

# Background to the Canons of Dort

We're about to embark on a study of the Canons of Dort. And yes, those Canons form a daunting read, as you perhaps well know. You crack open the Canons, and immediately meet something called a "head of doctrine"—related, surely, to a head of cabbage. One reads next of "Divine Election and Reprobation"—and we suspect we've stumbled into the realm of heavenly politics. Hardly stimulating material for the questions of this life!

And that's only the beginning. You page through the Canons and find that each head of doctrine consists of multiple articles setting forth some pretty complicated dogma. You take a run at a sentence, and try again, and then once more before you feel you've got your head a bit around what it wants to say—and then bump into a series of articles described as "Rejection of Errors" that read as if they're gospel truth themselves! And if all of that isn't confusing enough, the subjects raised on the pages of the Canons are the very subjects that repeatedly niggle on the inconsistency between our conduct and our conscience. We confront questions as:

- I'm not such a bad person, am I?
- I know so many good people. Why do bad things happen to them? Or to me?
- Would God really cast into hell decent people who happen to be unbelievers? Surely it's most unfair to damn eternally people who through accident of birth were raised far from the Christian faith and never heard the gospel?
- Is Jesus really the only way to be saved? Why?
- Am I saved? How do I know?
- Is it possible that one day I could end up denying the faith I today embrace? If not, how do you explain the neighbour I knew as a godly man, but has left his wife and kids and immersed himself into the lifestyle the Bible categorically condemns? Could I do the same?

Big questions these are, and yes, the Canons of Dort dare to cover them.

In the pages that follow we'll survey the thinking of the Canons as they answer these and similar questions. First, though, we should gain some understanding of the context in which these Canons were written.

## Historical Background

Nearly four hundred years ago some one hundred men gathered in the Dutch town of Dortrecht (commonly known as Dort), close to the city of Rotterdam. Five Dutch theologians, fifty-seven ministers and elders from across the Netherlands, twenty-one commissioners from several governments (federal or provincial) across the country, twenty-seven delegates from foreign countries, plus a handful of interested observers: it was an imposing assembly of learned church men and empowered government officials. The very mix of people present speaks to the potential for disagreement, and the need to strive to understand one another. We're left to wonder: how could this diverse group ever be a blessing to the churches?

The opening meeting took place on November 13, 1618, and the final—154 sittings later—occurred on May 9, 1619. In the six months these men met, they compiled the Canons of Dort, finalized the Church Order of Dort, and authorized an up-to-date Dutch translation of the Holy Bible (the so-called *Statenvertaling* that finally appeared in 1637)—and that's only a beginning of what these men accomplished. The bulk of their time went to the formation of the Canons of Dort, the document that we'll study in detail in this publication.

## When?

The Synod of Dort sat four hundred years ago. To us in our fast-paced twenty-first century, that sounds like an eternity ago. And it is long ago; so much can change in four months, let alone in four centuries. Perhaps, then, it's worth pausing to try to grasp something of what happened in the years leading up to this Synod. I highlight the following points:

- **1517:** Martin Luther published his ninety-five position statements, supposedly by nailing them to the door of that church in Wittenberg. This event, of course, kick-started the Great Reformation. I'll come back in a moment to why this Reformation was necessary. For now, it's enough to note that in the years that followed, Luther's tracts and

publications spread over much of Europe, so that many people who had been raised on a doctrine of salvation by works came to know and love the good news of salvation by grace alone. Through no effort of one's own God freely gives forgiveness of sins. That's good news indeed for people whose sins burden them!

• **1536:** John Calvin published his first edition of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. In his *Institutes* Calvin set forth, on the basis of ample biblical evidence and with broad appeal to the chief thinkers of the early church, a well-thought-out system of the teaching the Lord had revealed in Holy Scripture. His *Institutes* went through multiple editions as Calvin's own insights grew, with the fifth and final edition appearing in 1559. His work had a profound effect upon the thinking of many preachers and thinkers across Europe, with as blessed result their preaching moving increasingly closer to Scripture.

• **1561:** Guido de Brès completed and published the Belgic Confession. He did this in a context of intense persecution, as authorities sought to wipe out from the Netherlands those who embraced the ancient gospel of Scripture as the Reformers (notably John Calvin) had rediscovered it. He later died a martyr's death (1567) because he continued to preach and teach the gospel of free grace. Various Synods of the fledging Reformed Churches of the Netherlands in the 1570s and 1580s affirmed the Belgic Confession as an accurate summary of what the Lord had revealed in his Word.

• **1563:** In the Palatinate city of Heidelberg, at the request of Elector Frederick III, Caspar Olevianus and Zacharias Ursinus finalized the Heidelberg Catechism. This Catechism was intended to be a tool to instruct converts from Roman Catholicism, particularly young people, to the truth of Scripture. It was quickly recognized as a superb tool for that goal: by 1566 it was available in Dutch and used in those churches as a guide in the preaching. National Synods in the 1570s repeatedly confirmed that the Heidelberg Catechism was an accurate summary of the Lord's Word, and required office bearers to go on public record (through a signature) that they agreed with its content.

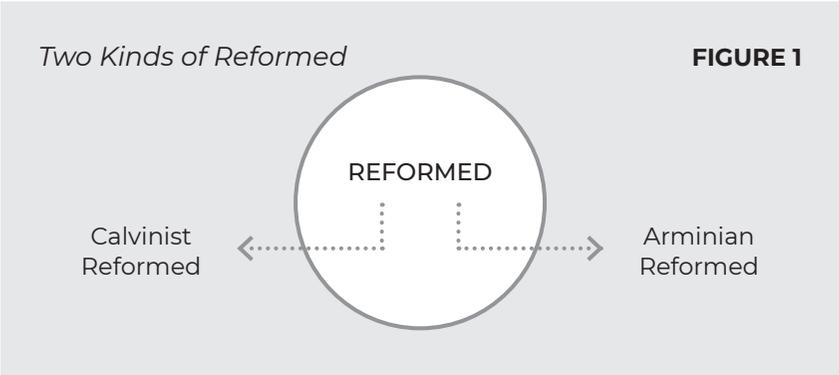
• **1572:** With persecution over, the first Dutch synod was held on Dutch soil. A period of intense church-building followed, with ministers and office bearers dedicated to teaching and defending the truth of Scripture as summarized in the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism.

All in all, in a period of two generations—the time, say, between the end of the Second World War and today—a continent once ensnared by the repressive works-doctrine of Roman Catholicism (“Have I done enough to please God? Am I good enough to win his favour?”) received new life and energy with the glorious gospel of forgiveness of sins only through God’s grace in Jesus Christ. This development represented a liberating turnaround in understanding how a finite, fallible human being relates to God, and can only be ascribed to the mighty and marvellous work of God through the Holy Spirit.

It is not surprising, then, that the glorious gains of the Reformation were soon under severe attack as Satan fought to re-ensnare the people he had lost to the gospel of free grace. The Synod of Dort was a decisive moment in resisting Satan’s advances. To get a handle on those advances, we need to appreciate more detail of the actual struggle.

