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The Third Heading: Human Corruption

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Introduction

As the professor of Biblical Counseling, and not as one trained in history, nor systematic theology, it may rightly be wondered what a practical theologian may contribute to the present consideration of the 400th anniversary of the Calvinist/Arminian controversy in the Church in the Netherlands. Yet, if a professor of counseling is to take up a particular head of doctrine under the Canons of Dort, it would make the most sense he be given charge over Dort's anthropology. The question of: "who is man?" is of utmost importance to the field of counseling, and thus, the third head of doctrine finds itself directly connected to this author's particular field of study.

The purpose of the present treatment is not to rehash the contents of the Canons, for that would occupy the entirety of the article itself. Instead the goal of this paper is to provide the theological undergirding of the third head of doctrine, along with the Synod's affirmations and respective rejections; in order that the present reader may take up the Canons, and thereby have a fuller appreciation of what the Synod was aiming to do — specifically what they understood they were affirming and what they comprehended they were rejecting.

One further caveat at the outset itself on the language of the "Remonstrants" and the "Contra-Remonstrants." "Arminians" and "Calvinists" are regularly employed surrounding this historical debate and the present paper will likewise use such terminology interchangeably. That said, it should be made known the wishes of the Synod of Dort itself, when it declared in its judgments — the written conclusions after the multi-year deliberations — when they said:

[S]ome, *who are gone out from among us*, calling themselves *Remonstrants* (which word, as well as that of *Contraremonstrants*, the Synod wills and requires to be buried in perpetual oblivion) have ...¹

Since it was the will of the faithful ecumenical assembly, that the name of Remonstrants be "buried in perpetual oblivion," the current treatment will seek to honor their wishes as best as possible. After all, "Remonstrants" means "forceful demonstrators," and since they were forcefully demonstrating against confessional, reformed theology, it is fitting to denounce their intended goal as expressed by their name. What is more, the Arminians sought to resist the

¹ Herbert H. Rowen, *Low Countries in Early Modern Times* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1972), 139.

ecclesiastical tradition common at the time of naming theological movements after heretics.² Therefore, they wanted to avoid the moniker “Arminians”, though they certainly identified with Jacobus Arminius and his theology – it was a public persona they wanted to maintain, and the public ire they wanted to avoid.

Thus, and without further ado, we turn to the third main point of doctrine in the 17th century Calvinist/Arminian controversy, that of human corruption.

Dispelling Misconceptions

If, at the outset we have in our minds, the Calvinistic summative acronym, T.U.L.I.P., for how we have come to organize the well-articulated theology coming from the Synod of Dort in the Canons; we may mistakenly believe that “Total Depravity” (the meaning of T.U.L.I.P.’s “T”) or “human inability” should be the place to begin. If, after all, we are approaching the entire discussion of God and man’s respective roles in salvation, does it not logically follow that one ought to begin with man’s complete inability to save himself? If man is to be honest with what man has to work with, indeed, the “T” ought to be one’s starting point.

If, however, there is an effort to downplay and overcome man’s inability, and instead, speak to a possible *ability* or *semi-ability* of man to contribute to his salvation, *then* man’s deprivation of knowledge, righteousness, and holiness is not the place one would desire to begin. Thus the Arminian position presented man’s deprivation in the third head of their remonstrance, and the Calvinist response simply followed their ordering, affirming and denying accordingly.³

Human Deprivation

Now in considering the doctrine of human deprivation itself, there is one final point of misconception which must be dispelled at the outset, and is the assumed disagreement between the stated position of the Remonstrance and the Canons themselves. Is it not simply presumed that at every major head of doctrine, the two parties vehemently disagreed and offered entirely different constructions of each point of theology? And yet if one were to merely read each articulation of man’s depravity; first the Arminians, and then the Calvinists, on the surface, there would appear to be formal and outward agreement!

