

# The Synod of Dordt

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## Historical Introduction

**W**hen the Calvinistic Reformation came to the Netherlands, there were many priests and monks who left the Romish Church and were given ministerial status in the Reformed Church. Some of these were good men who broke with Rome under deep convictions of the truth. Many were evil men who, with wet fingers held high in the ecclesiastical winds that blew, saw that the power of Rome was broken in the Netherlands. They were determined to abandon a sinking ship. For personal reasons they came to the side of the Reformation. But they carried with them the errors of Rome—the doctrine of works righteousness and the heresy of semi-pelagianism. They proved fertile soil for the seeds of Arminianism. Besides, there were leaders in the Church (Coornhert, for example) who opposed the doctrine of predestination and who wanted only a very general creed such as the Apostolic Confession to serve as the confessional basis of the Church. It was Arminius though, who united all the erring elements in the Church into one party which became a power to reckon with in the defense of the faith.

**Arminius** was born in the town of Oudewater in 1560. Very early in life he was left fatherless but two Reformed ministers sponsored his education in the Academy of Leiden. Finishing his education here at the age of 21, he was sent to study in the University of Geneva, sponsored by a merchant’s guild from Amsterdam. The University of Geneva was famous throughout the continent of Europe as the center of Reformed studies. It was founded by John Calvin himself and was, after the death of Calvin, under the administration of Theodore Beza, a staunch defender of Calvin’s views. It was at Geneva that Arminius met Uitenbogaert who became his close friend and, who was destined to play such a large role in the Arminian struggle back in the Netherlands. We shall meet him again. After a brief trip to Italy, Arminius returned to Geneva for a short time then came back to his homeland where he passed his classical examination and was admitted to the ministry of the gospel by unanimous vote.

Under the wise and inscrutable providence of God **three events took place** which soon brought the views of Arminius into the open.

The **first** of these events really served to strengthen Arminius in heretical views that he had begun to develop already while in Geneva. Coornhert had engaged for some time in agitation against the doctrine of election and Arminius was asked to refute these views for the benefit of the churches. In his studies which he made prior to his refutation he came to the conclusion that he was unable to refute the views of Coornhert because he was himself becoming more and more convinced that they were true. This startling fact he did not make public.

The **second** of these events was the fruit of the preaching of Arminius in his congregation in Amsterdam. He was busy with a series of sermons on the book of Romans. From the beginning of the book, his heretical views occasionally cropped up, but it was emphatically in his sermons on Romans 9 that his congregation noticed his denial of the Reformed and Scriptural view of sovereign predestination. His congregation was alarmed. And especially his fellow minister, Plancius, opposed his views and combatted the evil doctrines he was developing.

The **third** of these events is very strange. In the midst of all the troubles in Amsterdam, Arminius was appointed professor of theology in the University of Leiden. How it was ever possible for Reformed men to agree to the appointment of this man who was under suspicion in Amsterdam remains partly a mystery.

However, there were two factors that had bearing on the matter. On the one hand, the university was not under the control of the Church, but rather under the control of the State. The relation between the Church and the State was (and is today) different in the Netherlands than it is in the USA, for instance. Strictly speaking the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands were not a "State Church." Nevertheless, the State did have a certain amount of control over the Church. The Reformed Churches existed under the favor and blessing of the State; the State supported the Church financially and the State had much to say about such questions of Church polity as the calling of ministers, the appointment of professors, the convening of broader ecclesiastical assemblies, etc. At the time when (and up to the time of the meeting of the Synod of Dordt) the State was in the hands of men who favored Arminianism, or at least did not think the entire matter of Arminius' heresy was sufficiently important to create trouble about it in the Church. The result was that Arminius was appointed with the blessing of the State.

On the other hand, Arminius himself was a very crafty man. While he was teaching his views whenever the opportunity presented itself, he was also covering up his views and staunchly insisting that he was indeed Reformed. He succeeded for the most part in quieting the fears of those who did not trust him. And so the heretic from Amsterdam gained the important chair of theology in the University of Leiden. The year was 1602.

It is not difficult to imagine what a splendid opportunity this furnished Arminius for the spreading of his views throughout the Church. There is no more strategic place to influence others than a theological school. Here were instructed the ministers of the gospel, the teachers of the schools, the leaders of the Church. Here in the classroom of theology came those

who were to carry on the defense of the faith in the years ahead. Here Arminius made good use of his opportunities and his position to spread the leaven of heresy throughout the Church.

