

Church History (32): The Canons of Dort

In this lesson, we shall consider the historical context and major teachings of the *Canons of Dort*. "The Council of Trent (1545–63) sealed the Roman Catholic Church in its rejection of the Reformation. The Synod of Dort (1618–19), the greatest of the Reformed church assemblies, preserved the great heritage of the Reformation for the Calvinistic churches" (Godfrey).¹

I. The Canons of Dort

1. *Its context.* The story of the Canons of Dort has its beginning with Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609). "Born in the province of Utrecht, in The Netherlands, his whole family perished when the Spanish army invaded and destroyed his hometown. He enrolled at the new University of Leyden in 1576. In 1582, Arminius continued his education at the Geneva Academy, headed by Theodore Beza, the successor to John Calvin. In 1588, Arminius was ordained a minister of the Gospel and became a pastor of the Reformed Church in Amsterdam" (Beeke).² "Arminius' doubts about the Reformed understanding of divine predestination and human freedom seem to have begun almost immediately after his ordination" (Needham).³ He was appointed as professor of theology at Leyden University in 1603. "By then, he had said enough to draw upon himself a widespread suspicion of unsoundness on predestination and related doctrines" (Needham).⁴ Arminius had several important political supporters. "Arminius' most eminent backer in the Dutch government was Johan van Oldenbarnevelt (1547-1619), who held the supremely influential political office of 'land's advocate of Holland.' Holland was by far the largest and wealthiest province of the Dutch Republic, the whole Republic often simply being called 'Holland.'" (Needham).⁵

Arminius' appointment to the University of Leyden was not without opposition. "While he would receive opposition from many Calvinists, perhaps his most aggressive opponent was Franciscus Gomarus (1563-1641), a student of Beza. Gomarus, believing Arminius to be in agreement with Pelagianism, was not alone when he declared that Arminius' theology violated the Belgic Confession (1561) and the Heidelberg Catechism (1563)" (Barrett).⁶ Arminius at first maintained he was in agreement with both confessions, but eventually argued for modest changes. "One year before Arminius' death, his departure from the Reformed confessions would become even more explicit in his *Declaration of Sentiments* in 1608, which included a clear affirmation of synergism as well as a refutation of Calvinism's decretal theology. For Arminius, Calvinism was in conflict with God's love and man's free will, ultimately making God the author of sin" (Barrett).⁷ Arminius gave his *Declaration* on October 13, 1608, before the state leaders of Holland (a region in the Netherlands). Arminius provided his views on ten topics: On predestination, Divine providence, the freedom of the will, the grace of God, the perseverance of the saints, the assurance of salvation, the perfection of believers in this life, the Divinity of the Son of God, the justification of man before God, and the revision of the Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechism. Overall, Arminius was orthodox on the assurance of salvation, the Divinity of the Son, and the justification of man before God. But with respect to the other topics, he clearly and at times aggressively and arrogantly, deviated from the Reformed faith. He asserted election was based on the foreknowledge of God, because of preventing grace man possesses a free-will, all grace can be rejected

¹ Robert Godfrey, *Saving the Reformation: The Pastoral Theology of the Canons of Dort*, 1

² Joel Beeke, *The Canons of Dort*, 3

³ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 4:128

⁴ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 4:129

⁵ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 4:130-131

⁶ Matthew Barrett, *The Grace of Godliness: An Introduction to Doctrine and Piety in the Canons of Dort*, 12

⁷ Matthew Barrett, *The Grace of Godliness: An Introduction to Doctrine and Piety in the Canons of Dort*, 12

and resisted, denied the perseverance of the saints, and believed saints could reach moral perfection in this life.⁸

