

An Historical Overview of the Synod of Dordt Reformation Church History

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THE SYNOD OF DORDT (1618-1619)

The Synod of Dordt (1618-19) was held in Dordrecht (South Holland); this was during the second generation of the Reformation (59 years after the final edition of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* and over 55 years after the first edition of the *Belgic Confession* which was the accepted confession of the Netherlands- 'Belgic' referring to northern and southern Netherlands).

James Arminius (c. 1559-1609, Professor of Theology at Leiden University; his full name was James Hermanson) had studied at the Genevan Academy and been greatly influenced by Theodore Beza (d. 1605- He was one of John Calvin's theological successors). As early as 1590, Arminius showed some disagreement with Calvinist theology in that he interpreted Romans 7 as describing the Apostle Paul's pre-conversion experience and not a struggle of a true and regenerate Christian. Later, Arminius was asked to support Calvin's doctrine of predestination and election as being biblical, against a Roman Catholic teacher named Dirk Coornheart. Upon reflecting upon his own theology and what he believed the Scriptures taught concerning this, Arminius realized he did not agree with Calvin's doctrine.

Arminius died in 1609 but those who he had influenced, those such as **Simon Episcopius** (1583-1643) and Ugtenbogaert, formed a group known as the "**Remonstrants**" or better known simply as "**Arminians**". These followers of Arminius' teaching were named after the document whereby they taught Arminius' view rather than Calvin's view of predestination and election (that has been summarized in the *Belgic Confession*); the document was entitled **The Remonstrance of 1610**.

Essentially Arminius' (and the Remonstrants') doctrine of election was that God had elected based on the faith of man that was foreseen by God in eternity past, which Calvinism confessionally denied. The Remonstrants or Arminians also taught in contrast to Calvin and Reformed confessions of the 16th that the atonement was universal, grace could be resisted, and people could lapse from the grace of God, essentially losing their salvation.

It should be remembered that as early as 1605 confessional, orthodox Reformed pastors were calling for Arminius and his followers to be disciplined for their unbiblical teaching. Politically at this early time some of the Arminians that held political positions refused to call the other Arminians to account and desired rather to revise the ***Belgic and Heidelberg Catechisms*** to make them more consistent with Arminian teaching.

In God's good providence, the Synod of Dordt was finally called as an attempt by **Prince Maurice of Nassau** (1567-1625), governor of the Netherlands, who was committed to

the orthodox Confessional Calvinist Reformed Churches of the Netherlands, to bring these confessional brethren to account for theological issues that they had once affirmed and subscribed to confessionally, but had recently denied as being unbiblical.

Simon Episcopius was the spokesperson for the 13 representatives of the Remonstrants. Politically, the Netherlands had just won independence from Spain's Catholic leadership in 1609, and they needed theological unity as well as political unity if the Reformation was going to "take hold" against pockets of Catholicism that yet remained.

The synod was national as well as international in breadth, and met 154 times from November 13, 1618 to May 9, 1619 and Reformed voting representatives from eight foreign countries were invited to participate (Places such as England, Heidelberg, Scotland, Geneva, France, Switzerland and others were represented).

The synod has been called the greatest international Reformed synod that has yet to meet in history because of the theological issues involved with regard to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The synod consisting of some 80 members, both clergyman and politicians, paved the way for Reformation, and built a Reformed consensus in the Netherlands prior to the Westminster Assembly in England (1640s).

The treatment of the Remonstrants may seem harsh to many today. The synod had some men executed for their unbiblical views and unwillingness to submit to the decision of the synod (Grotius who taught hypothetical universalism was imprisoned for his unbiblical teachings). However, we should be reminded of the time period in which these men lived, and admit that these were very important theological as well as political matters that jeopardized the unity of the country, and threatened the spread of the Reformation Gospel against lands and people who were ingrained in Roman Catholic teachings (the Reformation was at stake!!). It is also important to note that when Prince Maurice initially called the council Arminian riots broke out in response causing death and danger for many in the Netherlands. Additionally, Prince Maurice's chief opponent threatened him with war in 1618 for having the audacity to bring the Arminians to be possibly disciplined for their teachings at the synod.

The Synod of Dordt was able to articulate against "The Five Points of Arminianism" the **Five Points of Calvinism** (the response to the Arminian threat was entitled: ***The Decision of the Synod of Dort on the Five Main Points of Doctrine in Dispute in the Netherlands***).

