

Grace Changes Everything

Part 1 – Controversy and Confessionalism

*Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.*
- John Newton

“In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace...”
- Ephesians 1:5-6



Dutch painting depicting the Protestant / Catholic conflict

Historical Background

“We fight for the doctrine of Dort, because it is from the Lord!”

Those words came from a Dutch churchman named G.C. Ledebouer (1808-1863) as a rallying cry for the Reformed churches of the Netherlands as they pushed back against doctrinal indifferentism and encroaching liberalism. The words reflect the ancient Christian understanding that the church is helped immeasurably by creeds and confessions of faith which faithfully summarize the system of doctrine found in the Scriptures. Specifically, Ledebouer's words refer to the *Canons of Dort* which is the confession of faith produced by the Synod of Dort (or Dordrecht) which assembled from 1618-1619.

But let's back up a bit...

Jude instructs us to “contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ” (vv. 3-4). It may sound odd to some that we are called to *fight* for the message of *grace*. But when the Scriptures' teaching of God's gracious salvation is diminished or distorted the gospel itself is undermined and souls are imperiled.

Covenant Presbyterian Church Adult Sunday School

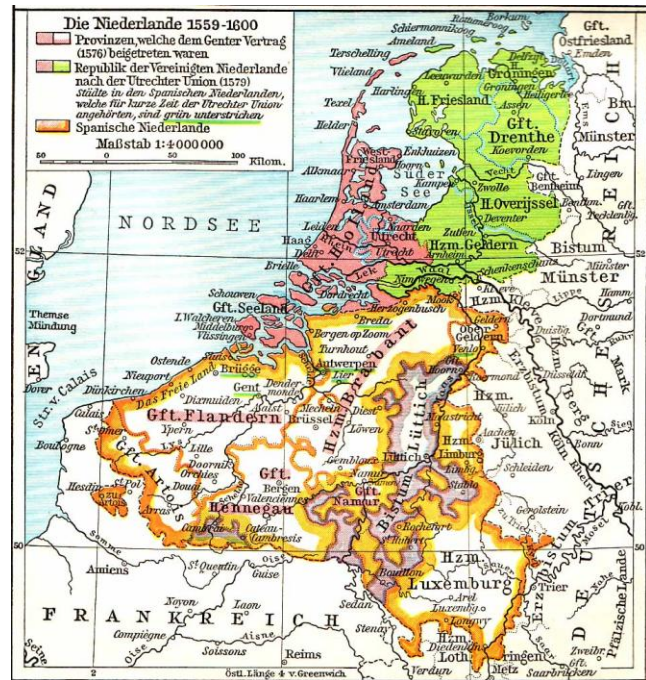
In the earlier days of the Reformation, many Reformed churches included in their baptism liturgy the words that Christians are called “manfully to fight under his banner against sin, the world, and the devil, and to continue Christ’s faithful soldier and servant unto life’s end.”¹

It is important to keep these things in mind as we consider why earlier generations of Christians affirmed the importance of creeds and confessions of faith and the necessity of maintaining from one generation to the next faithful reception of biblical doctrine.

Why the Netherlands matter...

Any study of the Reformed Church in general and the Doctrines of Grace in particular has to focus on the importance of what was happening in the Netherlands well before Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses on the door of the church in Wittenburg on October 31, 1517.

Over 150 years before Luther, various reform movements within the church were present in the Netherlands. The Waldensians, a reform-minded movement founded in the 12th century, was driven from France and found a home in the Netherlands. Likewise, the Lollards formed in England in the 14th century fled persecution and found refuge in the Netherlands. There were even Dutch voices within the Church of Rome who were pressing for certain reforms. Most notably was Luther’s contemporary Desiderius Erasmus who would ultimately oppose the Reformation.



Soon after Luther completed his translation of the Bible into the German language it was translated into Dutch and distributed widely throughout the Netherlands. It was even being used in the preaching of Dutch Augustinian monks. Two of those monks were among some of the earliest Reformed martyrs: Johann Esch and Heinrich Voes who were burnt at the stake on July 1, 1523 in Brussels. Luther memorialized them in a hymn he entitled “A New Song Shall Now Be Begun.”

