

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

Website: [www.churchredeemeraz.org](http://www.churchredeemeraz.org)

**Series:** Exposition of Romans  
**Number:** 140  
**Text:** Romans 11:4-10; Luke 4:16-30  
**Date:** June 28, 2009 (a.m.)

**Pastor/Teacher**  
**Gary L. W. Johnson**

### THE DIFFICULT DOCTRINE OF REPROBATION (Part III)

One of the great tragedies that has historically characterized many who claim the label *Evangelical* is a disinterest in history – especially when it pertains to the history of doctrine. The late John H. Leith correctly identifies this mentality that has gained wide acceptance in many of our evangelical churches. There is, he writes, a “prevalent conviction that the faith the church has confessed in the past is not adequate for a post-Enlightenment culture, the idea that the faith must be accommodated to culture has undermined the teaching of the church’s faith.” This is true not only in the mainline churches (Leith’s audience for this particular book), but applies equally to our evangelical churches. TV journalist and social commentator Bill Moyers once remarked that Americans are very interested in, and knowledgeable about, what has happened in the last twenty-four hours, somewhat concerned with the last twenty-four days, vaguely aware of what occurred twenty-four months ago, indifferent about what happened twenty-four years ago and blissfully ignorant about the past twenty-four centuries. This historical hebetude does not simply run through the rank and file of professing evangelicals, it gallops. Alister McGrath remarks: “It cannot be emphasized too much that evangelicalism has a family history of which it is painfully unaware. The rediscovery of that heritage is of major importance to the long-term future of the movement.” There is more at work here, however, than simply a lack of historical sensitivity and a disdain for anything that is not contemporary. “Popular evangelical faith,” observes David F. Wells, “has developed a bias against theology (not to mention against the intellect), and what is more, it has elevated the bias to the level of a virtue, defending it as vigorously as democracy.” This is reflected more and more in the pulpits of professing evangelical churches. Doctrine, or to be more precise, confessional theology is purposely avoided.<sup>1</sup> Why on earth should we get excited about the Synod of Dort – something which happened 390 years ago? What does the Arminian Controversy have to do with us? Do we really have to know anything about these theological and doctrinal contentions that disrupted the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands so long ago? My answer would be an emphatical yes! We should get excited about church history because we should be vitally interested in Christ’s church-gathering work throughout the ages. Understanding church history will enable us to understand the religious issues of today. In particular, understanding the Arminian Controversy of the 1600’s will make clear to us that many, if not most, North American churches trace their origins to this time in history. Understanding what the Synod decided will make us realize that in these Canons we have one of the most authoritative and valuable expositions of Calvinistic theology – a confession and valuable tool to refute the errors of Arminianism also today.<sup>2</sup>

#### I. CALVINISM VS ARMINIANISM

In 1610, the followers of Arminius (who were first called Remonstrants) compiled five articles or statements of faith based on the teachings of Arminius. These five articles were subsequently examined by the Synod of Dort 1618-1619. The Reformed, scriptural stance this Synod took in relation to the doctrinal issues raised in these Five Articles of the Remonstrants has been formulated into what we today call the *Canons of Dort*. Since the first article of the Remonstrants concerned itself with God’s eternal decree concerning man’s salvation, Chapter 1 of the *Canons of Dort* sets forth the Scriptural teaching concerning God’s eternal decree. Hence this first head of doctrine is entitled

“Divine Election and Reprobation.” Said the Arminians in Article 1 (and the error of their position is most clearly deciphered when the following key words are lifted out). *“We believe that God by an eternal ... decree has ... determined ... to save ... those ... who ... shall believe ... and persevere ...”* By these words the Arminians are essentially saying that God, before Creation, looked into the future to see who would believe in Him, and then determined that He would save those specific persons. Salvation of man, then, follows this sequence: 1. man believes and then, 2. God saves those who believe. Having seen ahead of time that a person was going to believe, God chose him for salvation. Say the Arminians, *“we believe God determined to save those who shall believe and persevere.”* The issue at stake here is, what is election? The Arminians say it is not a divine decree as to who will be saved, but rather, a divine decree as to the means by which man will be saved. God does not choose the *recipient* of salvation (Tom or Dick or Harry), but the *requirement* for salvation, namely faith – and, since God sees ahead of time that Tom and Dick will believe, they are automatically included for salvation.<sup>3</sup>

