

# Synod of Dort (1618-1619)

## 'Calvinism' versus 'Arminianism'



The theological controversy that came to a head in the Dutch Republic (now Netherlands) in the early 17th century at the Synod of Dort but is still very much alive up to the present day.

### 1. Challenging the terms

The names Calvin and Arminius and the positions Calvinist and Arminian are used to define this debate but that can be somewhat misleading for a number of reasons:

- i. Calvin and Arminius never debated each other. John/Jean Calvin died in 1564 when Jacobus Arminius was only three years old. Arminius was actually reacting against his old teacher Theodore Beza and others (esp. Gomarus) who held to a specific doctrine of predestination ([supralapsarian](#)).
- ii. Calvin in his day and since then has never had a dominating role in Reformed<sup>1</sup> theology. Certainly in the late 16th and early 17th century, Theodore Beza and Heinrich Bullinger were just as influential if not more so. Whereas Luther had (and continues to have) a huge position in Lutheranism (including writing their confessional documents), Calvin has never had such a role in the Reformed movement (the key confessions being the Canons of Dort or the Westminster Confession or the 1689 Baptist Confession, written long after his death). So "Calvinism" can be slightly misleading when used as a synonym for Reformed theology.
- iii. Furthermore the "5 Points of Calvinism" are a 20th century summary of the Canons of Dort (produced at the end of the Synod of Dort) so while Calvin would probably have agreed with them they are not from his pen.
- iv. And even if they are taken as in line with Calvin, the "5 Points" are not a summary of all Calvin's thought. His theology is much wider than this, involving issues of worship, sacraments, the relationship between the old and new covenants which are not central to the Synod of Dort

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<sup>1</sup> When Protestantism splits in 1529 (particularly over doctrine of the Lord's Supper) it is between the Lutherans and the Reformed.

debate. The 5 Points are simply a reaction to the Remonstrants 5 Articles centring on the particular issue of predestination and God's sovereignty in salvation.

- v. Like Calvin, Arminius had also died before the Synod of Dort took place in 1618-19. Just as Calvin didn't write the 5 points of Calvinism, so Arminius was not the author of the 5 Articles of the Remonstrants, though the gap was much smaller – Arminius died just a year before they were drawn up. The direct successor to Arminius in his university chair and as leader of the Remonstrants was Conrad Vorstius who was more radical than Arminius, taking off in a Socinian direction (which included a number of heretical positions, particularly the denial of God's full omniscience re. the future). Vorstius however had been exiled by the time of the Synod of Dort and was not actively leading the Remonstrants.

## 2. The history behind the controversy

[Augustine](#) is key. Just as someone once remarked that all Western philosophy was “footnotes to Plato,” one could say that a huge amount of theology has been footnotes to Augustine. He didn't get everything right but in his debate with the British monk Pelagius he set out very clearly the depravity of man (“curved in on himself”) and God's sovereign, gracious, predestined salvation. Throughout church history since then, there have been times when Augustine's themes have been emphasised, times when they have been more muted, and times when the debate has been repeated in a slightly different form (e.g. the Thomists versus the Ockhamists). [Luther](#) went to an Augustinian monastery and started to rediscover and emphasise his themes, but he was not the first or only one to do this. Through the centuries there had always been some who had focused on the Cross of Christ and emphasised grace and made attempts to reform the church back to these. Carl Trueman argues<sup>2</sup> that what happened at the time of the Reformation was that a few people started emphasising the Augustinian themes and following them to their logical conclusions to the extent that they started clashing with the authority of the church so that, while they started off as loyal churchmen with no thought of splitting anything, eventually they could not be held within the bounds of the established Catholic church.

So in the Remonstrants versus Reformed debate of the early 17th century you have in some ways another replay of the Augustine versus Pelagius debates. Certainly at the time the Remonstrants were accused of being secretly Jesuit (the more Pelagian wing of the Catholic church) and this charge has some power as a) Arminius did borrow some concepts and arguments from Jesuit theologians and b) there was strong support for the Remonstrants from the protestant Dutch traders who wanted to be free to trade with Catholics and so would favour a theological position which did not make so much of the difference between Catholicism and Protestantism.

## 3. The Synod of Dort (1618-1619)

The Synod was an international meeting of Reformed representatives, called with the purpose of squashing the heresy of Arminianism. The Remonstrants 5 Articles were:

1. Election is based on foreknowledge (that someone will chose to believe).
2. Christ's atonement was universal rather than specific (1 John 2:2).
3. Man is depraved and can do nothing without God's grace (John 15:5).
4. God's prevenient grace enables a man to accept *or resist* saving grace (Acts 7:51).<sup>3</sup>
5. Given the Scriptures that suggest it is possible for a saved person to fall away from salvation, we should consider leaving some room for this view.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Find his series of lectures on the Reformation at Westminster Theological Seminary at iTunes U.

