

Part 4: The Modern Church (1600-2000)

Week 11: The Synod of Dort (1618-1619)

Jacobus Arminius (1559-1609)

1579-81: Studied at the University of Leiden in 1579, which was a great Reformed university.

1581-83: Studied in Geneva under Theodore Beza, John's Calvin's successor. He had some philosophical trouble with Beza but Beza wrote him a glowing letter of recommendation in 1586 for his ordination. After studying in Geneva he took a detour through Italy to return to Holland. Later, his theological opponents used this as an occasion to pass the rumor that he had gone to see the Pope and kissed the Pope's toes.

1587-1603: Ordained in Amsterdam and pastored. Married into important merchant family. Began to preach through Romans (as all good Reformed pastors do!). In 1591 he came to Romans 7 and suggested that Paul was speaking of the unregenerate man. By 1593 he made it to Romans 9 and got into even more trouble suggesting that "Jacob I loved and Esau I hated" meant not the individuals but classes of people.

1603: The plague took the lives of two of the three theological faculty at Leiden. Only Franciscus Gomarus survived. Arminius was appointed to the faculty, which concerned the strict Calvinist ministers. Gomarus agreed to interview Arminius and was satisfied. Within a couple of years, though, questions began to surface about Arminius' theology because of the students he was turning out. Gomarus became convinced that Arminius was undermining the chief article of the church: the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Arminius was teaching election by a foreseen faith; thus, faith became a work by which we are justified. Arminius responded by saying that Gomarus misrepresented him and was attacking him because he wasn't a supralapsarian. Gomarus, though, insisted that his attack had nothing to do with supralapsarianism but with justification and the gospel.

1608: An investigation of Arminius began. He was asked to write out his views and published his *Declaration of Sentiments*. The investigation had to be suspended when he became sick, and then died in 1609.

The Remonstrance

1610: 42 ministers, led by Uytenbogaert, who were followers of Arminius and convinced that his views should be tolerated in the church prepared a document called *The Remonstrance*. A "remonstrance" is a public protest and petition. This party of ministers became known as the Remonstrants. The government tried to keep it a secret but that didn't work and the controversy was in public view.

Article 1

That God, by an eternal, unchangeable purpose in Jesus Christ His Son, before the foundation of the world, hath determined, out of the fallen, sinful race of men, to save in Christ, for Christ's sake, and through Christ, those who, through the grace of the Holy Spirit, shall believe on this His Son Jesus, and shall persevere in this faith and obedience of faith, through this grace, even to the end; and, on the other hand, to leave the incorrigible and unbelieving in sin and under wrath, and to condemn them as aliens from Christ, according to the word of the Gospel in John 3:36: "He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him," and according other passages of Scripture also.

Article 2

That, agreeably thereto, Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, died for all men and for every man, so that He has obtained for them all, by His death on the cross, redemption and the

forgiveness of sins; yet that no one actually enjoys this forgiveness of sins except the believer, according to the word of the Gospel of John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." And in the First Epistle of John 2:2: "And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world."

Article 3

That man has not saving grace of himself, nor of the working of his free will, inasmuch as he, in the state of apostasy and sin, can of and by himself neither think, will, nor do anything that is truly good (such as saving Faith eminently is); but that it is necessary that he be born again of God in Christ, through the Holy Spirit, and renewed in understanding, inclination, or will, and all his powers, in order that he may rightly understand, think, will, and perform what is truly good, according to the Word of Christ, John 15:5: "For without Me you can do nothing."

Article 4

That this grace of God is the beginning, continuance, and accomplishment of all good, even to this extent, that the regenerate man himself, without prevenient or assisting, awakening, following and co-operative grace, can neither think, will, nor do good, nor withstand any temptations to evil; so that all good deeds or movements towards, that can be conceived, must be ascribed to the grace of God in Christ. But as respects the mode of the operation of this grace, it is not irresistible, inasmuch as it is written concerning many, that they have resisted the Holy Spirit. Acts 7 and in many places.

