



FOREWORD BY JOEL R. BEEKE

SAVING *The*
REFORMATION

THE PASTORAL THEOLOGY

OF THE

CANONS OF DORT

W. ROBERT GODFREY

ENDORSEMENTS

“W. Robert Godfrey is a gifted teacher. As a recognized historian, he helpfully sets the historical and ecclesiastical context for the writing of the Canons of Dort. As a trusted theologian, he clearly explains the exegetical and theological basis for each of the canons. As an experienced pastor, he carefully shows the practical nature of the doctrines of grace preserved in the Canons. In an age of constant change and theological amnesia, *Saving the Reformation* is an important contribution, an accessible treatment of one of the great documents of the Reformation.”

—REV. JOEL E. KIM

President and Assistant Professor of New Testament
Westminster Seminary California, Escondido, Calif.

“*Saving the Reformation* is characteristic of Dr. Godfrey’s engaging, clear, pastoral teaching that has benefited so many over the years. Guiding us through the history and biblical truth confessed in the Canons of Dort, he brings us to the reality of the sovereign goodness and all-sufficient grace of God in Christ for us: we are hell-deserving sinners, saved, sanctified, and surrounded by God’s all-powerful love. This is worth reading about.”

—DR. WILLIAM VANDOOEWAARD

Professor of Church History
Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Mich.

“*Saving the Reformation* confirms Dr. Godfrey’s reputation as a premier student of the Synod of Dort and the Dutch Reformation. In a clear, accessible, and compelling way, Godfrey provides his readers with an account of the historical context and occasion for the convening of the Synod of Dort in 1618, as well as a helpful exposition of the teaching

of the canons. He also provides a fresh translation of the Latin version of the Canons of Dort, and several useful appendices on their order and arrangement. These features combine to make this book an excellent resource for church members and scholars alike.”

—DR. CORNELIS P. VENEMA
President and Professor of Doctrinal Studies
Mid-America Reformed Seminary, Dyer, Ind.

S A V I N G *The*
R E F O R M A T I O N

S A V I N G *The*
R E F O R M A T I O N

THE PASTORAL THEOLOGY

OF THE

CANONS OF DORT

W. ROBERT GODFREY

Saving the Reformation: The Pastoral Theology of the Canons of Dort

© 2019 by W. Robert Godfrey

Published by Reformation Trust Publishing

A division of Ligonier Ministries

421 Ligonier Court, Sanford, FL 32771

Ligonier.org ReformationTrust.com

Printed in York, Pennsylvania

Maple Press

0000119

First edition

ISBN 978-1-64289-030-3 (Hardcover)

ISBN 978-1-64289-031-0 (ePub)

ISBN 978-1-64289-032-7 (Kindle)

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—without the prior written permission of the publisher, Reformation Trust Publishing. The only exception is brief quotations in published reviews.

Cover design: Ligonier Creative

Interior design and typeset: Katherine Lloyd, The DESK

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are the author's translation from the Canons of the Synod of Dort and other documents.

Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked KJV are from the King James Version. Public domain.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Godfrey, W. Robert, author. | Synod of Dort (1618-1619 : Dordrecht, Netherlands). Canones Synodi Dordrechtanae. English.

Title: Saving the Reformation : the pastoral theology of the Canons of Dort / W. Robert Godfrey.

Description: Orlando, FL : Reformation Trust Publishing, a division of Ligonier Ministries, [2019]

Identifiers: LCCN 2018031346 | ISBN 9781642890303 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781642890327 (kindle) | ISBN 9781642890310 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Synod of Dort (1618-1619 : Dordrecht, Netherlands) | Pastoral theology--History of doctrines--17th century. | Reformation--Netherlands --Sources. | Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk--Doctrines--History--Sources. | Pastoral theology--Netherlands--History--17th century--Sources. | Netherlands --Church history--17th century--Sources.

Classification: LCC BX9478 .G63 2019 | DDC 238/.42--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018031346>

For my family,

Mary Ellen

William

Mari and Mark

Robert and Catherine

Katrina, Kellan, Anne, William, and Emmaline

CONTENTS

Foreword by Joel R. Beeke	xi
Introduction	1

PART I

HISTORICAL AND THEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

Chapter 1: The New Church and the New State	7
Chapter 2: The Synod of Dort	21

PART II

THE CANONS OF THE SYNOD OF DORT— A PASTORAL TRANSLATION

Chapter 3: God's Predestination	35
Chapter 4: The Death of Christ and the Redemption of Humans through That Death	47
Chapter 5: The Corruption of Humans, and the Conversion to God with Its Way of Happening	53
Chapter 6: The Perseverance of the Saints	65
Chapter 7: Conclusion	75