**A. The revival of the semi-Pelagian error.**

Arminius and his followers fell back into the error of semi-Pelagianism and made the operation of grace dependent upon the human will. Already in his claims regarding predestination, published on February 7, 1604, Arminius taught that God, who is not only a righteous Judge but also a loving Father, had from eternity made this distinction within the fallen human race, namely, that God would pardon the sins of, and bestow eternal life upon, those who turn away from their sins and place their trust in Christ, but He would punish the hardhearted; and further, that it was pleasing to God that all people be converted and, having come to a knowledge of the truth, continue therein, but He compelled no one. At the 1611 conference in The Hague, the Remonstrants did say that a person does not acquire saving faith on his own nor by virtue of his free will, but that it is necessary that he be reborn and renewed in understanding, disposition, and will by God in Christ through His Holy Spirit, such that the grace of God constitutes the principle, the progress, and the perfection of all good. But they turned all of this upside down by adding that the way this grace works is not irresistible, and they were compelled to explain how it was that the human will does not work alongside grace but nevertheless, enabled by grace, renders itself capable of faith and repentance or of refusing and rejecting the grace received. In this very trajectory they then also explained at the Synod of Dort that the effectual grace whereby a person is converted is not irresistible; and although God does move the will by means of the Word and the internal operation of His Spirit, He both supplies the power to believe or requisite supernatural powers, and also indeed causes a person to believe; nevertheless, a person on his own can despise this grace and not believe, and in this way can, as a consequence, be lost through his own fault. They clarified their opinions still further with this explanation: Although, according to the entirely free will of God, the inequity of divine grace may be very great, nevertheless, the Holy Spirit gives or is prepared to give as much grace to one and all alike, to whom God’s Word is preached, as is sufficient for advancing the conversion of people in various stages. In that regard, not only do those whom God had declared, according to His decree of absolute election, to be willing to save, receive grace sufficient unto faith and repentance, but also those who are not actually converted receive sufficient grace. This explanation leaves nothing unclear. According to the sentiment of the Remonstrants, all who live under the gospel receive or can receive grace sufficient unto faith and repentance. But whether they eventually believe and are converted depends upon human will. The grace of the Holy Spirit is thus dependent upon the person; his consent, his free decision of the will, stands between grace and its operation. Thereby the Remonstrants denied the internal, effectual, irresistible grace of the Holy Spirit that works alone—in other words, the immediate and directly working grace of the Holy Spirit, and they accepted only a moral, advisory grace.

**B. Dort’s rejection of Remonstrant errors.**

This Remonstrant sentiment was rejected at the Synod of Dort. Over against that claim, Reformed Christians in those days argued that, since by nature man is dead in sins and trespasses, in applying the benefits of the covenant God must be the primary Agent who by His grace operating within a person brings about not only the capacity to believe, but also the

believing itself. The decisions of the Synod which record the Reformed teaching on this important point are familiar, and for our purpose need to be recalled merely with a few words. First, the fathers of Dort declare in this regard that faith and repentance are not to be ascribed to the person, as if by an exercise of one's free will a person can distinguish himself from others who with equal or like sufficient grace were supplied unto faith and repentance. Rather, faith and repentance are to be ascribed to God who, even as He has chosen His own in Christ from eternity, so also these same persons He calls effectually within time, bestowing upon them faith and repentance and, having plucked them from the power of darkness, transfers them into the kingdom of His Son [Canons of Dort, II, art. 7]. Secondly, the fathers of Dort confess that when God executes this His good pleasure within the elect, He not only causes the gospel to be preached externally to them, such that the Holy Spirit effectually enlightens their understanding, but through the external power of the same regenerating Spirit He also penetrates the innermost recesses of a person, opens their closed hearts, renders what is hard to be soft, circumcises the uncircumcised, infuses new capacities into the human will, and makes those who were dead to be alive, those who were evil to be good, those who were unwilling to be compliant, and those who were stubborn to be submissive [Canons of Dort, III-IV, art. 10, 11]. Furthermore, they describe this operation of God's Spirit further with the terms *regeneration*, *renewal*, *new creation*, *resurrection from the dead*, and *making alive*. They also declare that apart from us, God works all of these within us. For this does not occur by means of moral advice, whereby it would remain within human power whether or not to be regenerated, whether or not to be converted. Rather, it is an entirely supernatural, omnipotent, and at the same time fully intimate, wonderful, and inexpressible operation; in its excellence it is to be esteemed neither less nor lower than the creation of the world or the resurrection of the dead [Canons of Dort, III-IV, art. 12]. Finally, from all of this they formulated the decision that everyone in whose heart God works in such a miraculous manner, is certainly, infallibly, and effectually regenerated and actually believes. To that extent faith is a gift of God, not in the sense that it is offered by God to man's free will, but it is actually bestowed, breathed in, and infused within a person. In addition, faith is a gift of God not in the sense that God grants merely the capacity to believe, whereas the consent or act of believing would subsequently accord with the person's free will; but it is a gift of God in this way, that God actualizes within a person both the will to believe and believing itself. It is God alone who works both the willing and the doing, and is thus all in all [Canons of Dort, III-IV, art. 14]. This is the judgment that the Synod of Dort rendered against the sentiments of the Remonstrants. A prevenient, moral, advisory grace is inadequate for bringing a person to faith and repentance. By means of the power that the Word exercises, an other, internal, secret operation of the Holy Spirit must come alongside, which in the first place bestows the capacity for faith and repentance and thereafter in the second place causes that capacity to be realized with infallible certainty in the act of faith and repentance.<sup>4</sup>