Article 5

That those who are incorporated into Christ by a true faith, and have thereby become partakers of His life-giving Spirit, have thereby full power to strive against Satan, sin, the world, and their own flesh, and to win the victory; it being well understood that it is ever through the assisting grace of the Holy Spirit; and that Jesus Christ assists them through His Spirit in all temptations, extends to them His hand, and if only they are ready for the conflict, and desire His help, and are not inactive, keeps them from falling, so that they, by no craft or power of Satan, can be misled nor plucked out of Christ's hands, according to the Word of Christ, John 10:28: "Neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand." But whether they are capable, through negligence, of forsaking again the first beginnings of their life in Christ, to again returning to this present evil world, of turning away from the holy doctrine which was delivered them, of losing a good conscience, of becoming devoid of grace, that must be more particularly determined out of the Holy Scripture, before we ourselves can teach it with the full persuasion of our minds.

Conclusion

These Articles, thus set forth and taught, the Remonstrants deem agreeable to the Word of God, tending to edification, and, as regards this argument, sufficient for salvation, so that it is not necessary or edifying to rise higher or descend deeper.

Evaluation of the Remonstrance

***Recognize that what we believe as Reformed churches isn't summarized in 5 simplistic points. What we believe is confessed in the Belgic Confession and taught in the Heidelberg Catechism. Arminianism, though, was summarized by the Arminians into 5 points. We simply responded to them.*

Article 1 teaches a conditional election: God has determined to save those who believe and persevere - a class who meet certain conditions, rather than particular individuals.

Article 2 teaches universal atonement: Jesus actually died for all men.

Article 3 teaches total depravity: *there is nothing wrong with this particular statement as early Arminianism was orthodox in this area.* (This is why our Canons of Dort have a II/IV Head of Doctrine)

Article 4 teaches a resistible grace: God's answer to sin is grace, but the Arminians claim it can be resisted.

Article 5 at least casts doubt upon the perseverance of the saints.

The Remonstrance (cont.)

1611: When word got out about the Remonstrance, some leading Calvinists wrote the Contra-Remonstrance, which led to a meeting between the two parties, but to no resolution. Tensions in the church continued to grow increasing the need for a national synod. The Arminians, though, knew that they were a minority so they didn't want a synod; therefore they sought the support of Jan van Oldenbarneveldt, the merchant prince. Because a synod was not called many Calvinists, as they were called, moved from one congregation to another to avoid Arminian preachers, which was seen as a revolutionary act.

1617: The Calvinists had aligned themselves with Maurice. In response, Oldenbarneveldt tried to raise troops to keep a synod from meeting, but the effort was vain as Maurice was better prepared with a standing army. Oldenbarneveldt was finally arrested and executed as a traitor.

The Synod of Dort (1618-19)

The States General finally voted for a national synod and Maurice ordered it to meet.

This national synod was turned into an international synod as invitations were sent throughout Europe to Reformed countries and churches to send their best theologians to help settle this disturbance in the Reformed churches. Invitations were sent to England, France, Switzerland, and Germany. King James of England himself received the invitation to England, which annoyed the Scottish Presbyterians who were not represented. In France, the invitation went to the church as the monarch was Catholic. The French delegates, though, couldn't attend because they wouldn't be allowed back into France. They sent their advice via letters and treatises. The only Reformed churches that were not invited were the Hungarian Reformed, as they were too far away.

Other matters pertaining to the Dutch churches were dealt with such as:

1. Appointing a committee to translate the Bible into Dutch (this translation has the dominant version until the 20th century!).
2. Revising the text of the Belgic Confession.
3. Missions were addressed as the question of should children born to servants in Christian households be baptized? It was said that Abraham circumcised a similar group in the O.T. We see the heart for evangelism, even in our culturally-condemned institution of slavery (remember, this was the 17th century!), as the final advice was not to baptize these children until their servant-parents taught the gospel *and taught to read Scripture for themselves.*
4. The question of the Christian's obligation on Sunday was addressed in response to many overly-strict Puritan documents. The Synod didn't have time to study this issue thoroughly, but in the 164 Session (May 17, 1619) advised the following:

1. There is in the fourth commandment of the divine law a ceremonial and a moral element.

2. *The ceremonial element is the rest of the seventh day after creation, and the strict observance of that day imposed especially on the Jewish people.*

3. *The moral element consists in the fact that a certain definite day is set aside for worship and so much rest as is needful for worship and hallowed meditation.*

