

The Synod of Dort and Moral Government Theology

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No charge has been used more often or to greater effect to stifle theological discussion and disagreement than the charge of "unorthodox," or even worse, "heretical." Before one succumbs to the emotional pressure of these terms it is instructive to be aware of the history of theological disputes. Theological discourse through the centuries often changes from principled reasoning, or even disagreement, to emotional demagoguery and ad hominem attacks. Moral Government Theology has been attacked in recent years as both "unorthodox" and "heretical." But Moral Government Theology finds its roots squarely in the theological system known as Arminianism, a system and tradition fully encompassing millions upon millions of Christians today. While those who have attacked Moral Government Theology purport to recognize Arminianism as a legitimate alternative perspective on the Christian faith, Arminians as a whole have had to defend themselves from the charges of the "reformed" wing of the Church of "unorthodoxy" and "heresy" since its inception. The debate is an historic, and indeed pivotal one, summed up and defined early on in a conference called the Synod of Dort.

The Synod of Dort refers to a national religious conference of the Netherlands Reformed Church held in Dordrecht (Dort), the Netherlands, from Nov. 13, 1618 to May 25, 1619. The conference was called to deal primarily with three problems confronting the Church: 1) Erastianism, the control of the church by the state; 2) anticonfessional humanism they deemed more Hellenistic than biblical, whose two leading proponents were Erasmus and Coornheert (or Koornheert); and 3) the positions of the Arminians as outlined in The Remonstrance of 1610. For the purpose of this overview, we will focus only on the third subject.

The story of the Synod of Dort, however, does not begin with the Synod itself, but rather with the person of Jacobus Arminius (1560+1609). Arminius was a Dutch Reformed minister, a student of Theodore Beza (the undisputed leader in Geneva as John Calvin's successor) and, later, a professor of theology at the University of Leiden. While a young scholar and popular pastor in Amsterdam, Arminius was asked to write a paper refuting the teachings of Dirck Coornhert, a Dutch public servant and lay theologian. Coornhert found the doctrine of predestination as taught by strict Calvinists objectionable and a denial of justice of God, which he published in 1576. While studying the objections raised by Coornhert, Arminius was convinced that in many of his views, Coornhert was correct. Controversy did not erupt, however, until Arminius was appointed professor of theology at Leiden when his views clashed with those of Franciscus Gomarus, not only a strict Calvinist but a supralapsarian (supralapsarianism is the doctrine that God decreed both election and reprobation before the fall of Adam).¹ In his *Declaration of Sentiments* (1608) Arminius gave twenty arguments against supralapsarianism, which he applied also to infralapsarianism. Arminius believed that both positions were void of good news; repugnant to God's wisdom, goodness and justice, and to man's free will; "highly dishonorable to Jesus Christ;" "hurtful to the salvation of men;" and that it "inverts the

order of the gospel of Jesus Christ" (i.e. that believers are justified after they exercise faith, not prior to). However, his principal objection was that unconditional predestination makes God "the author of sin." Arminius was chiefly concerned that any doctrine of the Church, including (perhaps, particularly) predestination, be Christ centered and edify believers. Thus Arminius declares his two main objections to both infra- and supra-lapsarianism: (1) For this predestination is not that decree of God by which Christ is appointed by God to be the Savior, the Head, and the Foundation of those who will be made heirs of Salvation. Yet that decree is the only foundation of Christianity. (2) For the doctrine of this Predestination is not that doctrine by which, through faith, we as lively stones are built up into Christ, the only cornerstone, and are inserted into him as the members of the body are joined to their head.²

As Arminius began to set forth his positions with greater conviction and clarity, action against him, by Gomarus and his followers, intensified. The Church in Holland became divided into two hostile camps and the debate became as much political as theological. Gomarus predicted that the debate might even erupt into a civil war. In 1608 Arminius requested of the States of Holland and West Friesland (now a province of the Netherlands) a national synod be appointed to hear the debate. He made a defense of his position before the States General (the ruling body of the Netherlands) in 1609, but died before this conference ended, at the age of forty nine.

