal responsibility and the practice of hypervigilance in order to draw near to God and avoid being on the wrong side of the conditional aspects of the faith.

Arminianism came to the forefront of the U.S. religious imagination during the Second Great Awakening, a movement which spanned the first half of the nineteenth century. The stark differences between the First and Second Great Awakenings can be primarily attributed to who received credit for each movement: God or humankind. Jonathan Edwards, the theologian of the First Great Awakening, was a staunch Calvinist who titled his account of the movement *A Faithful Narrative of a Surprising Work of God*. Edwards's counterpart Charles Finney, on the other hand, declared that "revival was 'the work of man.'"⁷ In this age of revivals, Finney doubted that Calvinism was practical: it did not lend itself to mass conversion because it required waiting on God's action. "Instead, he preached that by the mere exercise of volition anyone could repent of sin and thereby claim salvation ... salvation was available to all; it required merely an assent on the part of the

⁵ Michael D. Williams, "The Five Points of Arminianism," *Presbyterion* 30, no. 1 (2004): 26-27.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁷ Randall Balmer, "The Age of Revivals and the First Amendment," in *The Making of Evangelicalism: From Revivalism to Politics and Beyond* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 19.

individual.”⁸ This proved appealing to Finney’s audience, a nation of people who had just recently determined their own political destiny and were now being invited to determine their own religious—or *eternal*—destiny as well. The promise that “you control your own spiritual destiny”⁹ suited the American people and has survived through generations of evangelicalism—the Purity Movement is just one example of many of how Arminianism continues to influence expressions of American Christianity today.

The Arminian conviction of conditional election is based on John 3:36—“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God’s wrath” (NRSV). Unlike its parent—Calvinism—in which salvific election is predestined on an individual level, Arminianism operates on a broader scope in which sinners are placed into two classes of people: the saved and the damned. “God does not predestine individuals,” Michael Williams explains, “but rather classes of persons, that is to say, those who will believe the gospel and those who will not.”¹⁰ There are two kinds of people in the world—and it is up to each person to decide which kind they will be for all eternity.

This sense of agency in claiming salvation for oneself is expressed in the Purity Movement’s emphasis on personal responsibility. Elisabeth Elliot’s *Passion and Purity: Bring Your Love Life Under Jesus Christ’s Control*, published in 1984, is part memoir, part sermon, part cultural commentary. It tells the story of Elliot’s 1948-1952 courtship with her late husband, Jim Elliot, while critiquing post-sexual-revolution America and teaching what it means to live a Christian life. Reflecting on the days gone past, Elliot writes, “A

⁸ Ibid., 20.

⁹ Ibid., 25.

¹⁰ Williams, 17.

woman knew that she possessed a priceless treasure, her virginity. She guarded it jealously for the man who would pay a price for it—commitment to marriage with her and with her alone. Even in societies where polygamy was allowed, rules governed responsibilities to spouses, rules on which the whole stability of the society depended.”¹¹ Elliot advocates for a return to traditional gender roles, which she asserts are innate in humankind.¹² She places a high importance on order and *the way things ought to be*. In other words, *the way God intends things to be*. Ever since Adam and Eve and their debacle with the fruit,¹³ humanity is at a disadvantage in its sinful nature, but strict adherence to God’s Way is still required. It will require extra effort. If only men and women could get back to God’s intended roles for them, everything else would fall into place; it is what “the whole stability of the society” depends on.

The good news is that atonement is universally available to all. Williams explains that, whereas Calvinism allows that “Christ died for me,” Arminius and his followers shift the focus to say, “Christ died for sins.”¹⁴ The elimination of particularity seen in the first article applies here as well, making atonement available to everyone who has sinned, rather than specific individuals, based on I John 2:2—“He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world” (NRSV). Those who concern themselves with purity are able to capitalize on this theological value to remind their audience that God has already taken the initiative and only awaits their response. “Have you forgotten,” Elliot quotes from a conversation with God in her journal, ““that

¹¹ Elisabeth Elliot, *Passion and Purity: Bring Your Love Life Under Jesus Christ’s Control* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1984), 20.

¹² *Ibid.*, 109.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Williams, 28.

your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and is God's gift to you, and that you are not the owner of your own body? You have been bought, and at a price!' The sense of destiny: Someone has paid for me with blood."¹⁵ Joshua Harris, a disciple of Elliot and poster child for the Purity Movement, advises his readers in their shame for sins already committed, bad relationships, sex already had. In his book, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, he addresses this shame in himself also, being a recovered dater, writing, "For sinners like you and me, there's good news: Christ paid our debt."¹⁶ Even though personal responsibility plays a major role in Purity Movement literature, the hard work of saving is indeed a free gift. Christ is risen; he is risen once and for all.