But, besides these things, I had some annotations to make on the Confession of the Dutch Churches and on the Heidelberg Catechism; but they will be discussed most appropriately in our Synod, which at the first opportunity we hope to obtain through your consent, or rather by means of your summons. This is the sole request which I prefer to your mightinesses, that I may be permitted to offer a few brief remarks on a certain clause, subject to which their high mightinesses, the States General, gave their consent to the convening of a National Synod in this province (Holland), and the substance of which was, that in such Synod the Confession and Catechism of the Dutch Churches should be subjected to examination. This clause has given great umbrage to many persons, not only because they account it unnecessary, but likewise unjust, to subject the Confession and Catechism to examination...But it is by no means true that the revision of the Confession and Catechism is unnecessary and unjust, because it is obviously agreeable to reason as well as to equity, and quite necessary in the present posture of affairs, that such a measure should be adopted. First. That it may openly appear to all the world that we render to the word of God alone such due and suitable honor, as to determine it to be beyond (or rather above) all disputes, too great to be the subject of any exception, and worthy of all acceptance. Secondly. Because these pamphlets are writings that proceed from men, and may, on that account, contain within them some portion of error, it is, therefore, proper to institute a lawful inquiry, that is, in a National Synod, whether or not there be any thing in those productions which requires amendment.⁹

After Arminius died in 1609, his followers summarized his views in *The Remonstrance of 1610*. "In order that your Worships may know what the Remonstrants believe and teach concerning these same matters, we declare that our opinion on this is as follows."¹⁰ They then provided their views on five doctrines: predestination was conditional, the atonement was universal, man's will remains free, grace is resistible, and salvation can be lost. To this, the Reformed Church responded with *The Counter Remonstrance of 1611*. "With respect to the points of doctrine, when they present certain teachings which they claim are carried to extremes by us, we cannot find therein that they have dealt honestly and in good faith, since they begin with the profound point of predestination concerning which we endeavor to speak with restraint and caution, solely for the sake of demonstrating God's underserved grace and removing all human merits and worth."¹¹ They then provided seven points of clarification, wherein the views of the Remonstrants were countered. This was followed in 1618 with *The Opinions of the Remonstrants*, wherein the Arminians expanded upon their previous *Remonstrance of 1610*. They divided this into five main headings (with several sub-points). The first main heading was on the decree of predestination; the second was on the universality of the merit of the death of Christ; the third and fourth were on the grace of God and the conversion of man; and the fifth was on perseverance. It would be in response to this document, that the Synod of Dort would meet that same year (1618), and write the *Canons of Dort*.

2. *Its Synod*. "This first ecumenical synod of Reformed churches met between November 1618 and May 1619 in the Dutch town of Dordrecht (also known as Dort). It comprised the cream of Dutch

⁸ Jacob Arminius, *Works*, 1:124-186

⁹ Jacob Arminius, *Works*, 1:186

¹⁰ Preface to *The Remonstrance of 1610*

¹¹ Preface to *The Counter Remonstrance of 1611*

Reformed theologians, representatives from Great Britain, several important German cities, and separate delegations representing Geneva and the rest of Switzerland" (Gatiss).¹² In total there were 61 delegates from the Netherlands, 4 from Great Britain, 7 from Germany, 5 from Switzerland, and 2 from Geneva (4 delegates from France were commissioned to come, but were forbidden by King Louis XIII). "Each delegation prepared its own position paper on the five doctrines chosen by the Arminians for dispute, which were then read in the gathered Synod. After discussion on these papers, later collected and published, the Canons or judgments of the Synod were drawn up" (Gatiss).¹³ "The synod concluded its business on May 9th 1619. Its canons now became authoritative in the Dutch Reformed Church, alongside the Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechism (known collectively as the Three Forms of Unity)" (Needham).¹⁴ "The Canons of Dort were officially adopted on April 22, 1619, and were read in front of all the delegates in attendance. All the delegates, including the foreign representatives, pledged their subscription to the canons without exception" (Barrett).¹⁵ "Some 190 pastors were deposed for refusing to subscribe to the canons—Arminianism was purged out of the ranks of the clergy. Of the 190 deposed, 80 were banished, 70 allowed to remain in the Dutch Republic but deprived of their ministries, while 40 eventually conformed to the canons and were restored" (Needham).¹⁶

Dort's response to the Remonstrants was characterized by the threat they saw to the confessional standards. As Arminius was outside the bounds of the Reformed confessions, the same can be said of the Remonstrants who followed. But the point to be made here is not just that their theology strayed outside of the Reformed confessions but also that the Remonstrants held a different view concerning the authority of the confessions themselves. In other words, the Remonstrants, following Arminius, were in favor of confessional revision. Such revision was not of grammar, style or of minor details. The Reformed agreed that confessional standards cannot replace Scripture or stand on equal authority with Scripture. Yet, they viewed the confessional standards as essential in order to maintain ecclesiastical unity as well as to guard against heresy.¹⁷

