

Chapter 1

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE CANONS

Alongside the Belgic Confession (1561) and the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), Reformed Churches accept the Canons of Dort as one of their confessional standards. We refer to these confessions as the "Three Forms of Unity". Since the Canons of Dort are a faithful summary of what the Bible teaches they should not be read or studied as merely a historical document but as a confession of the Reformed churches and even more specifically as our confession of faith.

The church and its confession

The church by its very nature is a confessing church. It is the assembly of those who believe with the heart and confess with the mouth.

Officebearers have a responsibility to make sure the congregation lives its confession since they are to take heed to the flock in which the Holy Spirit has made them overseers (Acts 20:28). An elder must "...hold firm to the sure word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to confute those who contradict it" (Titus 1:9) because every member must "...leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity..." (Hebrews 6:1).

Confessing is a duty required of every member in the covenant and church of our Lord Jesus Christ (Lord's Day 12 Q. & A. 32). Hebrews 10:23 states, "*Let us hold fast the confession of our hope...*". The congregation must "...contend for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3).

When we stand up in front of the congregation and promise to live like the Lord's children, we make a public statement of our faith and conviction that everything in the Old and New Testament as summarized in our written confessions is the true and complete doctrine of salvation. Thus, in order to be living members of the church of Christ we must thoroughly know our written confessions.

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The written confessions are clothed with authority because they are derived from and summarize the contents of Holy Scripture. If we speak or act contrary to the written confessions we deny the vow we made when we professed our faith before the congregation. At that time we were asked "Do you wholeheartedly believe the doctrine of the Word of God, summarized in the confessions and taught here in this Christian Church? Do you promise by the grace of God steadfastly to continue in this doctrine in life and death, rejecting all heresies and errors conflicting with God's Word?"¹ Our Lord Jesus Christ speaks sharp words against those who deny their confession: "...*whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven*" (Matthew 10:33).

We can give a person a Bible and say, "Here you will find the contents of my faith," but we can do the same thing with our written confessions. The Canons, as a confession of faith, are important for four reasons:

1. In them the church responds to the Word of God and in faith answers the promises of the covenant.
2. They form the mould by which the church is kept together in the unity of faith. The church of Christ must avoid choosing unity with others at the cost of confessional faithfulness.
3. They guard the church against heresy. As members of Christ's church we may not be indifferent about the teachings of others. All false doctrine and unbiblical teachings must be exposed and rejected. The church of the Lord is the household of God and "*the pillar and bulwark of the truth*" (1 Timothy 3:15). Every member has the calling to defend and preserve the truth, to ward off heresy, unbelief and false doctrine. Truth does not tolerate lies.
4. They keep us in line with the generations that have gone before us and unite us with those who truly want to serve the Lord today. Unity in faith and confession binds people together. To let members believe what they wish takes away from the unity of the church. Unity must be maintained with

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all other bodies of believers (faithful churches) throughout the world (1 Corinthians 1:2). A written confession such as the Canons is a beautiful formulation for church unity. Through it, office-bearers and congregation stand on the same foundation and basis and believers recognize each other as brothers and sisters in the Lord.

Why were the Canons of Dort written?

The Reformed churches in the Netherlands did not wake up one morning to find the heresy of Arminianism on the horizon. Arminianism has its roots in every human heart. The basic issue comes down to this: is humanity good or evil? Can we contribute to our own salvation in any way?

According to the Scriptures we confess that "*The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt...*" (Jeremiah 17:9). The will is not free to choose for good or evil because our entire being -- heart, soul and mind -- is under the bondage of sin. God the Holy Spirit works the only good that is in us. Furthermore, we cannot contribute to our salvation. We are elected and chosen to everlasting life by God's sovereign good pleasure and not on the basis of what we do.

In the centuries prior to the Synod of Dort, men such as Augustine, Luther and Calvin defended the doctrines of election, predestination and reprobation against the false teachings of Pelagius, the Roman Catholic Church, and Erasmus.