## Two Kinds of Reformed

In the wake of the Great Reformation that washed through Europe in general and over the Netherlands in particular, there developed (for want of a better term) two kinds of Reformed people. The terms are not precise, but it will do for now to describe the two groups as Calvinist Reformed and Arminian Reformed.



### Calvinist Reformed

The Calvinist Reformed were very comfortable with what John Calvin had written in his *Institutes*. They believed the Bible to be the inspired Word of God, and accepted at face value all it said (adhering, of course, to the normal rules for reading). They recognized that God the

Creator formed a world free of pain and brokenness. As the Creator of all, he was also entitled to tell creatures why they live and how they are to live day by day. People, however, rebelled against God's clear instructions, and so ruined the peace and delights of his perfect world. As a result, so much pain and grief entered this world. God, though, told fallen people what he would do through his Son Jesus Christ to restore this fallen world. Holy Scripture is the record of God carrying out his plan of redemption. So the Calvinist Reformed argued that God's Word was not to be challenged, but instead to be embraced in humility and obeyed.

The child of God, then, reads God's Word in the midst of life's actual, daily questions, and then *repeats after God* (be it in his own words) what the Lord has revealed in his Word. This *repeating after God* is one's *confession*—a statement of faith that echoes accurately (though not necessarily completely) what God has revealed. The statement of faith can be self-made. One can also adopt the considered words of other confessors as one's own echo of God's Word. It turns out that these Calvinist Reformed were more than happy to receive as their own the confessions penned by Guido de Brès (the Belgic Confession of 1561) and by Caspar Olevianus and Zacharias Ursinus (the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563). Out of deep respect for God's Word as fully accurate and authoritative in all it says, and in the conviction that these two statements of faith captured accurately what God had revealed in Scripture (be it, again, not completely), the Calvinist Reformed were happy to subscribe to these confessions when they knew themselves called to serve the churches in one of its ecclesiastical offices.

## **Arminian Reformed**

By contrast, the Arminian Reformed did not see need to submit to the absolute authority of Scripture. The reason for their refusal to grant such a high place to Scripture (and by extension to confessions that echoed Scripture) was their positive perception of humankind. They rightly understood that the position of the Calvinist Reformed was rooted in the notion that the human race is degenerate and corrupt, and so man cannot of himself know the truth. For the same reason, he cannot discover for himself what is right and good. Instead, man is dependent on God to tell him. To see the self as dead in sin (in the words of Ephesians 2:1) was offensive to the Arminian Reformed because they insisted that the mind and heart of man are not dead. Human ability, they taught, was such that people were able to figure out for themselves what is right and wrong, and so could determine what is truth and what is not, what is good and what is not, what one ought to believe and what not. The Bible can

be of assistance, they said, but in their judgement every reader of Scripture must use his or her mind critically in an effort to understand the truth. With every reader thinking things through for themselves, there will—they held—invariably be many different conclusions as to what constitutes truth, and so they insisted on a spirit of tolerance for others' opinions.

Obviously, this fundamental position left the Arminian Reformed unable to agree with the Belgic Confession or the Heidelberg Catechism. Consider, for example, what Article 15 of the Belgic Confession says on the subject of human goodness:

*“We believe that by the disobedience of Adam original sin has spread throughout the whole human race. It is a corruption of the entire nature of man and a hereditary evil which infects even infants in their mother’s womb. As a root it produces in man all sorts of sin. It is, therefore, so vile and abominable in the sight of God that it is sufficient to condemn the human race. It is not abolished nor eradicated even by baptism, for sin continually streams forth like water welling up from this woeful source.”*

No person who embraced the Arminian view of man could possibly adopt that confession as his own!

But that led to conflict with another article of the Belgic Confession. If people were not totally depraved, salvation did not need to depend entirely on God; man, at a minimum, could contribute *something*. So the Arminian of necessity also had to challenge Article 16:

*“We believe that, when the entire offspring of Adam plunged into perdition and ruin by the transgression of the first man, God manifested himself to be as he is: merciful and just. Merciful, in rescuing and saving from this perdition those whom in his eternal and unchangeable counsel he has elected in Jesus Christ our Lord by his pure goodness, without any consideration of their works. Just, in leaving the others in the fall and perdition into which they have plunged themselves.”*

That article leaves no contribution on man's part to his salvation, but describes him instead as fully dependent on God's grace in Jesus Christ. The Arminians had the same problem with Article 21:

*“[Jesus Christ] presented himself in our place before his Father, appeasing God’s wrath by his full satisfaction, offering himself on*

*the tree of the cross, where he poured out his precious blood to purge away our sins. . . . He was numbered with the transgressors. . . . He died as the righteous for the unrighteous.”*

For those who had learned to love the doctrine of salvation by grace alone, freely given by God to the unworthy, the positions held by the Arminian Reformed constituted an attack upon the central message of the Great Reformation and an assault upon the very heart of the gospel itself. No wonder the two sides clashed.

## **Is the Issue Relevant Today?**

You're perhaps thinking that all this material dates from long ago, and is hardly relevant to today's issues. Feeding the hungry, ensuring equitable wealth distribution, pursuing social justice, withstanding political aggression in some countries and fixing political dysfunction in others, answering the fears concerning climate change—these and so many other contemporary needs are far more pressing than a stuffy old controversy from four hundred years ago!

I hear you loud and clear. Let me ask you, then, whether any of the issues just listed existed as issues in the Paradise God created in the beginning. We know the answer: the world God created was free of all brokenness and experienced no injustice. Hunger, unequal wealth distribution, social injustice, political aggression, and so many other issues we deal with today are post-creation developments resulting from mankind's willful rebellion against God in our original sin. In response to mankind's transgression God pressed his hand of judgment on Planet Earth, so that in turn all creatures ever since Paradise experience suffering under God's righteous curse. Despite countless efforts over the span of thousands of years, the human race is simply not strong or smart enough to find ways to overcome the brokenness and the injustice and the pain resulting from God's response to our disobedience. We creatures, fallen as we are, are simply at his mercy.

And there *is* mercy in Jesus Christ, as the Canons of Dort draw out in much detail. To grasp that mercy, though, implies that we need to be very aware in our thinking that God is so much bigger than we are, and conversely that we are so much smaller than God is. The Canons draw out that distinction in great detail. And that, at heart, is why the material addressed in the Canons is so highly relevant for today's world.

In fact, this matter of the greatness of God in contrast to the smallness of man is the one central issue that has dominated history ever since the fall into sin, and will dominate it till Jesus' return on the last day. I realize that's quite a claim, and so I'll try to show you what I mean.