<sup>3</sup> Arminius taught something like this from Romans 7 where he saw Paul in a pre-regenerate state battling against the Spirit (cf. the transitional understanding of this passage that it describes the battle in a regenerate believer).

<sup>4</sup> Notice the caution with which this was originally put, though it has often been characterised by opponents as a hard position that people are definitely in real danger of losing their salvation. Admittedly some Remonstrants did seem to believe this (judging by the rebuttals in the Canons) and later Arminians also did.

These points were refuted under corresponding ‘heads’ or points, each with several articles – the [Canons of Dort](#).

1. Unconditional election
2. Limited atonement
3. Total depravity
4. Irresistible Grace<sup>5</sup>
5. Perseverance of the Saints



Centuries later these points (with their long connected arguments) were summarised and re-ordered into the 5 Points known today by their acronym T-U-L-I-P.

#### 4. Reception today

Although the Remonstrants were thoroughly defeated at the Synod of Dort and condemned as heretics, today Arminianism is very strong throughout evangelicalism<sup>6</sup> and particularly in our context in Kenya. It has arrived here through at least four routes:

- 1) John Wesley was strongly influenced by Arminian views.<sup>7</sup> The Methodist Church and other churches that descend from the Wesleyan/Holiness tradition (e.g. Nazarene) are very largely Arminian. To the extent that these denominations have influence in Kenya they tend to carry that understanding of salvation.
- 2) One descendent of the Wesleyan/Holiness tradition was the theology associated with the Keswick Convention in the UK at the end of the 19th century and in the early 20th century. This theology built on Wesleyan views on Christian perfection and has been criticised as neo-Pelagian in its emphasis on free will and decision.<sup>8</sup> Keswick theology was a strong contributing factor to the East African Revival, through CMS missionaries, most notably Joe Church. Although, with Festo Kivengere, the revival matured beyond Keswick Theology,<sup>9</sup> the Keswick emphasis on ‘commitment’ and ‘giving your life to Christ’ continued to be very significant and has become the most common way of describing conversion or ‘getting saved’ in Kenyan churches up to the present day.<sup>10</sup>
- 3) The Pentecostal movement largely came out of this tradition (though also drawing on other traditions) so tends to be somewhat Arminian in flavour. Pentecostalism has a huge influence on Christianity in Kenya, through a) Western Pentecostal missionaries and denominations and more recently Nigerian influence; b) indigenous Pentecostal church planting; c) since the mid-1980s the influence of Pentecostalism in the mainline denominations e.g. Anglican.
- 4) The 4 Spiritual Laws tract written by Bill Bright of Campus Crusade for Christ in 1956 has been very influential particularly in university ministry. Bright was influenced by Keswick language of carnal/spiritual Christians. Most importantly he decided in devising the 4 Spiritual Laws to move points 1 and 2 from the regular order in gospel presentations so that God’s universal love and

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<sup>5</sup> Points 3 and 4 were dealt with together under one head: “Human Corruption, Conversion to God, and the Way It Occurs” – they recognised that these points are inseparable – the Remonstrants appeared to believe in Total Depravity but with their fourth point they showed they had subtly shifted on that doctrine.

<sup>6</sup> A leading church historian [recently commented](#) on world evangelicalism summed up the central feature of this religious phenomenon as “the decision for Christ.”

<sup>7</sup> Though there is some debate how strongly he really held to Arminianism. Some of Charles Wesley’s hymns seem quite strongly Reformed in their understanding of salvation (e.g. And Can it Be). There was certainly conflict between Wesley and more Reformed revivalists such as Whitfield and Toplady.

<sup>8</sup> See the [handout by Andrew Naselli on Keswick theology of sanctification](#). Interestingly Keswick, somewhat similarly to Arminius, took a controversial line on Romans 7.

<sup>9</sup> See [‘Festo Kivengere: Keswick Theology Matures in East Africa’ on A Mission-Driven Life](#). Cf. Alfred Olwa, *Missionary of Reconciliation: The Role of the Doctrine of Reconciliation in the Preaching of Bishop Festo Kivengere of Uganda Between 1971-1988*, who notes the connections and differences between Keswick’s and Festo’s revivalism.

<sup>10</sup> For more on the Keswick influence today and J I Packer’s response see [here](#).

'good plan for your life' come first – implying an Arminian doctrine of universal atonement requiring simply a faith decision to accept.