The third of the five articles of remonstrance holds together total depravity and prevenient grace. The two go hand-in-hand because "humans can do nothing good on their own account, and [...] the grace of God is necessary in order to do good."¹⁷ Prevenient grace is Arminianism's upgrade to Calvinism's total depravity doctrine in allowing for God's grace to permeate the world to the extent that it is inescapable. As Williams summarizes, "Human beings, who were formerly unable to contribute the slightest to their own redemption, and who were deprived by and enslaved to sin, are sufficiently restored by God's gift of prevenient grace so that they are able to choose for or against the work of Christ."¹⁸ The dark underbelly of this gift of grace is that, like universal atonement, there is no excuse for not knowing, accepting, loving, and following Jesus Christ. Who would say no to that?

¹⁵ Elliot, 24.

¹⁶ Joshua Harris, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye: A New Attitude Toward Romance and Relationships* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books, 1997), 107.

¹⁷ Gonzales, chap. 21.

¹⁸ Williams, 30.

The Purity Movement hinges on a low view of humanity and a high view of God, the two of which are often in opposition to one another. Harris writes, “The sooner we get acquainted with the contents of our hearts, the better. Too many of us are blissfully unaware of how deceitful the core of our beings can truly be. [...] But often, if we’d really examine our hearts, we’d find lies, selfishness, lust, envy, and pride. And that’s the abridged list!”¹⁹ This low view of humanity is found throughout the entirety of the Purity Movement, and “though we might be surprised” by the contents of our hearts, “God is not.”²⁰ On the other hand, God is very, very good—so much so that God’s will and human will are eternally opposed to one another. This leads some to advocate for the erasure of one’s self in order to be more like Christ.

Instead, Elliot reflects on the angst she reads in her old journal as she wrestled with her desires and yearned for transformation: “I was certainly in a state! ‘Clogged with wishes.’ I was wishing that my wishes were what God wished, and if my wishes were not what God wished, I wished that I could wish that my wishes would go away, but the wishes were still there.”²¹ This becomes problematic when one’s view of humanity and self becomes so repugnant that it becomes difficult to function. Elliot’s story is full of grinding halts, of not being able to move forward out of an inability to trust herself and her instincts, that prevent her from fully living into her call as a missionary and denies Jesus’s claim that he came to give life abundant.²²

¹⁹ Harris, 137.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Elliot, 45.

²² “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly,” John 10:10, NRSV.

The grace of God, though prevenient, is also resistible. This conviction is in direct contrast with Augustine’s teaching that God’s grace acts upon humanity regardless of human response or action. But Scripture itself bears witness to people resisting God’s grace—see Judas Iscariot and the rich young ruler, for example—and according to the Remonstrants, the one who resists is no “blindly recalcitrant rebel,” for “No such person is possible according to Arminius, for all people are sufficiently enabled to accept the gospel, if they so will.”²³ This understanding of each believer’s responsibility to meet God in the middle—to reach out and grab hold of the salvation being offered—makes abundantly clear that when it comes to being of the saved class, the locus of control is firmly seated in the heart of the would-be believer.

Therefore “the difference between the elect and the non-elect lies in the use that each makes of the grace offered to all.”²⁴ Within the realm of the Purity Movement, this value is expressed in pressure to behave in certain ways; it assumes that sexuality is dangerous—“dangerous as dynamite. Fire and water, too, are gifts of God, but when they get out of control, the result is devastation”—and has the power to damage one’s life and relationship with God beyond recognition.²⁵ And of course, the capacity to respond to the demands Christian faith puts on a person’s life is available through prevenient grace, so there is no excuse to do otherwise. Randy Alcorn’s *The Purity Principle* is a small guidebook that offers strategies for maintaining sexual purity. Emphasizing the importance of setting personal and personalized boundaries, he writes, “A boundary may be not

²³ Williams, 25.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Like a flood, one’s sexuality could destroy oneself. Or their family. Or perhaps their entire village. Elliot, 95.

standing in a checkout line where certain magazines are displayed. Or not driving in a certain part of town. Or never going on a business trip alone.”²⁶ Because of the imminent threat posed by a sexuality that is with a person wherever they go, there is no opportunity for rest. Diligence is required, lest the sexual beast inside rear its ugly head.

In a similar vein, the fifth and final article pertains to conditional perseverance, “that staying saved is contingent not only upon the grace of God but also human effort.”²⁷ Unlike its predecessor Calvinism, Arminian theology does not guarantee a stable status of salvation. Possibly an unintended consequence of this theological point, when followed to its logical conclusion, is that, lacking permanence, salvation can conceivably be lost. As demonstrated above, purity culture requires personal responsibility, even diligence, and finally, when times get especially tough, one can always develop an unrelenting practice of hypervigilance.

