

## **God's Free Mercy: The Church in the Netherlands**

We have been looking at developments in the seventeenth century in England and Scotland. Now we go to the Netherlands, the most significant Protestant Church on the continent, to study the history of that church during the seventeenth century.

The Heidelberg Catechism is one of the three forms of unity that Dutch churches use with the Belgic Confession and the Canons of the Synod of Dordt that we are going to study today. For our prayer time, I would like to read two of the questions from the Heidelberg Catechism, which is a very lovely, wonderful catechism that we should be familiar with. Heidelberg question 116 asks, "Why is prayer necessary for Christians?" The answer is, "Because it is the chief part of the gratitude which God requires of us and because God will give His grace and Holy Spirit only to those who sincerely beseech Him in prayer without ceasing and who thank Him for these gifts." Then, question 118 asks, "What has God commanded us to ask of Him?" The answer is "all things necessary for soul and body, which Christ the Lord has included in the prayer which He Himself taught us." Let us join together now in praying the Lord's prayer. Let us pray.

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.*

I want to start with a picture of a flower. It is the tulip, which is a famous and beautiful flower. We think the tulip originated in the Near East or in North Africa, but in the sixteenth century it was imported into Europe. In the seventeenth century, it became a craze in Holland where extravagant prices were paid for bulbs of rare color. From there, the tulip has spread around the world. Today, it is beloved by horticulturalists and by Calvinists everywhere.

The Synod of Dordt met in the Netherlands for about six months in the latter part of 1618 and the first part of 1619. The Synod of Dordt is one of the defining episodes in Reformed church history. The background of the Synod is the clash that took place between two groups of Dutch Christians. One group was called the Remonstrants; the other group was called the Counter-Remonstrants. In order to understand who the Remonstrants were, we need to talk about Jacob Arminius.

Arminius was originally from the Netherlands. He went to Geneva where he studied with Theodore Beza and became a strict Calvinist, as we would expect. He remained on the Calvinist side of things for some time, but at one point in his career he was asked to write against a theologian or a man who was questioning some of the teachings of Calvinism. Arminius set out to do that, and as sometimes happens in that sort of exercise, he discovered that as he tried to answer these anti-Calvinist arguments, he became less and less convinced of the accuracy of his own beliefs. So, Arminius shifted in his faith from Calvinism to what in time has become known as Arminianism.

Arminius was appointed professor of theology at the University of Leiden in 1603. There, he soon clashed with a strict Calvinist colleague, a man whose name was Franciscus Gomarus. Arminius died in 1609, but that was just the beginning of the dispute, because the followers of Arminius (and there were a number by this time) in the Netherlands put forth a document called the Remonstrance. They felt that their views needed to be better understood and accepted in the Netherlands. The Remonstrance was

produced in 1610. Even though Arminius had died, there were others there who could set forth his views as they did in this document.

What the Remonstrance teaches can be summarized in five points. It teaches that the election of individuals is based not on God's choice but on God's foreknowledge, although election often does not relate to individuals at all. Second, Christ died for everyone. Third, lost people certainly need God's grace. This document is not a Pelagian document. Grace is needed for people to believe, but the fourth point is that this grace is resistible. It is up to the individual as to whether or not he or she will believe. And the fifth point states that the theologians who drew up this document could not quite make up their minds about perseverance. They thought that they needed to study that further.

The main point in all of this was that God does not choose anyone in the sense that the Calvinists were teaching the doctrine of election. But, God makes it possible for everyone to choose Him. This was not an isolated phenomenon in the Netherlands. It was part of a Europe-wide encroachment on the theology of the Reformation by the rationalism of the Renaissance. But, the clash in the Netherlands was the classic example of a Calvinist versus a non-Calvinist interpretation of soteriology.

There were many other social and political concerns that were connected with the theological issue. A theological debate is almost never purely about theology only. The theological debate in the Netherlands became caught up in the explosiveness of seventeenth-century Dutch politics. Tensions grew and threatened to bring the united provinces to civil war.

