



# The Five Points of Calvinism (1):

## *An Historical Introduction*

In recent years Calvinism has acquired a new level of energy and interest. In 2009 *Time* magazine called Calvinism one of the top ten ideas changing the world.<sup>1</sup> But what is Calvinism?

Broadly speaking Calvinism (named after the 16<sup>th</sup> century Genevan reformer John Calvin) is a biblical world-and-life view that speaks to the head, heart, and hands with implications for church, family, vocation, government, and everything in between.

But more narrowly conceived Calvinism is the Reformed understanding of salvation. To borrow from James Packer, it is a defense of a simple, three-word assertion: God saves sinners. The triune God alone provides the solution; man only contributes the problem. In biblical salvation God saves to the uttermost (Heb. 7:25), linking every aspect of our salvation into one unbreakable golden chain (Rom. 8:29–30). And those God saves he ingloriously describes as dead in sins (Eph. 2:1) and worthy of eternal punishment (Rom. 6:23).

Unknown to many, this understanding of salvation was carefully studied and officially affirmed at a synod in the Dutch city of Dort, almost 400 years ago. The document produced, the *Canons of Dort*, remains a vital summary of Scripture for many believers around the world.

The events that produced the Canons are a little-known story of conflict and conquest.

### **Background to the Five Points**

From the official start of the Reformation in Europe (1517), it took a generation for the Reformed church to gain prominence in the lowland territories now known as Holland or the Netherlands. Around that time, beginning in the 1550s, the region experienced severe political and religious oppression at the hands of Catholic Spain. Thousands of Dutch Christians were put to death during the Great Inquisition.

In the 1570s William of Orange lead the Dutch in a long and painful war against their Spanish occupiers; in 1581 several provinces united to form the Republic of the Netherlands. As Spain was driven out the influence of the Roman Catholic Church began to wane as did that of the Anabaptists who generally shunned cooperation in political affairs. The religious group that mainly facilitated, and chiefly benefited from, these social and political gains was the Calvinists.

Because of the revolution, Dutch social, religious and political life melded. The Synod of Dort, although officially dealing with a theological issue, was greatly shaped by the socio-political tenor of the day.

### ***Formation of the Dutch Church***

Since the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century the Dutch reformed church had two official doctrinal standards to which ministers and elders were required to subscribe; the *Belgic Confession* (1561) and the *Heidelberg Catechism* (1563). Both summarized Scripture in order to maintain the unity of the church and provide a roadmap to help people navigate the Bible. Beginning in the 1560s several regional and national synods were held for the mutual edification of the churches.

## ***Challenges to a Calvinistic Consensus***

Near the start of the 17<sup>th</sup> century the solidarity of Dutch Calvinism was challenged from several angles.

First, in contrast to the more sober view of natural man reflected in Romans 3 and articulated by Calvinists there was the lingering appeal of Pelagianism and semi-pelagianism. Pelagius was a fourth century British monk who denied the need for divine aid in performing good works (semi-pelagianism is a less extreme denial of the effects of the fall of man).

Second, there was the influence of the Dutch Scholar Erasmus (1466-1536) who argued against Martin Luther that man's will is free to choose for or against God. Following Erasmus' lead many humanist ministers in the closing years of the 16<sup>th</sup> century were deposed for undermining the doctrine of predestination. Remarkably their salaries continued to be paid by the government!

Third, and most significantly, was the influence Jacob Arminius. Born in South Holland, in 1560, Arminius was orphaned in his early teens. As a young man his personal graces and gifts prompted several gracious sponsors to pay for his early education. Arminius was sent to Geneva (at public expense) for theological training but was dismissed for leading private lectures contradicting the positions of the professors. After leaving Geneva he became a popular minister in the Netherlands in 1588. Around 1591, Arminius publicly argued against the Reformed view of predestination and questions about his orthodoxy began to arise. In 1602, Arminius was elected to replace the Reformer Francis Junius as a professor of divinity in the University of Leyden. This call was conditioned on the following: First, he must meet with fellow professor Gomarus to settle the concerns that were presently encircling him. Second, if he at any point disagreed with the *Belgic Confession* he should not disseminate these views.

