THE SPIRIT OF CALVIN AND THE SYNOD OF DORDT

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BY

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DECEMBER 19, 2009
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INTRODUCTION

Beginning in November of 1618, in the Dutch city of Dordrecht, the Reformed Church of the Netherlands convened a synod to examine and consider the positions being promoted by a group of pastors and theologians known as the Remonstrants. Chief among the disputed points were the doctrines of soteriology, though there were other, ancillary issues that had developed from this time as well, such as the proper relationship between church and state and church polity. A number of countries sent delegates to the synod which met over 180 sessions. In the end, the Synod denounced the Remonstrance and confirmed the doctrines which have ever since been identified as Calvinism.

The resulting confessional formulation, the Canons of Dordt, agreed both upon a negative refutation of the doctrines of the Remonstrance and upon a positive affirmation of the doctrines now commonly known (in English) by the acrostic TULIP: Total Depravity; Unconditional Election; Limited Atonement; Irresistible Grace; and Perseverance of the Saints. What became the accepted position was argued and defended largely on the strength of the works of Theodore Beza, a student of the Genevan Reformer John Calvin, for whom the theological system of Calvinism is named. Some have held that the Canons (and, subsequently, the ensuing developments of Calvinism) are more closely aligned with the thought of Beza than with the system’s namesake. However, this paper will examine the theological biography of the principles associated with Calvinism and the history of key Reformed doctrines to show that in answering the Remonstrants’ soteriological disputation, the Synod was not departing from the theology of John Calvin in any significant way.
THEOLOGICAL BIOGRAPHY

W. Robert Godfrey stated well the question at hand: “Scholars are asking how direct is the line from the doctrine of Calvin to the Synod of Dort.”¹ The possibility of any legitimate answer to this question necessitates a survey of the principle figures along the trajectory of early Reformed theology. The primary individual associated with Calvinism is, of course, John Calvin. His student, Theodore Beza, is arguably the second most important figure in early Reformed theology, as he is generally understood to have advanced Calvin’s theology toward the time of the Synod of Dordt. While some hold that he advanced it beyond where Calvin had intended, others hold that he merely added precision and clarification. At any rate, his role is essential to a proper examination of the resolutions achieved at Dordt. Finally, because of the role he played in fomenting the debate at Dordt, Beza’s student, Jacobus Arminius, is quite pivotal as well. His opposition, presented by his followers who came to be known as the Remonstrants, served to solidify the particulars of the Calvinistic system, at least as they were defined at Dordt. Each of these figures will be considered, with an aim to determining the degree to which they were in theological agreement.

CALVIN

It is often thought that John Calvin was the great systematizer of Reformation theology. While it is true that he presented an organized overview of the primary doctrines of Christianity in the *Institutes of Christian Religion*, McGrath rightly notes:

“[I]t is incorrect to speak of Calvin developing a ‘system’ in the strict sense of the term. His religious ideas, as presented in the 1559 *Institutes*, are systematically

arranged, on the basis of pedagogical considerations; they are not, however, systematically derived on the basis of a leading speculative principle.²

The “first generation of Reformers had to re-educate the laity who had been raised under the Roman Catholic system.”³ Thus, the concern of Calvin was, first of all, pastoral. It would be the task of the successors to flesh out the doctrines expounded by Calvin.

BEZA

Some scholars see in “Beza's continuation of the Calvinian heritage… a slavish lack of originality.”⁴ Beza himself attests to his high view of Calvin:

“I confess that I am one of those the Lord has educated in the true and holy doctrine of his Gospel by his faithful servant John Calvin. I will certainly never be ashamed to call myself his disciple and one of many thousands of men that he has won to Christ.”⁵

Yet, as was mentioned, there are also many scholars who see in Beza’s theology too much originality. McGrath suggests that this may be a result of a differing methodology:

“Where Calvin adopts an inductive and analytic approach to theology, focusing upon the specific historical event of Jesus Christ and moving out to explore its implications, de Beze adopts a deductive and synthetic approach, beginning from

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⁵ *Beza, Tractationum Theologicarum*, i.422.
general principle and proceeding to deduce their consequences for Christian theology.\footnote{6} Be that as it may, it will be shown that the content of Beza’s theology did not propose significant variations, even if the context in which that theology is systematized did.