He had one strong and tireless opponent. Gomarus was his name. He also taught in the University. And this staunch and outspoken man never ceased to combat the evil which Arminius developed and taught. But Arminius had the protection and blessing of the State that favored him. He had a way that left others with the impression that he was earnestly seeking the truth. He again and again persuaded the authorities (when he was called on the carpet for his views) that there was no cause for alarm. And his disciples went forth thoroughly imbued with his views to preach and teach them over the whole land.

If he could not with safety teach his views in the University, he retired to the seclusion of his home. Here he gathered select groups of his students to discuss with them what he believed. Here he used his charming ways to make them into his ardent defenders.

In 1609 Arminius became sick and died. But his cause continued. Especially his good friend Uitenbogaert carried on the heresies which Arminius developed. And a party was organized within the Reformed Churches called the *Remonstrants*, and dedicated to the cause of establishing the heresy of Arminianism as the official doctrine of the church.

It is difficult to write an obituary of Arminius—except that there have always been many like him in the history of the Church. He was a brilliant scholar, a thoroughly educated man, a student who pursued his studies even in the parsonage. He was a man of pleasing personality, not difficult to get along with, easily making friends, refined in manners, elegant in appearance, a popular teacher who could make a lasting impression on the minds and hearts of his students. He was a gifted preacher, a good pastor, easily ensuring the favor of those to whom he ministered. Especially this was true if we compare him with Gomarus, his opponent in the University. Gomarus was everything that Arminius was not. He was a stern man, not given to smiling, often crude and gruff, holding people at arm's length, not easy to know, difficult to “come close to,” not always able to hold his temper. When he opposed Arminius his voice thundered with wrath, his language was the language of a man who was solely interested in the truth without any concern for what people thought of him or what the reactions would be in the minds of his audience. Yet he was fearless and unbending, wholly dedicated to the cause of the Church of Christ.

Besides, Arminius was crafty. He could play with words, speak out of both sides of his mouth, promote his views with subtlety and in an all but unnoticed way. He always tried to leave the impression that he stood for the Reformed faith and on the basis of the Reformed Confessions, while all the time he carried his views in his pocket. He tried to smuggle his heresy into the Church under the guise of developing the Reformed faith. He tried to lull the people into spiritual slumber the better to feed them the poison of his errors. He worked “under the table,” behind people's backs, dealing in treachery and deceit to accomplish his ends.

And thus it is with many a heretic. They are not satisfied with merely defending their views and if they are found not to be in harmony with the views of the Church to which they belong, they leave for other places. They are always insistent on dragging with them as many people as they can, making every effort to destroy the Church before finally they are cast out. This had happened before in the history of the early Church when Pelagius fought with Augustine. This has happened since the time of Dordt. This will happen again. And the reason is that behind heresy is the devil who uses heresy to try, if possible, to destroy the Church of Christ.

Arminius was dead. But this did not mean that his heresy had died with him. His influence had been too extensive. His doctrines had been sown in the hearts of too many men. His departure did not alter appreciably the course of Arminianism in the Netherlands. Those who had followed him in these teachings soon organized into a party known as the "*Remonstrants*." This well-organized party within the Reformed Churches had considerable influence on the doctrine and faith of the Churches even though the leader was gone. This group came together in the city of Gouda in 1610 to draw up a formulation of their views.

However, the claim of these Remonstrants was that they did not intend to introduce into the Church any new doctrines. Nor did they want to leave the impression that they were critical of the Confessions; they stoutly insisted that they were deep lovers of the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism. Rather they wanted the Churches to believe that these formulations which they drew up were really only certain remarks and observations which they had to make concerning the Confessions. Nevertheless, the fact is that this document struck at the very heart of the Reformed faith. If not refuted, it would mean the death-blow to Calvinism in the Low Countries. We quote this document on ensuing pages of this article.

To refute this document, however, seemed to be impossible. It required the convocation of a Synod. And a Synod was very difficult to call in those days, because it could not be called without the permission of the government.

There were those men, staunch defenders of the Reformed faith, who had long pleaded for a Synod to settle this matter of the Arminian controversy. But their pleas were ignored. The government was controlled by a man named Oldenbarneveldt who was openly and without apology a friend of the Arminians. He refused to grant permission to convene a Synod for fear that his friends would be condemned. Rather he insisted that both varying views within the Churches be discussed in a series of conferences. But these conferences helped nothing except to give to the Remonstrants additional opportunity to make propaganda for their views while they found shelter beneath the benevolent wing of the State.