PART III

AN EXPOSITION OF THE CANONS OF DORT

Chapter 8: The Form of the Canons	81
Chapter 9: God's Predestination	85
Chapter 10: The Death of Christ and the Redemption of Humans through That Death	113
Chapter 11: The Corruption of Humans, and the Conversion to God with Its Way of Happening	127

Chapter 12: The Perseverance of the Saints	153
Chapter 13: Conclusion	173
Chapter 14: Closing Reflections	179

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Arminius: A New Look	185
Appendix 2: General Pattern in Each Head of Doctrine	229
Appendix 3: An Outline of the Canons of Dort	231
Appendix 4: Relation of the Positive Articles of the Canons to the Rejection of Errors	237
Appendix 5: A New Translation of the Doctrinal Statement by the Synod of Dort on the Sabbath	239
Acknowledgments	241
Notes	243
Scripture Index	251
Subject Index	255
About the Author	265

FOREWORD

Reformed confessional theology is a statement of faith set within a story of faith. As statements of believed truths, confessions express the mind of God's people embracing God's Word. If we neglect the church's historic statements of faith, we end up with mindless and spineless Christianity—more fit to drift like a jellyfish than to swim against the stream of this world. Confession of faith is an essential act of courageous Christianity, as we see from the living history of the people who wrote these declarations. They made their confession out of personal faith in Christ and fervent love for God—sealed with their tears and sometimes their blood, as was the case with Guido de Bres, the martyred author of the Belgic Confession. Reformed confessional theology was written not to pick a fight but to protect the church in the battles she already faces and to nurture people in the truth, as we see in that pastoral masterpiece the Heidelberg Catechism.

This book is an exposition of the Canons of Dort, the third document, with the Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechism, in the Dutch Reformed triumvirate known as the Three Forms of Unity. Of course, *canon* does not refer to artillery but to a rule to direct the church. The word derives from the Greek term *kanōn*, which literally refers to a rod or rule such as one used by builders and hence came to signify a standard for belief or conduct. After Paul's exposition of justification by faith alone and sanctification by the Spirit, the Apostle said, "As many as walk according to this rule [*kanōn*], peace be on them" (Gal. 6:16, KJV). The Canons of Dort furnish those who build up Christ's church with important tools for constructing right beliefs (orthodoxy) leading to right action (orthopraxy), both by the grace of God.

Unlike the Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechism, the Canons of Dort do not present a complete summation of the teaching of the Bible and the faith of the Reformed churches. Instead, here we find the Reformed doctrine of salvation focused to a point of intense and brilliant clarity. The Synod of Dort (1618–19) wrote the canons as a specific response to the Arminian challenge against salvation by God’s grace alone—specifically, the objections to Reformed doctrine expressed in the five points of their Remonstrance. The synod was an international assembly of Reformed scholars who gathered to remedy the spreading infection of this false teaching that undermines the gospel.

Though an increasing number of Christians in the United States affirm the five points of Calvinism, few today have read the Canons of Dort, of which the five points are mere bullet-point summaries. The Synod of Dort produced one of the most mature and biblically balanced statements of the doctrine of salvation ever written. For example, the treatment of sovereign predestination begins with man’s sin and the good news of salvation to all who believe in Jesus Christ. The treatment of particular redemption opens with the necessity of satisfying God’s justice by the punishment of sin, which means that the salvation of sinners requires a substitute to die in their place. Thus, these distinctive Reformed doctrines are grounded in the gospel. It is important for all Christians to attain the biblical balance and gospel grounding that the Canons of Dort present, but it is particularly crucial for preachers and teachers of God’s Word to do so.

Approaching a historic document can be somewhat intimidating, like hiking trails through the mountains. For the task, it helps to have an experienced trail guide, and few are more qualified to lead us through the canons than my friend W. Robert Godfrey. Having taught church history at Westminster Seminary, first in Philadelphia beginning in the 1970s and then in California since 1981, he brings to the task a wealth of wisdom as a historian and a theologian of the Reformed church. I have known Bob for decades and have always found his writings to be insightful and thought provoking. This book is no exception; in fact, Dutch Reformed church history and theology are two of his greatest strengths.

FOREWORD

We experienced that firsthand at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary when he taught a Dutch Reformation church history class that emphasized the Canons of Dort and their value for the church today.

Dr. Godfrey's treatment of the canons will be very helpful to students of the canons as well as to those who teach in church or seminary classes. He tells us the history behind the Synod of Dort so we can understand the conflict that gave birth to this statement. He gives a fresh translation of the canons for the modern reader. He walks us through each article of faith or refutation of error in the canons, offering brief comments to illuminate each section's meaning in its historical and theological context.