Quoting from the third article of the Remonstrance itself, the Arminians advocated the following:

That man does not possess saving grace of himself, nor of the energy of his free will, inasmuch as in his state of apostasy and sin he can of and by himself neither think, will, nor do any thing that is truly good (such as saving Faith eminently is); but that it is necessary that he be born again of God in Christ, through his Holy Spirit, and renewed in understanding, inclination, and will, and all his faculties, in order that he may rightly understand, think, will, and effect what is truly good, according to the Word of Christ, John 15:5, “Without me you can do nothing.”⁴

² W. Robert Godfrey, *Saving the Reformation: The Pastoral Theology of the Canons of Dort* (Sanford, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2019), Introduction.

³ The Synod of Dort, *The Articles of the Synod of Dort and Its Rejection of Errors* (London: The Sovereign Grace Union, 1932), 20.

⁴ *The Five Articles of the Remonstrants* (1610), as quoted by Dennis Bratcher, accessed at <http://www.criovoice.org/creedremonstrants.html> on September 28, 2019.

The astute reader of the above does not pick apart each and every tedium of that complex and singular sentence, in order to come away saying: “that is total depravity as the Scriptures present it!” That the human person is unable to do anything that is truly good; he is not able to think, will, nor do anything that is holy, all apart from the regenerative work of the Holy Spirit enabling him. A Calvinist sees the above statement, and would rightly say, “that is *our* doctrine.”

It is due to this outward apparent agreement that some present-day commentators on the Canons of Dort largely pass over the significance of disagreement on the third head of doctrine.⁵In such cases, likely little more is done than reading the Arminians’ third point of doctrine and the Calvinists’ respective rebuttal and concluding they are in sum and substance, one and the same.

So wherein lies the actual disagreement? Is there one? Is it some micro-fine point of theology contained within that singular sentence, which must be scrutinized with exacting precision? Or is the disagreement under the third head of doctrine, actually contained elsewhere than the formally stated position of the Arminians in their Remonstrance? With but a short consideration, the latter will be made clear: that the Arminians presented themselves in a better light in their public remonstrance than they did elsewhere in their writings and stated positions regarding man’s inability – or perhaps more correctly – lack thereof!

A Depravity which is not “Total”

James Dennison, in his exhaustive compilation of *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries*, suggests the singular greatest distinction between the Calvinists and the Arminians involves that operation of the soul: the human will, and thus represents the Arminian position as a “Partial Inability” so far as the will is concerned.⁶

Tripartite Understanding of the Operations of the Soul

It can be clearly seen in the Calvinist and Arminian writings, that both parties embraced the basic and biblical understanding of a tripartite soul. Upon Creation, the human soul contained three primary operations, or powers, those being *the intellect*, *the will*, and *the affections*. Again, both the Arminians and the Calvinists agreed that those operations of the soul were gifted by God at the time of Creation, with true knowledge, righteousness, and holiness.⁷ And still more, both the Arminians and Calvinists were in agreement that there was a resultant change in the human soul at the time of the Fall, and again at the time of regeneration.⁸

In other words, there was clear agreement between the Calvinists and the Arminians that the human soul is composed of the three primary faculties – the intellect, the will, and the affections – whose operations were gifted by the Lord upon Creation, but there was a change in those giftings at the time of the Fall, and those giftings are at least in part restored at the time of regeneration.

The difference, then, is primarily found in *the extent* that those giftings are lost at the time of the Fall. Are true knowledge, righteousness, and holiness completely and totally lost, as they pertain to the powers of the intellect, the affections, and the will? Or is their loss only partial? Herein

⁵ See Sean Cole, *Understanding Christianity*, Series on the Canons of Dort, accessed at <https://www.seancole.net> on September 28, 2019, as one contemporary example.

⁶ James T. Dennison Jr., ed., *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries* in English Translation, 4 Vol. Set (Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), 3413.

⁷ Aza Goudriaan and Fred Lieburg, eds., *Revisiting the Synod of Dordt* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2010), 88.

⁸ *Ibid.*

lies the rub, and why contemporary theologians speak of “Partial Depravity” regarding the Arminian system.