It is a fundamental principle of all history that God is sovereign and Lord of all that takes place in the world. History is the work of God by means of which He causes His eternal counsel to be revealed in time. But this truth has, among other things, one important impli-

cation. The main part of history is always the history of the Church of Jesus Christ. It is true, of course, that the world ignores this fact. They claim that they make history, that what they do is all that counts. But no matter how small the “7000” may be who belong to the Church (especially in comparison with the millions in the world), the Church constitutes the important part of all history. Any history book that ignores this fact is not a history book at all. The history of wicked men therefore must serve the purpose of the Church of Christ. Pharaoh brought Israel into slavery that deliverance might be a picture of the salvation of the Church through God’s power. Caesar Augustus decreed that all the world should be taxed so that Christ could be born in Bethlehem. Pilate condemned Christ to death so that the cross might be atonement for the sins of the elect. Charles V was so busily engaged with the problems of his empire that Luther was left undisturbed by this tyrant (who favored the Roman Catholic Church) so that the Reformation was not squelched in its inception. The same is true of the history of the Netherlands in these early years of the 17th century just prior to the great Synod of Dordrecht.

To all appearances it seemed as if the Arminian movement was to gain a complete victory in the Reformed Churches. The hands of the faithful were tied. Things were rapidly deteriorating. The cause of the Reformation in the Low Countries seemed to be lost. The government held tight check on the faithful to prevent them from condemning officially the heresy of Jacobus Arminius.

But suddenly things changed. In a lightning coup d’etat Prince Mauritz overthrew the existing government, clapped Oldenbarneveldt in irons, took over the reigns of government and instituted a state sympathetic to the Reformed Churches. (Oldenbarneveldt was later tried and killed for treason. Whether his death was just or not remains a question. But, strangely, I have heard men of Reformed persuasion defend him as a champion of the truth.)

Now things moved swiftly. Although no national Synod had been held for many years, quickly one was now called. Allowing only sufficient time for the provincial Synods to meet to elect delegates, the great Synod of Dordrecht was called together to consider the all-important question of this Arminian heresy.

It convened in **September of 1618.**

Who were those who stood in the line of Calvin? Could the Arminians prove their claim that they were the ones? Was it true that they were intent only on developing the Reformed faith, as they claimed? Or was it rather true, as the leaders of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands maintained, that their views were destructive of Calvinism? And, that they had attempted, be it in a devious and crafty way, to destroy the truth of God’s Word? We will let the Arminians speak for themselves.

You recall that in 1610 the Arminians (who were at this time known as Remonstrants) had met in the city of Gouda to formulate their views. The product of this meeting was a document known as the five points of the Remonstrants. In these five articles, they com-

mented on the truths of sovereign predestination, the total depravity of man, the atonement of Christ, the work of salvation in the hearts of the elect, and the perseverance of the saints.

You will not dispute the fact that these five doctrines of the Reformed faith are all the cardinal doctrines. The Arminians were not speaking of rather minor points (if one can properly speak of minor points of the Word of God) of the truth. They were discussing the towering doctrines of Scripture, the foundations of the Christian faith. They were not interested in developing points on which the Church had not spoken before this time. They were formulating opinions on questions on which the Church had for many centuries maintained specific positions. They were calling attention to questions on which Calvin had written extensively.

Calvin had taught (in keeping with the views of St. Augustine) that God sovereignly determined in His eternal counsel by the decree of predestination the ultimate destination of all men, angels and devils. Calvin had taught that this predestination (both election and reprobation) was altogether the sovereign determination of God, and that it was not based on any other consideration, e.g., the works of men. He did not elect those who He knew would do good works. Nor did God reprobate those who He knew would sin. He sovereignly chose His own. He sovereignly rejected the rest. What did the Arminians say about this crucial question? The first article of their Formulation made in Gouda reads:

“That God, by an eternal, unchangeable purpose in Jesus Christ His Son, before the foundation of the world, hath determined, out of a fallen, sinful race of men, to save in Christ, for Christ’s sake and through Christ, those who, through the grace of the Holy Ghost shall believe on this his Son Jesus, and shall persevere in this faith and obedience of faith, through this grace, even to the end, and, on the other hand, to leave the incorrigible and unbelieving in sin and under wrath, and to condemn them as alienate from Christ according to the word of the gospel in John 3:36: ‘He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him,’ and according to other passages of Scripture also.”

It is a good question whether there are very many today who would be able to detect the error in this point. In fact one does not find it at all uncommon to read and hear people of Reformed persuasion defend these very views. This is not only due to the fact that the Arminians were very subtle in stating their position (admittedly this is true), but it is also due to the fact that there is terrible ignorance in the Church world today. The fact is that the above article does not maintain that God sovereignly determines who are elect and who are reprobate. It teaches the very opposite. It teaches that God chose those to be His elect who would believe on His Son Jesus and who would persevere in this faith and obedience of faith to the end. Thus it makes man’s faith to be the condition of his election, and his perseverance in faith is the condition for his remaining elect. This has been called conditional predestination, and so it is.