Recall that Harris holds a disparaging view of the human heart. To combat this natural state, “Picture guarding your heart as if your heart were a criminal tied in a chair who would like to break free and knock you over the head. In other words, protect yourself from your heart’s sinfulness. Keep a wary eye on your heart, knowing that it can do you damage if it is not carefully watched.”²⁸ The rally speaker in the introduction to this paper knew this to be true as well: virginity can be lost in a moment, so every moment matters. There is only one chance to not ruin everything for all time. Although practitioners will allow for the work of God’s redemptive grace for healing, Alcorn explains (and Harris

²⁶ Randy Alcorn, *The Purity Principle* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2003), 44.

²⁷ Williams, 32.

²⁸ Harris, 137.

agrees) that there is no erasure of the damage that has been done, only a clean slate for moving forward.²⁹

What Williams describes as a synergistic model of redemption—“Salvation is a matter of both God and the sinner each doing [their] part”³⁰—plays out as a lifetime of working against oneself in order to stay in God’s graces. “Keep your television unplugged, store it in a closet, or put it in the garage to prevent mindless flip-on. Use the ‘off’ switch freely. Use the remote quickly when temptation comes. Have a safe channel ready to turn on.”³¹ Have a plan and have also a contingency plan for when the plan fails. The scary consequences are often left up to one’s imagination. Have an exit strategy in case The Worst happens. It will be bad. It will not technically be permanent because of God’s grace and forgiveness, but the consequences will definitely remain.

This sense of impending doom that may strike at any moment contributes to deep-seated sexual shame. One of Alcorn’s disciples wrote to him,

Occasional masturbation may not seem to warrant radical choices, but where will your sin lead? Will you end up with a friend’s wife? With a prostitute? Maybe, if unchecked, ten years from now you’ll be guilty of child sexual abuse, with news trucks pulling onto your front lawn. Sin always escalates. How many times have I heard men say, “I’m not that bad”? I always add, “... yet.”³² (Alcorn, 44)

Not only is this an obscene exaggeration of what a downward spiral *would actually likely look like* (if anything), it demonizes a natural impulse for touch and sexual pleasure. This is especially dangerous to adolescents receive a message of fear of what ‘could happen’ if they engage in masturbation (which they have probably already done) in lieu of teachings that

²⁹ Alcorn, 85; Harris, 107.

³⁰ Williams, 30.

³¹ Alcorn, 70.

³² Ibid., 44.

promote critical thinking and a healthy understanding of the inner-workings of their biology and body. It equates something harmless with something criminal and creates fear in the process.

Sara Moslener, professor of religion and author of *Virgin Nation*, analyzes the motivations behind the Evangelical Purity Movement and finds both fear and promise. In the present age, a new paradigm of church has emerged that promises prosperity—but in this case it is not monetary gain, but personal fulfillment (being a morally upstanding person) and sexual fulfillment (the promise that abstention from premarital sex improves marital sexual satisfaction).³³ In this context, the religious right has created and promotes a moral economy “in which the assurance of emotional, marital, and sexual fulfillment is provided in exchange for bodily control and spiritual obedience. In order for the economy to function, the purity movement relies upon the moral absolutism of the religion of fear.”³⁴ Do not masturbate, even one time. Do not have sex, even one time. Best to not get too close, because of What Could Happen. But if one does these things, there is great reward on the other side.

Arminian theology is not bad theology. It is, as all theologies are, imperfect; and it attempts to hold together the reality of free will and the benevolent goodness of God’s character. It would be a very rare anomaly to find that a theology was developed with the intent to harm, and there is no evidence that that is the case here. It has however, be distorted along the way as the leaders of the religious right have pulled from various Christian traditions along the way to gaining political and cultural power for their own

³³ Sara Moslener, “Fear and Accommodation in the Contemporary Purity Culture,” in *Virgin Nation: Sexual Purity and American Adolescence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 154.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 158.

benefit. As Moslener finds, “Much anxiety emerges from the fact that religious transformation is primarily personal and internal process—one that is often not easily detected by another unless revealed explicitly...a spiritually correct course is outwardly expressed in a sexually pure and disease-free body that is adorned with a silver [purity] ring.”³⁵

Today, what began with Arminius’s commitment to scripture and critical analysis of inherited doctrine has been used to leverage fear into performance. Where his early adherents bore witness to the prevenient grace of God, this particular group of modern Evangelicals gravitated toward the work that must be performed in order to stay ahead of the slippery slope of sin. A doctrine that begins with conditional election and ends with conditional perseverance ultimately leaves a great deal of room to lean too far toward a love of human agency and just a bit too far away from a love of God’s active salvific work in the world. Finding a balance that honors both God and humanity would provide an entrée to finding a path to a sex-positive theology that embraces the wonder of the human body and erases the need for hypervigilance, leading to a deep rest in the abundance of a life in God’s embrace.

³⁵ Ibid., 161.

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