## Pelagius

Way back in AD 354, in what is today Great Britain, a lad was born who would end up playing a vital role in the development of Christian thinking. Pelagius believed the following:

- God created Adam neither good nor bad, but *neutral*. God gave him a free will so that he could freely choose for himself whether he would do good or bad. Picture somebody sitting on a fence, free to jump off onto either side.
- God made Adam a mortal being, so that he would eventually die no matter which side of the fence he would choose. In other words, death is not the wages of sin.
- Adam chose to come off the fence on the side of sin and evil. The consequence of his choice was not that Adam became *sinful*, depraved, or dead in sin, but rather that Adam became a *sinner*. His heart did not become evil, but his hands became dirty with the mud of his fall. Even after he came off the fence, Adam continued to have a free will and so was still able to come back from doing evil and do good (be it that once he had tasted the forbidden fruit of sin, it was harder to refrain from sinning more).
- When Adam chose to sin, he dirtied himself alone, and not his descendants. Adam's fall was Adam's alone; his descendants did not fall off the fence with him. So no other human is guilty of original sin, nor did any one become depraved. Adam's children remained the way Adam was created: neutral, on the fence. As to why people habitually come off the fence on the same side as Adam did, Pelagius reasoned that children naturally follow the example of their parents and teachers. If a child never saw the negative example of another person, that child had equal likelihood of coming off the other side of the fence.
- Mankind did not need God's grace in order to be saved from his fall. He could figure it out for himself.

## Augustine

In the same year that Pelagius was born, another lad who would loom large in the history of the church was born in Africa. Augustine believed that the Bible taught the following:

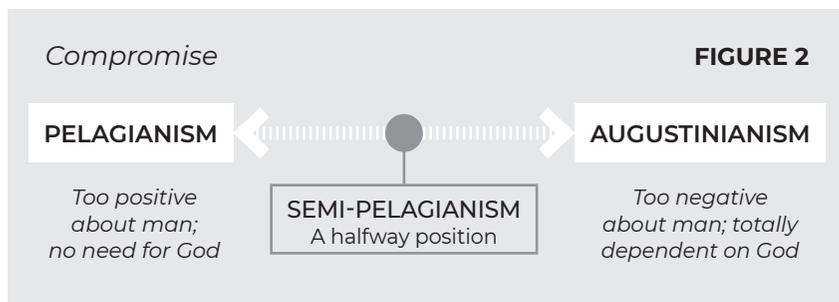
- God created Adam good. God did not place Adam on a neutral fence between good and evil, nor did God put Adam in a position where he had to choose to be either good or evil. God created Adam so that—to stay with the imagery of the fence—he was distinctly on the good side of the fence so that Adam was without sin in his heart and only did what was good. As far as Adam’s free will was concerned, Adam was able to choose to remain good or become evil; he could (if I may say it this way) move to the evil side of the fence. By putting the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the garden of Eden, God placed Adam before a test.
- Adam was not created mortal; he would not die unless he sinned. Death, in other words, is the wages of sin.
- When Adam fell into sin he changed from being good to being evil. He did not merely become a *sinner* but he became *sinful*, corrupt in his heart of hearts so that evil-doing became his default nature.
- With Adam’s fall into sin, all his descendants fell also. The whole human race was present in Adam when he fell into sin and so every person on the planet, past, present, and future, has lost the goodness with which God created the human race and become wicked. More, each person is responsible for his own fall into sin, so that each is guilty of original sin.
- Once he made himself wicked, Adam did not have the wherewithal to cross the fence back to the good side. He was stuck in bondage to sin and Satan unless and until sovereign God in mercy would rescue him. He was, then, totally *dependent* on God’s grace. This is true for every person of every generation, from Adam through to the last child born on the last day. No person can contribute anything to his salvation.
- An acknowledgment of total dependence on God for salvation implies an acknowledgment of God’s sovereignty. Only those whom God chooses to save will in fact end up receiving salvation.

## A Halfway Position?

Both Pelagius and Augustine actively taught what they believed. Invariably, the two positions clashed, so that folk found themselves needing to make a decision as to who was correct.

In 431 a Synod was held in Ephesus to provide scriptural judgment on these two positions. This Synod judged Pelagius’ teachings to be heretical, and upheld the position of Augustine as scripturally accurate. I might add that herewith the Lord’s church was directed again to the position the apostle Paul had held, and to the position Jesus had maintained, and which the Old Testament prophets had championed also.

It should not surprise us that Synod’s judgment did not settle the matter. The human heart, after all, defaults to a too-positive reading of human nature. Besides, Satan continues to suggest that people can be like God and decide between good and evil (Gen. 3:5). So although people agreed (with Synod) that Pelagius’ teachings were not correct, people at the same time concluded that Augustine’s teachings were too extreme. Pelagius was condemned for being too positive in his views concerning human nature, but Augustine was seen as being too negative. So a compromise position was sought somewhere between the two, leading to what is known as “Semi-Pelagianism” (see Figure 2). And yes, hang in there, please, this has everything to do with the Synod of Dort. . . .



## Semi-Pelagianism

On three vital points of doctrine, Semi-Pelagianism settled for the following positions:

- *Human nature* is neither good nor bad, but injured. Just as a person who fell out a third-floor window is restricted by his broken leg and

punctured spleen from doing what he wishes, so the person who fell into sin can no longer do all the good he would like to do. His free will remains, but because of the damage of the fall he is no longer able to carry out his intent. He cannot do much more than decide to request and receive help, but ask for help and accept it he certainly can.

- *Fallen man needs God's grace*, for people are too injured to help themselves. People can, however, decide whether to accept God's grace. Salvation, then, is a matter of *cooperation* on the part of God and man alike, with each contributing a part. It's like a math equation: as  $7 + 3 = 10$ , so God's grace + man's acceptance of God's grace = salvation.
- The *sovereignty of God* is limited by man's decision to cooperate with God or not. In the equation above, anything less than 3 means 7 will never equal 10. So too, anything less than people accepting God's grace means that God's offer to help us does not bring about our salvation. It's possible, then, that God can plan to save people (contribute the 7) but end up with an empty heaven because people refuse to supply the 3.

That people can contribute something to their salvation is agreeable to the human ego. We're *something*, and God acknowledges that; yes, that feels a lot better than the mindset that has us fully dependent on God's mercy. Over the course of time, this Semi-Pelagian doctrine became the official theology of the Roman Catholic Church.

## Roman Catholicism

Official Roman Catholic teaching has historically embraced the work of Jesus Christ on Calvary as necessary for forgiveness of sins and the sinner's reconciliation with God. At the same time, official Roman Catholic teaching has held over the centuries that you needed to contribute your two-cents' worth before you could claim Jesus' work as beneficial to yourself. That underlying thought triggered, for example, Johan Tetzels sale of indulgences



in 16th century Europe; your financial contribution had to complete Jesus' work to deliver your beloved mother from purgatory and catapult her into the glory of heaven. That same underlying thought drove people to their repeated prayers; praying the Hail Mary or the Lord's Prayer opened the floodgates of the goodness Jesus obtained on the cross. Again, sacrificing Christ anew in the Holy Eucharist completed Christ's work for you so that you could be assured of the forgiveness of your sins. The equation typical of Semi-Pelagianism received expression in historic Roman Catholic thinking.

But if Jesus' 7 never becomes a 10 for you unless you provide a full 3, the conscientious Christian can never be assured that the 10 is really his. That was Martin Luther's great struggle. This devout Roman Catholic monk struggled within his soul on the pressing question of whether God had *really* forgiven his sins. He did not doubt whether Jesus Christ had died to pay for sin (that is, provide the 7), but he was deeply plagued on the question of whether he himself had done enough to turn Jesus' 7 into the 10 of salvation. So he tormented his conscience into ever-greater postures of remorse for sin; surely if he were remorseful enough his contribution would amount to the required 3. But the thorny question was: when was I remorseful enough? Would another prayer, another apology, a bigger donation to the church treasury, another good work for the neighbour get me over the edge? Yet no matter the effort, always the doubt niggled: I haven't done enough, my efforts don't amount to a 3, and so I can't acquire the 10. . . .