3. *Its content.* The *Canons of Dort* contain five main headings (the third and fourth are coupled together), each with a number of articles, and a rejection of various errors. The prudent and sensitive way these doctrines are treated is evident in that assurance is addressed under the first and fifth heads. Thus, *Article 12* of the first head says: "The elect in due time, though in various degrees and in different measures, attain the assurance of this their eternal and unchangeable election, not be inquisitively prying into the secret and deep things of God, but by observing in themselves with a spiritual joy and holy pleasure the infallible fruits of election pointed out in the Word of God such as, a true faith in Christ, fatherly fear, a godly sorrow for sin, a hungering and thirsting after righteousness, etc." Likewise, *Articles 9-13*, under the fifth head, are given to the subject of assurance. *Article 9*: "Of this preservation of the elect to salvation and of their perseverance in the faith, true believers themselves may and do obtain assurance according to the measure of their faith, whereby they surely believe that they are and ever will continue true and living members of the Church, and that they have the forgiveness of sins and life eternal."

(1) The First Main Point of Doctrine: Divine Election and Reprobation. The *Canons* begin with the universal guilt of man (*Article 1*) and the universal love of God (*Articles 2-3*). God's love is seen

¹² Lee Gatiss, *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her*, 143

¹³ Lee Gatiss, *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her*, 147

¹⁴ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 4:141

¹⁵ Matthew Barrett, *The Grace of Godliness: An Introduction to Doctrine and Piety in the Canons of Dort*, 18

¹⁶ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 4:141

¹⁷ Matthew Barrett, *The Grace of Godliness: An Introduction to Doctrine and Piety in the Canons of Dort*, 22

through the preaching of the gospel, and man's guilt is seen in rejecting that gospel. It then answers the question, why do some believe the gospel and others do not? "The cause or guilt of this unbelief as well as of all other sins is no wise in God, but in man himself; whereas faith in Jesus Christ and salvation through Him is the free gift of God."¹⁸ It then defines God's eternal decree in general, and election and reprobation in particular. "That some receive the gift of faith from God, and others do not receive it, proceeds from God's eternal decree. According to which decree He graciously softens the hearts of the elect, however obstinate, and inclines them to believe: while He leaves the non-elect in His just judgment to their own wickedness and obstinacy. And herein is especially displayed the profound, the merciful, and at the same time the righteous discrimination between men equally involved in ruin; or that decree of election and reprobation, revealed in the Word of God, which, though men of perverse, impure, and unstable minds wrest it to their own destruction, yet to holy and pious souls affords unspeakable consolation."¹⁹

Election is defined as "the unchangeable purpose of God, whereby, before the foundation of the world, He has out of mere grace, according to the sovereign good pleasure of His own will, chosen from the whole human race, which had fallen through their own fault from their primitive state of rectitude into sin and destruction, a certain number of persons to redemption in Christ, whom He from eternity appointed the Mediator and Head of the elect and the foundation of salvation."²⁰ The *Canons* then clarify "this election was not founded upon foreseen faith and the obedience of faith, holiness, or any other good quality or disposition in man,"²¹ but is attributed to "the good pleasure of God" as "the sole cause of this gracious election."²² Reprobation is then defined as "the act of passing by the non-elect; whom God, out of His sovereign, most just, irreprehensible, and unchangeable good pleasure, has decreed to leave in the common misery into which they have willfully plunged themselves, and not to bestow upon them saving faith and the grace of conversion; but, permitting them in His just judgment to follow their own ways, at last, for the declaration of His justice, to condemn and punish them forever, not only on account of their unbelief, but also for all their others sins. And this is the decree of reprobation, which by no means makes God the Author of sin (the very thought of which is blasphemy), but declares Him to be an awful, irreprehensible, and righteous Judge and Avenger thereof."²³