Godfrey also includes historical and analytical appendices, of which the first, third, and fifth are particularly valuable. In the first appendix, he argues that Jacobus Arminius was not a moderate Reformed theologian who was offended by extreme supralapsarianism and fell victim to a new, intolerant form of Reformed orthodoxy. Rather, Arminius sought to replace mainstream Reformed teaching with an altogether different theology—while claiming to be faithful to the Reformed confessions. The third appendix is a detailed outline of the canons, which teachers will find illuminating for organizing their presentations of its doctrines. The fifth appendix consists of a translation of the synod's statement on the Sabbath, which offers much-needed insight into Continental sabbatarian theology and its agreement with that of the British Puritans.

The Canons of Dort have meant a great deal to me for half a century now, ever since I was first converted. When I was a teenager, I struggled with the doctrine of predestination for months until I realized that the canons are scripturally accurate in their biblical, pastoral, sensitive, and warm presentation of this doctrine. Through reading the Canons of Dort, I learned as a teenager that the great question to be answered is not, How could God reject anyone and send His own creatures to hell? but rather, How could God elect anyone and bring His fallen, hell-worthy creatures into heaven to be with Him forever? The canons helped me be more amazed by "amazing grace" than I had ever been before. Later on, when doing a doctoral dissertation on assurance of faith for Westminster Theological Seminary, I came to appreciate and treasure

SAVING THE REFORMATION

the beauty and balance of the canons' treatment of this doctrine in head V. I saw as never before how the Canons of Dort paved the way for the Westminster Confession of Faith's magisterial treatment of assurance in its renowned chapter 18—a chapter that has codified the Reformed view of this doctrine ever since. More recently, the canons' Reformed stress on preaching, and its encouragement to pastors to boldly proclaim the lofty doctrines that it unpacks from a biblical, doctrinal, experiential, and practical vantage point, have moved me to write on this subject.¹

In sum, though the Canons of Dort are a document worthy of historical and theological analysis, their value does not end with the intellectual or academic. The canons declare the redeeming love of God in Jesus Christ for fallen, corrupt, helpless sinners—the greatest love story of all. “We love him, because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19, KJV), and so the canons are a call to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves.

The Canons of Dort cannot be rightly received or understood without prayer to God and faith in His Word. The synod was convened with prayer, and the canons call for prayer. The canons conclude with a prayer that God's Son, seated at the right hand of God, would empower and sanctify His servants so that they may glorify God and edify men. The Synod of Dort closed not with an academic debate but with a worship service, where the delegates heard a sermon on Isaiah 12:2–3: “Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and not be afraid: for the LORD JEHOVAH is my strength and my song; he also is become my salvation. Therefore with joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation” (KJV).

Therefore, study the Canons of Dort with an open Bible, an open heart thirsting for Christ, and an open mouth proclaiming the praises of God.

—Dr. Joel R. Beeke
President, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary
Pastor, Heritage Reformed Congregation of Grand Rapids, Mich.

INTRODUCTION

Most meetings of church assemblies are neither interesting nor significant. But throughout the history of the church there have been notable exceptions. The great Council of Nicaea (325) powerfully defended the eternal divinity of Jesus. 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. This synod is both interesting and significant, and its decisions are a theological and spiritual treasure for Christians. On the occasion of the four-hundredth anniversary of the synod, it is good to remember and be renewed in an appreciation of its accomplishments. But studying the canons is much more than a historical exercise. It will be spiritually profitable for Christians and churches today.

The Synod of Dort was in the first place theological in its concerns. It met to answer the Arminian doctrines and articulate the biblical alternative. One scholar said that the Arminian challenge was “the greatest crisis in dogma since the age of the first reformers.”¹ As vital and central as that theological work was, the synod was significant for other reasons as well. Ecclesiastically, the synod expressed a clear vision of the church, its ministry, and its life. Politically, the synod met in cooperation with the state and in the context of wars to resolve tensions that might have threatened the very survival of the Dutch Republic. Ultimately, however, and most importantly, the synod was concerned with the deepest issues of the Christian religion.

The synod expressed the most profound religious truths: the absolute sovereignty of God, the effectiveness of the work of Christ and of the Holy Spirit, and the comfort Christians find in the gospel. This book will

SAVING THE REFORMATION

explore great matters—theological, ecclesiastical, and political—but we must be careful never to lose sight of the underlying religious concern, which was always of greatest consequence. This book will concentrate on the fundamentally religious convictions of the synod and the canons.

In a profound sense, this synod saved the Reformation for the Reformed churches. While Lutherans would reject several elements of the canons, Calvinists saw clearly that a proper understanding of election was necessary to protect the Reformation’s “grace alone.” The proper understanding of Christ’s atoning work was necessary to protect the Reformation’s “Christ alone.” A proper understanding of the regenerating and preserving work of the Holy Spirit and of the Christian’s comfort in these doctrines was necessary to protect the Reformation’s “grace alone” and “faith alone.” Implicit in the canons’ conclusions is their commitment to the Reformation’s “Scripture alone” as the only source of religious truth.