This is the frustration that drove Martin Luther to search the Scripture on how Jesus' work saves sinners. By the grace of God he found the Bible's delightful equation: God's grace in Jesus Christ = salvation. Christ's work is the full 10 so that I need contribute nothing at all! This is the gospel God graciously gives to sinners, the good news sinners may embrace in faith. That discovery released Luther from his anguish and filled his heart with peace, and this is the discovery that lay at the heart of the Great Reformation that swept across Europe in the 16th century. Tragically, the Roman Catholic Church rejected this delightful equation, and that's why Luther ended up formulating and publishing those Ninety-Five Theses, and why he eventually ended up outside the Roman Catholic Church. He protested Semi-Pelagianism!

## The Reformers' Response to Semi-Pelagianism

Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin, and others developed Luther's work further. Men as these read and reread the Scriptures of God, studied and

restudied the writings of the church fathers, and came to the conclusion that Augustine had it right, while the official doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church about human nature, the grace of God, and God's sovereignty were wrong. They rejected not just Pelagianism, but also the halfway position the Roman Catholic Church had adopted.

This position of the Reformers came out clearly in the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563. Consider Lord's Day 3 (see sidebar):

- On human nature this Lord's Day says, "*God created man good.*" That confession contrasts, we realize, with Pelagius' insistence that God created man neutral. Herein the Catechism is decidedly Augustinian.
- The next Question & Answer reads, "*From where then did man's depraved nature come?*" The question admits to mankind's general wickedness. As to the source of this badness, the Lord's Day gives this answer: "*From the fall and disobedience of our first parents, Adam and Eve, in Paradise, for there our nature became so corrupt that we are all conceived and born in sin.*" Again, this is distinctly the position of Augustine (and of Paul and Jesus and Isaiah, etc.) as opposed to the position of Pelagius. You'll recall that according to Pelagius, Adam alone fell into sin, but Augustine and Reformation theology learned from Scripture that *everyone* sinned in Adam, with the consequence that "*our*" nature became corrupt.
- Again, the last question & answer of Lord's Day 3 elaborates on the extent of our corruption: "*But are we so corrupt that we are totally unable to do any good and inclined to all evil?*" Pelagius would have answered in the negative; man is basically good, and by means of his free will can choose to do good. Semi-Pelagians would answer

### Lord's Day 3

#### **Did God, then, create man so wicked and perverse?**

No, on the contrary, God created man good and in his image, that is, in true righteousness and holiness, so that he might rightly know God his Creator, heartily love him, and live with him in eternal blessedness to praise and glorify him.

#### **From where, then, did man's depraved nature come?**

From the fall and disobedience of our first parents, Adam and Eve, in Paradise, for there our nature became so corrupt that we are all conceived and born in sin.

#### **But are we so corrupt that we are totally unable to do any good and inclined to all evil?**

Yes, unless we are regenerated by the Spirit of God.

that man is corrupt but not so corrupt that he is unable to do any good, for man is, as it were, injured from the fall. The Catechism, however, in agreement with what Augustine taught, answers with a categorical “yes,” insisting that man is completely unable to do any good and inclined to all evil because human nature is totally depraved. In fact, the Catechism ends with saying that man is so corrupt that he can do no good unless God work on him through his Holy Spirit.

Consider also Lord’s Day 23 of the Heidelberg Catechism (see sidebar):

- This Lord’s Day asks how you are righteous before God. A Pelagian answer would say that I by my free will can decide to do the good, and so be acceptable to God. The Catechism, however, in step with Augustine, says that you are righteous before God “*only by true faith in Jesus Christ.*” Semi-Pelagians would not dispute that man’s righteousness is attained by true faith, but would have made an equation out of this, so that “faith” becomes the 3 that man must add to God’s 7 so that he finally gets salvation.
- Of course, adding one’s own decision to God’s work of redemption assumes that man is alive, be it injured. The language of the Heidelberg Catechism, however, assumes that man is dead. Man has “*grievously sinned against all God’s commandments*” and is “*still inclined to all evil.*” Since a dead person can do nothing, faith

*Lord’s Day 23.60, 61*

**How are you righteous before God?**

Only by true faith in Jesus Christ. Although my conscience accuses me that I have grievously sinned against all God’s commandments, have never kept any of them, and am still inclined to all evil, yet God, without any merit of my own, out of mere grace, imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ.

He grants these to me as if I had never had nor committed any sin, and as if I myself had accomplished all the obedience which Christ has rendered for me, if only I accept this gift with a believing heart.

**Why do you say that you are righteous only by faith?**

Not that I am acceptable to God on account of the worthiness of my faith, for only the satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ is my righteousness before God. I can receive this righteousness and make it my own by faith only.

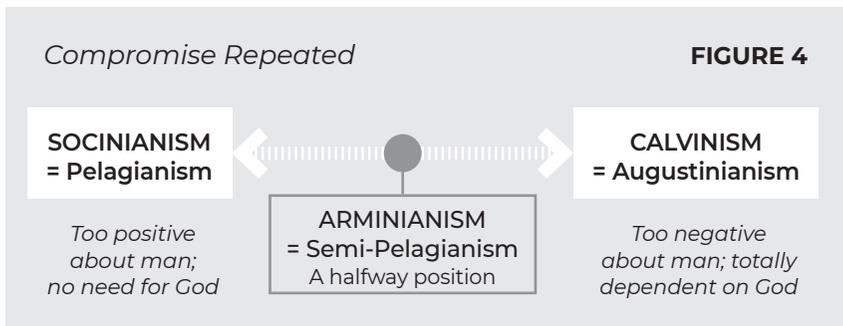
cannot be a choice of man. That's why Lord's Day 23 continues, "yet God, without any merit of my own, out of mere grace, imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ." That language implies that God supplies the full 10 so that I receive the gift of salvation without contributing so much as a sigh.

- The Lord's Day even adds that my faith is not part of any saving equation: "Not that I am acceptable to God on account of the worthiness of my faith, for only the satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Jesus Christ is my righteousness before God." So the equation is: Christ's work = my salvation. Christ's work is the full 10! That's the good news God gives, and I receive. And receiving it, taking hold of it, accepting it—that is faith: "I can receive this righteousness and make it my own by faith only," concludes Lord's Day 23.
- The Lord's Day adds concerning God's sovereignty, "God . . . out of mere grace, imputes to me." God does not ask for my permission, nor does he expect my cooperation, let alone my contribution; freely, sovereignly, he imposes his redemption-through-Christ onto my account. God is God. That is why his work of salvation is not dependent on my approval.

These doctrines have come to be known by the term *Calvinism* or *Reformed*. Amongst other peoples of Europe, many of the folks of the Netherlands came to love this Calvinism, with its emphasis on salvation by God's grace alone.