**ARMINIUS**

Carl Bangs contends that Arminius “always considered himself Reformed and in the line of Zwingli, Calvin and Bucer.”\footnote{7} Indeed, Olson adds that “Arminius did not believe he was introducing anything new to Christian theology.”\footnote{8} How is it, then, that he who saw himself as Reformed and saw his theology as nothing substantially new could be responsible for such a radically different system of theology from Beza? One solution is that many of the Reformed churches at that time were “generically Protestant”\footnote{9} and not strictly doctrinally Calvinistic, and the ministers were not required to adhere to the particulars of the Reformed faith as they were being taught in Geneva. “Arminius genuinely seems to have been shocked and surprised by the opposition mounted by Calvinists against his evangelical synergism.”\footnote{10}

While the popular story is that Arminius was called upon to defend the Reformed faith against the synergistic theologian, Dirk Coornhert, and in the process was himself converted to

\footnote{6} McGrath, 213. \footnote{7} Carl Bangs, *Arminius: A Study in the Dutch Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 198. \footnote{8} Roger E. Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006), 22. Olson also writes that “Arminianism is a correction of Reformed theology rather than a departure from it.” (49). \footnote{9} Bangs, 198. \footnote{10} Olson, 48.
that view, Bangs has fairly convincingly refuted that notion and argues instead that Arminius had
never fully adopted the “high Calvinism” of his teacher, Beza:

“All the evidence points to one conclusion: namely, that Arminius was not
in agreement with Beza’s doctrine of predestination when he undertook his
ministry at Amsterdam; indeed he probably never had agreed with it.”\textsuperscript{11}

\textbf{DOCTRINAL HISTORY}

Having sketched the principle figures leading up to the Synod of Dordt, it is perhaps
helpful to trace the particular doctrinal positions of each of these men with respect to three key
doctrinal concerns that were at the heart of the soteriological controversy: predestination, the
scope and efficacy of the atonement, and the possibility of the assurance of saving faith. As
mentioned earlier, there were other areas where discontinuity may be observable; however, these
are outside the scope of this work, which is more concerned with the representative
soteriological systems and how they were or were not consistent.

\textbf{PREDESTINATION}

John Calvin’s name is practically synonymous with the doctrine of predestination.
Calvinists and non-Calvinists alike acknowledge that the prevailing idea behind most if not all of
Calvin’s work was the sovereignty of God. Whenever the discussion turned to matters of
salvation, whether in his commentaries or in his magnum opus, \textit{Institutes of Christian Religion},
Calvin can reasonably be expected to incline toward a monergistic soteriology that aims to
remove every vestige of merit from man. Nonetheless, it is important to note that predestination

\textsuperscript{11} Bangs, 141.
was not the predominant theme of Calvin’s’ work; the sovereignty of God was. As such, the doctrine of predestination was, for Calvin, a necessary outworking of the doctrine of God’s sovereignty. However, it is true that, for Calvin, there was no real discernable distinction between biblical exposition and systematic theology.  

For those who followed him, especially Beza, there arose a need to defend the theological intricacies that distinguished the Reformed school from that of the Lutheran and, for that matter, the Roman. Beza is properly credited with carrying through on Calvin’s doctrine of predestination and expounding a more precisely defined doctrine that came to be known as supralapsarianism. However, R. T. Kendall goes too far in saying that “Beza was the first of these to make the doctrine of predestination central to his system,” for predestination was not the central doctrine for Beza; it was merely one of the offshoots of a Calvinian understanding of sovereignty that Beza more fully developed than did Calvin.