It soon became evident that while Arminius spoke in favor of Reformed doctrine in public he spoke against it in private. As Arminius' inconsistencies became apparent churchmen began again to investigate his views. While attending a conference in The Hague to discuss his views, he took ill and died on October 19, 1609.

The next year, Arminius' followers (called Remonstrants) drew up a document called a Remonstrance (or protest) challenging several points of the Dutch doctrinal standards. This Remonstrance taught that God elects sinners on the condition of future faith, that Christ died to save everyone, that sinners must cooperate with God to be saved, and that God's grace cannot overpower man's unbelief. It also suggested that true believers can lose their salvation. To oversimplify the positions of the two sides, the Calvinists maintained God's sovereignty in salvation while the Arminians emphasized man's ability.

To further their cause the Remonstrants tried to fill the position vacated by Arminius' death with a certain Vorstius, whose theology was significantly worse than Arminius'. Even England's James I strongly admonished the Dutch government to disallow the appointment. Around this time a leading Arminian named Episcopius was appointed to a professorship in the University of Leyden. It became evident that many in the government were warming up to their cause. Since, in those days the government called church synods, any efforts to examine the Arminian's views was denied. Chaos ensued in the church and society. The unrest grew so great that in August 1617 Dutch officials mobilized soldiers to restore public order in the cities.

## ***Demand for a Synod***

Around that time, James I sent a letter to the Dutch government in which he earnestly recommended the calling of an international synod to sort out the matters. The influential prince of Orange urged the same thing. After much resistance by the Remonstrants, in 1618 the decree was issued that later that November a synod should be held in Dort, South Holland to examine the theology of the Arminians. All expenses were to be paid by the government. Letters of invitation were sent to England, France, Germany and Switzerland to send voting representatives to the synod.<sup>2</sup>

## **The Birth of the Five Points**

Before convening the synod the government declared a day of fasting and prayer, seeking God's help.

### ***Commencement of the Synod***

On November 13 an international assembly of over 100 delegates from across Europe, secular, academic and ecclesiastical (including both Presbyterians and Anglicans) began its seven month deliberation. Each delegate swore an oath to *"use no human writing, but only the word of God, which is an infallible rule of faith."*

Arriving quite late, the Remonstrants, led by Episcopius, tried to begin their defense by refuting Calvinistic doctrine, especially that of predestination. The Synod declined this method reminding them that the meeting had convened to examine the Remonstrant's views in light of Scripture. Their plans frustrated, the Arminians withdrew from the Synod and it proceeded without them.

### ***Decision of the Synod***

After considerable discussion, the delegates rejected the Arminian positions. They also positively set forth the biblical doctrine on these five points, both without a single dissenting vote. The *Canons of Dort* became the third doctrinal standard in the Dutch churches.

The synod also voted to provide the Dutch churches with an improved Bible translation. The singing of exclusive psalmody was affirmed (although a few scripture hymns were allowed) and the practice of preaching from the themes in the *Heidelberg Catechism* was established. Children were also to be catechized at home by the parents, in school by the teachers, and at church by the ministers.

### ***Reflection on the Synod***

Bishop Hall, one of the English delegates, a man remarkable for his piety, later reflected on the Synod that there was no place upon earth which he regarded as so like heaven as the Synod of Dort, or in which he should be more glad to remain.

Those who understand the doctrine that was defended at Dort can understand Hall's sentiments. We rejoice that more and more people are coming to agree that this "heavenly doctrine" most greatly glorifies God and most greatly comforts believers.

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<sup>1</sup> "The New Calvinism" By David Van Biema. Mar. 12, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> The French delegates, who were forbidden attendance by king Louis XII, also approved the Canons of Dort at their synod of Alais on October 6<sup>th</sup>, 1620.