After Arminius' death, the leadership of the "Arminians" (also known as the Remonstrants) passed on to Simon Episcopius (or Bisschop) who also assumed Arminius' chair at the University of Leiden. In response to Gomarus' and his followers' attempt in 1610 to pressure the authorities to remove all Arminians from their teaching positions, the Arminians issued the document known as *The Remonstrance*, which was signed by forty-six pastors of the National Church. This document outlined in five main articles their principal disagreements with strict Calvinism. Those articles, in summation, declared: (1) That God determined in Christ Jesus to save out of sinful humanity those who believe on Christ and who shall persevere in faith and obedience; and to leave the "incorrigible and unbelieving in sin and under death." (2) Jesus Christ died for all men and for every man, and that by his death on the cross, redemption and forgiveness of sins is obtained; "yet that no one actually enjoys this forgiveness of sins except the believer." (3) Fallen man "has not saving grace of himself" and that apart from the Holy Spirit "can of and by himself neither think, will, nor do anything that is truly good." (4) That, in light of article three, "all good deeds and movements [in man] must be ascribed to the grace of God in Christ", this grace, however, "...is not irresistible inasmuch as it is written concerning many, that they have resisted the Holy Ghost." (5) Those who believe in Christ have "full power" to persevere in faith and overcome any and all temptations, but whether or not, through their own negligence or forsaking of the Gospel may become "devoid of grace" required more study of Scriptures.³

After the publication of *The Remonstrance*, the controversy soon involved many political and social issues as well as theological ones. Most of the middle class of the day, and the maritime province of the Netherlands, supported the Arminian position. The rural classes, particularly those of the lower areas of Holland, supported Gomarus and his brand of

strict Calvinism.⁴ Such a strong divisiveness developed throughout the nation that it threatened to split the National Church and the provinces of the Netherlands. The situation became so bad that in 1617 civil war threatened.

Thus, on November 11 of 1617 the States General decreed that a synod should be called to settle the questions. When the Synod of Dort met in 1618, the Remonstrants expected that they would be recognized as equals and that the synod would be a conference to discuss and come to some consensus on, or at least an understanding of, the points in questions. Instead, with the Synod heavily weighted in favor of the strict Calvinists, thirteen Arminian theologians were summoned before the Synod and treated as defendants. Eventually, Arminianism was declared heresy and more than two hundred Arminian ministers were ejected from their pastorates and 15 were arrested.

The Canons of the Synod of Dort were a direct response to the five articles of the Remonstrance and uphold the Augustinian understanding of the biblical doctrines of sin and grace. The Canons of Dort set Forth: (1) Unconditional election and damnation as a result of the predetermined will and decree of God whereby God "softens the hearts of the elect, while he leaves the non-elect in his just judgment to their own wickedness and obduracy. And herein is displayed...that decree of election and reprobation." (2) That the atoning sacrifice of Christ extends to the elect only, and that "Christ should effectually redeem all those, and those only, who were from eternity chosen for salvation and that Christ should purge them from all sin, both original and actual, whether committed before or after believing and should preserve them even to the end." (3,4) The total depravity and inability of man to respond to the Gospel; the response of individuals "is not to be ascribed to the proper exercise of free-will...but it must be wholly ascribed to God, who has chosen his own from eternity in Christ." The grace which engenders man's response is irresistible being "the gift of God, not on account of its being offered by God to man, to be accepted or rejected at his [man's] pleasure, but because it is in reality conferred..." (5) Those God saves are preserved by Him in the faith, "...it is utterly impossible, since his counsel cannot be changed, nor his promise fail, neither can the call according to his purpose be revoked," for the elect to fall from grace.⁵

These Canons were received not only by the Church in the Netherlands, but throughout the European Reformed Churches. The Synod served as an example for the Westminster Assembly, held in Britain a generation later, and in fact still are held symbolically in authority for the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands, the Reformed Church in America and the Christian Reformed Church.⁶