*A new song now shall be begun,
Lord, help us raise the banner
Of praise for all that God has done,
For which we give Him honor.
At Brussels in the Netherlands
God proved himself most truthful
And poured his gifts from open hands
On two lads, martyrs youthful
Through whom He showed His power.²*

By the 1540’s the doctrines of the Protestant Reformation were spreading widely throughout the Netherlands. But this did not go unnoticed by the Church of Rome. In a letter from Guido de Bres (1522-1567) who was the primary author of the Belgic Confession (one of the first Reformed Confessions of Faith) wrote in a letter to the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, Charles V dated November 2, 1561:

“Our enemies have stopped your ears with so many false accusations and reports that we are not only prevented from appearing before you, but are driven from your territories, murdered and burnt

¹ From the *Book of Common Prayer* (1662, reprint 2012). This language is also part of the Dutch Reformed liturgy baptism: *Psalter Hymnal* (1976).

² Daniel R. Hyde, *Grace Worth Fighting For: Recapturing the Vision of God’s Grace in the Canons of Dort* (The Davenant Institute, 2019) p. 4

Covenant Presbyterian Church
Adult Sunday School

wherever we may be...If your Majesty, having heard us, judges us to be guilty, let the burnings increase and the tortures and torments multiply throughout your kingdom. And counterwise, if our innocence is manifest to you, may you be for us a support and refuge against the violence of our enemies.”

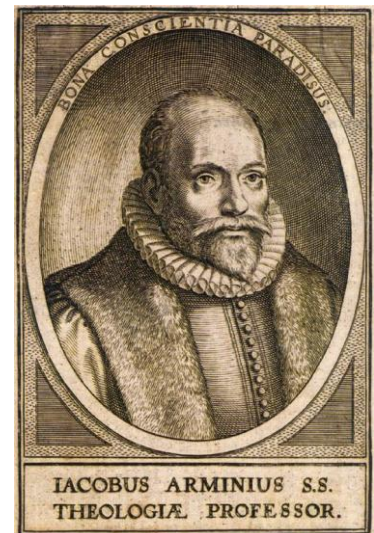
Charles V was no fan of the Reformation. Indeed, he enacted laws, one of which (the 1550 Edict) “forbade reading and possessing forbidden books, worshipping outside the Roman Church, talking or disputing openly or secretly Scriptures and especially difficult doctrines, and reading, teaching, or expounding the Scriptures unless a graduate of a university. The penalty for confessors was the sword for men and being buried alive for women, while those who would not confess, the fire awaited.”³

Still, King Charles was a good politician. Seeing the growing popularity of the Reformed movement he never seemed to strictly apply the laws outlawing Protestantism. However, when he abdicated his throne, it passed to his son King Philip II of Spain. Whereas Charles enjoyed broad popularity, Philip was widely despised not least of all for his increased persecution of Protestants. He withdrew the liberties which Charles had allowed. A popular uprising was the result and decades of conflict ensued. Eventually the territories were divided with the south remaining under Spanish / Roman Catholic rule (These territories ultimately became Belgium).

The northern territories (about seven provinces) organized themselves into the United Provinces (1579). Later this region became known as the Netherlands. This region was dominated by Protestants. This did not bring an end to the violence and intrigue. Indeed, William of Orange, a committed Protestant, became the chosen sovereign of the Netherlands. But in 1584 he was assassinated by order of Philip of Spain.⁴

By the seventeenth century the Reformed Church had become the leading religious movement of the Netherlands. And by the end of the century there was a major theological dispute within the Dutch Church over the nature of God's saving grace. The seeds of this controversy were planted by a theology professor and pastor named Jacob Arminius (1559-1609).