## II. A SUMMARY OF THE REFORMED POSITION

- A. There is a divine providence whereby God, according to his eternal counsel, upholds and governs all his creatures. Thus all things come to pass not by chance but according to God's plan and purpose.
- B. At the heart of this providential purpose of God is his gracious election of some to eternal life.
- C. This eternal election is in Christ, who is the mirror, as it were, in which we contemplate with gratitude our own election.
- D. This election of some unto life implies the rejection of others, whose death is the death of the reprobate.
- E. The choice of the elect is not based upon God's foreknowledge of their faith, much less upon their merit or desert, but wholly upon his good pleasure.
- F. By contrast, those who are foreordained to death are contemplated as members of a fallen humanity whom God passes by and devotes to a just condemnation for their disobedience and unbelief.
- G. Thus it is that while the salvation of the elect is due to God's grace alone, the condemnation of the reprobate is due to their sin and transgression.

- H. Hence, there is no naked decree (*decretum absolutum*) WHEREBY God condemns some according to his pleasure and wholly apart from any consideration of their deserts, much less is God the author of sin.
- I. The number of the elect, known only to God, is fixed and definite and can be neither increased nor diminished.
- J. Though God predestines the elect to salvation and the reprobate to condemnation, the word of the gospel is a genuine and sincere call to repentance, and the response to that call is a free and responsible choice both in those who accept and in those who reject the gospel.
- K. This “high article” of predestination is a mystery, for God has sealed the Book of Life until the day of judgment. To those who cavil at it, one can only respond in the words of the apostle, “But who are you, a man, to answer back to God?” (Rom. 9:20).
- L. The purpose of the doctrine is not to “agitate us with miserable anxiety and perturbation” but to fill us with joy, for God “has chosen us that we should be holy and without blame before him in love.” Election, then, is “the foundation of every saving good.”<sup>5</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** “The creeds of Christianity” wrote J. Gresham Machen, “are not expressions of Christian experience. They are summary statements of what God has told us in His Word. Far from the subject-matter of the creeds being derived from Christian experience, it is Christian experience which is based upon the truth contained in the creeds; and the truth contained in the creeds is derived from the Bible, which is the Word of God... The first prerequisite, then, for any advance in Christian doctrine is that those who would engage in it should believe in the full truthfulness of the Bible and should endeavor to make their doctrine simply a presentation of what the Bible teaches. There are other principles also that must be observed if there is to be real doctrinal advance. For one thing, all real doctrinal advance proceeds in the direction of greater precision and fullness of doctrinal statement. Just run over in your minds again the history of the great creeds of the church. How meagre was the so-called Apostles’ Creed, first formulated in the second century! How far more precise and full were the creeds of the great early councils, beginning with the Nicene Creed in A.D. 325! How much more precise and how vastly richer still were the Reformation creeds and especially our Westminster Confession of Faith! This increasing precision and this increasing richness of doctrinal statement were arrived at particularly by way of refutation of errors as they successively arose. At first the church’s convictions about some point of doctrine were implicit rather than explicit. They were not carefully defined. They were assumed rather than expressly stated. Then some new teaching arose. The church reflected on the matter, comparing the new teaching with the Bible. It found the new teaching to be contrary to the Bible. As over against the new teaching, it set forth precisely what the true Biblical teaching on the point is. So a great doctrine was clearly stated in some great Christian creed... In recent years the church has often entered upon an exactly opposite course of procedure. It has constructed what purport to be doctrinal statements, but these supposed doctrinal statements are constructed for a purpose which is just the opposite of the purpose that governed the formation of the great historic creeds. The historic creeds were exclusive of error; they were intended to exclude error; they were intended to set forth the Biblical teaching in sharp contrast with what was opposed to the Biblical teaching, in order that the purity of the church might be preserved. These modern statements, on the contrary, are inclusive of error. They are designed to make room in the church for just as many people and for just as many types of thought as possible.”<sup>6</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> These quotes are cited in my chapter, “The Eclipse of the Reformation in the Evangelical Church: Much Ado About Nothing?” eds. G. L. W. Johnson and R. F. White, *Whatever Happened to The Reformation?* (P & R, 2001) p. 1-2.

<sup>2</sup> S. Vandergugten, “The Arminism Controversy and the Synod of Dort” *The Clarion* (Sept. 16, Vol. 37, No. 19, 1989 available at [http://spindleworks.com/library/vandergugten/arminian\\_c.htm](http://spindleworks.com/library/vandergugten/arminian_c.htm)).

<sup>3</sup> See the fine analysis of this issue at <http://members.iinet.net.au/~jvd/Canons/ch1art1-5.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> This section is adopted with slight modification from Herman Bavinck, *Saved By Grace: The Holy Spirit’s Work in Calling and Regeneration* (Reformation Heritage Books, 2008) pp. 19-21.

<sup>5</sup> This list is taken from P. K. Jewett, *Election & Predestination* (Eerdmans, 1985) pp. 13-14.

<sup>6</sup> J. G. Machen, *God Transcendent and Other Sermons* (Eerdmans, 1949) pp. 144-147.