## Resistance

It's no surprise to learn that there were those in Reformation Europe who did not agree with the Reformers' preaching about human nature, God's free grace, and God's sovereignty in working salvation. One such person who



resented this gospel was Faustus Socinius (1539–1604). Over against the return to Augustine he resurrected Pelagius’ teaching, insisting that Adam was created neutral (neither good nor bad) and that when Adam sinned he, and he alone, came off the fence to evil’s side. All Adam’s descendants are born neutral, he claimed, and everyone can choose between good and evil. This was plainly a return to the Pelagianism rejected by the church some thousand years earlier. Over against the Calvinism (= Augustinianism) of the Reformers, Socinius placed his Socinianism (= Pelagianism).

But now again, as happened centuries earlier, Socinianism was written off as being too positive about human nature, while Calvinism was seen as too negative, too damning, and depressing. The resulting compromise was at heart a return to Semi-Pelagianism. Jacob Arminius in particular was responsible for bringing Semi-Pelagianism to life again in the midst of the Reformed Churches. His particular brand of thinking has popularly become known as *Arminianism*. In the Synod of Dort, this Arminianism was examined in the light of Scripture. In this Synod, the church of the Reformation was essentially dealing with Semi-Pelagianism—that default position of the human heart—all over again (see Figure 4).

## Relevant?

Is there need, then, to spend time in our busy twenty-first century considering the issues that busied the men of the Synod of Dort four hundred years ago? The answer is emphatically yes, simply because heresies do not die off—and especially not this one. People just do not like to be told that we are evil at heart, can contribute nothing to impress sovereign and holy God, and so are dependent on his grace. Such a position is seen to be much too condemning, too demeaning, and too belittling. Calvinist Reformed people understand that response because they believe that the human heart is bent toward evil, wicked to the core, and thoroughly depraved. Even so, Calvinist Reformed people, too, can—and do—fall for the thought that we need to do something, *something*, to make God happier with us. We might not think that we have to add a 3 to Christ’s 7 to make the 10 of salvation possible, but add a 1 to a 9—ah, yes, if I don’t read my Bible God won’t bless me, and if I pray a little more God will smile more upon me, and when things go wrong with my child it must be because I’ve sinned. . . . Semi-Pelagianism is not far from anyone’s heart.

Statistics don’t say everything, but they do say something. Some years ago, a survey in America learned that 84 percent of Christians interviewed (they called themselves “evangelicals”) agreed that in matters of salvation,

“God helps those who help themselves,” and 77 percent believed that human beings are basically good.<sup>1</sup> That’s not Calvinism; that’s Semi-Pelagianism. You see, the content of the Canons of Dort is popularly rejected.

You agree, then, that the issue is worth studying? I’m grateful that you’ve agreed to carry on. We’ll look next at who Jacob Arminius was, and then at the role the Dutch government played in the budding controversy. Once we have that information in hand (or head), we’re ready to grapple with the heart of the matter.

## So Who Was Jacob Arminius?

Jacob Arminius was born in 1560, a few short years before the death of the great Reformer John Calvin (1564). Young Jacob was orphaned at the tender age of fourteen, then taken into the home of a Reformed minister who, in 1576, sent Arminius at age sixteen to the University of Leyden. Chief instructor at this University was the theologian Casper Koolhaas.

We need to know that with the arrival of the Renaissance a century before, European scholarship allowed itself to be influenced and guided by the philosophy of long-dead Greeks as Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates. This influence popularized in Europe the notion that the human mind is able to sort out and resolve the deep questions of human existence. Those who embraced this Greek influence were known as *humanists*; they typically agreed that humans are good, they defended the doctrine of man’s free will, and they questioned man’s need for God’s grace in order to achieve any form of salvation—for man had it within himself to save himself from whatever perils life put to him. Koolhaas embraced this Greek influence eagerly, and did not hesitate to press this man-centric confidence upon his students, including young Jacob Arminius.

It’s not, to be sure, that young Arminius (or even the older Koolhaas, for that matter) disavowed their Christian heritage totally in favour of full-blown Greek paganism. On the contrary, Arminius trained to be a preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ within the Reformed Church in the Netherlands. But his education taught him how to mix elements of humanism with his Christianity, and it’s that mix that produced the

---

1 See Michael S. Horton, “What Still Keeps Us Apart?” in *Roman Catholicism: Evangelical Protestants Analyze What Divides and Unites Us*, ed. John Armstrong (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 263ff.

variant known as Arminian Reformed. To put it differently, his training under Koolhaas led him to find Augustinianism (and so the Calvinism of the Reformation) as too stuffy, so that in turn, under the influence of humanist optimism concerning human nature, he embraced Semi-Pelagianism.

## Pattern

After his graduation from seminary in 1587, Arminius was ordained as minister of a large Reformed Church in Amsterdam. This congregation already had another minister in the person of Peter Plancius. The consistory quickly recognized Arminius' exceptional gifts, and so requested their young minister to evaluate the publication of a person by the name of Dirck Coornhart (1522–1590). The consistory sought an opinion on this publication because of what it said about human nature, free will, and the need for God's grace.

Arminius' response to Coornhart's book exposed the fact that Arminius himself held faulty positions on man's free will, depravity, and God's grace. As a result, the other minister of Arminius' congregation faulted him for holding to a general goodness in man, that man had an ability to use his free will, and that man could cooperate with Jesus Christ in attaining salvation. Plancius referred to Article 15 of the Belgic Confession (see sidebar), a document to which Arminius had given his subscription when he first became a minister: "*We believe that . . . original sin . . . is a corruption of the entire nature of man and a hereditary evil which infects even infants in their mother's womb. As a root it produces in man all*

### *Belgic Confession, Article 15*

We believe that by the disobedience of Adam original sin has spread throughout the whole human race. It is a corruption of the entire nature of man and a hereditary evil which infects even infants in their mother's womb. As a root it produces in man all sorts of sin. It is, therefore, so vile and abominable in the sight of God that it is sufficient to condemn the human race. It is not abolished nor eradicated even by baptism, for sin continually streams forth like water welling up from this woeful source. Yet, in spite of all this, original sin is not imputed to the children of God to their condemnation but by his grace and mercy is forgiven them. This does not mean that the believers may sleep peacefully in their sin, but that the awareness of this corruption may make them often groan as they eagerly wait to be delivered from this body of death.

In this regard we reject the error of the Pelagians, who say that this sin is only a matter of imitation.

*sorts of sin.*” He drew attention also to the Heidelberg Catechism’s answer to the question “*But are we so corrupt that we are totally unable to do any good and inclined to all evil?*” as an emphatic yes, unless God works upon us by his Holy Spirit to regenerate us (see Lord’s Day 3 in sidebar above).

In his response to Plancius’ criticism, Arminius claimed he fully agreed with the confessions. He stated that though he would prefer to see some changes made to the confessions, he certainly knew himself bound to the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism, and so he would teach and preach in full agreement with those confessions. This response turned out to be typical of Arminius’ manner of working; he was not truthful, and so what he really thought was extraordinarily difficult to pin down. This pattern repeated itself in the years that followed, and all the while the little humanist seeds Arminius had sown would grow and bear fruit among his audience.