(2) The second Main Point of Doctrine: Christ's Death and Human Redemption through It. This subject created the greatest debate among the Reformed delegates. "All the delegates to the Synod agreed that the Arminian theses submitted to the Synod were unacceptable. But when the Synod came to formulate the orthodox position, significant differences emerged among the delegates. The sharpest disagreements revolved around the extent of the atonement. Neither the orthodox delegates nor later historians appreciated the wide variations on the extent of the atonement contained within Reformed thought" (Godfrey).²⁴ "It was the deliberation of the extent of the atonement that was the most time-consuming and difficult. The Synod wanted to be careful in what they affirmed and what they did not affirm when it came to the extent of *sufficiency* and to the extent of the *efficacy* of the atonement. Thus, the Second Canon of Dort is carefully nuanced when it comes to the extent of both the efficacy and the sufficiency of the atonement" (Johnson).²⁵ It was the English delegation, led by Samuel Ward and John Davenant, who appealed to the *Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church England*, and to the Lombardian formula that

¹⁸ Canons of Dort, *First Head, Article 5*

¹⁹ Canons of Dort, *First Head, Article 6*

²⁰ Canons of Dort, *First Head, Article 7*

²¹ Canons of Dort, *First Head, Article 9*

²² Canons of Dort, *First Head, Article 10*

²³ Canons of Dort, *First Head, Article 15*

²⁴ Robert Godfrey, *Tensions within International Calvinism: The Debate on the Atonement at the Synod of Dort*, 151

²⁵ Jeffrey Johnson, *He Died for Me*, 39

Christ's death was "sufficient for all men, yet efficient only for the elect." This meant, Christ suffered sufficiently so as to atone for the sins of all men, and yet He suffered effectually so as to secure the salvation of some men. *Article 3* is worded so that all of the delegates could agree: "The death of the Son of God is the only and most perfect sacrifice and satisfaction for sin, and is of infinite worth and value, abundantly sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world."

The Arminians maintained: "The price of the redemption which Christ offered to God the Father is not only in itself and by itself sufficient for the redemption of the whole human race but has also been paid for all men and for every man, according to the decree, will and grace of God the Father; therefore no one is absolutely excluded from participation in the fruits of Christ's death by an absolute and antecedent decree of God."²⁶ "This takes the first part of the Lombardian formula ('sufficient for all, effective for the elect') but pushes it further. Not only was the cross sufficient but it was actually effective in paying for each and every person, and indeed was designed by God to do so. In response to this, the delegates at Dort separated out the two issues of sufficiency and intentionality. All delegates agreed the death of Christ (because He was the GodMan) was sufficient for the sins of the whole world. There was no defect or insufficiency in the cross which could be blamed for the loss of the reprobate" (Gatiss).²⁷ But the Reformed collectively disagreed with the Arminians about the intention of God in applying the merits of Christ's death. For the Reformed, this intention was limited only to the elect of God.

And, whereas many who are called by the gospel do not repent nor believe in Christ, but perish in unbelief, this is not owing to any defect or insufficiency in the sacrifice offered by Christ upon the cross, but is wholly to be imputed to themselves. But as many as truly believe, and are delivered and saved from sin and destruction through the death of Christ, are indebted for this benefit solely to the grace of God given them in Christ from everlasting, and not to any merit of their own. For this was the sovereign counsel and most gracious will and purpose of God the Father that the quickening and saving efficacy of the most precious death of His Son should extend to all the elect, for bestowing upon them alone the gift of justifying faith, thereby to bring them infallibly to salvation.²⁸

(3) The Third and Fourth Main Points of Doctrine: Human Corruption, Conversion to God, and the Way It Occurs. Heads three and four address the depravity of man and the application of salvation through an effectual call (i.e., irresistible grace). These two topics relate together in that man's depravity renders him unwilling and unable to come to God of himself. Man needs an efficacious or irresistible call. This was in contrast to the Arminians view of depravity and grace. "We hold, however, that the grace of God is not only the beginning but also the progression and the completion of every good, so much so that even the regenerate himself is unable to think, will, or do the good, or to resist any temptation to evil, apart from that preceding or prevenient, awakening, following and cooperating grace."²⁹ "While affirming the need for grace, notice the type of grace the Remonstrants identify as that which is necessary to regenerate fallen man. As 3:2 makes clear, it is a 'prevenient' or 'cooperating' grace. In other words, while grace is necessary to deliver man out of his state of depravity and bondage, nevertheless, grace is synergistic, meaning man must cooperate with it. As the Remonstrants state in 3:5, 'The efficacious grace by which anyone is converted is not irresistible.' While man is dependent upon

