

Lesson 16 INTRODUCTION TO THE CANONS OF DORT

16.1 The **Circumstances** Leading to the Canons of Dort

1. The Synod of Dort, 1618-1619

The Canons of Dort were drafted and adopted at the great Synod of Dort, 1618-1619. Delegates from several foreign countries contributed to the debates and final rendition of the Canons. The Synod stated that the decision regarding the position of the Remonstrants was taken out of the Word of God. Hence, they intended this document to have **creedal** status.

2. The Remonstrant party

The background to the teachings of the Remonstrants is found in the humanistic ideas of Daniel Coornhert (1522-1590). Coornhert held an Erasmian position on the free will. According to this view, faith arises out of man himself, being an act of his free will. The party was strengthened in its position through the influence of Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609), a minister at Amsterdam and later a professor of theology at Leiden. Arminius was opposed in his approach by F. Gomarus, who later took an active role in the formulation of the Canons of Dort. Although Gomarus tended to a supralapsarian position, his defense of the truth of Scripture formed an integral element in exposing the errors of remonstrantism.

3. The Immediate Circumstances

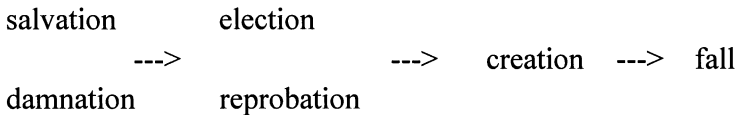
The Remonstrants were indicted by the Synod to submit their views to the Synod in writing. At first they repeatedly did so only in negative terms, but eventually presented a positive general statement

on their views. This document, called the **Remonstrance**, became the basis on which the position of the party was evaluated. The Canons take their queue from this document. However, the Canons at the same time took an approach of their own. The authors took pains to follow the approach from the side of man, (see Lesson 5, above).

4. The Order of the Decree of God

The terms **infralapsarian** and **supralapsarian** were used to describe two approaches to God’s decree of election and reprobation. There were two opinions in the Reformed camp, corresponding to these approaches. The strategy of the Remonstrants was to attempt to play off the two views against each other. However, the president of the Synod, J. Bogerman, and other delegates saw through these schemes, and drafted the Canons in such a way that these two views were able to live side by side with one confessional rendering. In a simplified way, we can sketch the difference between the two views as follows (note that each term represents a decision in the mind of God, and not the actual occurrence of the events):

a. **supralapsarian** order



b. **infralapsarian** order



16.2 The **Central Issue** at Dort

16.2.1 The View of the Remonstrants

The fundamental idea marking the position of the Remonstrants is that man in himself was still quite good, and had the free will and capacity to do good. While they spoke of election, it had a secondary role relative to the human will, and human choice. Whatever grace was given could at any time be lost, and one who is regenerated can become unregenerate.

Briefly stated, the Remonstrants held to the following points:²

- a. Election is based on foreseen faith. Various conditions must be fulfilled before one can be elected, and human nature after the fall is such that it is able to fulfil those conditions if one is willing to do so.
- b. Jesus Christ died for all people, but only in such a way that His death opened up the possibility for them to be saved. Whether this possibility is actually realized is a matter of their responsibility.
- c. Faith is to be considered a gift of God, but only in this sense that this gift is freely offered to man, and it is in man's power to either accept or reject it.

² For a more detailed view of their position, see Appendix 1, which gives the *Remonstrance* of 1610, the official position statement to which the Canons of Dort reply.

- d. People are able either to accept or resist the workings of God's grace and the offer of the gospel. Man can also resist the work of regeneration.
- e. Perseverance is a definite reality in the life of a believer. However, it is a condition to election, rather than a fruit of it. And this condition can only be fulfilled by a willing cooperation with the assisting grace of God.

16.2.2 The View of the Counter-Remonstrants

The central issue for the Counter-Remonstrants (the Reformed party) was the sovereignty, majesty and authority of God in the lives of men. For the Counter-Remonstrants, the position of the Remonstrants contained within it a poisonous leaven, the leaven of humanism. The essential doctrine hidden under the many layered foils of Remonstrant language was one of the essential godness, or at the very least, the minimal defection of man. Remonstrantism was nothing more than a revival of the ancient heresy of Pelagius which held that the heart and soul of man did not fall into **total corruption** with the fall into sin.

Exercises Lesson 16

I. Reference Passages

Memorize: Romans 11:33-36

Study and Review: Canons of Dort, Introduction and Conclusions

II. Review Questions

1. With what kind of attitude must one approach the matter of the eternal counsel of God?
2. Why does Scripture speak of **depths** with regard to this counsel? Mention a corresponding passage in the Old Testament.
3. What do the Canons stress before they confess the decree of God in Article 6 and 7 of Chapter 1?
4. Why are the conclusions to the Canons of Dort so important?

III. Extra Questions

1. Study the Five Articles of the Remonstrants, (See Appendix 1). What according to you are the objectionable clauses in these articles? What were some of the errors of the Arminians?

2. What does God give to His elect? How do we know what God gives, and how He gives these things? Prove your answer.
3. Why may the Church have its joy concerning reprobation? Can you think of some Scripture passages which teach this?
4. Explain the difference between Gomarus and Arminius. What was the error in Arminius' stand? Was there a danger in Gomarus' stand?
5. What is the difference between a synod and a conference? Why did the Arminian party continually resort to holding conferences?
6. What does Barthianism want to do with the doctrine of election?