In the Colloquy at Montbèliard (1586), when Beza was faced with the task of debating Calvinism with Jacob Andreae, the “pope of the Lutheran churches,” he was in a new and different spot. Though Luther himself had held a strong view of predestination, the Lutheran school had largely been dominated by the thought of Melanchthon who did not. Consequently, at Montbèliard Beza was called upon to defend the doctrines of election against a party that had already abandoned the similar views of its founder. Yet even in Beza’s presentations in this debate, he did not significantly alter the substance of the theology he had learned at the feet of

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12 McGrath, 211.


Calvin, though he did carefully maneuver the doctrine so as to avoid the charge that predestination is the cause of damnation. For Beza, those who are condemned are condemned because of their corrupt nature, which harkens back to Calvin’s (and Augustine’s) doctrine of depravity. All are born into a state of condemnation, but some are saved and others are passed over. However, in both cases it was not due to the person’s will but was rather all of grace. As Raitt comments,

“That is the nub of the matter. Calvin had understood the consistency of such a position if grace were to be absolutely free and unconditioned by works of any kind. Grace had to precede human activity, including that of willing to find grace.

Beza understood Calvin's position and sought to buttress it.”

In defending his position against Andreae, Beza was adamant that nothing could happen apart from God’s knowledge and will, and thus “there must have been a decree in which the reprobate were included since to elect some is, ipso facto, to reject others.” Again, however, such an idea was not novel to Beza; rather, it is the logical outgrowth of the doctrine of predestination held by Calvin and previously formulated in the French and Belgic confessions.

However, the Bezan position of stating explicitly that which had been until then only implied, had significant repercussions. Those who professed to be followers of Calvin’s theology split into factions. Arminius emerged as a leading and outspoken critique of the Bezan interpretation of the doctrine of predestination as contained in the confessions. Arguing that Beza had undertaken an inductive method to derive this doctrine, Arminius wrote that:

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16 Raitt, 149.
17 Raitt, 148.
It has long been a maxim with those philosophers who are the masters of method and order, that the theoretical sciences ought to be delivered in a synthetical manner, but the practical in an analytical order, on which account, and because theology is a practical science, it follows that it must be treated according to the analytical method.\(^{18}\)

Thus, for Arminius this was a question of logical methodology. He, too, saw in Calvin a proper starting point for the expansion of the doctrine of election. However, because he began with the use of a different interpretive method, he consequently arrived at a different conclusion regarding the nature and function of the elective decrees of God.

The Synod at Dordt was held (among other reasons) because of the conflicting views between those holding to unconditional election and those, following Arminius, who held to a doctrine of predestination conditioned upon God’s foreknowledge. Further, within the former group, the debate between the supralapsarians and the infralapsarians is well-known, as is the fact that Beza was clearly on the side of the supralapsarians. Against the general consensus – at least among those promoting a “Calvin against the Calvinists” perspective - Schaff contends that “while Calvin was claimed by both schools, he must be classed rather with the Supralapsarians, like Beza...”\(^{19}\) Expressly rejecting the distinction between permission and volition in God, Calvin wrote that “It is not absurd to assert that God not only foresaw, but also foreordained the fall of Adam and the ruin of his posterity.”\(^{20}\) Thus, it may be concluded that, in regard to the doctrine of

\(^{18}\) McGrath, 216.

\(^{19}\) Schaff, 390. Emphasis added.

election and predestination, Beza and Calvin were essentially of one accord, and Arminius and
the Remonstrants held a position on this doctrine that was opposed to both Beza and Calvin.

**ATONEMENT**

For whom did Christ die, and what did the death of Christ accomplish? These questions,
regarding as they do the doctrine of the atonement, were intrinsically connected to the debate
leading up to Dordt and have characterized both theological camps ever since. Much as
predestination can be seen as an effect of Calvin’s theocentric theology, so too may Calvin’s
view of the atonement be seen as flowing from both his understanding of sovereignty and
predestination.