While the Arminians freely acknowledged in their writings and public teachings that the intellect was darkened, the will affected, and the affections altered by the Fall, at every one of those points the Calvinists and Arminians disagreed on just how substantive those changes really are. Since those disagreements are most pronounced concerning the will, special focus will be given separately and finally to that operation of the soul.

First under consideration, then, is *the intellect*. The Arminian writers affirmed that the human intellect was darkened, and unable in itself to think anything truly good. However, with the right use of a common grace available to all men (by this, they mean a prevenient grace, and the right use of the light of nature), man was able, in his estate of misery, to think rightly.⁹ And having availed himself of that general grace, the Lord provides more grace.¹⁰ The idea being akin to: “whoever is found faithful in a little will be entrusted with much.”¹¹

Second, and much more briefly, mankind’s *affections* post-Fall have become tainted by sin, and thus desire that which is impure. In all actuality, very little attention is given to the affections on both sides of the controversy, however. This fact seems to be due to both the Calvinists and the Arminians seeing the intellect as taking a “leading role.” In that, what one’s mind is set upon, one’s heart tends to follow. The discussion which follows will hopefully demonstrate to the reader how this point is crucial to the Arminian system.

A Will which is Truly Free

Both Calvinists and Arminians affirmed a freedom of the will. It is not as though the Arminians affirmed such freedom, and the Calvinists denied it. Again, it is a matter of extent, of definition of what is meant by free. The Synod of Dort delegates upheld that the human will is always free, whether in a state of innocency, corruption, redemption, or even in the future heavenly life. Simply because the will is determined toward one thing does not mean it fails to be free. If after the Fall, sinful people are perpetually and unswervingly determined toward evil, that reality does not make the will any less free to “will or not will...without coercion, and by a personal and spontaneous motion whatever should be elected or rejected.”¹² Put another way, the Calvinists were not suggesting the will lacks freedom, simply because sinners are determined to pursue evil continually. After the Fall and prior to regeneration, evil is what the fallen free will freely pursues at all times!

Now that man’s will is limited, namely depraved, makes it no less free. It simply is unable to will any good, and only freely wills evil continually.¹³ So both Arminians and Calvinists embraced a freedom of the will.

⁹ Donald W. Sinnema, Christian Moser, and H. J. Selderhuis, *Acta et Documenta Synodi Nationalis Dordrechtanae* (1618-1619), V & R Academic (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), Acta 2, 177-179, as translated by Goudriann, 91. As the present author did not work with the original Latin, Goudriann’s translation and interaction with the *Acta* provided a foundational contribution to this paper.

¹⁰ Ioannes Corvinus, *Defensio sententiae D. Iacobi Arminii* (Leiden, 1613), 154. As translated by Goudriann, 92.

¹¹ Luke 16:10.

¹² Sinnema, Acta, 2: 184-185.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 3:280.

The Arminians, however, insisted that for the will to be *truly free*, it must be able to purpose after both good and evil.¹⁴ So once again, the question of extent is before us: “just how free, is free?” At this point, one might be wondering how the Arminians can arrive at an affirmation of free will which is so extensive, after affirming the operations of the soul have lost their original gifting in the Fall. Stated another way, if man has lost the ability to will holiness in the Fall, how then is the will free to choose good or evil? The Arminian answer to this dilemma was most clearly stated at the Conference of the Hague in 1611, where the Arminians argued that the human will has no original gifting at creation.¹⁵ The will, regardless of its estate, whether in innocency prior to the Fall, or in misery after the Fall, to be a human free will, must always be able to choose good or evil. Thus, to the Arminian, even after the Fall the will is essentially “still intact”.

The Need and Presence of Prevenient Grace?

This is where the issue becomes most fascinating and where the third head of doctrine begins to touch upon the fourth head. For at this point in the consideration of man’s need, the question becomes “what is the need for a general or prevenient grace?” If the human will is not the problem; and fallen people are able to will *true good*, then the problem resides primarily with the intellect and/or the affections. The problem with the Arminian construction is that sinners’ minds are darkened and their affections impure.