Pelagius

Pelagius (who lived in the beginning of the fifth century) believed in the basic goodness of man. He did not accept that children "are conceived and born sin, and therefore subject to all sorts of misery, even to condemnation".² He believed mankind sins by imitating the bad example of others. Christ gave us a good example to follow. Therefore a person has the power to save himself from perdition if

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he tries hard enough and imitates Christ's example. Pelagius rejected the doctrine of the total depravity of man.

Roman Catholicism and Semi-pelagianism

The Roman Catholic Church's doctrine of salvation is semi-pelagian. Pelagius taught man is healthy. He does not need Christ for salvation. Roman Catholics suggest humanity is sick. Christ is the medicine that helps people "get over the hump" and feel better. You need Christ for salvation but you can do a great deal through your own good works as well.

The influence of Erasmus

Erasmus was a Dutch "Christian" humanist. Humanism starts from the premise that man is good. Erasmus dressed this up in a coat of Christianity. He opposed many practices and doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church. Yet he did not follow the Reformation in confessing salvation is through Jesus Christ alone and by faith alone. In contrast to Luther's bondage of the will, Erasmus advocated the freedom of the will.

At the Synod of Dort, the Reformed churches in the Netherlands were called to defend the truth of scripture against the teachings of the Arminians, which were similar to those of Pelagius, the Roman Catholic Church and Erasmus. In the years leading up to the Synod of Dort controversy broke out over two issues.

Matters of doctrine

The first concern was a matter of doctrine. At the Synod of Emden in 1571, the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism were adopted as the confessional standards of the church. Ten years later the Synod of Middelburg ordered all theological professors, ministers, elders, deacons, and school teachers to sign a form stating they agreed with the doctrines taught in the Confessions.³ Not everyone was happy about this decision. Some thought it wasn't necessary to subscribe to the confessions.

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Yet as time went on it became clear that the Synod of Middelburg had made a wise decision. The teaching and preaching of several ministers caused alarm and raised questions. For example, Dirk Coornhert rejected the binding character of the Confessions and recognized all people who claimed to be god-fearing, whether they were Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, Baptist or Muhammadan as brothers in the Lord. He believed that man had to strive after virtue and follow Christ whom he considered a good example but no redeemer. Coornhert wanted a very broad confessional basis, like the Apostles' Creed, to unite the churches and avoid 'denominational' divisions.⁴

Matters of church government

The second issue at stake involved matters of church government (church polity). Reformed church polity honours the authority of the local church. We form a federation of churches with classes, regional and general synods. The major assemblies serve the well-being of the local congregations. Back then the churches were subject to a system where the civil government was deemed the highest authority in ecclesiastical (church) matters. Thus the government had the authority to appoint and depose ministers, to examine candidates for the ministry, and to call a synod.

Most of those who supported ministers like Coornhert favoured the Erastian⁵ system of government (because most of the governing officials were sponsors of the "Arminian" position). The government did not want to call a Synod to deal with the issues raised by the Arminians. They wanted to keep peace at all cost.⁶ Yet peace and unity are gone once the foundation of the church begins to shift and crumble.

The views of Jacob Arminius

The conflict escalated with the arrival of Jacob Arminius on the scene (1560-1609). Arminius received education in the Reformed faith at the University at Leyden and at Geneva. He gradually departed from

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the teachings of Scripture (as summarized and confessed in the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism) on several points of doctrine.

In 1588, Arminius was ordained minister of a Reformed church in Amsterdam. His sermons were well-received and the congregation appreciated his faithful labours. After serving the congregation for five years several members became suspicious.⁷ In his sermons Arminius hinted to the fact that he objected to certain parts of the Reformed confessions, especially the doctrine of predestination and election (Belgic Confession Article 16 & 17). However, when approached about it, he would reassure the elders of the consistory and his colleagues that he was loyal to the confessions and that his opinions were only matters of exegesis (interpretation). He promised that he would not teach anything contrary to the Heidelberg Catechism or Belgic Confession.