Kendall begins his now classic work with these words: “Fundamental to the doctrine of
faith in John Calvin (1509-64) is his belief that Christ died indiscriminately for all men.”
Likewise, McGrath contends that “at no point does Calvin himself suggest that Christ died only
for the elect.” However, Roger Nicole points to a potential problem with such an analysis:

“A historical difficulty appears when we attempt to explain how Reformed
thought moved so quickly from Calvin’s alleged endorsement of universal
atonement to the very emphatic support of definite atonement by all but one or
two of the delegations at the Synod of Dort. What happened in these fifty-five
years to cause the Reformed community to make such a drastic shift?”

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21 Kendall, 1.

22 McGrath, 216.

23 Roger Nicole, “John Calvin’s View of the Extent of the Atonement,” *Westminster Theological Journal*
47:2 (Fall 1985), 224.
Granted, the oddity in such a theological shift in such a short time does not necessarily render it impossible. Still, if Calvin’s view of the atonement were more closely aligned with the Remonstrants, it would seem highly likely that he would have been championed as one of their own. It would also seem probable that, in the works of Beza and other “high Calvinists” of the time, there would have appeared some treatise outlining and explaining why Calvin was thought to be wrong on this matter and why a theological shift did or must occur. Yet the historical record shows no such treatise. Again, Nicole:

Usually the name of Beza is associated with this change, but can we really accept that his influence was so very far-reaching that he practically single-handedly reverted the whole trend in Reformed circles, putting himself at loggerheads not only with Calvin, but as it is alleged, with Scripture itself, and this without producing any major work centering on this topic? Somehow a lot more light should be shed on this area before such an unlikely development can be assumed to have taken place.”

Helm provides a helpful summary of what Calvin believed concerning the atonement of Christ: First, Christ’s death achieved actual remission; second, all of the elect, and they alone, have their sins actually remitted by the death of Christ; and third, that it was the intention of Christ to procure the remission of the sins of the elect. Calvin wrote of 1 John 2:2:

Here a question may be raised, how have the sins of the whole world been expiated? [Some] have said that Christ suffered sufficiently for the whole world, but efficiently only for the elect. This solution has commonly prevailed in the

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24 Ibid.

schools. Though then I allow that what has been said is true, yet I deny that it is suitable to this passage; for the design of John was no other than to make this benefit common to the whole Church. Then under the word *all* or whole, he does not include the reprobate, but designates those who should believe as well as those who were then scattered through various parts of the world.

And, more explicitly, in a discussion of the Communion table, Calvin wrote: “I should like to know how the wicked can eat the flesh of Christ which was not crucified for them, and how they can drink the blood which was not shed to expiate their sins.”

Contrary to the way in which he begins his discussion of Calvin’s view of the atonement, Kendall begins the comparable section on Beza by saying: “Fundamental to the doctrine of faith in Theodore Beza (1519-1605), Calvin’s successor in Geneva, is his belief that Christ died for the elect only.” Kendall believes that it was the followers of Calvin (beginning with Beza) who developed the doctrine of limited atonement. Yet the words of Calvin above seem to indicate clearly that while Beza certainly held to the doctrine of limited atonement, his theological forebear was not far removed from that precise view.

Regarding Beza and his contemporaries who taught limited atonement, Nicole observed:

“As far as we know, they did not assert that they were conscious of differing with Calvin on this score, nor did Calvin take issue in writing with any of those who formulated the view during his lifetime.”