The Synod of Dort thus started anew in the post reformation period a debate that has raged among sincere Christians since Augustine (354-430 AD), and its history shows that those adherents of strict "five point" Calvinism have always regarded Arminians as "heretics". While space limitations prohibit this overview from dealing with any but the five principles or articles deemed most central by those involved at the time, the theological intricacies which distinguished Arminianism from the Orthodoxy of the day were many and diverse, and considered just as "heretical" by that same "Orthodoxy". J. K. Grider, in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Walter A. Elwell, presents

another area of Arminian theology which still elicits the cry of "heresy:" Arminianism teaches that Christ suffered for us rather than "paid" the penalty sinners "owe." Arminians teach that what Christ did he did for every person; therefore what he did could not have been to pay the penalty, since no one would then ever go into eternal perdition. Arminianism teaches that Christ suffered for everyone so that the Father could forgive the ones who repent and believe; his death is such that all will see that forgiveness is costly and will strive to cease from anarchy in the world God governs. This view is called the governmental theory of the atonement. Its germinal teachings are in Arminius, but his student, the lawyer-theologian Hugo Grotius, delineated the view. Methodism's John Miley best explicated the theory in his *The Atonement in Christ* (1879). Arminians feel that the reason Scripture always states that Christ suffered (e.g., Acts 17:3; 26:23; II Cor. 1:5; Phil. 3:10; Heb. 2:9+10; 13:12; I Pet. 1:11; 2:21; 3:18; 4:1, 13), and never that he was punished, is because the Christ who was crucified was guiltless because he was sinless. They also feel that God the Father would not be forgiving us at all if his justice was satisfied by the real thing that justice needs: punishment. They understand that there can be only punishment or forgiveness, not both, realizing, e.g., that a child is either punished or forgiven, not forgiven after the punishment has been meted out.⁷

From this article it can be seen that rather than being a new theory, Moral Government Theology has its' modern roots in Arminianism. In fact, elements of what has come to be called Moral Government Theology can be traced all the way back to the anti-nicene period of Church history. These tenets are not new, neither is opposition to them new. Arminius endured it, Wesley endured it. Finney vociferously rejected the appellation "Arminian" due to the negative connotations it carried among New England Presbyterians and Congregationalists, even though he was closer theologically to Arminianism than he was "Old School" Calvinism.

The Synod of Dort further illustrates the process in which the theology of the Reformation became "schematized into a strict orthodoxy."⁸ The problem with orthodoxy is not in what it attempts to articulate, but rather that it tends to separate its most ardent adherents from a living faith. Orthodoxy changes faith from a dynamic relationship with the living Christ, a day to day "possession" of the believer by the Holy Spirit, into a legal system of propositions to be believed. No longer do the "just live by faith", but Orthodoxy calls the just to defend the faith. As we have seen above, historically, to be on the "wrong" side of Orthodoxy has not always been to be on the wrong side of God!

Endnotes

¹ Supralapsarianism differs from infralapsarianism on the relation of God's decree to human sin. The differences go back to the conflict between Augustine and Pelagius. Before the Reformation, the main difference was whether Adam's fall was included in God's eternal decree, supralapsarians held that it was, but infralapsarians acknowledged only God's foreknowledge of sin. Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin were agreed that Adam's fall was somehow included in God's decree, it came to be referred to as a "permissive decree," and all insisted that God was in no way the author of sin. As a result of the Reformers' agreement, after the Reformation the distinction between infra- and

supralapsarianism shifted to differences on the logical order of God's decrees. Elwell, Walter A. *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. Electronic Media, article on "Supralapsarianism."

² Nichols and Bagnall, *The Writings of James Arminius*, 1:216+17.

³ All quotations from *The Remonstrance*, taken from Ferm, *Readings in the History of Christian Thought*, pp. 397-406

⁴ Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought*, p. 258.

⁵ All quotations of the Canons of the Synod of Dort taken from Ferm, *Readings in the History of Christian Thought*, pp. 397-406.

⁶ Brauer, *The Westminster Dictionary of Church History*, p. 276.

⁷ Grider, J. K., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Elwell, Walter A., ed., Electronic Media, article on "Arminianism."

⁸ Gonzalez, p. 261

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