Yet Arminius could not be trusted. At one time he admitted that the article on election in the Belgic Confession deserved a thorough revision. It seemed unacceptable to him that the only ground of election could be God's sovereign good pleasure. Where did man and his faith fit in? Arminius ruffled a few feathers when he preached a series of sermons on the book of Romans. Preaching on the first chapters, he remarked more than once that his hearers "would have been better off if they had remained in the Roman Catholic church, because then at least they would be doing good works in the hope of eternal reward while now they did none at all".⁸ In his sermon on Romans 5 and 6 he taught that death would be inevitable even if man had never sinned, since God alone is immortal. He declared that when Paul spoke about the good he would do but did not (Romans 7), he was reminiscing on the way he used to be before he was converted. Preaching on Romans 8 through 11 Arminius stressed man's free will. In his sermon on Romans 13 he attributed the highest authority in religious matters to the civil government.⁹

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In 1602, Arminius was appointed as professor at the University of Leyden. At the University, Franciscus Gomarus became his strongest opponent. Gomarus' reason for opposing Arminius was simple: "I would not dare to appear before God's throne if I believed what Arminius does".

Arminius influenced his students (candidates for the ministry) with his views, but publicly went under the pretence of being orthodox and faithful to the confessions of the church. His students were forbidden to publish his lecture notes.

From the examination of students for the ministry it became clear Arminius had quite a following. Several churches complained about what was going on at the university. They were also disturbed by the calibre of candidates coming out of Leyden. However, Arminius always declared himself orthodox and the civil authorities refused to take any action.

Arminius and his followers caused unrest in the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands. The authority and character of the confessions were at stake. The people in the pew became confused by the criticism against the accepted confessions.

The position of the Arminians

In 1609, Arminius died but his followers continued the struggle. Simon Episcopius became the chief representative for the Arminian side. He had enough support to gain for himself an appointment to the University at Leyden, where he served as professor from 1612-1619.

For the sake of the truth the Arminian position was vehemently opposed by the Reformed Churches. Candidates for the ministry were thoroughly grilled concerning the disputed points. Those churches who wanted to remain faithful to the Lord and to His Word also thought about introducing stricter forms of subscription to the

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Confessions. The Arminians protested. In 1610 they put together a document called the Remonstrance (a remonstrance is a formal statement of grievances). In it they claimed they did not want to change the meaning of the confessions but merely wished to see them revised. However, it became clear from the document that the very heart of the gospel was being attacked. In their Remonstrance the following views were promoted:

1. God elects on the ground of foreseen faith. Faith is a condition man must fulfil before God elects him. Election is based on an act of man and not on God's sovereign good pleasure. Who will be elected is not God's choice but man's choice. A person is saved if he/she decides to accept Jesus Christ into his/her life.
2. Christ's atonement is for all men. Christ obtained the possibility for man to be saved but did not actually secure salvation for anyone. The effectiveness of Christ's redemption depends on man's acceptance of it.
3. Mankind can do good. With the "light of nature" and the help of God's grace, man can be regenerated and come to faith by his own volition. Whether or not he is saved depends on his own free will. He can choose for good or evil in all spiritual matters. Faith is man's contribution to salvation.
4. Man can effectively resist the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit. It is in man's power to be regenerated or not. The Holy Spirit cannot give life unless the sinner responds. A believer can fall in and out of the grace of God. Until his dying day he can never be sure of his salvation. Perseverance is a condition he must fulfil before his election.

The basic point

In all these points one basic and central issue was at stake: who decides our salvation? According to the Arminians salvation is a combined effort. God takes the initiative and people respond. The following diagram portrays the typical Arminian approach to "getting saved":

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Important Election		
Make your calling and election sure. -- 2 Peter 1:10		
BALLOT		
<i>Will you be saved?</i>	Yes	No
God has voted	X	
Satan has voted		X
A tie vote! Therefore you cast the deciding vote. You must choose for or against God. ¹⁰		

"The conflict concerned the nature of divine sovereignty and the nature of human responsibility".¹¹ The Canons of Dort teach a human responsibility that is subordinate to and surrounded by God's sovereignty. God is one hundred percent sovereign and we are one hundred percent responsible for our actions.