In those days, cartoons dealt not with political matters but with theological matters because that is what concerned most people. Cartoons had very sharp points back then as they do today. I have a picture of a seventeenth-century Dutch cartoon. We see a man on the left with a large hat, and his name is Sound Head. He is a Calvinist, and has his head screwed on right. The one on the right, who is a Roman Catholic monk with a shaved head, is called Round Head. The one in the middle, who is looking both ways, is the Arminian because he is trying to draw something from one side and something else from the other side. He is given the name Rattle Head.

Well, that is not very nice, but people did not prize niceness much in this period as far as theological debate was concerned. It was important for the church in the Netherlands and for the country to settle this debate because it was not just a tempest in a teapot. It was something that threatened to undo the government and create chaos in society. The fact that the Dutch were able to settle this debate in the Synod of Dordt must have contributed to the progress of the Netherlands as one of the great nations of exploration and colonization in the seventeenth century with Dutch ships going all over the world and Dutch people settling from New Amsterdam in America to Indonesia in Asia and many other places as well. However, I will not talk about the political and social issues. You can read that short statement from Carl Bangs' book called *Arminius*, which summarizes nicely the issues on both sides. I will come to the theological debate, which is our main concern in this lesson.

A synod was called by the nationalist and anti-Catholic Prince Maurice of Orange to meet at Dordrecht near Rotterdam in November of 1618. It was an ecumenical, Reformed synod. By "ecumenical" I do not mean that people came from different churches—Lutherans, Anglicans, and Catholics were not there, of course. It was ecumenical in the sense that this was not just a Dutch synod but Reformed theologians came from England and Scotland, from the Palatinate in Germany, which was the main Reformed area of the German-speaking world, from German-speaking Switzerland, and from Geneva. Delegates were invited from France, but they were not able to come because of the persecution of the Huguenots in France at this time. This was a truly international synod and the only truly international synod that the

Reformed church has held. There were 84 members. All of them were Calvinists. The Arminians were not present except as defendants. After several weeks of skirmishing, they were expelled altogether. So, this was not a synod that was going to even-handedly debate the issues. This was a Calvinist synod framing an answer to the Remonstrance of the Arminians.

There was a unanimous consensus on the major issues debated at Dordt. There were some minor differences expressed on issues such as Infralapsarianism and Supralapsarianism. The canons were stated in such a way that people holding to different views on the order of the decrees were satisfied with the general way with which an issue like that was dealt. Out of the discussion and the debate came the famous five heads of doctrine, which correspond with the five points of the Remonstrance. Rearranging the order produced the famous five points of Calvinism that we remember with the word tulip: total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints. The overall thrust of the canons (or the rules set down by the delegates at Dordt) is this: it is God who saves us by fulfilling His plan. This is sometimes called election. It is God who saves us by fulfilling His plan, which means that it is Christ who saves us by His effective purchase of us on Calvary, and it is the Holy Spirit who saves us by instilling faith in us so that we will believe. To summarize it all, we could simply say, “God saves sinners.” This is what the Canons of Dordt are all about. Often, these five heads, particularly as rearranged and put in the order of “tulip,” are called the five points of Calvinism. I do not think this is the best way to describe these five points. It is better to see these five points as the Calvinist response to the five points of the Remonstrance.

Of course, Calvinism is much more than these five points. I do not think we should think of summarizing Calvinism in just five points. These five points do deal with the issue of soteriology in Calvinism in a helpful way, but Calvinism is much larger than the five points of Calvinism. “Tulip” is a nice, easy way to remember the five points. However, there is some debate (for good reason) as to whether these particular words are the best words to use in describing what Calvinism really stands for. For instance, “total depravity” could better be stated as “radical depravity.” I will not go through that whole list and try to defend the changes. I also teach Calvin’s *Institutes*, and we can look into that in some detail if you are interested in taking that course.

I would like to stress something else about Dordt. Some claim that when you get into scholastic, Reformed theology like this, you are getting into dry, dead Orthodoxy. It is amazing to read these documents and realize how much they are misunderstood and misrepresented. This is not really a dead, dry document. The first Canon section 13 dispels that right away: “The doctrine of election,” Dordt says, “leads to humility, it leads to worship, and it leads to godly living.” Those were concerns that the theologians who met at Dordt had. They did not meet just to win a theological battle but to teach something that they believed the Bible taught would result in humility, worship, and godly living. The conclusion of the Canons is also a very fine statement as to how to teach and preach the doctrine of election, irresistible grace, and the other related doctrines found in the teachings of Dordt.