This may seem as a trivial point to debate, but most emphatically it is not. And the Arminians were fully aware of the importance of this position. If it would be adopted (although Calvin had taught quite the opposite) it would open the flood gates to the view that man of himself can believe. This, in fact, was precisely what happened, man does not believe because he is elect; he is elect because he believes. The Arminians may say that he believes only by grace, but this is more of that terrible subterfuge with which they tried to make their views sound good. The point had to be answered or the Reformed faith was lost forever. It was answered beautifully and concisely in the first chapter of the Canons of Dordt. Calvin had taught that the death of Christ on the cross was only for the elect. He taught without any doubt that the blessings which Christ merited for the elect were for them alone. He took away their sins by His blood and earned for them alone eternal life through His obedience. And all this was rooted in a love of God which was towards the elect only. The reprobate were, in an absolute sense, excluded from all this. Did the Arminians teach this? Let them speak for themselves. Their second article reads:

“That, agreeably thereunto, Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world, died for all men and for every man, so that he has obtained for them all, by his death on the cross, redemption and the forgiveness of sins, yet that no one actually enjoys this forgiveness of sins except the believer, according to the word of the Gospel of John 3.16: ‘God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.’ And in the First Epistle of John 2:2: ‘And he is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.’”

It seems as if the Arminians become bolder here, for they say very clearly that they are firmly convinced that Christ died for every single man and that He merited His blessings for everyone that ever lived. It is true that they add that only the believers ever receive this forgiveness, but the inescapable conclusion is that Christ died for many that are not saved. And the only reason why they are not saved is that they do not, by their own will, agree to believe on Christ. Really the Arminians, having written Article I had to write Article II. They are so logically related that the one necessarily follows from the other.

But the cross is thereby destroyed. Christ cannot save those for whom He died.

This had to be answered. The Canons answered this in the second chapter. Calvin had taught (and in this respect also he simply repeated what Augustine before him had maintained) that man is totally depraved. He could not do any good in the sight of God at all. The fall had robbed him of every ability to fulfill in any respect the law of God. He was sold under sin and thoroughly corrupt. He was (and is) a foul fountain spueing forth a dirty stream of sin.

And most important of all, because of this total depravity, he can do nothing to save himself. The Arminians had something to say about this too. Only, what they had to say sounds very good. They thought evidently, that at this point they had better hew to the Reformed

line lest they arouse undue suspicion. They forgot that they already implied (and later in the articles do state) that man can of himself exercise his own free will. They speak very strongly, of total depravity.

Their third article reads:

“That man has not saving faith of himself, nor of the energy of his free will, inasmuch as he, in the state of apostasy and sin, can of and by himself neither think, will, nor do any thing that is truly good (such as saving Faith eminently is), but that it is needful that he be born again of God in Christ, through his Holy Spirit, and renewed in understanding, inclination, or will, and all his powers, in order that he may rightly understand, think, will, and effect what is truly good, according to the Word of Christ, John 15:5: ‘Without me ye can do nothing.’”

They did not mean this, of course, it was a camouflage. It is not at all unusual to hear the same things in our days. Oftentimes, Christian people are convinced that a man is sincerely interested in the truth because, although he may bring false doctrine, he nevertheless at the same time speaks the language of Reformed believers. He talks both ways. We must beware of this. It is intended to deceive. There is an old Dutch proverb which, freely translated, says, “*The devil never comes in wooden shoes, but always in slippers.*” Calvin had taught that the work of salvation was by grace alone. It was a work of God Who accomplished it all through His Spirit. It was performed in the heart of man as God’s work, not man’s. God not only chooses those whom He saves, He also comes into the hearts of these elect and redeemed people whom He loves, and saves them by His power and His grace. The only possibility of salvation in any sense is the work of God.

In addition to this, Calvin taught that when God comes into the hearts of His people, He comes irresistibly. There is no man who can resist this work of God. He may hate God, rebel against the truth, be a bitter enemy of the Church, walk in the deepest paths of sin; but he cannot resist God. When God works salvation, he is helpless in God’s hand. Those whom God wants to save are actually saved. In this teaching Calvin followed closely the doctrine of St. Augustine who lived many centuries before him. And he followed in the footsteps of Martin Luther, his contemporary and fellow-reformer, who taught this especially in his book, *The Bondage of the Will*. It seemed at first as if the Arminians agreed on this point. In their fourth article they wrote:

“That this grace of God is the beginning, continuance, and accomplishment of all good, even to this extent, that the regenerate man himself, without prevenient or assisting, awakening, following and co-operative grace, can neither think, will, nor do good, nor withstand any temptations to evil, that all good deeds or movements, that can be conceived, must be ascribed to the grace of God in Christ.”