²⁶ The Opinions of the Remonstrants (1618), 2:1

²⁷ Lee Gatiss, *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her*, 149-150

²⁸ Canons of Dort, *Second Head, Article 6-8*

²⁹ The Opinions of the Remonstrants (1618), 3:2

God to initiate grace (i.e., prevenient grace), ultimately man himself reserves the right to resist and thwart God's saving purposes" (Barrett).³⁰

In contrast to this, the *Canons* root man's need of an irresistible call in his radical depravity and total inability. "All men are conceived in sin, and are by nature children of wrath, incapable of saving good, prone to evil, dead in sin, and in bondage thereto; and without the regenerating grace of the Holy Spirit, they are neither able nor willing to return to God, to reform the depravity of their nature, or to dispose themselves to reformation."³¹ And yet, the *Canons* also affirm the responsibility of man to comply with God's call, and the sincerity of God in extending that call. "As many as are called by the gospel are unfeignedly called. For God has most earnestly and truly declared in His Word what is acceptable to Him, namely, that those who are called should come unto Him. He also seriously promises rest of soul and eternal life to all who come to Him and believe."³²

It is not the fault of the gospel, nor of Christ offered therein, nor of God, who calls men by the gospel and confers upon them various gifts, that those who are called by the ministry of the Word refuse to come and be converted. The fault lies in themselves... But that others who are called by the gospel obey the call and are converted is not to be ascribed to the proper exercise of free will, whereby one distinguishes himself above others equally furnished with grace sufficient for faith and conversion (as the proud heresy of Pelagius maintains); but it must be wholly ascribed to God, who, as He has chosen His own from eternity in Christ, so He calls them effectually in time, confers upon them faith and repentance, rescues them from the power of darkness, and translates them into the kingdom of His own Son.³³

(4) The Fifth Main Point of Doctrine: The Perseverance of the Saints. Although the fifth head uses the phrase, the perseverance of the saints, it actually speaks of the preservation of the saints: its necessity (*Articles* 1-7), certainty (*Articles* 8-13), and means (*Articles* 14-15). The necessity of our preservation is found in our remaining corruption, weakness, and danger of falling into serious sins. Though God may discipline His children for sin (even grievous sin), "He does not wholly withdraw the Holy Spirit from His own people even in their grievous falls; nor suffers them to proceed so far as to lose the grace of adoption and forfeit the state of justification."³⁴ "For in the first place, in these falls He preserves in them the incorruptible seed of regeneration from perishing or being totally lost; and again, by His Word and Spirit He certainly and effectually renews them to repentance, to a sincere and godly sorrow for their sins, that they may seek and obtain remission in the blood of the Mediator, may again experience the favor of a reconciled God, through faith adore His mercies, and henceforward more diligently work out their own salvation with fear and trembling."³⁵ This preserving work of God is accomplished through means. "And as it has pleased God, by the preaching of the gospel, to begin this work of grace in us, so He preserves, continues, and perfects it by the hearing and reading of His Word, by meditation thereon, and by the exhortations, threatenings, and promises thereof, and by the use of the sacraments."³⁶ This is in contrast to the Remonstrants who affirmed: "True believers can fall from true faith and can fall into such sins as cannot be consistent with true and justifying faith; not only is it possible for this to happen, but it even happens frequently."³⁷

³⁰ Matthew Barrett, *The Grace of Godliness: An Introduction to Doctrine and Piety in the Canons of Dort*, 79-80

³¹ *Canons of Dort, Third and Fourth Heads, Article 3*

³² *Canons of Dort, Third and Fourth Heads, Article 8*

³³ *Canons of Dort, Third and Fourth Heads, Articles 9-10*

³⁴ *Canons of Dort, Third and Fourth Heads, Article 6*

³⁵ *Canons of Dort, Third and Fourth Heads, Article 8*

³⁶ *Canons of Dort, Third and Fourth Heads, Article 14*

³⁷ *The Opinions of the Remonstrants (1618)*, 5:3