The Synod at Dordt did some other things. The main focus of the work in that six-month period was to create the canons that I have been talking about. The rest of the work at Dordt was divided into two parts: the proacta work and the postacta work. This really means what was done before they got to the main business and what was done after they finished the main business. The proacta work was done before the Arminians arrived. Dordt approved a new Dutch translation of the Bible, organized catechetical instruction, and established the plan for the preparation of ministers in the church. The postacta work took place after they had completed work on the canons. They established a definitive text of the Belgic Confession (or the Dutch Confession, as it is sometimes called—one of the three forms of unity in the Dutch churches), set guidelines for Sunday observance somewhere between the stricter

Puritan policy and the more moderate continental policy. The Netherlands is located between England and Switzerland. Both geographically and on this point, the Dutch church seems to be somewhere between the strict Puritan position and the more relaxed continental position on the Sabbath. They also established a new church order—Presbyterian, although that word is generally not used in the Dutch churches. Reformed church order is the same thing as Presbyterian church order in Scotland. The Dutch Reformed Churches were Presbyterian from the beginning, but this new order was an attempt to free the church from Erastian control, which was always a problem in the Netherlands. The prince or the government had a fairly heavy hand in controlling the affairs of the church. Perhaps it was not as extreme as the Stuarts in Scotland and England, but it was more control than many Dutch Reformed Protestants approved of.

Well, that is one great thing that took place in the Netherlands in the seventeenth century, but I want to come to two other points. As we think of Dutch Christian history in the seventeenth century, we really need to talk about three things. The first is the Synod of Dordt, which is very, very important on anybody's list, and in a Reformed discussion of church history, it is near the top of the list of the important events that took place in the post-Reformation period.

Something else happened in the churches in the Netherlands, called the Second Reformation or the newer or more precise Reformation. We have already come across a similar expression in studying the history of the church in Scotland and the Second Reformation. There was also a second reformation in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries in the Netherlands.

Let me sketch, for a moment, the situation of the Dutch churches in the seventeenth century. The Reformed Church was close to being an established church. It had a preferred status, although other churches were allowed to meet. The result was that with this close connection between church and state, the Reformed churches began to grow very rapidly. With that growth (as we often see in church history), a kind of nominalism came into the church. The problem I mentioned a moment ago about state interference in church matters was a problem. So, the Reformation in the Netherlands, as in Scotland and England, was believed by many to be incomplete. The church needed to be reformed more in the sense of being renewed. A revival was needed. What happened in the Second Reformation was not a theological correction. It was not a repudiation or even a weakening of Calvinism but a development or practical application of the Reformation, particularly the teachings of Calvin. There were many connections or contacts between Holland, English Puritans, and Scottish Presbyterians. In fact, the Puritans and the Presbyterians looked on the Netherlands as a special sanctuary of the Lord. When things got too hot in England or Scotland, the Netherlands was the place to go. As early as 1610, Amsterdam was home to at least 10 English Puritan Churches with many English-speaking Christians of Puritan and Presbyterian conviction.

Just three years before this, as you know, a group of those English Puritan Christians—who had originally come from England some years before—got in a little ship to make another trip. This time they sailed in the Mayflower across the Atlantic to Plymouth. The people who settled the first colony at Plymouth in New England came from England but by way of the Netherlands. It is interesting to study church architecture and to realize that the typical Puritan building or what we think of as a typical New England church draws much of its inspiration from Reformed church architecture—the unadorned simplicity of church architecture in the Netherlands.