As the Reformation was a revival of a biblical Augustinianism, so the Synod of Dort stands in the great Christian heritage that rejects Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism. It stands in the tradition of Jesus against the Pharisees, Paul against the Judaizers, Athanasius against Arius, Augustine against Pelagius, and Luther against Erasmus. Dort against the Arminians continues that great commitment. The canons became the official teaching and sincere conviction of many churches and millions of Christians through the last four centuries.

The synod also met on the eve of a profound shift in Western thought. Increasingly after the synod, culminating with the Enlightenment, Western thought adopted a positive view of human nature and human abilities. The biblical view of fallen human nature and of a sovereign, personal God who acted in Christ, which was articulated by the Calvinists at Dort, increasingly seemed old-fashioned and wrong to modern thinkers. Yet Dort remained an invaluable witness to the truth of the Bible and of the Reformation. It also is a great resource to contemporary Christians for instruction and direction in understanding God’s truth and Christian faith and living.

This book is intended to help churches and Christians appreciate and study the synod and its canons. The central part of the book is part

INTRODUCTION

II, a new translation of the Canons of Dort. The canons were written for the church in a form designed to make them understandable for church members. This translation seeks to fulfill that aim. The translation does not simplify the vocabulary. Its main difference from earlier translations is to break the long Latin sentences of the original into shorter English sentences. A little of the precision of the Latin is lost in this process, but the result is a faithful translation that is much easier to read and understand for contemporary readers of English.

Part I of the book presents the historical and theological background to the synod. This material significantly helps with the understanding of the teaching of the canons in their original setting. Part I goes on to review the character and work of the synod itself. This section shows not only the situation for the writing of the canons, but also the broader work of the synod for the life and ministry of the church. Part III follows on the translation by presenting an analysis and exposition of the canons to help the reader understand the teaching of the canons. The aim is to see the general form of the canons as a whole and the meaning of each of the articles in itself and in relation to the other articles.

For those interested in more detail in these matters, this book contains several appendices. The first and longest is on the life and teaching of Jacobus Arminius. It challenges the dominant interpretation of Arminius' biography and as a result suggests an understanding of his role in the controversy in the Netherlands that is different from the one generally held today. The second appendix presents the general pattern of teaching in each of the heads of doctrine. The third appendix is a detailed outline of the teaching of the canons. The fourth appendix shows the relationship in each head of doctrine between the positive articles and the rejections of errors. Finally, the fifth appendix presents the statement of the Synod of Dort on the doctrine of the Sabbath.

Taken as a whole, this book seeks to help church members and pastors appreciate the important work of the Synod of Dort in the history of the church. But it aims even more at helping contemporary Christians to deepen their faith by seeing the greatness and goodness of God in His electing love and saving work in Christ.

PART I

HISTORICAL
AND THEOLOGICAL
BACKGROUND

Chapter 1

THE NEW CHURCH AND THE NEW STATE

Interest in the Reformation appeared early in the Low Countries. The first Protestant martyrs—monks who adopted the views of Martin Luther—died there in the early 1520s. By the later 1520s, Anabaptism attracted a much larger following there than Lutheranism. These Anabaptists in the Netherlands were quite diverse in their convictions, ranging from pacifist Mennonites to the violent and revolutionary followers of John of Leiden. All of the Anabaptists were severely persecuted by the civil government.

Still later, in the 1540s, Calvinist preachers from Geneva and France began to enter the Low Countries from the south. Calvinism spread as a popular movement first in the French-speaking south and then more slowly in the Dutch-speaking north. The government strongly opposed this advance with vigorous persecution. The Reformed churches, however, grew steadily even while suffering “under the cross” as the persecuted.

These churches were like other Reformed churches throughout Europe in doctrine and worship. They organized themselves much like the Reformed churches of France. Local congregations were governed by ministers, elders, and deacons. The local churches assembled in regional meetings called classes. Delegates from each classis formed provincial synods (or in the case of the province of Holland with its large

population, the particular synods of north Holland and south Holland). These regional synods at times met together as national synods.

The character of this church was from the beginning staunchly Calvinistic. Some ministers dissented, but they encountered strong disciplinary reaction from the church. The church adopted as its confessional standard the Belgic Confession (1561), written by the preacher Guido de Bres and modeled after the French Confession (1559), written largely by John Calvin. Beyond the material in the French Confession, de Bres expanded especially on the doctrine of the church and sought to distinguish clearly the Reformed teaching from both the Roman Catholic and the Anabaptist teaching. De Bres in his rejections of Anabaptism had the violent side of the movement particularly in mind. He died a martyr for his faith in 1567, making the Belgic Confession the only major Reformation confession sealed with the blood of its author. The other doctrinal standard adopted by the churches was the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), originally prepared for the Reformed churches of the Palatinate, an important part of the Holy Roman Empire. This catechism became a key teaching tool for spreading a thorough knowledge of the Reformed doctrines. The church required subscription to these standards by all ministers, elders, and deacons.¹