There isn’t anyone who would criticize what is taught here, least of all the leaders in the

Netherlands who met at the Synod of Dordrecht. This is good Reformed doctrine. Calvin would have said, “Amen.” And we have no criticism to make of this either. But, the trouble is that this is not the whole article. As so often happens, men who are determined to bring evil doctrine into the Church, try to sound as Reformed and Scriptural as they can. They only come with their evil doctrines by the back door. And so the rest of this article reads quite differently from the first part:

“But as respects the mode of the operation of this grace, it is not irresistible, inasmuch as it is written concerning many, that they have resisted the Holy Ghost. Acts. vii, and elsewhere in many places.”

So, this is after all what they wanted. Salvation is by grace they say. They wouldn't want you to think that they deny it. But, this grace was resistible. You don't have to take it if you prefer not to. It only comes to you as an offer of God. You can reject it, and it will then never be yours. Even if God wants to save you, you don't have to be saved if it is your choice to remain in your fallen state.

And, of course, it follows from this (and this was and is also consistent Arminian theology) that grace can only come to you and be your salvation if you accept it. You must want it. You must agree to receive the Holy Spirit. You must be willing. Only then can you actually be saved.

So..... salvation is dependent upon the will of man. He must make the first advance towards God. He must initiate this work in his heart. Else it is all hopeless after all. Christ died for such a man, but it makes no difference, he is not saved until he agrees to salvation. And.... only this decision of a man will result in his election or reprobation—depending on what decision he makes. If he does agree, well, then he becomes elect. He may not agree however. The rejection of God's willing grace makes him a reprobate.

Our fathers knew this was not the truth of Calvin—and not the truth of Scripture. They severely condemned this doctrine in the third chapter of the Canons.

It follows from all these cardinal doctrines (sovereign predestination, limited atonement, total depravity, irresistible grace) that when God saves His people for whom Christ died, that they are saved not only in this life, but they are also brought safely into heaven to enjoy the blessings of salvation in the hearts of His people. He maintains this work faithfully. He keeps His people in the midst of temptation from falling away. He protects them and defends them from the attacks of persecution. He makes it impossible for their evil flesh to win over them throughout all their life. Once saved, saved forever. Calvin saw this truth in Scripture and taught it. But the Arminians (quite naturally) wanted nothing of it.

In their last article they said:

“That those who are incorporated into Christ by a true faith, and have there-

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

There are two points which the Arminians make. The first point is that a person who is once saved is quite capable of falling away so that after all, he goes to hell. He can return again to the evil world. He can turn away from the truth of Scripture which once was his. He can lose a good conscience which he once possessed. He can become devoid of grace. There is every possibility of this happening. His salvation is like a fortune gained or lost on the stock market depending on the whims of investors. It is true that the Arminians did not really state this as their position. They merely ask a question. They suggest the possibility that this might be true, but they are willing they say, to withhold final judgment of this question. Only, they want to be shown that Scripture teaches the opposite. Nevertheless, it was plainly a deceitful way of sowing seeds of doubt about the perseverance of the saints in the minds of the faithful.

Secondly, they insist (and they do this in a very emphatic way) that, if it is true that a man does succeed in remaining a believer and does safely reach heaven, it is only because he takes hold of the hand that Christ extends to him. If he does not fall away, it is only because he is ready for the conflict, really wants Christ's help and remains at all times active. In other words, if it is true that you find anywhere a believer once in a while who does remain faithful to the end, this is his own work, and not God's work in him. He needs some help, it is true. But it remains his work nonetheless. God's help becomes the truck driver who brings ammunition to the soldier on the front line.

This error was specifically answered in the last chapter of the Canons. The Church was threatened in those days. A blow had been struck at the very foundation of the faith of the gospel. These are cardinal doctrines that came under attack. They are the fundamentals of Scripture. They are basic because they are necessary to maintain the glory of God. **Soli Deo Gloria**-this was Calvin's theme. But the Arminians were trying hard to steal this glory from God and give some of it to man. It may not be done. Our fathers saw to it that it was not done. We can do no less today. "For by grace are ye saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God: Not of works, (and this is after all *the* question) lest any

man should boast.” Ephesians 2:8-9.