These "five points" were developed to answer each objection of the Remonstrants (Important to note is that these five points are not a comprehensive exposition of Reformed Doctrine but a response to the doctrines in dispute; they are a great way to be introduced to Reformed doctrine however). Church historian R. Scott Clark says wisely: "The canons are more than five letters (as in TULIP). The canons teach a pastoral doctrine of grace and provide a model for the stewardship of the gospel" (Quoted in *Tabletalk*, April 2008).

These "five points" have been memorized by the acrostic or mnemonic **TULIP**, but below I have listed it as ULTIP (this is how it appears in the actual canons). The "five points" were as follows:

(1) Unconditional Election -*God sovereignly elects not based on anything good or evil in a person.*

From Canons of Dort (Canon I, Rejection v):

[We reject those] Who teach that the incomplete and nonperemptory election of particular persons to salvation occurred on the basis of a foreseen faith, repentance, holiness, and godliness, which has just begun or continued for some time; but that complete and peremptory election occurred on the basis of a foreseen perseverance to the end in faith, repentance, holiness, and godliness. And that this is the gracious and evangelical worthiness, on account of which the one who is chosen is more worthy than the one who is not chosen. And therefore that faith, the obedience of faith, holiness, godliness, and perseverance are not fruits or effects of an unchangeable election to glory, but indispensable conditions and causes, which are prerequisite in those who are to be chosen in the complete election, and which are foreseen as achieved in them.

This runs counter to the entire Scripture, which throughout impresses upon our ears and hearts these sayings among others: Election is not by works, but by him who calls (Rom. 9:11-12); All who were appointed for eternal life believed (Acts 13:48); He chose us in himself so that we should be holy (Eph. 1:4); You did not choose me, but I chose you (John 15:16); If by grace, not by works (Rom. 11:6); In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son (1 John 4:10).

(2) Limited, or Definite Atonement -*Christ's death is efficacious and truly saves the elect.*

From Canons of Dort (Canon II, Rejections iii-iv):

[We reject those] Who teach that Christ, by the satisfaction which he gave, did not certainly merit for anyone salvation itself and the faith by which this satisfaction of Christ is effectively applied to salvation, but only acquired for the Father the authority or plenary will to relate in a new way with men and to impose such new conditions as he chose, and that the satisfying of these conditions depends on the free choice of man; consequently, that it was possible that either all or none would fulfill them.

For they have too low an opinion of the death of Christ, do not at all acknowledge the foremost fruit or benefit which it brings forth, and summon back from hell the Pelagian error.

[We reject those] Who teach that what is involved in the new covenant of grace which God the Father made with men through the intervening of Christ's death is not that we are justified before God and saved through faith, insofar as it accepts Christ's merit, but rather that God, having withdrawn his demand for perfect obedience to the law, counts faith itself, and the imperfect obedience of faith, as perfect obedience to the law, and graciously looks upon this as worthy of the reward of eternal life.

For they contradict Scripture: They are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Jesus Christ, whom God presented as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood (Rom. 3:24-25). And along with the ungodly Socinus, they introduce a new and foreign justification of man before God, against the consensus of the whole church.

(3) Total, or Radical Depravity -*Man cannot choose the good, although he freely chooses, because his will is in bondage to sin.*

From Canons of Dort (Canons III-IV, Rejections i, iii-iv):

[We reject those] Who teach that, properly speaking, it cannot be said that original sin in itself is enough to condemn the whole human race or to warrant temporal and eternal punishments.

For they contradict the apostle when he says: Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death passed on to all men because all sinned (Rom. 5:12); also: The guilt followed one sin and brought condemnation (Rom. 5:16); likewise: The wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23).

[We reject those] Who teach that in spiritual death the spiritual gifts have not been separated from man's will, since the will in itself has never been corrupted but only hindered by the darkness of the mind and the unruliness of the emotions, and since the will is able to exercise its innate free capacity once these hindrances are removed, which is to say, it is able of itself to will or choose whatever good is set before it--or else not to will or choose it.

This is a novel idea and an error and has the effect of elevating the power of free choice, contrary to the words of Jeremiah the prophet: The heart itself is deceitful above all things and wicked (Jer. 17:9); and of the words of the apostle: All of us also lived among them (the sons of disobedience) at one

time in the passions of our flesh, following the will of our flesh and thoughts (Eph. 2:3).