## 5. Assessment

### i. Scriptures

- a. The best Scriptural arguments for the Reformed understanding of salvation come from passages such as Ephesians 1 (where the Father, Son and Spirit are shown to work sovereignly for our salvation, predestining, atoning for and sealing those who are saved) and Romans 9 (very strong on predestination and anticipates the objections people always make).<sup>11</sup>
- b. The Arminian view emphasises those Scriptures which emphasise that faith is essential to salvation. But reading John's Gospel shows that again and again human choice and divine choosing are laid side by side (John 1:12-13; 3:8,16; 6:37). Ultimately, people only believe because the Father draws them (John 6:44).
- c. Where the Arminian arguments have more strength is regarding limited/unlimited atonement. Many very godly otherwise-Reformed evangelicals today reject this third point of TULIP. There are verses which suggest a limited extent (Matt. 1:21; 20:28; John 10:15) and others that suggest a universal extent (John 1:29). The strongest verse on the Arminian side is 1 John 2:2. John Owen's response to this (in *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*) is that a) "the whole world" here refers to the inclusion of Gentiles as well as Jews; he gives various examples in Scripture where the expression does not need to mean the whole number of people in the world; b) the high priesthood of Christ in view here means that he provides propitiation for the sins of people and then takes the sacrificial blood into the holy place to plead for them as their advocate on the basis of this blood; so that would suggest (on a universal reading) that everyone in the whole world is eternally secure, which would be a strange truth with which to comfort the convicted believer.
- d. The other Arminian argument which is quite strong is that it is possible for those who are truly saved to fall away. The warning passages such as Hebrews 6 and 10 can certainly be taken as pointing that way. The classic Reformed response has been that those who fall away and don't return were never really saved (1 John 2:19). But it is at least very striking how much those people seemed to be 'the real thing'.

### ii. Logic

- a. The Arminian argument is often that the Reformed faith is illogical in saying that God is completely sovereign in salvation when we clearly have a choice. However, Carl Trueman points out that the logical difficulty is really with Arminianism which tries to hold onto God's sovereignty and human free will. Reformed theology doesn't have so much of a problem because it is willing to concede a radical limiting of the human will (the bondage of the will), basically dispense with the notion of 'free will' and live with a God-determined universe.
- b. A strong argument for the Reformed position is the whole issue of regeneration – the fact that we are completely dead (Eph. 2) and then God give us new life by his Spirit (John 3; Titus 3). The Arminian view tends to suggest that we are lifted by grace to some kind of middle state where we can make a free choice before we are fully regenerate; but surely you are either dead or alive?<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> We looked at these passages in [Doctrine of Salvation \(2\)](#) at the last MTC.

<sup>12</sup> This links into the question of the possibility of two stage conversion (justification and then Spirit baptism) and also tricky questions about believers before Pentecost, certain exceptional passages in Acts and the state of those who experience something of the Spirit but then fall away (Heb. 6). However the basic argument of death or life still stands.

- c. The logical difficulty with universal atonement is that it is difficult to square with substitutionary atonement. If Christ dies in the place of sinners, taking the punishment they deserve (1 Pet. 2:24; 3:18) then with universal atonement either everyone is saved (which is clearly not the case) or some sins are punished twice (on the Cross and in hell).
  - d. TULIP holds together as a coherent logical progression whereby God sovereignly elects, atones for, calls and keeps some people (e.g. John 10; Eph. 1:1-14; Rom. 8:28-29; Titus 2:11-14). Instead of God creating a 'system' whereby people may be saved, he actually saves people, powerfully, effectually, fully and irrevocably.<sup>13</sup>
- iii. Pastoral
- a. The potential danger with the Reformed arguments is that it can lead to laziness and license. Those who drew up the Canons of Dort were obviously aware of this accusation and replied that assurance of salvation should be a great incentive to holiness (e.g. Romans 6).
  - b. Another danger of the Reformed view is that in saying that those who fall away were never saved there can be a tendency (which particularly developed in the 17th century in late Puritanism) to become introspective and constantly concerned whether you really are one of the elect. This developed in the 18th century and later into a Hyper-Calvinism which ironically led to an almost Catholic denial of assurance in a way that Calvin himself would have hated.
  - c. The danger of an Arminian system is either a) false assurance as someone makes a commitment/decision but is not genuinely born again; or b) lack of assurance when someone is genuinely born again but is afraid of falling away because it depends on them to stay in the faith. In both cases the over-emphasis on the point of decision is unhelpful in drawing attention away from Christ and his work on the Cross.

## 6. Questions to ponder

- What are our expectations when it comes to missions? Do we think everyone will believe if we do a good enough job of powerfully preaching the gospel?
- Can we say to unbelievers, "God loves you and has a good plan for your life"?
- Is it ok to say to unbelievers, "Christ died for you"?
- What does the way we tell our testimonies of conversion reveal about our theology?
- How much do we focus on our choosing Christ and how much on his choosing us?
- What are the benefits and the disadvantages of 'altar calls'?
- How would you help someone pastorally who was struggling with assurance?

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<sup>13</sup> On this see particularly J I Packer's [introduction](#) to John Owen's *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*.