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27 Kendall, 29.
28 Nicole, 198.
By contrast, in Arminius’ theology there is no room for limited atonement. Regarding the biblical “all” and “world” passages (John 1:29, 4:42; 2 Corinthians 5:19; 1 John 2:2 et al), he argued:

That, in the word “world,” in these passages, all men, in general, are to be understood, is manifest from these passages and from Scriptural usages. For there is, in my judgment, no passage in the whole Bible, in which it can be proved beyond controversy that the word “world” signifies the Elect. Again, Christ it is said to have died for all, in Hebrews ii. 9, and elsewhere.29

Once may reasonably conclude, therefore, that while Beza was in relative harmony with the views espoused by Calvin, it was once again Arminius who was suggested that the Reformed faith as it was presently defined in the Belgic Confession was in fundamental error.

ASSURANCE

The final doctrine under consideration concerns the way in which the elect can, in fact, know that they are elect. For Calvin, “the testimonium internum Spiritus sancti is the sole actual testimony for belief.”30 He writes:

the power of the Spirit… is comprehended, when a conviction of it is imprinted on our hearts by the same Spirit. This glory [of the Resurrection] is not made known to us, until the same Spirit imprints a conviction of it on our hearts… the testimony which all the faithful feel in their hearts.31


30 Mallinson, 23.

31 Calvin, Commentary on Romans (1:4).
Beza, too, considered the difficult question of how one can know if he is numbered among the elect. His conclusion was that “You must… believe that Christ died for you and that your predestination is secure in Christ… You must be as certain as though you had heard it from the mouth of God. And you can so hear it when you hear God's word preached and you are called to Christ. This is not,” said Beza, “a doctrine for children.” He continues:

You will know this through the Spirit of Adoption crying within you, “Abba! Father!” and also because through the power of the Spirit you both feel and show it. Even though sin may still dwell in you, it will not reign in you. If you do sin, you will hate your sin and return to the merciful Father and call on him. These are the effects of faith and indicate that you are efficaciously called and drawn by God.  

For Arminius, assurance of salvation was a “principal point of departure,” believing that the supralapsarianism of Beza led to “unwarranted security or unwarranted despair.” Arminius wrote:

With regard to the certainty [or assurance] of salvation, my opinion is, that it is possible for him who believes in Jesus Christ to be certain and persuaded, and, if his heart condemn him not, he is now in reality assured, that he is a son of God, and stands in the grace of Jesus Christ.

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32 Raitt, 153. (Raitt does not cite the source of these quotes.)


34 Bangs, 347.

35 *Arminius, Works* 1:5:VI. Emphasis added.
Thus, for Arminius, one could have a “present assurance of a present situation”\textsuperscript{36} “now.” There was no sense of a promise of future assurance. This led to the formulation of a doctrine that allowed for falling away from grace. This was in stark opposition to the Reformed tradition to that point.

Kendall makes the case that for Arminius “the decree of election... is not rendered effectual in Christ's death but in His ascension and intercession at the Father's right hand.”\textsuperscript{37} However, as Frederick Leahy has noted, this “simply removes the problem of assurance from the area of Christ's atonement to that of Christ's intercession.”\textsuperscript{38} The believer, in Arminius’ thought, had no guarantee of future perseverance and was thus left with no security and the potential for a warranted despair. So again it can be seen that while there was an essential unity between Beza and Calvin in this doctrine, Arminius and his followers held a position that was contrary to them both.

THE CASE IN DORDRECHT

Having thus considered the theological and doctrinal history leading up to the Synod of Dordt, the particulars addressed at that council may be examined. All of the principle figures discussed to this point – Calvin, Beza, and Arminius – had died and it was left to their respective followers to debate the case and determine what would become the orthodox position of the Dutch Reformed churches. The matter came to a head with the publication of a “Remonstrance” by the followers of Arminius that challenged a number of doctrinal issues found chiefly in the

\textsuperscript{36} Bangs, 347.

\textsuperscript{37} Kendall, 16.

\textsuperscript{38} Frederick S. Leahy, “Calvin and the Extent of the Atonement,” \textit{Reformed Theological Journal} 8 (November 1992), 58.
Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism. While the “Remonstrants” as they came to be called numbered about forty-five, the principle figures were Simon Episcopius (most probably the author of the Remonstrance)\textsuperscript{39} and Hugo Grotius. While the group did not explicitly identify themselves as “Arminians,” they essentially adhered to the theology of Arminius. The year after Arminius died, the Remonstrants presented their document.