We are now ready to discuss the Synod of Dordrecht itself. You will recall that, through the overthrow of the government of Oldenbarneveldt in the Netherlands by Prince Mauritz, a government sympathetic to the Reformed cause had come into power. This government convened the Synod that met in the city of Dordrecht and dealt with the problem of Arminianism.

The Synod began its meetings on **November 13th, 1618** and met until **May 9th, 1619**. In all, 154 sessions were held, although the Synod dealt with considerably more than the error of Arminianism. The first month of the Synod (until December 6, 1618) was occupied with other business. It was toward the end of April in 1619 that the Arminian controversy was finally settled by the adoption of our present Canons of Dordt.

## The Delegates at the Synod

The Synod was not, as is sometimes supposed, simply a “Dutch” Synod. There were delegates present at the Synod from practically all the Calvinistic Churches of the continent of Europe. It is true that these foreign delegates did not have a deciding vote at the Synod (their vote was more advisory), but the fact remains that they did a tremendous amount of work, entered freely into all the discussions, served on the committees of study, composed their own written opinions about the articles of the Arminians and the Canons themselves, and even signed these Canons when they were finally adopted.

There were, in all, **57 delegates from the Netherlands Churches**. Thirty-four of these were ministers, 18 were elders, and five were professors from the Reformed Universities and Seminaries in the Netherlands.

Among the professors we ought to take special notice of Gomarus. He was the man that had opposed Arminius for many years while they were both professors at the University of Leiden. He had long argued for the convocation of just such a Synod as now was meeting to treat the Arminian heresy. He had seen from personal contact with Arminius and his followers, the terrible danger of these views. It was with deep thanksgiving, no doubt, that this venerable defender of the faith now saw the Synod convened which could treat the errors of Arminius and his followers and settle the terrible controversies that were raging in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands.

There were **27 foreign delegates** which came to the Synod from all parts of the continent—Great Britain, the Palatinate (where the Heidelberg Catechism had been written), Hessa, Switzerland, Wetteraw, Geneva, Bremen and Emden. The delegates of France could not attend although they had been invited. They were refused permission to leave their land by the French government. Another staunch defender of the faith, Dr. Paraeus who was professor of theology in the University of Heidelberg, also could not come

because of the infirmities of old age. But he did send to the Synod a written opinion of the five articles of the Arminians which agreed essentially with the position that was finally adopted by the Synod in its Canons.

All of these men were leaders in the Reformed and Calvinistic Reformation. They were the theologians, the scholars, the brilliant lights of the Post-Reformation period. They represented Calvinism at its purest and had a hand in developing the great principles of the Genevan Reformer in the Century following the Reformation. Many of them had studied in the centres of Reformed and Calvinistic thought—the University of Heidelberg in the Palatinate where Ursinus and Olevianus had taught, and in the University of Geneva founded by Calvin and administered later by Calvin's successor, Theodore Beza.

There were also present at the Synod representatives of the government. This was due to the unique relation between Church and State that existed in the Netherlands which we have discussed before. The State could convene a Synod, and all the decisions of the Synod were also approved by these governmental representatives. The former government of Oldenbarneveldt would never have approved of what the Synod did, for Oldenbarneveldt and his government had always been sympathetic towards the Arminians. But the present government of Mauritz favored the Reformed cause, and the Synod had no trouble in its work from the government's delegates.

Finally, you may perhaps wonder why the Arminians are not listed above as also being present at the Synod. The fact of the matter is that they were there. But, in the first place, they were only there from **December 6, 1618** (when they were invited to come) until they were dismissed on **January 14th, 1619**. When the Synod finally got to work in the formulation of the Canons, the Arminians were gone. In the second place, the Arminians never had a vote on the Synod. This was due to the Church Polity then in effect. They were, prior to the convocation of the Synod, indicted for heresy, and the Synod was called to pass judgment on this indictment. They could be present to defend their views and state their objections to the Synod's actions, but they could not vote in their own case and in the proceedings that dealt with their matter.

However, we must not be left with the impression that the Synod simply condemned them without a hearing. They were given abundant opportunity to defend themselves, to prove, if they could, that their views were in harmony with Scripture, to point out what they considered to be errors in the Synod's actions. In fact, they were given so much opportunity to do this that even the foreign delegates, who generally knew very little or nothing about the Arminian controversy, concluded that Synod had exhausted a most remarkable patience in dealing with them. Not only this, but there were always delegates on the Synod who favored to a greater or a lesser degree the position that the Arminians had taken. This was especially true of some of the delegates from England and Emden. Thus, in one way or another, the position of the Arminians was represented on the Synod throughout the entire proceedings. This is important to emphasize because those who object to the Canons of Dordrecht sometimes make the charge that the Canons are not very important because

they were adopted by a “straw Synod” or a “packed Synod” that allowed no other views to be entertained but the views of a minority who were determined to foist their minority position on the Churches. This is a slanderous charge and does grave injustice to the fathers who composed this important and beautiful confession.