Arminius did his graduate studies at the University of Leiden and from there went on to study in Geneva and Basel. During those years the leading professor in Geneva was Calvin's successor, Theodore Beza. From 1588 to 1603 Arminius served as a pastor. He was then appointed professor of theology at the University of Leiden where he served until his death in 1609. His professorship caused some stir as his views seemed to be increasingly in conflict with the doctrinal confessions of the Reformed Church. What made charges against Arminius difficult to secure owed largely to the fact that during his life he published nothing.⁵



In 1608 the controversies surrounding Arminius came to a head. He presented to the government a statement entitled his *Declaration of Sentiments* (only published after his death). In this document, the professor expressed his departures from the Reformed orthodoxy of the Dutch Church. Indeed, he “vehemently attacked” various points of the doctrine of election.⁶ His views on the effects of sin and the doctrines of election, effectual calling, atonement, and final perseverance were in direct contradiction to the Reformed confessions of faith.

Following his death, it became clear that Arminius' views had taken root in a number of his students, some of whom had become ministers in the Dutch church.

³ Daniel Hyde, p. 5

⁴ Robert Godfrey, *Saving the Reformation: The Pastoral Theology of the Canons of Dort* (Sandford, FL: Reformation Trust, 2019) pp. 8-9

⁵ Godfrey, p. 11

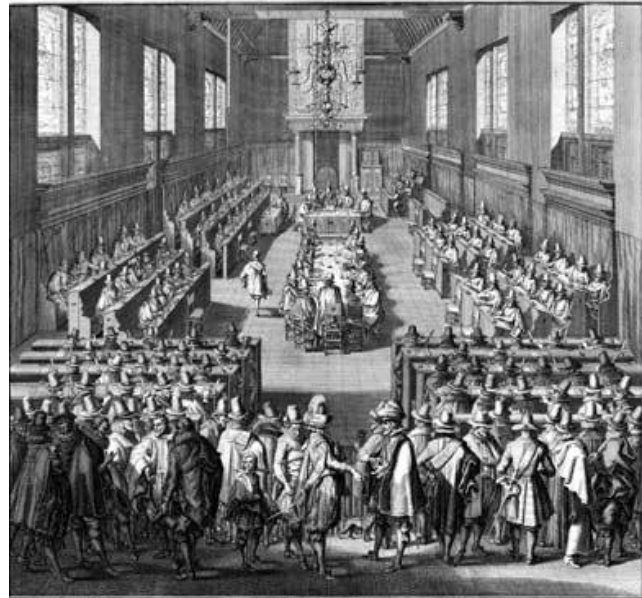
⁶ Godfrey, p. 11

The Doctrines of Grace

The ministers who had adopted the theology of Jacob Arminius formally petitioned the government in hopes to gain tolerance for their views. They composed a document – referred to as a “remonstrance” – which came to be known as the *Remonstrance of 1610*. The signers of the petition became known as the *Remonstrants*. The document they composed was explosive. Those who read it understood that it represented a clear break with many points in the theology of the Reformed church. Indeed, much of what the document affirmed seemed little different from the positions of the Roman Catholic Church.

Specifically, the *Remonstrance of 1610* affirmed five key points related to God’s grace in salvation which directly contradicted the Reformed confessions. These five points became known to some as the Five Points of Arminianism.

The Dutch church quickly responded with a seven-point refutation to the Remonstrance. Several years later the church would call a formal meeting of the church to craft a more thorough refutation. That gathering would occur in the city of Dort (or Dordrecht) between 1618 and 1619 and would be called the Synod of Dort. Their work would yield one of most important Reformed confessional documents ever penned: *The Canons of Dort*.



Affbeelding van het vermaarde Synode van Dordrecht in het jaar 1618 en 1619.

That document, both theological and pastoral, refuted the five points of Arminianism. Those five points of refutation would later become known as the Five Points of Calvinism and would be summarized with an acrostic appropriate to the geography: TULIP.

- T – Total Depravity
- U – Unconditional Election
- L – Limited Atonement
- I – Irresistible Grace
- P – Perseverance of the Saints

Outline of the Canons of Dort

- I. First Point of Doctrine: Redemption Planned
- II. Second Point of Doctrine: Redemption Accomplished
- III. Third and Fourth Points of Doctrine: Redemption Applied
- IV. Fifth Point of Doctrine: Redemption Preserved