**PRESENTMENT OF REMONSTRANCE**

In 1610, the Remonstrance was presented at Gouda, Holland to a conference of church and state officials.\textsuperscript{40} Among the points that drew the most contention were:

2. That, in consequence of this, Christ the Savior of the world died for all and every man, so that He obtained, by the death on the cross, reconciliation and pardon for sin for all men; in such manner, however, that none but the faithful actually enjoyed the same (John iii, 16; I John ii, 2).

4. That this grace was the cause of the beginning, progress and completion of man's salvation; insomuch that none could believe nor persevere in faith without this co-operating grace, and consequently that all good works must be ascribed to the grace of God in Christ. As to the manner of the operation of that grace, however; it is not irresistible (Acts vii, 51).

5. That true believers had sufficient strength through the Divine grace to fight against Satan, sin, the world, their own flesh, and get the victory over them; but whether by negligence they might not apostatize from the true Faith, lose the happiness of a good conscience and forfeit that grace needed to be more fully inquired into according to Holy Writ.\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{39} Olson, 23.

\textsuperscript{40} Olson, 31.

\textsuperscript{41} A. W. Harrison, *Beginnings of Arminianism to the Synod of Dort* (London, University of London Press, 1926), 150-151.
CONFESSIONALIST RESPONSE

Following the publication of the Remonstrance, those opposing Arminius and his theology, presented a “counter-Remonstrance” that refuted the Remonstrants. These were supporters of the doctrinal positions contained in the confessions that were at the center of the debate (hence, they are known as “Confessionalists”). The States of Holland convened a meeting of representatives from both parties. These discussions, as well as others two years later, proved fruitless.

Because of the increasingly contentious disputes between the two theological schools, the States in 1614 banned any sermons that addressed the doctrinal issues in question. Subsequently, the Confessionalists began to gather separately from the Remonstrants and called for a national synod. Eventually, when Prince Maurice took their side, such a synod was finally called.

SYNODICAL RESOLUTION

After 180 sessions, the Synod rendered its judgment in May 1619. The doctrines of the Remonstrance were renounced, the Remonstrants were expelled from the church, and they were prohibited from holding services. The Remonstrants were called before the Synod, and those who would not renounce further disruptive activity were banished, including Episcopius. By 1625, following the death of Prince Maurice, the Remonstrants were tolerated, though they would not be officially recognized until 1795. The Canons of Dordt, drawn up by the Synod, became one of the chief confessional standards of the Calvinistic theological system throughout the Dutch Reformed Church and the greater whole of the Reformed church across Europe.
CONCLUSION

In conclusion, no redaction of the historical account is warranted. Arminianism was not a return to “true” Calvinism, nor did Beza present a radical departure from the theology of his teacher, but rather provided the logical and systematic synthesization of it. Those who seek to divorce the theology of John Calvin from that espoused by the Synod at Dordt have failed to consider the Swiss Reformer’s thought adequately. While Beza was certainly more systematic in his theology, what he was systematizing was, for all intents and purposes, the theology of Calvin. The points at which Arminius diverged from Beza were divergent from Calvin as well, and were not at all a restoration of Calvin’s theology. The Remonstrance set forth a theological framework that would have been egregious to Calvin’s overriding sense of God’s sovereignty.

From Calvin to Dordt, there remained an essential theological continuity, despite the long and storied strain of ardent opposition to this view from Amyrault to Kendall and beyond. Nevertheless, it was Arminius and not Beza who was attempting to redirect the flow of the Dutch Reformed Church, and that redirection was to be from a monergistic to a synergistic system of soteriology. Were Calvin to have witnessed the Synod, he may well have been the first to step forward to endorse the Canons.
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