Finally, it ought to be remarked that the foreign delegates did not speak for the Churches they represented. They were not at the Synod as representatives of the Reformed Churches in their particular countries. They were merely called in to help the Netherlands Churches and to serve them with advice. And, even though they later signed the Canons, they did **not** do this as official representatives of their Churches in order to make the Canons binding also upon them.

## **The Proceedings of the Synod**

We may turn now to a brief description of the actual proceedings of this Synod. We have already noticed that the time between November 13th and December 6th was taken up in other business.

Before the Arminians were actually called to appear on the floor of the Synod to defend themselves, they had met in Rotterdam to determine on a course of action. They had decided to pursue a course of action which clearly showed their evil intent -an intent that was not at all for the welfare of the Church. They decided not to allow themselves to be engaged in any doctrinal discussions of the questions that were at issue, nor to permit the Synod to examine their views in the light of Scripture. They decided instead to detain and obstruct the Synod in every way they possibly could in the hopes that the Synod (especially the foreign delegates) would weary of it at last and go home without having decided anything. They were rather confident that if they could delay the Synod for some time, the ecclesiastical assembly that had been called to try them would dissolve. And, if they were given some more time to propagate their views, they were reasonably certain that they could win the day in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands so that their position would become the official position of the Church.

In order to accomplish this, they decided, on the one hand, to question the legality of the Synod to try their case. They decided to insist that the meeting of the Synod was not a Synod at all that possessed any authority to deal with them, but that rather it was a conference between opposing viewpoints that could, at best, make certain recommendations. On the other hand, they decided to appeal to the foreign delegates in an attempt to gain their sympathy. The appeal was to be made on the basis that the Dutch theologians maintained (especially in the truth of reprobation) an allegedly most cruel, repulsive and God-dishonoring doctrine. They hoped to convince the foreign delegates that this Synod was called merely to condemn serious and pious men who stood in the way of such doctrines. Thus the defense of the heretics was to rest on personal attacks and on a strategy of delay.

The Synod chose a very staunch defender of the faith in their president, Johannes Bogerman, whom the Arminians tried to get out of the chair. As its two clerks upon whom fell the mountain of work of recording the minutes and the speeches, the Synod chose Hommius and Damman.

Almost immediately, upon being summoned to the Synod, the Arminians began their work of destroying the Synod if they could. A very learned, suave, capable and clever man by the name of Episcopius was their spokesman. No sooner had the Arminians opened their defense and Episcopius arose to pronounce a blessing upon the entire body. But then they proceeded to put into force their tactics which they had decided to use. Every form of deceit, every stratagem of double-dealing, every conceivable argument, every haughty and boastful villainy against the Synod was used in an attempt to prevent the Synod from entering into the doctrinal implications of the issue. The Synod attempted again and again, with tremendous patience, to examine the Arminians' position and hold the views of these men up to the light of Scripture. But they were never permitted to do it. And, when the issues became sharply drawn and the heretics had dug out the last of their tricks to delay the Synod, they flatly refused to submit to Synod's authority.

All was finally brought to a close on **January 14th, 1619**. President Bogerman arose and addressed the following words to the Arminians:

“The foreign delegates are now of the opinion that you are unworthy to appear before the Synod. You have refused to acknowledge her as your lawful judge and have maintained that she is your counter-party, you have done everything according to your own whim; you have refused to answer; you have unjustly interpreted the indictments. The Synod has treated you mildly; but you have—as one of the foreign delegates expressed it- ‘begun and ended with lies.’ With that eulogy we shall let you go. God shall preserve His Word and shall bless the Synod. In order that she be no longer obstructed, you are sent away! You are dismissed! Get out”!

The Arminians left, but not before they made many pious pronouncements. “With Christ I shall keep silence about all this. God shall judge between me and this Synod,” Episcopius cried. Some appealed to the judgment day and others left calling the Synod an assembly of the Godless.

As you can well imagine, the Synod was deeply moved by this dramatic moment, and stirred by the departure of these men. But, without the lengthy interruptions and delays of the Arminians, Synod could now get down to work.

The Synod was first divided into a number of sub-committees including sub-committees of the foreign delegates which were instructed to meet separately and hand in written opinions of the five articles which the Arminians had composed in Gouda several years before. The Arminians, although put out of the Synod's assemblies, were still permitted to hand in a written defence of their views-which they did in lengthy documents covering more than 200 pages recorded in the Acts of the Synod.