## Professor

In 1603 two of three professors at the University of Leyden died as a result of a plague. Arminius was appointed to replace one of them. The remaining professor at the University, Franciscus Gomarus (1563–1641), was unhappy with Arminius’ appointment. Those who made the appointment, however, refused to give Gomarus’ concerns a hearing unless he could demonstrate, after a discussion with Arminius, how he erred. In the resulting discussion, Gomarus (just as Plancius had experienced) was not able to nail Arminius down to any error because Arminius repeatedly voiced his agreement with the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism. At the same time, though, he shied away from openness. When he entered the classroom in Leyden he taught his students in private, with the express instruction that they were not to publish their notes on his lectures.

Eventually, however, the emphases in Arminius’ instruction came out through the conversations and public teaching of his students. When Gomarus again challenged what Arminius was teaching his students, government-appointed judges cautioned Gomarus that he ought to be more tolerant of Arminius. There appeared to be nothing that could be done to bring his teaching into the open, or to silence it.

Arminius died in 1609. His teachings, however, did not follow him into the grave. He had taught future ministers for six years, and through them his thoughts and manner of speaking lived on. There were those in the churches who were content with this humanist sort of preacher, and many others who were not. Predictably, that in turn brought considerable

tension in the churches. As to who was appointed to fill the vacancy at the University of Leyden caused by Arminius' death—well, a fellow humanist named Simon Episcopius (1583–1643) received that task. And yes, he was a government appointee.

That brings us to another angle of the background to the Synod of Dort, and that's the role of the national government.

## The National Government

For a thirty-two-year period beginning in 1586, Holland's strongman was Johan van Oldenbarnevelt. Theologically he was a humanist, and so believed that people are essentially good, have a free will, and are able to decide between good and evil. So it's no surprise to learn that his government was favourably inclined to the Arminian Reformed, and had little sympathy for the Calvinist Reformed. Furthermore, since ministers of the gospel were on national payroll, government officials insisted they themselves determine which minister would serve in which congregation. Well now, given the kinship between the Arminians and the government, it invariably followed that vacant congregations often found themselves saddled with an Arminian minister. This in turn generated unrest in the land, because countless of the common people struggled with their sins and their conscience, and so longed to hear Sunday by Sunday the glorious gospel of God freely granting forgiveness of sins and life eternal to undeserving people. But given their Arminian preachers, that's not what they heard from their pulpits.

The resulting unhappiness across the land prompted calls for a national synod, a meeting of the churches to settle the question whether there was room in a truly Bible-centred church for Arminian thinking. Does the Bible teach, or even leave room for, a God who needs people's participation and consent before he will save them? Do people even have it in them to contribute to salvation? Despite the pressures rising from the common folk of the land, the government of the day—walking in lockstep as they did with the Arminian Reformed—refused permission for the churches to meet together in a synod to deal with such questions. The government insisted: the state, not the churches, has the final authority in all matters of the land, including matters of church and church doctrine. So no synods could be held between 1586 and 1618—to the great dismay of the Calvinist Reformed who learned from Scripture that the government had no God-given right to interfere in church matters.

As an aside: given this history it is no surprise that when a synod finally was convened in 1618, it did not concern itself only with matters of doctrine, but also matters of how the church should be governed. The Church Order of Dort is a product of this Synod, finalized in response to too many churches and office bearers agreeing with the government position. This Church Order<sup>2</sup> is still widely used in Reformed churches around the globe because it is recognized that this Church Order catches well what the Lord has revealed in Scripture about how he would have his churches be governed. And yes, this Church Order firmly fixes responsibility for church matters with the churches themselves.

## A Synod!

Given the opposition of Oldenbarnevelt's government to a synod, one wonders how a synod nevertheless could be convened in 1618. The story is intriguing, and highlights the gracious and mighty work of God.

As the first decade of the 1600s gave way to the second, Oldenbarnevelt's leadership became increasingly oppressive for those who embraced the ultimate authority of God's Word. So opposed was Oldenbarnevelt to the doctrine of man's total depravity that he set about oppressing those who embraced it. By 1617 the pressure on the Calvinist Reformed—remember, these were the ones who embraced the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism—was so acute that the truth of Scripture was close to being snuffed out in the Netherlands. No, the government did not impose a death penalty on those who humbly embraced God's revelation. But to be simply biblical was not cheap: embracing the faith of Scripture could cost one one's job, one's land, one's comforts. These were dark, very dark days for the godly and for the gospel of grace that formed the core of what Martin Luther and John Calvin had taught in the Great Reformation.

In the midst of the darkness, the Lord God sovereignly continued his work. The house of the leading nobility (under Philip William, Prince of Orange) quietly supported the Arminians and so condoned the strong-handedness of Oldenbarnevelt over against the Calvinist Reformed. But as the cry of those who sought to be faithful to God's revelation in Scripture went up to the Lord, he in mercy reached into the leading family to elevate a man who sympathized with the Calvinists. Prince Maurice of Nassau

---

2 For an introduction to this Church Order, see Clarence Bouwman, *Spiritual Order for the Church* (Winnipeg: Premier Printing, 2000).

(Philip William's half-brother) was not given to religious business (he was a man of the military), but did habitually go to church—with the Arminian Reformed. But when Prince Maurice internalized what he heard in church (man is basically good), and at the same time observed how “his” prime minister Oldenbarnevelt was forcibly crushing those who insisted man is evil to his core, he gradually came to see the inconsistency of the Arminian position—and so in time came to embrace Calvinist Reformed thinking. So he began publicly to go to church with the Calvinist Reformed in order to show his allegiance with the oppressed. When Philip William died in 1618, this Maurice became Prince of Orange.

Upon ascending the throne, Prince Maurice swore an oath to defend the Reformed faith, and now he made clear what he understood by the word “reformed.” When Oldenbarnevelt shortly thereafter encouraged his people to take up arms to free Holland of the Calvinist Reformed (how is that evidence of man's basic goodness?)—and even hired soldiers to help achieve his sinister goal—Maurice took bold action. To prevent civil war from tearing his country apart he had Oldenbarnevelt and his ministers imprisoned. With that action the political strength of both the humanists and the Arminian Reformed was broken, and so the Calvinist Reformed could breathe a deep sigh of relief. Maurice gave his blessing to the convening of a synod, exactly because he saw the need for the churches to examine God's own word on the points of doctrine that had caused so much tension in the country.

## **Soli Deo Gloria**

It is fitting and proper to attribute the political collapse of the Arminian supporters to the gracious work of sovereign God. The psalmist of old had put to words one's dependence on God in the face of hateful opposition (Ps. 124):

*“If it had not been the LORD who was on our side—let Israel now say—  
if it had not been the LORD who was on our side when people rose up against us,  
then they would have swallowed us up alive,  
when their anger was kindled against us;  
then the flood would have swept us away, the  
torrent would have gone over us;  
then over us would have gone the raging waters.”*

This God, though, gives the way of escape:

*“Blessed be the Lord, who has not given us as prey to their teeth!  
We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowlers;  
the snare is broken, and we have escaped!”*

One can appreciate the rejoicing of the faithful as the oppression lifted and space was created to resolve the matters of doctrine that lay so dear to their hearts. It’s a confession we share:

*“Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.”*

## **What’s the Real Issue?**

It’s been a long story thus far. But getting a handle on who Jacob Arminius was and what position the government took sets us up now to dig into the actual meat of the issue and so grasp why this controversy was so important. Sometimes, after all, we need to live and let live. But when the issue is God himself, we can’t. And that’s the actual concern here.