What then is needed is for the unconverted to choose what is right. In the Arminian system, man is not being called upon to will that which is entirely contrary to his nature: to will holiness when he is completely incapable of willing holiness. Instead, what is needed is for him to choose good when he thinks wrongly and loves that which we should not love.

At this point the reader ought to see just how surmountable the problem is for the Arminian: all sinful humanity needs to do in order to choose rightly, is to think rightly and love rightly. The need, then, for a general grace — a prevenient grace — is not to restore a depraved will, but to enable the correction of wrong thinking (wherein the distorted affections will follow) through the due use of the light of nature. Such a need is far less than the regeneration of a spiritually dead man.

An Age Old Heresy, or Semi-Heresy?

As the significant differences between the Calvinist and Arminian anthropology begin to take shape, the question that will likely arise is, just how *serious* are these differences? This question, when approaching the topic of the 17th-century controversy in Holland, is often expressed in terms of whether or not the Synod understood the Arminian construction to be a heresy. To put a more precise point on it: are the Remonstrants heretics? Aside from the fact that the judgment flowing from the Synod necessarily found the Remonstrants guilty of heresy, (for, after all, these were the charges before them),¹⁶ it is in this third head of doctrine that the notion of heresy is made most clear. For it is under this heading where the Synod makes regular comparisons to the age-old heresy of Pelagianism. In what is the shortest section of the Canons (considering the Third and Fourth heads are combined), the reader is met with two of the articles and two of the rejections of error making direct reference to the Pelagian heresy. Whereas the other points of doctrine, by comparison, find the appeal to the Pelagian heresy minimally so.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 2:236, 243.

¹⁵ Goudriaan and Lieburg, *Revisiting the Synod of Dordt*, 97.

¹⁶ William VanDoodewaard, “Remonstrants, Contra-Remonstrants, and the Synod of Dordt (1618-1619): The Religious History of the Early Dutch Republic,” *Puritan Reformed Journal* 4, no. 1 (January 2012), 158.

When considering the extent of man's problem and his ability to choose good and will holiness, the allusion to Pelagianism is a natural one. Yet does this reality not put a fine point on how egregious the Synod perceived this error of anthropology to be, that it would consistently refer to Arminianism as harkening back to the ancient heresy of man's ability, known as Pelagianism?

In contemporary theology, a modifier is employed, of course. Today Arminianism, as a system, is referred to as "semi-pelagian." But to this point, is it superior for an ecumenical church council to declare theology to be "semi-heretical"? To relate this semantical difference to a real-world experience: would it be a substantial improvement to eat semi-poisonous food as opposed to poisonous food? The wise theologian and believer would just as soon refrain from both types.

Surely the Synod understood the Arminians to be presenting an entirely different conception of the human condition, man's problem, than what the Scriptures present. Especially under the Third Head, they saw the Arminian system as containing a pernicious error and declared it as such.

Conclusion: A Different Anthropology

What one is left with, then, when harkening back to a 400-year-old debate, or today, when contrasting classical Arminianism and historic Calvinism are two entirely different anthropologies. On the surface, there was an attempt by the Remonstrants to present apparent agreement between the two systems; yet they could not be more dissimilar regarding their construction of the human person as revealed in Scripture.

On the one hand, the Calvinists viewed man as completely blind in spiritual matters, dead and utterly unable to rightly think God's thoughts after him. Man, by his fall, has been plunged into horrible darkness, perversity, and impurity of mind and affection, and wills nothing but rebellion and hardness of heart toward God. Whereas, on the other hand, the Arminians viewed man in his fallen condition, as being capable of attaining partial, but true knowledge of God, by nothing more than the light of nature and prevenient grace, as having a weakened will, and dulled affections toward God.

Fundamentally the solutions for such entirely different problems are entirely different as well. One finds us as desperate enemies of God in need of alien and external salvation from a Sovereign Lord. The other sees our needed solution as a choice. Thanks be to God that he rightly assesses our pessimistic and dire condition, and sovereignly overcomes our total inability by an act of *his* free will — not ours!