Christians in these three countries were in close contact, and they helped and supported each other in some wonderful ways. However, there were some differences. Church polity was not so much an issue in Holland as it was in Scotland because it had already been settled in Holland in the Reformed or

Presbyterian direction. The problem was the Erastian control of the church. In Scotland, it was settled too, but the Stuarts kept trying to unsettle it. With the Puritans in England, there were different points of view—mainly between Presbyterians and Congregationalists, as we will see when we come to the Westminster Confession of Faith. Another difference was that the Scottish Presbyterians and the English Puritans wrote books of theology but generally practical theology. Even theologians like John Owen did not write full systematic theologies, but the Dutch did. They loved systematic theology. Some of the great post-Reformation scholars of Reformed Orthodoxy were Dutch professors and pastors. When we study Reformed Orthodoxy, we will see that many of these men were professors and pastors at the same time and somehow still had time to write great tomes of systematic theology in Latin. Much of these books have not been translated down to the present.

Two representative leaders of the Second Reformation in the Netherlands were William Ames and Gisbertus Voetius. William Ames was a transplanted Englishman. He was a disciple of the early Puritan, William Perkins, who was exiled to the Netherlands because of his very forceful criticism of the Church of England in 1610. He taught at the University of Franeker. He was a delegate to the Synod of Dordt, and he wrote a very famous book called *The Marrow of Theology*, which was written in 1623. It is a book of systematic theology, but with William Ames you get the best of scientific theology and the best of practical theology. For instance, there is a chapter on contentment in *The Marrow of Theology*. You not only have chapters on the Trinity, the atonement, the incarnation, and other things that you would expect to find, but you also have a whole chapter on contentment in a book of systematic theology. Later, this book became the first textbook at the new Harvard College when it was established in New England.

The other man is Gisbertus Voetius, who was a Dutch scholar and pastor. He was very influenced by the Englishman, William Ames, who spent many years in the Netherlands. Voetius was a delegate to Dordt as a young minister. He then became a professor at the University of Utrecht. There are three things I could say about Voetius. I will mention all three, but they will come up again later. He was a scholastic theologian. He was a man of great piety—a leader in what was known as the Precisionist movement in the Netherlands, which is the equivalent of Puritanism in England. This movement had great influence on the very important German Pietist movement that we will study later. Voetius was a man who worked to bring piety and spiritual life into the church. Third, he was a leader in missions. This is quite unusual because Protestant churches at this stage in the history of Protestantism had not yet become fully aware of the importance of worldwide missions. But, Gisbertus Voetius was already writing a theology of missions back in the seventeenth century.

Like Puritanism in England, the Second Reformation in the Netherlands was a movement that God owned and blessed. There was a revival in the churches. Even though it has been criticized as Puritanism has been criticized, the things that happened in this movement were of great significance in reviving and renewing the Dutch churches. One cannot speak about the religious history of seventeenth-century Holland without talking about the Synod of Dordt and the Second Dutch Reformation. Neither could you speak about seventeenth-century Dutch history without talking about an artist—a man, of course, whose name is Rembrandt.

Rembrandt was a boy of 12 when the Synod of Dordt met. He died a few years before Voetius died, so he lived during this period of Dordt and the Second Dutch Reformation. As Bach would later come to dominate Protestant Church music, so Rembrandt is the greatest Protestant artist. He was born in Leiden into a Reformed family, which does not surprise us because most people in the Netherlands were Reformed at this time. We know that he was taught the Bible by his mother, which does not surprise us either because many people are taught the Bible by their mothers. I certainly was, and I expect some of

you were as well. It is interesting, and really a blessing to me, to look at the pictures of Rembrandt and see how often he painted his mother, especially when she was very, very old. He painted her as an old woman with wrinkles on her face, but there is still something about Rembrandt's painting of his mother that shows his love for her. Often, she has a big Bible in her hands. I expect that was Rembrandt's way of saying, "My mother taught me the Bible."