International representation at the Synod

The doctrines disputed were not merely a theological tempest in a Dutch teapot but touched the heart of life in the catholic church of Christ. Therefore foreign Reformed theologians were invited to assist and judge on the issues in question. They came from Germany, England and Switzerland to attend the synod. The French Reformed Churches wanted to send a delegation but were prevented from coming by their own national government.

The answer of the Synod of Dort

The Synod of Dort 1618/19 refuted the articles of the Remonstrants. It was opened on November 13, 1618 and closed (154 sessions later!) on May 9, 1619.

The previous synod was held in 1586! Why was the convening of a synod delayed so long? Those who defended the Reformed faith

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wanted a synod. However, the supporters of Arminius did not favour a National Synod unless the participants were willing to give the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism a complete overhaul and revision conforming to the doctrinal views expressed in the Remonstrance.

The Arminians knew that if a synod would be convened their position would be refuted and condemned since most of the Reformed churches did not agree with them. What they wanted was friendly talks and conferences to deal with the issues and if they could not come to some consensus, the churches could agree to disagree and tolerate both positions.

What the Arminians wanted was freedom to promote their views. Thus they disputed the binding character and authority of the confessional standards. Piously they would say, "Not the confession but the Bible is our norm". Arminius and his followers repeatedly advocated a revision of the confessions to give more room for their beliefs. They argued that a binding confession ultimately conflicts with the authority of Scripture and with the freedom of the individual conscience.

Today many evangelicals argue the same way. They do not see the need for binding individuals to their confession. Yet such statements as "The Bible and the Bible alone is our guide," should not impress us.

The Arminians held the churches hostage until the arrival of Prince Maurice. At first, Maurice defended the Reformed faith for political reasons; he was convinced that if the Arminians won the unity of the Netherlands would disintegrate. Later Maurice supported those who maintained the Reformed Confessions because he was persuaded that these agreed with what the Bible taught. Through his initiative the Synod of Dort was convened and by the grace of God the doctrine of the Reformed faith was upheld.

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The Arminians were present at the first sessions and were given the opportunity to defend their views. However, it became clear from the beginning that, if at all possible, they would obstruct the proceedings of the Synod and avoid dealing with the issues. The members of Synod put up with it until the patience of the chairman, John Bogerman, ran out. He sent the Arminians out of the assembly on January 14, 1619.¹² From that point on they were judged on the basis of their writings.

The answer the Synod gave to the Arminians became known as "The Five Articles Against the Remonstrants" or "The Canons of Dort". A Canon is a pronouncement made by a church council or synod stipulating rules and principles by which the members of the church should live. The Arminians had five major grievances against the Confessions of the Reformed Churches. With five Canons the Synod of Dort answered their criticism and objections. Two Canons are combined and placed under the same heading (Chapters III/IV). Each Canon gives an exposition of the Reformed faith and rejects the corresponding errors. The five Canons are:

1. **Unconditional election**
Election is the sovereign act of God's love. An individual does not have to fulfil certain conditions before God will elect him. Election is not the fruit of faith but faith is the fruit of election.
2. **Limited (particular) atonement**
Christ died for the elect. Election does not depend upon the will of man but on God's mercy and sovereign good pleasure. Christ came to save His people from their sins. Christ did not acquire for man the possibility to be saved but He obtained for them their actual salvation.
3. **Total depravity**
All human beings are dead in sin and therefore by nature are totally incapable of doing any good. The regenerating power

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of the Holy Spirit, who works through the preaching of the Word, must bring sinners to life.

4. **Invincible grace**

God is stronger than man and will break his resistance. He makes him willing to believe.

5. **Perseverance of the saints**

Believers may fall into sin but they will not fall completely out of the grace of God. Perseverance of the saints is a result of election.