The growth of the Reformed churches in the Low Countries took place at the same time that the state there was undergoing fundamental changes. The Low Countries had been composed of seventeen provinces that had passed to the sovereignty of the Holy Roman emperor Charles V. When he abdicated, in 1555, the Low Countries passed to his son, who had become King Philip II of Spain. By 1568, a revolt against Philip had begun, sparked by his insensitivity to historic liberties in the Low Countries and by his severe persecution of the Anabaptists and Calvinists. (This revolt in the Netherlands became known as the Eighty Years' War since it was not finally settled until 1648, when the Thirty Years' War in Germany also ended.) After decades of war in the Low Countries, the conflict reached a stalemate that in effect divided the land into two parts.

The southern part of about ten provinces remained under Spanish control and Roman Catholic in faith, and it ultimately became the country

of Belgium. The northern part of about seven provinces organized itself on the basis of the Union of Utrecht (1579) into what became known as the United Provinces. These northern provinces, basically comprising what is today the Netherlands, were dominated by Protestants, although the Reformed church did not become the majority religion there until the later seventeenth century. After abjuring the rule of King Philip in the 1580s, the United Provinces tried to find a monarch, particularly hoping that Queen Elizabeth of England would rule over them. She was not willing, because she feared that they would ultimately be defeated by Spain. In time, the United Provinces became a republic and survived in that form until the Napoleonic era in the late eighteenth century. The United Provinces were formally governed by a legislative body called the States General. In this body, each of the seven provinces had one vote, and most important matters had to be decided unanimously.

The leading Protestant in the revolt against Spain was Prince William of Orange, who provided careful and heroic counsel to church and state until his assassination in 1584 by an agent of King Philip. After his death, executive leadership in the state passed to Jan van Oldenbarnevelt, an official from the province of Holland. William's son, Prince Maurits (sometimes rendered Maurice in English histories), became the military leader and a very successful strategist and warrior against Spain. He became the other dominant figure in the politics of the United Provinces in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

Weary of war, the United Provinces arranged with Spain an armistice now known as the Twelve Years' Truce, which was signed in Antwerp on April 9, 1609. That year was significant also because on October 19 the Dutch Reformed minister and professor Jacobus Arminius died.

While the war with Spain raged, that external pressure had kept the strains in the state and church of the United Provinces somewhat in check. But with the truce, those strains came more to the fore. In the state, the merchants of Holland led by Oldenbarnevelt wanted a permanent peace for the sake of trade and commerce. But others, led by Maurits and supported by many Calvinists, wanted the war to continue. They wanted to keep the whole of the Low Countries united and to

liberate the southern provinces both from Spain and from the Roman Catholic religion.

Strain had also appeared in the church. The majority of the Calvinist ministers wanted the church to be more self-governing with less dependence on the state in matters of discipline and particularly in the calling of a national synod. These ministers knew that the church had had national synods before the formation of the United Provinces and thought that national synods should be used to address vital issues affecting the whole church. The Dutch Reformed churches according to their own reckoning had had five national synods before the Synod of Dort (1618–19): at Emden (1571), Dordrecht (1574 and 1578),² Middelburg (1581), and the Hague (1586). After the great Synod of Dort, no national synod of the Dutch Reformed churches was held for almost two hundred years.³

Arminius

A minority of ministers and many of the merchants in Holland wanted significant state control over the church, especially in matters of discipline. Such an approach to state control was called Erastian, after Thomas Erastus of Heidelberg, who had defended this view of church government. In addition to this difference over church polity, by 1609 it was also clear that a small group of ministers in the Reformed church dissented from the Calvinist orthodoxy of the majority. This theological difference would become very divisive and dangerous in the years after 1609.

For the background to this theological difference that would lead to the Synod of Dort, we must look to the life and work of one minister in particular, Jacobus (James) Arminius (1559–1609). He would, ironically, become the most famous theologian ever produced by the Dutch Reformed Church.

Arminius' biography is simple. He was born in the province of Holland in about 1559. His father had died in the war against Spain, leaving the family quite poor. Authorities supported his education, recognizing his academic talents. He was among the first students at the

new University in Leiden, and from there he went for graduate study in Geneva and Basel. The leading professor in Geneva at that time was Calvin's successor, Theodore Beza. Arminius returned to Amsterdam, where he was ordained to the ministry and served as a pastor from 1588 to 1603. He was then appointed professor of theology at the University of Leiden, where he served until his death in 1609.

For most of his life, Arminius was not well known or widely influential. He caused some local controversy in Amsterdam among ministers for his sermons on Romans 7 and Romans 9. While these concerns seemed to be resolved, they were significant enough that some ministers criticized his appointment to teach theology at Leiden. In the latter years of his professorship, rumors circulated that he was undermining orthodoxy. The criticisms and rumors were hard to evaluate at the time because—as strange as it may seem—Arminius published none of his writings in his own lifetime.

