

A PLACE LIKE HEAVEN

The convocation and proceedings of the Synod of Dort may be considered as among the most interesting events of the seventeenth century. The Westminster Assembly of Divines was, indeed, more immediately interesting to British and American Presbyterians; and the works of that celebrated Assembly, as monuments of judgment, taste, and sound theology, have certainly never been equalled by those of any other uninspired ecclesiastical body that ever convened.¹ Yet the Synod of Dort had, undoubtedly, a species of importance peculiar to itself, and altogether pre-eminent. It was not merely a meeting of the select divines of a single nation, but a convention of the Calvinistic world, to bear testimony against a rising and obtrusive error; to settle a question in which all the Reformed Churches of Europe had an immediate and deep interest. The question was, whether the opinions of Arminius, which were then agitating so many minds, could be reconciled with the Confession of the Belgic Churches?²

The opinions denominated Arminian had been substantially taught long before Arminius appeared. The doctrine of Cassian, of Marseilles, in the fifth century, commonly styled Semi-Pelagianism, was almost exactly the same system.³ Bolsec, too, in Geneva, about the year 1552, according to some, had also taught very much the same doctrine, though justly regarded as infamous on account of his shameful moral delinquencies.⁴ And about fifteen or twenty years before Arminius arose, Corvinus, in Holland, had appeared as the advocate of opinions of similar import.⁵ But having less talent than Arminius, and being less countenanced by eminent men, his error made little noise, and was suffered quietly to sink into insignificance, until a stronger and more popular man arose to give it new consequence, and a new impulse.

1. The Westminster Assembly first convened on July 1, 1643 and last officially met in the Spring of 1653.

2. The Belgic Confession was written chiefly by Dutch pastor Guido de Brès in 1561, and revised by various Synods before and at the Synod of Dort.

3. John Cassian (c. 360-c. 435) was a Christian monk and mystical writer.

4. Jérôme-Hermès Bolsec (died c. 1584) was a French Carmelite theologian who converted to Protestantism but engaged in controversy with John Calvin.

5. Johannes Arnoldi Corvinus (c. 1582-1650) was a Dutch Remonstrant minister.

James Arminius, or Harmensen, was born at Oudwater, in south Holland, in the year 1560. His father died when he was an infant; and he was indebted to the charity of several benevolent individuals for the whole of his education. At one time he was employed as a servant at a public inn, and in this situation was so much noticed for his activity, intelligence, wit and obliging deportment, that numbers became interested in his being enabled to pursue the cultivation of his mind.⁶ Accordingly, by one of his patrons, he was placed, for a time, in the University of Utrecht; on his decease, by another, in the University of Marburg, in Hesse; and finally, by a third, in that of Leyden. In 1582, in the twenty-second year of his age, the magistrates of Amsterdam had received such impressions of his promising talents, and of his diligent application to study, that they sent him, at the public expense, to Geneva, which was then considered as the great center of theological instruction for the Reformed Churches. In that far-famed institution Theodore Beza then presided, with equal honor to himself, and acceptance to the students.⁷ Here Arminius, as before, manifested much intellectual activity and ardor of inquiry; but indulging a spirit of self-sufficiency and insubordination, in opposing some of the philosophical opinions held and taught by the leading professors at Geneva, and delivering private lectures to turn away the minds of the students from the instructions of their teachers, he became a kind of malcontent, and was constrained to withdraw from that Institution. This circumstance somewhat impaired that confidence in his prudence which his patrons had before reposed. Still they were willing to overlook it.

After travelling eight or ten months in Italy, he returned for a short time to Geneva, and soon afterwards to Holland, where he met with no small acceptance in his profession. Such was his popularity, that, in 1588, he was elected one of the ministers of Amsterdam, and entered on a pastoral charge in that city, with every prospect of honor, comfort, and usefulness. But his restless, innovating spirit soon began, in his new situation, again to disclose itself. Not long after his

6. [S.M.] Life of Wallaeus, one of the members of the Synod of Dort. [Johannes Walaeus, "Vita Antonii Walaei," in Antonius Walaeus, *Opera Omnia Tomus Primus* (Lugduni Batavorum: Adrian Wyngaerden, 1647), sig. A*4r-*****4r. The biographic details of Arminius appear on sig. ***4v-***5r.]