There were tensions that developed between Rembrandt and the Reformed church. We really wish we knew more about his connection with the Reformed Church and with Calvinism. We know he grew up in that context, but later he was estranged from the church because of a common-law marriage that he contracted with a woman after the death of his first wife. Apparently, he lived with this woman faithfully, but because of some technical, legal matters he was not able to have an official state and church marriage. That caused the church to put him under discipline. Rembrandt seems to have broken connections then with the Reformed church. Some people think that he moved into the Mennonite community. The Mennonites were very strong in the Netherlands. He undoubtedly had contact with the Mennonites. He had contact with the Jews. He loved to go into the Jewish part of Amsterdam and talk to the Jews, get to know them, and watch them, because when he painted pictures illustrating the New Testament, he painted Jews. Other artists had not done that, but Rembrandt's way of painting was to try to be as accurate as he possibly could. He wanted to study the Jewish community in order to be inspired to paint in a way that would reflect the Jewish culture more accurately.

We cannot say that much about his theology or his church connection. But, I think Rembrandt was a true believer. He gives his testimony in his art. No one has ever painted the poor, the sick, the crippled, or the destitute the way Rembrandt painted them. He had scores of pictures and sketches of beggars and blind people. I think Rembrandt was doing that not just because he wanted to paint vagabonds and people in sickness and suffering but as a kind of testimony. In fact, one of his self-portraits is Rembrandt himself as a beggar. He was probably never a beggar, but he painted himself to look like a beggar of Amsterdam. He did that because he wanted to set forth something of his understanding of human need and suffering not only in a physical way but also in a spiritual way as well. He knew that spiritual help must come from God if we are ever going to have what we need in this life. In his book, *How Shall We Then Live*, Francis Schaeffer wrote, "Rembrandt had flaws in his life like all people do, but he was a true Christian. He believed in the death of Christ for him personally."

Not only did he often paint beggars, which is a picture of human need, but he also painted the cross and the crucifixion. One of the most significant paintings of Rembrandt on the crucifixion is a painting with some men straining to raise the cross. Jesus was already crucified and nailed to the cross, and these men are straining to put the cross in the big hole. They are crucifying Jesus, and one of them is Rembrandt. He painted himself into that picture. He has a blue beret on in that picture, but it is clearly a self-portrait. Thus he stated, for all the world to see, that it was his sins that had sent Christ to the cross.

Not only is his art his testimony, but it is also his preaching and teaching. Francois Mauriac, the modern French, Catholic novelist wrote, "It seems to me that Rembrandt has given the most faithful representation of the Bible stories." He was a painter of the Bible. He created 850 paintings and drawings of the Bible. In Rembrandt's scenes of the Bible, we have both exegesis and exposition. When I am preaching on a passage from the New Testament—the Gospels, particularly—I am always concerned to know if Rembrandt painted that scene. By not only studying the text but also looking at one of his drawings, I can begin to understand more fully what that text is all about.

So, we summarize Dutch seventeenth-century history in these three ways: the Synod of Dordt, the Second Reformation, and Rembrandt. Let me close this lesson with the concluding words of the Canons of the Synod of Dordt, which beautifully summarize all three of these points.

*“May Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who is seated at the Father’s right hand and gave gifts to men, sanctify us in the truth. Bring to the truth those who err, and endue the faithful ministers of His Word with the Spirit of wisdom and discretion that all their discoveries may tend to the glory of God and the edification of those who hear them. Amen.”*

I have been asked, “When Prince Maurice called the Synod, does that imply a kind of Erastian action?” Yes it does, just like Westminster. In both of these cases in which church synod is called, it was called by governing officials—the prince in the Netherlands and the Parliament in England. There was a kind of restlessness in both cases, an attempt to be somewhat free from that control, but it was not completely successful in either case. So, it was an Erastian synod called not by the churches but by the prince. However, the prince had a strong, vested interest in this because his kingdom was suffering unless he could get some consensus on this matter.

The question has been asked, “What was the situation in the Netherlands in the seventeenth century in terms of religious freedom?” There was more freedom there than anywhere I know about until Rhode Island. But, even Rhode Island is not much better than the Netherlands. There was a preferred status in the Reformed churches, but Jews, Mennonites, Presbyterians, and Puritans were there. It was not a completely pluralistic and open system because there was the state church connection. However, there was a great deal more freedom there than anywhere else. The Pilgrims did express concern that their children were growing up in the Netherlands, speaking Dutch, and they wanted to save the English for them so they took New England where they could start all over again with an English colony. It was not that they were unhappy with the hospitality they received in the Netherlands.