The controversies that increasingly surrounded him came to a head in 1608. To express his views for the government investigation, he wrote his *Declaration of Sentiments*, presented to the government on October 30, 1608. This document, also not published in his lifetime, contained first a historical section reviewing his understanding of the past dissent from Calvinist orthodoxy in the Dutch churches. The second section was a theological section, in which he vehemently attacked one of the Calvinist understandings of election, called supralapsarianism:⁴ “This doctrine completely subverts the foundation of religion in general, and of the Christian Religion in particular.”⁵

Arminius then expressed his own view of predestination, which he very briefly summarized in terms of four decrees. Only the fourth of these decrees deals with predestination in relation to particular individuals; he stated that God decrees “to save and damn certain particular persons. This decree has its foundation in the foreknowledge of God, by which he knew from all eternity those individuals who would, through his preventing [i.e., prevenient] grace, believe, and through his subsequent grace would persevere.”⁶ This teaching was contrary to any Calvinist understanding of election and seemed very similar to the teaching of the

Spanish Jesuit Luis de Molina, first published in 1588. (For more details on Arminius and a reconsideration of his life, see appendix 1.)

Arminius' views as expressed in his *Declaration* would certainly have caused even greater controversy in the church, but his deteriorating health made further investigation difficult. He died on October 19, 1609. Some thought that his death might put an end to the troubles. But after the death of Arminius, it became clear that his teaching had had an impact and attracted a number of ministers. These ministers may have followed his teaching or may have simply felt liberated by his dissent to pursue their own forms of disagreement with Reformed orthodoxy. Whatever the actual direct influence of his thought, he became a symbol of the rejection of Calvinist orthodoxy, and his name became attached to various anti-Calvinist theologies.⁷

The Remonstrance of 1610

Those ministers influenced by Arminius at the time of his death recognized that their positions in the church were precarious. The vast majority of the ministers and elders of the church would have disciplined them for their views. To protect themselves, they prepared an appeal or petition to the civil government. They stated their theological positions and requested that the government ensure their toleration in the church. This petition—called a “remonstrance”—came to be known as the Remonstrance of 1610. Those who signed the petition and supported it came to be called the Remonstrants. In the United Provinces in the seventeenth century, the followers of Arminius were usually called Remonstrants rather than Arminians.

The Remonstrance of 1610 was a rather long document. The executive officer of the state, Jan van Oldenbarnevelt, saw immediately how explosive the document was and decided to keep it secret. As with most government secrets, it soon was widely known and evoked exactly the reaction that Oldenbarnevelt had feared. The orthodox Calvinists soon issued a written response that became known as the Counter-Remonstrance of 1611, and these Calvinists came to be called Counter-Remonstrants.

At the heart of the Remonstrance was a five-point summary of the

doctrinal views that the Remonstrants wanted protected. So, in 1610, the five points of Arminianism were articulated. Although the Counter-Remonstrants initially responded in 1611 with seven points, ultimately the Synod of Dort would respond point by point to the Arminians, giving the world “the five points of Calvinism.”

We should remember, however, that Calvinism has never summarized itself in five points. Calvinism is summarized in full confessional statements such as the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Westminster Confession of Faith. To be very accurate, Calvinism does not have—and never has had—five points. Rather, it has five answers to the five errors of Arminianism.

The Canons of the Synod of Dort are not a full confession but are rather a clarification and defense of some points in the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism. The Synod of Dort made this clear in the Form of Subscription that it prepared for ministers and others in the church. Ministers subscribed “the Confession and Catechism of the Dutch Reformed churches and also the Exposition [*declarationem*] of some articles of this doctrine made at the national synod of Dordrecht.”⁸

The Remonstrance of 1610 is so important to the later controversies and to the synod that a new translation of the summary five points is provided here:

THE REMONSTRANCE OF 1610⁹

Article 1

God—by an eternal and unchangeable decree in Jesus Christ, His Son, before the foundation of the world—has determined, out of the fallen and sinful human race, to save in Christ, because of Christ, and through Christ those who, through the grace of the Holy Spirit, believe in this His Son Jesus and persevere in this belief and obedience even to the end, through this grace. On the other hand, God has determined to leave the unconverted and unbelieving in their sin and under wrath and to condemn them as separate from Christ. This is the word of the holy gospel in

SAVING THE REFORMATION

John 3:36, “He who believes in the Son has eternal life, and he who is disobedient to the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.” Other passages of the Scriptures teach the same.

Article 2

From this it follows that Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, died for all men and for each man. He earned for them all, through the death of the cross, reconciliation and the forgiveness of sins. Still, Christ died in such a way that no one actually shares in this forgiveness of sins except those who believe. This is the word of the gospel of John 3:16, “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that whoever believes in him, should not perish but have eternal life.” And in the First Letter of John 2:2, “He is the reconciliation of our sins, and not only of ours, but of the sins of the whole world.”