7. Theodore Beza (1519-1605) was a French Protestant Reformer and theologian.

settlement, the doctrine of Beza concerning Predestination was publicly opposed by some ministers of Delft, in a tract which they printed on this subject. When this publication appeared, Martin Lydius, professor of Divinity at Franear, having a high opinion of the learning and talents of Arminius, judged him to be the most proper person he was acquainted with to answer it; and, accordingly, urged him to undertake the task.⁸ Arminius, in compliance with this request from his venerable friend, undertook to refute the heretical work; but during the examination of it, and while balancing the reasoning on both sides, he went over to the opinion which he had been employed to refute; and even carried it further than the ministers of Delft had done. This change of opinion, which took place about the year 1591, and which he was not long in causing to be understood, soon excited public attention. About the same time, in a course of public lectures, delivered in his own pulpit, on the Epistle to the Romans, he still further disclosed his erroneous views. He was soon accused of departing from the Belgic Confession, and many of his brethren began to look upon him and his opinions with deep apprehension. Such, however, were the vigilance and firmness manifested by the other members of his Classis, that they so far curbed and counteracted him as to prevent the agitation of the controversy, which it seems to have been his intention to excite. Arminius, however, though deterred, at that early period, from public and open controversy, exerted himself in a more private way, with considerable effect. With some divines, whose friendship he had before conciliated, his talents, his learning, his smooth address, and his insinuating eloquence were successful in winning them to his opinions. The celebrated Uytenbogart and Borrius were among the number of his early converts and followers.⁹ He also took unwearied pains to gain over to his cause some of the leading laymen of the country, and so on enlisted several of them in his cause.

In the year 1602, when the illustrious Francis Junius, an eminent Reformer, and no less eminent as a Professor of Divinity in the University of Leyden, was removed by death, to the great grief of the Belgic churches, Uytenbogart, who

8. Martin Lydius (1539-1601) was a Dutch theologian.

9. Johannes (or Jan) Uytenbogaert (1557-1644) was a Dutch Protestant leader of the Remonstrant party. Adrianus Borrius (1565-1630) was President of the University of Leiden. Miller's spellings of names and places have been retained in the text throughout.

was just mentioned as a particular friend and partisan of Arminius, proposed, and, with great zeal, recommended him to the Curators of the University, as a candidate for the vacant Professorship.¹⁰ The leading Belgic ministers, hearing of this recommendation, and deeply apprehensive of the consequences of electing such a man to so important a station, besought both Uytenbogart and the Curators of the University to desist from all attempts to place in such an office one who was the object of so much suspicion. But these entreaties were disregarded. The recommendation of him was prosecuted with undiminished zeal, and the Curators at length elected and formally called him to the vacant chair.

The call being laid, as usual, before the Classis of Amsterdam, that body declined to put it into his hands. They supposed that he was more likely to prove mischievous in the office to which he was called than in his pastoral charge, where he was more immediately under the supervision and restraint of his brethren in the ministry. But, at length, at the repeated and earnest entreaties of Uytenbogart, of the Curators, and of Arminius himself, he was permitted to accept the call, and was regularly dismissed from the Classis to enter on his new office. This dismissal, however, was granted upon the express condition, that he should hold a conference with Gomarus, one of the theological Professors in the same University with that to which he was called;¹¹ and should remove from himself all suspicion of heterodoxy by a full and candid declaration of his opinions in regard to the leading doctrines of the Gospel; and, moreover, the Classis exacted from him a solemn promise, that, if it should be found that he held any opinions different from the Belgic Confession, he would refrain from disseminating them. This conference was held in the presence of the Curators of the University, and the Deputies of the Synod, in the course of which Arminius solemnly disavowed Pelagian opinions;¹² declared his full belief in all that Augustine had written against those opinions; and promised in the most explicit manner that he would

10. Francis Junius the Elder (1545-1602) was one of the most celebrated Protestant divines of his day.

11. Franciscus Gomarus (1563-1641) was a Dutch Protestant pastor and theologian.

12. Pelagius (c. AD 360-418), opposed by Augustine of Hippo, was a British theologian who denied the doctrine of original sin and affirmed an unbiblical doctrine of human freedom.