[We reject those] Who teach that unregenerate man is not strictly or totally dead in his sins or deprived of all capacity for spiritual good but is able to hunger and thirst for righteousness or life and to offer the sacrifice of a broken and contrite spirit which is pleasing to God.

For these views are opposed to the plain testimonies of Scripture: You were dead in your transgressions and sins (Eph. 2:1, 5); The imagination of the thoughts of man's heart is only evil all the time (Gen. 6:5; 8:21). Besides, to hunger and thirst for deliverance from misery and for life, and to offer God the sacrifice of a broken spirit is characteristic only of the regenerate and of those called blessed (Ps. 51:17; Matt. 5:6).

(4) Irresistible Grace -*God's Spirit effectively and sovereignly calls and regenerates sinners dead in trespasses and sins.*

From Canons of Dort (Canons III-IV, Rejections vii-ix):

[We reject those] Who teach that the grace by which we are converted to God is nothing but a gentle persuasion, or(as others explain it) that the way of God's acting in man's conversion that is most noble and suited to human nature is that which happens by persuasion, and that nothing prevents this grace of moral suasion even by itself from making natural men spiritual; indeed, that God does not produce the assent of the will except in this manner of moral suasion, and that the effectiveness of God's work by which it surpasses the work of Satan consists in the fact that God promises eternal benefits while Satan promises temporal ones.

For this teaching is entirely Pelagian and contrary to the whole of Scripture, which recognizes besides this persuasion also another, far more effective and divine way in which the Holy Spirit acts in man's conversion. As Ezekiel 36:26 puts it: I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; and I will remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh....

[We reject those] Who teach that God in regenerating man does not bring to bear that power of his omnipotence whereby he may powerfully and unfailingly bend man's will to faith and conversion, but that even when God has accomplished all the works of grace which he uses for man's conversion, man nevertheless can, and in actual fact often does, so resist God and the Spirit in their intent and will to regenerate him, that man completely thwarts his own rebirth; and, indeed, that it remains in his own power whether or not to be reborn.

For this does away with all effective functioning of God's grace in our

conversion and subjects the activity of Almighty God to the will of man; it is contrary to the apostles, who teach that we believe by virtue of the effective working of God's mighty strength (Eph. 1:19), and that God fulfills the undeserved good will of his kindness and the work of faith in us with power (2 Thess. 1:11), and likewise that his divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness (2 Pet. 1:3).

[We reject those] Who teach that grace and free choice are concurrent partial causes which cooperate to initiate conversion, and that grace does not precede--in the order of causality--the effective influence of the will; that is to say, that God does not effectively help man's will to come to conversion before man's will itself motivates and determines itself.

For the early church already condemned this doctrine long ago in the Pelagians, on the basis of the words of the apostle: It does not depend on man's willing or running but on God's mercy (Rom. 9:16); also: Who makes you different from anyone else? and What do you have that you did not receive? (1 Cor. 4:7); likewise: It is God who works in you to will and act according to his good pleasure (Phil. 2:13).

(5) Preservation, or perseverance of the Saints -*God works in his people to persevere by his grace and he will lose none who he has saved.*

Canons of Dort (Canon V, Rejections i-ii):

[We reject those] Who teach that the perseverance of true believers is not an effect of election or a gift of God produced by Christ's death, but a condition of the new covenant which man, before what they call his "peremptory" election and justification, must fulfill by his free will.

For Holy Scripture testifies that perseverance follows from election and is granted to the chosen by virtue of Christ's death, resurrection, and intercession: The chosen obtained it; the others were hardened (Rom. 11:7); likewise, He who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all--how will he not, along with him, grant us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? It is Christ Jesus who died--more than that, who was raised--who also sits at the right hand of God, and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? (Rom. 8:32-35).

[We reject those] Who teach that God does provide the believer with sufficient strength to persevere and is ready to preserve this strength in him if he performs his duty, but that even with all those things in place which are necessary to persevere in faith and which God is pleased to use

to preserve faith, it still always depends on the choice of man's will whether or not he perseveres.

For this view is obviously Pelagian; and though it intends to make men free it makes them sacrilegious. It is against the enduring consensus of evangelical teaching which takes from man all cause for boasting and ascribes the praise for this benefit only to God's grace. It is also against the testimony of the apostle: It is God who keeps us strong to the end, so that we will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 1:8).