The setup of the Canons of Dort

The setup of the Canons of Dort seem to be rather straightforward and simple. Are we not speaking about God's eternal decree of election and reprobation? Yet when we take a careful look at the articles of each chapter we notice they do not begin with what took place in heaven before the foundations of the earth. Each chapter has us put on the glasses of Scripture to look at what is happening in the world today.¹³

If you look at the world around you, you not only find wickedness and perversity but also faith and obedience to the Lord. All godliness, however, does not have its origin in man but in God. Rather than contriving a rigid dogmatic system, our spiritual fathers at the Synod of Dort took a redemptive historical approach to answering the objections of the Arminians.¹⁴ Indeed, the first chapter speaks about election and reprobation but we must pay close attention to the manner in which these topics are addressed.

A point that was debated in the years preceeding the Synod was: Did God's decree of election come before or after the creation and fall into sin? Those who said God's decree of election took place before the fall into sin were called supralapsarians and those who said it took place after the fall were called infralapsarians. Arminius and his strongest opponent at the university of Leyden, F. Gomarus, debated the order of God's decrees. Arminius claimed to be infralapsarian.¹⁵

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Gomarus was a supralapsarian. The Synod of Dort, however, did not reject or accept either position but simply judged the five points of the Remonstrance on the basis of Scripture.¹⁶

Five Points of Calvinism?

Frequently the Canons of Dort (and the doctrines contained in them) are called the "Five Points of Calvinism". We should avoid using that expression because an "ism" is a belief in something or someone. We do not follow the teachings of a man but we listen to what the Lord our God teaches us in His holy and infallible Word.

Relevance of the Canons of Dort

The Canons were drawn up by the Synod of Dort of 1618-19 to defend the truth of God's Word against the heresy of Arminianism. It is an old document but not outdated. The issues debated then still apply today. Much of evangelical Christianity is Arminian. We have to be discerning and exercise caution. The false doctrine of Arminianism is in Christian novels, educational material and on radio and television. The doctrines contained in the Canons of Dort are unacceptable to many because it puts a knife into the sinful heart of man, cutting deeply into human pride.

Accepting the Canons of Dort as a faithful summary of what Scripture teaches requires a rejection of evangelicalism and fundamentalism. These movements hold that it is not important whether you are Arminian or "Calvinist" but that you agree with the following fundamental and cardinal truths:

- the verbal inspiration, infallibility and inerrancy of Holy Scripture
- the Trinity
- the deity of Christ and the virgin birth
- God's creating all things out of nothing
- substitutionary atonement
- the bodily resurrection and ascension of Christ

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- the regeneration of believers
- the personal and imminent return of Christ
- the resurrection and final assignment of all men to heaven or hell.¹⁷

What evangelicalism puts down as "fundamentals" is less than what the Bible demands. All scripture is inspired by God and therefore all its doctrines must be believed and applied.

The Canons and Evangelism

All members of the church of Christ, whether they are born and raised in a Christian home or join from a different background later in life, must come to know the pure doctrine of salvation. When Christ sent out His apostles He said to them, "*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you...*" (Matthew 28:19,20). This shows that being taught the doctrine of salvation is an important part of discipleship.

We should not be afraid to use the Canons of Dort when introducing new converts to the rudiments of the Christian faith. In fact the Canons will guard us against following the Arminian approach toward evangelism which is so rampant today.

Since Arminians assume that God has done His part and now it is up to the individual to be saved, they are constantly looking for new "soul-winning" methods and techniques which will attract the sinner to the gospel and persuade him to believe.

Arminianism, with its emphasis on the ability of the human will, and man-devised methods has come to view salvation solely in terms of a "decision". This "decision" is usually registered by responding to an "altar call", or going through a given procedure in a counselling room, and once this decision is registered

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it is confidently asserted that another soul has been born again.¹⁸

Understanding the truth, as expressed in the Canons of Dort, will keep us from a superficial view of conversion and salvation. The gospel is not preached to cause people to make *a* decision for the Lord. The Holy Spirit must shape us so that *every* decision is for the Lord.