By the **22nd of March** all the written opinions were in and read by Synod. After this, another committee of six was appointed to draw up “concept-Canons” which could be presented to the Synod for adoption. On **April 16th** the committee brought to the Synod the first part of their work—the “concept **Canons**” **I & II**. These were adopted by the Synod. The next day after this adoption, a day of prayer and thanksgiving was proclaimed by the State’s representatives, a day which the Arminians bitterly called “Ahab’s prayer day”. On **April 18th**, in its 130th session, the Synod adopted **Canons III, IV, and V**. To this was added a “Conclusion” which is also included in our Canons found in the back of the Psalter used in many modern Reformed Churches.

Our Canons are, as we noticed above, divided into five “**Heads of Doctrine**”. These five heads of doctrine or chapters are what have become known as the “*Five Points of Calvinism*” which are often memorized under the key-word: “**TULIP**”. To each chapter is added a series of articles in which various errors, particularly of the Arminians and Pelagians, are condemned. These five chapters are careful statements and thorough expositions of the truth of Scripture over against the five articles of the Arminians which they adopted at their meeting in Gouda.

We do well to notice briefly what they teach. The **first chapter** deals with “*Divine Predestination*”. In this chapter the truth is developed that the salvation of God’s people and the damnation of the wicked finds its origin in the eternal decree of God’s predestination. According to this decree God chose some to everlasting life and “leaves the non-elect in his just judgment to their own wickedness and obduracy.” (Article 6). This predestination is not a decree of God which is based upon what the Arminians called “foreseen faith and unbelief”; it is rather based only on the sovereign good pleasure of God. It is called consequently, “**Unconditional Election**”.

The **second chapter** deals with “*The Death of Christ, and the Redemption of Man Thereby.*” The particular teaching of this article is that Christ died only for His people so that the cross is a realization of the decree of election. Election and atonement are inseparably united. For the elect Christ died. And all of salvation is merited by Christ in this work of His cross. This we have come to call “**Limited Atonement.**”

The **third chapter** is combined with the fourth and is entitled, “*Of the Corruption of Man, His Conversion to God, and the Manner Thereof.*” Two main points are discussed. The first is that the fall of man resulted in his total corruption so that Adam and all his posterity are completely unable to do or will anything good or anything that will aid, abet or assist their salvation. Secondly, it is further emphasized in this article that man’s salvation is the fruit of the irresistible power of God’s grace—that regeneration, faith, conversion and all the blessings of salvation are solely the work of God which He performs sovereignly in the hearts of His rebellious (by nature) people in such a way that God accomplishes His own purpose of salvation. We refer to “**Total Depravity**” and “**Irresistible Grace**”.

**Finally**, the Canons, in their Fifth Head of Doctrine, develop the truth of the

*“Preservation of the Saints.”* The Arminians had also denied this. They taught rather that when God began the work of salvation in the hearts of His people, this was a work which He finished by His own power until the elect were brought to final glory. And this work of preservation was made sure by the decree of election and the work of atonement.

So Arminianism was defeated in the Netherlands. There are several remarks which we wish to make by way of conclusion:

1) The Synod of Dordt also disciplined the Arminian ministers who refused to subscribe to the Canons. Some 200 ministers were deposed from office in the Dutch Churches. The foreign delegates took no part in this disciplinary action since this was purely a national matter of no immediate concern to the Reformed Churches in other countries. Further, in years following, for good or for bad, some of these deposed ministers returned again to the bosom of the Reformed Churches. I say that this could possibly have been bad because it is doubtful whether they returned in all cases in strict honesty. Some held to their Arminianism within their hearts even though outwardly they subscribed to the Canons.

2) The Synod of Dordt, and the Canons which this Synod composed and adopted, was a great victory for the Church of Christ. It is a most remarkable demonstration of the faithfulness of God toward us and the gracious care of Christ for His Church. Indeed, “the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

3) As is always the case with long and bitter struggles in defense of the truth, this Synod was also instrumental in developing the Reformed faith beyond the statements of the Reformation. What Luther and Calvin had taught was now carried forward by their spiritual children. But these developments were hammered out on the anvil of ecclesiastical strife. So it always is. The lie is, under God’s sovereign control, a means to develop the truth. Dordt was no exception.

By **May 9th, 1619**, the great Synod of Dordrecht had finished its sessions; the delegates had returned to their homes. A great victory had been won in the Church of Jesus Christ. The truth of the Reformation had triumphed over the errors of Pelagianism as they had appeared in Arminianism. The fruit of this great victory was our **Canons**....a precious heritage which we treasure today.