These “five points” turned the Netherlands back to the historical and creedal positions to which they had once subscribed. Particularly they continued to confess with the creedal confessions of the **Belgic Confession of 1561 and the Heidelberg Confession of 1563**. It is important to note again for the historical record that both of these confessions were already accepted as standards for the Netherlands.

The *Canons of the Synod of Dort* and the *Belgic Confession* and the *Heidelberg Confession* for what is known as the **Three Forms of Unity** for the Reformed Churches today. Although there is still debate between Calvinians and Arminians (Calvinists and Arminiists?) we should all seek to know and understand the canons of the Synod of Dort and the scriptural support that that provide as we seek to know Christ “together with all the saints” (Eph. 3:18).

All who call themselves *Evangelical* should also take heed at the slanderous mischaracterizations that were put forth by the Arminians against the Confessional Calvinist teachers. The Synod of Dort wisely closes with a defense of Biblical Christianity and an admonishment to those who would misrepresent or mischaracterize the teachings of Scripture because they are more committed to reason than to judging all doctrines by Scripture alone (this should be heeded by many Evangelical Arminians today that continue to misrepresent the Calvinist position):

The Synod wrote against the blatant misrepresentation and mischaracterization of the Arminians in this way:

--that the teaching of the Reformed churches on predestination and on the points associated with it by its very nature and tendency draws the minds of people away from all godliness and religion, is an opiate of the flesh and the devil, and is a stronghold of Satan where he lies in wait for all people, wounds most of them, and fatally pierces many of them with the arrows of both despair and self-assurance;

--that this teaching makes God the author of sin, unjust, a tyrant, and a hypocrite; and is nothing but a refurbished Stoicism, Manicheism, Libertinism, and Mohammedanism;

--that this teaching makes people carnally self-assured, since it persuades them that nothing endangers the salvation of the chosen, no matter how they live, so that they may commit the most outrageous crimes with self-assurance; and that on the other hand nothing is of use to the reprobate for salvation even if they have truly performed all the works of the saints;

--that this teaching means that God predestined and created, by the bare and unqualified choice of his will, without the least regard or consideration of any sin, the greatest part of the world to eternal condemnation; that in the same manner in which election is the source and cause of faith and good works, reprobation is the cause of unbelief and ungodliness; that many infant children of believers are snatched in their innocence from their mothers' breasts and cruelly cast into hell so that neither the blood of Christ nor their baptism nor the prayers of the church at their baptism can be of any use to them; and very many other slanderous accusations of this kind which the Reformed churches not only disavow but even denounce with their whole heart.

“Therefore this Synod of Dordt in the name of the Lord pleads with all who devoutly call on the name of our Savior Jesus Christ to form their judgment about the faith of the Reformed churches, not on the basis of false accusations gathered from here or there, or even on the basis of the personal statements of a number of ancient and modern authorities--statements which are also often either quoted out of context or misquoted and twisted to convey a different meaning--but on the basis of the churches' own official confessions and of the present explanation of the orthodox teaching which has been endorsed by the unanimous consent of the members of the whole Synod, one and all.

Moreover, the Synod earnestly warns the false accusers themselves to consider how heavy a judgment of God awaits those who give false testimony against so many churches and their confessions, trouble the consciences of the weak, and seek to prejudice the minds of many against the fellowship of true believers.

Finally, this Synod urges all fellow ministers in the gospel of Christ to deal with this teaching in a godly and reverent manner, in the academic institutions as well as in the churches; to do so, both in their speaking and writing, with a view to the glory of God's name, holiness of life, and the comfort of anxious souls; to think and also speak with Scripture according to the analogy of faith; and, finally, to refrain from all those ways of speaking which go beyond the bounds set for us by the genuine sense of the Holy Scriptures and which could give impertinent sophists (Rationalists) a just occasion to scoff at the teaching of the Reformed churches or even to bring false accusations against it.

May God's Son Jesus Christ, who sits at the right hand of God and gives gifts to men, sanctify us in the truth, lead to the truth those who err, silence the mouths of those who lay false accusations against sound teaching, and equip faithful ministers of his Word with a spirit of wisdom and discretion, that all they say may be to the glory of God and the building up of their hearers. Amen.”