### **God**

The real issue in the Arminian controversy is the glory of God—or, better put, how much glory God should receive. I know you cannot quantify “glory,” for you cannot put it in a box or set it on a scale, let alone carry it from here to there, and so the question of *how much* glory God should receive could give the wrong signal. The point is, though, whether glory should be shared. The argument of the Canons is that God is too gloriously *divine* for any sharing to occur. The human race, creatures of dust as we are and sinful at that, simply have no right to the glory that belongs to God; to claim any of that glory for ourselves is to belittle the majesty and greatness of God. Yet claiming some of that glory for ourselves is precisely what Arminian thinking was doing (and what human nature wants to do). The Canons of Dort, on the other hand, seek to compel people to be God-centred in their thoughts and God-fearing in their hearts. The Canons are about God and his gracious ways with an undeserving people, while those whom the Canons seek to correct were about people and the nice things God does for people.

Just what were the nice things (according to the Arminians) that God did for people? The Arminians mentioned things like God sending his Son to earth to open the way of salvation for any who would believe. With Christ’s work on Calvary complete, God (and Jesus too) now waits

patiently for lost people to embrace this good news so that he might receive them into heaven. As the “perfect gentleman,” God does not sovereignly draw sinners to himself, but respects folk’s freedom to decide for themselves what to do with the redemption God has prepared for them in Jesus Christ. When, then, one decides in favour of the gospel, the credit for being saved is not fully God’s (who after all did no more than make salvation available for people); the credit is partly the believer’s because he chose to receive what God was offering him. Obviously, the glory is then no longer fully God’s.

It will be clear from the above that the people whom the Canons condemn perceive God as ultimately dependent on people’s decision, and therefore in the end not sovereign. Similarly, that the ultimate decision rests with people presumes that people are good enough to be able to choose for salvation for themselves. Those two thoughts—the greatness of God and the smallness of man—are two sides of one coin; you cannot insist on the greatness of God if you at the same time insist people have considerable capacity to contribute to salvation. God is small if you insist that people are big. The point of the Canons is that God is big, very big—and so people are small, very small.

You wish to have some further explanation? Read on, dear friend!

## Detail

As we will see in much more detail later on, the Canons of Dort are made up of five topics or “heads of doctrine” (also known as the “Five Points of Calvinism”). These Five Points are listed not because there is something distinctive about these five in themselves, but because the critics listed these five as points for discussion, and so the Synod responded with its positive statement on these Five.

The critics (that’s the Arminians) built a system of thought based on two philosophical pillars:

1. If God is in total control of everything, people obviously cannot make their own decisions. People are then puppets who can only do what God has ordained. To use big words: divine sovereignty rules out people having free will.
2. It is unfair and improper to hold a person responsible for things he simply is not able to do.

I have to grant that these two points make perfect sense to my mind, and so seem entirely correct. I’ll come back to this matter in a moment.

Meanwhile, on these two pillars the Arminians built two consequences:

1. Since the Bible obviously calls people to repentance and faith, it follows that faith is a person's own decision and responsibility, and cannot be the result of God's work in someone's heart.
2. Since the Bible wants all who hear the gospel to believe it, it follows that every person has within himself the ability to believe it.

Again I have to grant that these two consequences make perfect sense to my mind. It seems fair and proper, then, to embrace also the insistence of the critics that the Bible be read to support the following five points:

1. People are not so badly corrupted that they cannot believe the gospel. Instead, people have sufficient goodness within themselves to make a good decision about the gospel of Jesus Christ.
2. God does not control people so completely that people can't make up their own mind whether to believe the gospel or not. Instead, people are able to resist God's grace and even reject it.
3. God elects to salvation those whom he knows will one day decide to believe his gospel.
4. Christ's work on Calvary did not guarantee that anybody would be saved; instead, his atoning work gave all people nothing more than the opportunity to be saved.
5. Once people come to faith it is up to them to stay with the faith. If they fail to stay with the faith, these saints end up eternally lost even though they once truly believed.

To list the five differently:

- Human depravity is partial
- God's grace can be resisted and rejected
- God's decision to elect depends on whether you are going to believe
- Christ's atoning work is for all people
- Perseverance in faith is up to people

The whole package hangs together and makes logical sense. God needs people; people need God. God waits for people; people wait for God. God receives glory, and people share it. For ultimately, even though God offers people much, people in the final analysis hold the ace. It all makes sense.

## Unbiblical

The Synod of Dort held these five positions up against the light of Scripture, and found each in turn to be wanting—despite the fact that they make sense to human minds. If human depravity is not partial but total (as the Synod learned from Scripture), then it is no surprise that logic cannot be the standard for truth. The fallen human mind needs to accept in humility what sovereign God says in his Word, never mind whether it answers all questions or is agreeable to our sensitivities.

More importantly, the fathers at the Synod of Dort found the *system of thought* underlying these five points to be unbiblical, specifically because they did not do justice to God’s *Godness*, and at the same time did not do justice to mankind’s *humanity*. They understood that the one system of thought proclaimed a God who saves (that’s the Calvinist Reformed position), while the other system of thought (the Arminian Reformed) spoke of a God who enabled people to contribute to their salvation. The one system holds that the three persons of the Trinity work together to save particular people (the Father elects specific persons, the Son dies for those same persons, the Holy Spirit renews those very same persons), while the other system separates the work of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit so that the Son died for everybody, the Spirit works in those who are willing to believe it, and the Father elects only those who persevere in their willingness to believe the faith. At the end of the day, then, we have two radically opposing theologies, where the one says that salvation is fully the work of God, while the other says salvation is also the work of man. The one gives all the glory to God, while the other shares God’s glory with man.

In rejecting the system that divided the glory between God and man, the fathers at the Synod of Dort also rejected the need to read Scripture with the preconceived notion that God gave the human race full freedom to make its own decisions. To make the case, the fathers took each of the five points in turn, and drew out in five heads of doctrine what in fact the Scriptures said on each point. They countered the five points of the Arminians with five positions as follows:

Arminian Position	Synod’s Position
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Human depravity is partial</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Human depravity is total</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• God’s grace can be resisted</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• God’s grace is irresistible</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• God's election is conditional</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• God's election is unconditional</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Christ's atoning work is universal</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Christ's atoning work is limited to particular people</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perseverance is not assured</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perseverance is assured</li> </ul>

These five positions taken by the Synod in opposition to the Arminians are commonly summarized under the following headings:

- **Total Depravity**
- **Irresistible Grace**
- **Unconditional Election**
- **Limited Atonement**
- **Perseverance of the Saints**

If we take the first letter from each of these five points, they can easily be remembered by the mnemonic TULIP, fitting for a confessional statement that hails from the (southern) Netherlands. Of course, you need to unscramble the letters to make the memory aid work, but that's part of the fun.