4. *The Sabbath of the Jews having been abolished, the day of the Lord must be solemnly hallowed by Christians.*

5. *Since the times of the apostles this day has always been observed by the old catholic church.*

6. *This day must be so consecrated to worship that on that day we rest from all servile works, except those which charity and present necessity require; and also from all such recreations as interfere with worship.*

Arminian leaders were invited to present their case but they decided to divide and delay, knowing they had little chance of success. For example, they wanted to begin with reprobation, to get the infralapsarians and supralapsarians fighting with each other. The leader of the Arminians was Simon Episcopius, who gave several long speeches. By mid-January, Arminians were getting nowhere. President of the synod ordered them out. Arminians were then ordered to answer questions in writing. Groups of delegates were divided into "colleges," which were each asked to write a response to the Arminians. A committee drafted the final canons of the Synod of Dort and they were unanimously approved.

The Canons of Dort

One of the great issues before the synod was how to write the canons. How would the audience be - theologians or the church? For theologians, you could use technical language and writing could be very brief and concise. But the synod decided it needed to speak to the church so the Canons were written in popular language without technical vocabulary.

Basic recurring themes:

1. The justice of God: who is at fault for sin? In asserting God's sovereignty, we don't want to compromise his other attributes, such as justice.
2. Piety: the effects of Reformed doctrine on Christian living, particularly assurance.
3. The means of grace: some accuse the Reformed of turning Christianity into a radically individualistic religion ("God works on my souls alone"), undermining the ministry of Word, sacraments, and discipline of the elders.

The Extent of the Atonement

People have the most trouble with this point of Calvinism. There were significant differences among orthodox theologians at Dort. The debate centered around what Peter Lombard, the great medieval theologian, wrote in his *Sentences*: Christ died sufficiently for the whole world, efficiently for the elect alone. Many in the Middle Ages thought Christ died only for the elect but Lombard indicates a sense in which atonement is unlimited, but another sense in which it is limited

Positions represented at Dort:

1. Strict position of Theodore Beza: the sufficiency/efficiency distinction was useless. Christ died for the elect - period. Many at Dort adhered to this position.

2. Moderate (mediating) position: the distinction was useful as Christ's intention was not to save the whole world, but only the elect; however, the infinite, intrinsic value of his death, because he is the Son of God, is sufficient to save the whole world. If God had determined to save a larger number, Christ didn't have to suffer more.
3. Small minority (1 or 2 only): labeled #2 as a position of "mere sufficiency" but wanted to affirm instead "broad sufficiency." Said Christ died efficiently, with intent to save the elect alone, but he also died sufficiently for the whole world, with the intention of establishing a conditional covenant of grace such that everyone who believes will be saved. Christ established a covenant that can be preached to everyone so we can say to everyone, "Christ died for you."

The Second Head of Doctrine on the atonement is a very carefully crafted compromise:

1. Christ's death is the only and most perfect sacrifice and satisfaction for sin, of infinite intrinsic worth, sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world.
2. His death is of such infinite worth because he is fully Man and also fully God, plus there was a pouring out of God's wrath on Him.
3. Preaching is addressed in article 5 which says that the promise of the gospel is that whoever believes in Christ will not perish but have eternal life. This promise is given with the command to repent and believe and should be declared to all persons everywhere.

The Canons and Reformed Spirituality

"Theology that does not become biography is wishful thinking."

Theology should never be merely an abstraction but must impact life! Reformed theology is intrinsically oriented toward piety (our response to God's grace).

Our concern with the effects of sin upon our hearts, minds, souls, and wills leads us to acknowledge the reality of the problem of sin, as it alienates us from God and therefore makes reconciliation necessary. It also causes us who have been saved to humble ourselves before God and marvel at his amazing grace.

The great answer of Dort to our ongoing struggle with sin is God's grace in Christ, brought by the Holy Spirit in the context of the church through the means of grace – the preaching of the Word, especially the gospel, and the tangible sacraments.

Our doctrine of irresistible grace in which the Holy Spirit regenerates our hearts from death to life reminds us that we have been given a radical new orientation. The pursuit of holiness becomes a reality and we begin to progress in holiness (though not 100% perfection). Dort affirms that grace is life-changing.