The church labours in mission and evangelism because the Father has given a people to His Son. Therefore we may not take the liberty of making the gospel message more palatable. We are to speak to people of God's sovereign work of election, of the total depravity of man etc., leaving the results to the Lord. As the Lord said to Paul in a vision, "*Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man shall attack you to harm you; for I have many people in this city*" (Acts 18:9,10).

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Questions

1. How should we study the Canons of Dort?
2. "The church by its very nature is a confessing church". Explain what this means.
3. Do all members of the church need to be bound to the written confessions?
4. Why do we need confessions?
5. The Canons of Dort were written to refute and oppose the false doctrine propagated by the Arminians. Was this really a new controversy?
6. What was the basic issue in the controversy that arose in the Reformed Church?
7. What did the Arminians teach regarding election, atonement, depravity, grace, and perseverance? What was the answer of the Synod of Dort?
8. Give an example of Arminianism you have discovered in a book, novel or on a religious program.
9. Is it correct to refer to the Canons of Dort as the "Five points of Calvinism"?
10. What is the significance of the Canons of Dort for the church today?

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Notes

1. "Form for Public Profession of Faith", *Book of Praise* (Winnipeg, Premier Printing, reprinted 1995) p. 593.
2. "Form for the Baptism of Infants", *Book of Praise*, pp. 586-87.
3. W.R. Godfrey, *Tensions Within International Calvinism: The debate on the Atonement at the Synod of Dort, 1618-1619* (Ann Arbor, A Xerox Company, 1974) p. 29.
4. H. Hoeksema, *The Voice of our Fathers* (Grand Rapids, Reformed Free Publishing, 1980) p.6.
5. Thomas Erastus believed in the unity between church and state. Just as in the Old Testament church and nation were one so Christians are under one law. The government has the duty to govern the church and the life of the nation according to the law of the Lord. For more information see further J. Faber et al. *The Bride's Treasure* (Launceston, Geneva Press, 1979) pp.6-10.
6. G. Lievaart, *Alleen Om Gods Wil Getroost* (Maassluis, Marnix, 1990) p.20.
7. L. Doekes, "De Dordtse Leerregels" insert in *De Poortwake* (1981).
8. L. Praamsma, "The Background of the Arminian Controversy (1586-1618)" in *Crisis in the Reformed Churches* ed. P.Y. DeJong, (Grand Rapids, Reformed Fellowship, 1968) p. 27.
9. *Ibid.*, p.27.
10. A tract that carried this ballot was issued by the [Moody] Bible Institute Colportage Association and was printed by A. Kuyvenhoven in *The Banner* (February 23/1987).

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11. F. Klooster, "The doctrinal deliverances of Dort" in *Crisis in the Reformed Churches*, pp. 83ff.
12. *Acta Nationale Synode Van Dordrecht 1618-1619* (Houten, Den Hartog, first printed in 1621 and reprinted in 1987) pp. 200-204.
13. J. Kamphuis, "De inzet van de Dordtse Leerregels", in *Er staat geschreven. Er is geschied* (Bedum, Scholma, 1986) p.93.
14. *Ibid.*, p.94,98.
15. Arminius went far beyond the infra-lapsarian view. As L. Praamsma observes "However, it soon became plain that Arminius went far beyond the infra-lapsarian view both in denying that faith is the fruit of election and in asserting that predestination unto salvation is based on divine foreknowledge" *Crisis in the Reformed Churches*, p.29.
16. For further study see a dissertation by H.M. Yoo, *Raad en Daad* (Kampen, Mondiss, 1990). An English summary is found on the pages 259-266.
17. L.J. Coppes, *Are Five Points Enough? Ten Points of Calvinism* (Reformation Educational Foundation, Denver, 1980) p. ix.
18. W. Payne, "*Pastor What is the Difference?*" (privately published pamphlet) p.13.