

# **From Dordt to Today—**

## **The Development of the Reformed Faith**

“In the beginning of the seventeenth century, Arminianism rose as a necessary and wholesome reaction against scholastic Calvinism, but was defeated in the Synod of Dordt, 1619, which adopted the five knotty canons of unconditional predestination, limited atonement, total depravity, irresistible grace, and the perseverance of the saints. The Bible gives us a theology which is more human than Calvinism, and more divine than Arminianism, and more Christian than either of them.”

“It was only a century after Martin Luther had nailed his theses on the door of the church at Wittenberg, and not even a hundred years since the undaunted Genevan Reformer (John Calvin) had flaunted Rome’s power, when the Arminian errors appeared not only sporadically, here and there, upon the scene of Dutch Calvinism, but threatened seriously to split both state and church wide open, and necessitated a National Synod, which should with bold strokes cut down the devils of heresy which assailed the precious heritage of the truth from their very ranks!”

Such are the contradictory opinions that have prevailed in the Reformed church world among historians and common laymen until the present day whenever the Arminian controversy of the 16th and 17th centuries is discussed.

The staff of Beacon Lights has requested a series of articles which deal with the development of the Reformed faith beginning with the Synod of Dordrecht and continuing through to the present day.

It can be said without contradiction that the development of the Reformed faith throughout this entire period has been, more than anything else, a development of the sovereign grace of God over against the vicious error of Arminian free-willism. This has not always been true in the Church.

In its earliest history, shortly after the times of the apostles, the truth of the trinity and the divinity of Christ were the subjects of development and defense. Heresies of every conceivable kind arose which necessitated terrible battles for the defense of the faith, battles which lasted the better part of five centuries. The Reformation was a development of the truths of justification by faith, the authority of Holy Scripture and the priesthood of all believers over against the Roman Catholic lies of salvation by works, indulgences, the infallibility of tradition and the clergy, and the right of the church to forgive sins.

But, since Dordt, the greatest battles and, in fact, the only battles in which the Church has engaged have been the battles of the sovereign grace of God in the work of salvation over against the God-dishonoring and salvation-destroying errors of Arminianism. Though Arminianism was officially condemned by the Synod of Dordt, Arminianism marches on through the entire church world—Reformed and otherwise—with the most astonishing success, until it is almost impossible to find a place today where the truth of the sovereignty of God in salvation is steadfastly maintained and where the Calvinism of Calvin and the Synod of Dordt is honored and respected—yea, and even known.

There are other battles being fought today—battles against Modernism, Barthianism, Roman Catholicism, Communism, etc. But these errors are fought where the principle and leaven of Arminianism has already worked through the Church. And, because the church may have yet strength in part to fight against Modernism, but has capitulated to Arminianism, the battle is really lost. But where the truth of Calvin and the Canons of Dordt is maintained, not Modernism and Communism constitute threats, but Arminianism is the enemy to be resisted unwaveringly.

Yet, in a sense, the conflict between Arminianism and Calvinism (or, more correctly, Arminianism and Scriptural theology) is age old—a conflict that has persisted from Paradise. Arminianism is but another manifestation of man’s pride—a pride that caused our first parents to fall; a pride that continuously seeks salvation by works; a pride that comes to its most refined expression in Arminianism. Pride lies at the root of all sin. Pride leads men to rebel against God, deny his glory and seek glory for man “For by grace,” says Paul, “are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast” (Eph. 2:8, 9). But by works men have always tried to save themselves. Already in Israel there were those who, in the wanderings in the desert, insisted that the whole congregation was holy altogether apart from the sacrifice of Aaron and the intercession of Moses. (Cf. Num. 16:3). The Pharisees of Jesus’ day were no exception. It is not strange then that this basic error should develop into the Pelagianism of the early church, the work-righteousness of Roman Catholicism, the Arminianism of the 16th and 17th centuries, and the thorough-going Arminianism of our present day. It may be that an Arminian will object and insist that he maintains salvation by faith only; but by making faith man’s work he makes faith a work and denies what Scripture means by salvation by faith alone.

If such a series of articles as this needs any justification, the following may be noted:

- 1) There are many today who claim to stand in the tradition of Calvin and the Synod of Dordt; but who deny the very genius of the Genevan Reformer and the very heart of the Canons. Their teachings are wholly irreconcilable with the truth we confess as

Protestant Reformed Churches—we who claim also to stand in this same tradition. Who stands in the line of Geneva and Dordt then? This is not only a question which needs answering, but the answer which we claim needs an intelligent defense.

2) The cry is made today, also within Reformed circles, that Dordt is outdated inasmuch as the Calvinism of that great Synod is no longer a Calvinism applicable to our modern times. “Either discard the Canons, revise the Canons or ignore the Canons; but let’s not leave them the way they are. We need something else.” To this cry we must give answer that it is a lie. But why? Thus these articles.

3) To deal with the history of the Reformed faith is to deal with the history of the Protestant Reformed Churches. If one is to be a faithful member of the Protestant Reformed Churches, and, in this way, of the church of Jesus Christ, one must know history. This is true even in any country where a man expects to be a loyal and good citizen. Good citizenship demands a knowledge of the history of the country along with a knowledge of the principles on which his country stands. Far more true is this of the church. The history of the church is the history of the kingdom of heaven in which we have our citizenship. To be a faithful citizen of the kingdom of heaven (while here on earth) requires that we know this history of that kingdom as that history has unfolded in the church—and indeed, in our own. A knowledge of the eternal and unchangeable truths and principles upon which that kingdom is founded and which the church confesses is essential to our own responsible “citizenship” in the kingdom. An awareness of the battles fought by those who have gone before us, the “strategy” they employed, is necessary for us to know that we may fight the battles of today. That which our spiritual forebears believed, confessed, fought for and died for is our heritage, entrusted to our care which we must also believe, confess, and if need be, die for. Their steadfastness in trouble, faithfulness in suffering, dauntless courage against the attacks of the enemy can only inspire within us the same loyalty and utmost consecration to the truth which inspired them. A generation which ignores, or worse, despises, her past is a generation that enters the battle without weapons or training—a generation helpless on the battlefields of Christ’s kingdom.

4) If any justification for this series appearing in Beacon Lights is needed, it only need be said that our young people form the church of tomorrow and will have to take their place when it is time for the generation of today to depart. And tomorrow is, to all appearances, a troublous day—more troublous perhaps than any that have preceded it; for we stand in the end of the ages, and the days are evil. To know what our fathers taught yesterday, what the church believes today, will enable you of tomorrow to carry on this great heritage of the truth in the days that remain.