Article 3

Man does not have this saving faith from himself nor out of the power of his free will. Man in the state of apostasy and sin cannot, out of or from himself, think, will, or do any good that is truly good (as is particularly saving faith). But it is necessary that by God, in Christ, through His Holy Spirit, he be born again and renewed in understanding, affections, and will, and all powers so that he may rightly think, will, and do the truly good. This is the word of Christ, John 13:5, “Without me you can do nothing.”

Article 4

This grace of God is the beginning, continuance, and completion of all good, so much so that even the regenerate man can neither think, will, or do the good nor resist any temptation to evil without prevenient or assisting, awakening, following, and cooperating grace. So, all the good deeds or works of which man

can think must be ascribed to the grace of God in Christ. But as to the manner of the working of this grace, it is not irresistible. It is written of many that they have resisted the Holy Spirit, as in Acts 7 and many other places.

Article 5

Those who are united to Jesus Christ by a true faith and so come to share in his life-giving Spirit have abundant power to fight against Satan, sin, the world, and their own sin and to win the victory. But whether they of themselves through neglect can lose the beginning of their being in Christ, again take up with this present world, reject the Holy Spirit once given to them, lose their good conscience, and abandon grace, must first be sought out further from the Holy Scripture before we can ourselves teach it with the full confidence of our minds.

Conclusion

The Remonstrants who propose and teach these points consider that they are in conformity to the Word of God, are edifying, and in their content are sufficient for salvation, and that it is not necessary or edifying in these matters to climb higher or to descend lower.

Examining the Remonstrance of 1610

The Remonstrants or Arminians (forty-two ministers signed the petition) expressed their real theological convictions and concerns in this statement. They were also aware that they represented a small minority position in the church and that only the intervention of the civil government could protect them from the disciplinary actions of classes or synods. They expressed their views in their five points with an eye to presenting their views in the most sympathetic and attractive light.

Their five points were simple, straightforward, and cast in biblical terms. They were also clever, stating the issues in ways that played to their advantage. The central issue was predestination, but related

issues were both strategically important and pastorally sensitive. The Arminians sincerely believed that their views were more biblical than those of the Calvinists, but they also wanted to attack the Calvinists at their weakest theological, pastoral, and rhetorical points.

In the first point of the Remonstrance, the Arminians recognized that the Bible taught predestination, and so they presented their view of predestination. In it, they express a thoroughly biblical truth: God saves those who believe and who persevere in faith and obedience. But they take that biblical truth and turn it into their doctrine of predestination. Unlike the Calvinists, who understand predestination as relating to individuals, the Arminians define predestination as relating to a class or condition of people. For Calvinists, God chooses individuals to salvation; for Arminians, He chooses qualifications for salvation that individuals must meet.

This point prominently stresses the work of Christ and the grace of the Holy Spirit—again showing the Remonstrants’ efforts to appear biblical and Protestant—but it is not at all specific as to exactly what Christ and the Holy Spirit do. So, predestination is God’s determination to save obedient believers and not to save disobedient unbelievers. The Remonstrants also quote a familiar biblical text to substantiate their position (John 3:36). The text does indeed teach about salvation. It does not, however, relate immediately or definitively to predestination.

Next, the Remonstrance turns to the death of Christ. Point 2 opens with a particularly clear statement: Christ died for all men and every man. Here is a sharp challenge theologically and rhetorically to the Calvinists. It was often hard for the Calvinists to express and defend their notion that the death of Christ was “limited.” After its clear opening statement, the article then becomes exceedingly vague. Christ died for all, but not all are saved. Somehow, the effectiveness of the death of Christ is triggered by believing. The relationship between the work of Christ and the believing of an individual is completely undefined.

The great English Puritan John Owen provided the definitive analysis and refutation of this Arminian argument later in the seventeenth century in his work *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*. The brief

summary of Owen's case is this: If Christ died for all the sins of all men, did He die for the unbelief of the unbeliever? If unbelief is a sin, then Christ died for it, and the unbeliever is saved. If unbelief is not a sin, then God cannot condemn the unbeliever because of it. By its own inherent logic, the Arminian teaching on the atonement necessarily leads to universalism, however much Arminians try to deny that.

The issue of the extent of the atonement was for many the most emotional and controversial point of orthodox Calvinism. Yet the doctrine that Christ died for the elect was not unique to Calvinism but had been taught by a number of theologians in the Middle Ages. The greatest medieval textbook for theology, Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, declared that Christ had died sufficiently for all, but efficiently for the elect alone. Many Dutch Calvinists were particularly annoyed and offended by this emotional use of the work of Christ.

