The modest revival of interest in and study of the Dutch theologian Jacob Arminius (1559–1609) in the last three decades owes much to the efforts of Richard A. Muller, who in 1988 called for a “new perspective” on the theology of Arminius. Although Arminius has been a sort of ancillary project to his larger agenda on early modern Reformed theology, Muller’s important 1991 monograph and many illuminating articles on Arminius have demonstrated how much remains to be done for historians and theologians who wish to understand Arminius and the movement he inspired. In short, Muller has clarified Arminius’ relationship to the Reformed tradition and has shown that he was a key figure in the early development of Protestant scholasticism, revealing that there is much more to Arminius’ penetrating theology than a controversy about predestination.1

In addition to Arminius’ unqualified and eminent position as a Protestant scholastic, like most Reformed scholastics of his day, he stressed that the Christian faith was incomplete without the practice of piety. He was a minister at heart, preaching and pastoring in Amsterdam for fifteen years (1588–1603), more than twice the length of his later tenure as a theology professor in Leiden (1603–1609). In fact, his particular emphasis on good works—for instance, his high expectation for sanctification along with the acknowledgment that sin can precipitate a fall from grace—set him apart from many of his Reformed contemporaries and reinforced their charges of semi-Pelagianism against him.2 The prominence of right living for Arminius is summed up well in his oft-cited motto, which is the topic of this essay: *bona conscientia paradisus* (a good conscience is paradise). In this essay, the historical problems surrounding Arminius’ motto will be described, then the origin of the motto and its historical trajectory

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1 I have documented the contribution of Muller to Arminius studies more fully in Keith D. Stanglin, “Arminius and Arminianism: An Overview of Current Research,” in AAE, 8–13.

Historical Problems

There are two initial historical problems with the motto, *bona conscientia paradisus*. First, although it has been described by several biographers as Arminius' motto, it is difficult actually to trace the motto directly to Arminius himself. In his extant works, Arminius neither proclaimed the phrase as his motto nor wrote these three words in sequence. The first biographical sketch of Arminius—the funeral oration delivered by his friend Petrus Bertius (1565–1629)—says nothing of a motto. The first bit of positive evidence comes from a print of Arminius done by the Leiden artist, Willem van Swanenburg (1580–1612). This earliest surviving image of Arminius was published in a collection of prints in 1609. The second edition, which appeared in 1613, added the motto in all capital letters into the oval frame surrounding Arminius’ bust. This is the first appearance in print of this motto being connected with Arminius. The motto was often included in subsequent prints and portraits.

What about the first literary reference? Having checked the first Remonstrant history, written by Joannes Uytenbogaert in 1646, I did not find a reference to this motto. Rather, the first literary reference that connects this phrase to Arminius is found in volume two of Geeraert Brandt’s four-volume *History of the Reformation in the Low Countries*, first published in 1674. A Remonstrant minister charged by the Remonstrant Brotherhood with documenting their history, Brandt (1626–1685) wove many new stories about and epistolary excerpts from Arminius into his account of recent Dutch ecclesiastical history. After reporting Arminius’ death, Brandt wrote, “As a motto (sinspreuk) he used these words, BONA CONSCIENTIA PARADISUS, the good conscience is a Paradise.” An image