Within the Canons themselves the order of the five is altered in order to make the flow of thought easier to follow. The Canons begin with the sovereignty of God, and so deal first with unconditional election (First Head of Doctrine), and then draws out that Jesus' atoning work on the cross is limited to those whom the Father has given to the Son (Second Head of Doctrine). Thereafter the Canons confess the reality of humanity's total depravity (Third Head), and then show how God's sovereignty triumphs over human depravity, so that God's grace is ultimately irresistible (Fourth Head). They conclude with showing that those whom the Father has given to the Son ultimately persevere to the end (Fifth Head). The order of the Heads in the Canons, then, follows the mnemonic ULTIP.

<i>First Head:</i>	<b>Unconditional Election</b>
<i>Second Head:</i>	<b>Limited Atonement</b>
<i>Third Head:</i>	<b>Total Depravity</b>
<i>Fourth Head:</i>	<b>Irresistible Grace</b>
<i>Fifth Head:</i>	<b>Perseverance of the Saints</b>

Within the Canons the Third and Fourth Heads are combined into one chapter since the Arminian stance on grace was too confusing to unravel without speaking at the same time about human depravity.

These Five Points of Calvinism, then, are in the first instance *reactions* to teachings that belittle the God of glory. These Five Points *restate* what the Lord has revealed on the matters in question in his Holy Word, and so *defend* what the church had confessed in the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism. With these five points, then, the church insists once again on the glorious *greatness* of the God who created humanity and saves fallen sinners.

## The Arminian Articles

Can we nail down in greater precision exactly what these five Arminian points were? Yes, exactly. It's heady stuff, but printed below is what the Arminians themselves (known at the time as *Remonstrants*) put to paper in 1610, one year after Jacob Arminius himself died, for the benefit of certain government officials who wanted to understand better what the issue was. Give them a careful read, and see if you can pick out where the errors lie. Don't get discouraged if you feel you can't find anything wrong here. Remember, Arminius was known for being slippery. . . .

In order that your Worships may know what the Remonstrants believe and teach concerning these same matters, we declare that our opinion on this is as follows:

1. that God, by an eternal and immutable decree has in Jesus Christ his Son determined before the foundation of the world to save out of the fallen sinful human race those in Christ, for Christ's sake, and through Christ who by the grace of the Holy Spirit shall believe in this his Son Jesus Christ and persevere in this faith and obedience of faith to the end; and on the other hand to leave the incorrigible and unbelieving in sin and under wrath and condemn (them) as alienate from Christ—according to the word of the holy gospel in John 3:36, "*He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son*

*shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him,”* and also other passages of the Scriptures.

2. that in agreement with this Jesus Christ the Saviour of the world died for all men and for every man, so that he merited reconciliation and forgiveness of sins for all through the death of the cross; yet so that no one actually enjoys this forgiveness except the believer—also 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 shall not perish but have eternal life.”* And in the first epistle of John 2:2; *“He is the propitiation for our sins; and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.”*
3. that man does not have saving faith of himself nor by the power of his own free will, since he in the state of apostasy and sin cannot of and through himself think, will or do any good which is truly good (such as is especially saving faith); but that it is necessary that he be regenerated by God, in Christ, through his Holy Spirit, and renewed in understanding, affections or will, and all powers, in order that he may rightly understand, meditate upon, will and perform that which is truly good, according to the word of Christ, John 15:5, *“Without me ye can do nothing.”*
4. that this grace of God is the commencement, progression and completion of all good, also in so far that regenerate man cannot, apart from this prevenient or assisting, awakening, consequent and co-operating grace, think, will or do the good or resist any temptation to evil; so that all good works or activities which can be conceived must be ascribed to the grace of God in Christ. But with respect to the mode of this grace, it is not irresistible, since it is written concerning many that they resisted the Holy Spirit, Acts 7 and elsewhere in many places.
5. that those who are incorporated into Jesus Christ and thereby become partakers of his life-giving Spirit have abundant strength to strive against Satan, sin, the world, and their own flesh and to obtain the victory; it being well understood (that

this is) through the assistance of the grace of the Holy Spirit, and that Jesus Christ assists them through his Spirit in all temptations, extends the hand, and—if only they are prepared for warfare and desire his help and are not negligent—keeps them standing, so that by no cunning or power of Satan can they be led astray or plucked out of Christ’s hand, according to the word of Christ, John 10, “*No one shall pluck them out of my hands.*” But whether they can through negligence fall away from the first of their life in Christ, again embrace the present world, depart from the pure doctrine once given them, lose the good conscience, and neglect grace, must first be more carefully determined from the Holy Scriptures before we shall be able to teach this with the full persuasion of our heart.

These articles here set forth and taught the Remonstrants hold to be conformable to God’s Word, edifying, and with respect to this matter sufficient unto salvation, so that it is neither necessary nor edifying to rise higher or to descend more deeply.

A tough read indeed. This (and other material like it) received the concerted attention of the fathers at the Synod of Dort. So we’ll come back to the five paragraphs in this statement in the pages ahead.

## Today’s Christians

We live some four centuries after that difficult struggle occurred, and live in a place and culture far removed from the Netherlands. Yet the battle that was then fought on what God has actually revealed in Scripture remains a matter of ongoing importance. Need I earn forgiveness of sins, or is forgiveness in fact God’s free gift in Jesus Christ? Need I impress God before he grants me his favour, or may I see myself as an undeserving heir to his mercy? Is salvation an equation, to which I need to contribute my part before I can be assured that salvation is mine, or is salvation simply God’s free gift? The bottom line: is God big and I small, or is God sort of my size so that I can present my contribution to him? These are familiar and pressing questions, indeed, also in the twenty-first century! The tensions leading up to the Synod of Dort contributed to the depth of theological insight and wisdom caught in the Canons of Dort. To that insight we are heirs.

I love this mind-blowing thought: four hundred years ago already God was supplying for the needs of twenty-first century Christians (see 1 Corinthians 10:11)! So we'll now turn to the Canons themselves with eagerness.

## Questions for Discussion

1. What is to be gained from studying today a document written four hundred years ago? Explain your answer.
2. What did the humanist believe about man? Compare this teaching with the view of human nature dominant in today's Western thinking.
3. What is the relation between the Bible and the church's confessions
  - a. according to the Calvinist Reformed?
  - b. according to the Arminians?Which position are you most comfortable with? Why?
4. What does today's society think about the "tolerance" the Arminians wanted? Are you comfortable with that position? Explain your thoughts.
5. What was the central doctrine of the Great Reformation? Why is this doctrine offensive to people? Are you comfortable or uncomfortable with this central doctrine? Explain why you answer as you do.
6. Explain why no Synod was held from 1586 to 1618. What ought the role of today's governments be in the affairs of the church?
7. Why was Arminius not exposed as a false teacher while he was still alive? What lesson does that teach us today?
8. The Arminian articles were printed above. Detail the errors you found in these articles. (Don't be surprised if you didn't find any; you're not the first to find none!)
9. Outline briefly the teachings of Pelagius, Augustine and the Semi-Pelagians on:
  - a. human nature,
  - b. man's need for grace,
  - c. God's sovereignty.Show how in each case the three positions hang together.
10. Concerning these three points, assess
  - a. what position today's mainline churches hold,
  - b. what view today's Evangelical churches have,
  - c. what your own position is.