Point 3 aims to show that the Arminians have a Protestant view of the seriousness of sin. Again we have a clear statement, denying free will in fallen man and insisting that fallen man can on his own do nothing that is truly good. God must act to save this fallen man, who cannot save himself. As it stands, this point is perfectly acceptable to Calvinists. It is only as the thought begun in point 3 is continued in point 4 that Calvinists had trouble. (That is why the Canons of Dort in responding to the Remonstrants treat the third and fourth points together.)

If point 3 shows clearly the absolute necessity of grace to save fallen man, point 4 shows that that grace can be resisted and rejected by fallen man. Here again the effort is made to stress the centrality and pervasive activity of grace at all points of salvation. All the good in man must be attributed to grace alone. Still, that grace can be resisted. The will of fallen man can reject saving grace if he is determined to do so. Again, Scripture passages are cited to substantiate the position. For Calvinists, this sounds like a theology that tries to be as Augustinian as possible but in the end remains semi-Pelagian. In fact, it sounds very similar to the position taken by Erasmus in his criticism of Luther. Fallen man remains determinative as to whether grace is effective.

Point 5 continues the stress on the centrality of grace. God's grace

is powerfully sufficient to preserve the believer in the face of every difficulty and temptation. Nothing external to the believer can seriously harm him. But the Arminians state that they need further study of the Scriptures to decide if the believer can abandon Christ. In other words, they believe that the sinner can reject grace at the beginning of grace's contact with his life, but they are uncertain as to whether this grace can be rejected later. Since this doctrine of perseverance had been a clear and important teaching of Reformed Christianity since the days of Calvin, Calvinists saw this uncertainty on the part of the Arminians as disingenuous, indeed dishonest. The Arminians had had a great deal of time to study the matter and to reach a conclusion on it.

The brief conclusion to these five points insists on their orthodoxy, piety, and sufficiency. The Calvinists would deny that these points present the teaching of the Scriptures on the matters they cover. Indeed, the Calvinists would claim that the points of the Remonstrance reject the clear teaching of the Bible. They would also insist that teachings that are not true cannot be edifying. Finally, they would argue that the Bible indeed has a much higher and deeper doctrine on these matters than the Arminians realized. At the Synod of Dort, the Calvinists would lay out the biblical truth on these matters, show their biblical fullness, and make clear the truly edifying nature of genuine Reformed Christianity.

As problematic as the teachings of these points are, our study of the Canons of Dort—especially the rejections of errors—will show how much more radically Pelagian at least some of the Arminians had become in less than a decade after 1610. Some of the Remonstrants, particularly on points 3, 4, and 5, had gone much further theologically and become much less cautious.

After the Remonstrance

In the years between the Remonstrance and the Synod of Dort, various efforts were made to reconcile the Calvinists and Arminians, but the differences were too great and too deep to be negotiated away. The civil government did protect the Remonstrants from discipline by the church. But the polarization of the two sides increased steadily, leading to the

edge of a split in the church. Some Calvinists refused to attend churches with Arminian ministers. Some Calvinists spoke of organizing secret classes, as they had done in the days of Roman Catholic persecution.

As long as the civil government remained united in its policy of toleration for the Remonstrants, the Calvinists' options were limited. But in 1617, Prince Maurits left his congregation, which had an Arminian minister, and started attending a church with a Calvinist pastor. Increasingly, he opposed the policies of Oldenbarnevelt. The polarization of Dutch society was complete. As the civil government, Oldenbarnevelt, and the peace party supported toleration for the Arminians, so Maurits, the army, and the war party came to support the Calvinists. The United Provinces were not far from civil war. But Maurits had the considerable advantage of an army to support him, whereas Oldenbarnevelt did not. Oldenbarnevelt was arrested for treason in 1618, which was a shameful act against a Dutch patriot and one of the low points for Dutch Calvinists. Years of frustration boiled over in excessive anger. The new government, led by Maurits, authorized the meeting of a national synod to address at last the Remonstrant theology.

THE SYNOD OF DORT

Many ministers in the Reformed church had been calling for a national synod to address the Arminian challenge for years. The new civil government authorized the calling of the national synod, and the decision was made for the synod to convene on November 13, 1618, in the city of Dordrecht.

Dordrecht is a port city in the province of Holland (the name of the city is often abbreviated in English as Dort or Dordt). This city was the site of the meeting of the first free gathering of the States General after the beginning of the revolt against Philip II of Spain. It was also the site of the meeting of two earlier synods, reckoned by the Calvinists as national synods, in 1574 and 1578. The associations of this city with great events in the history of the United Provinces underscore the importance of this synod. The hall in which the synod actually met no longer stands. But the building where some of the delegates were housed (the same building where the first free States General met) and the church where they often worshiped are still standing.

The Composition of the Synod

The Arminians objected sharply to the calling of the synod, insisting that it would be unfair, indeed a kangaroo court. They stated that a synod