

From Dort to Today the development of the reformed faith

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A Time of Decline (1619-1834)

The Synod of Dordrecht had finished its sessions; the delegates had returned to their homes. A great victory had been won in the Church of Jesus Christ. The truth of the Reformation had triumphed over the errors of Pelagianism as they had reappeared in Arminianism. The fruit of this great victory was our Canons—a precious heritage which we treasure today.

But history moves on; and we must move on with it.

The period from the end of the Synod of Dordrecht in 1619 to the time of the first major schism in the Reformed Churches in 1834 was not a happy time.

It was a period in which the Church became more and more corrupt. Not only did Arminianism reappear in this period as an influential voice in the Netherlands; but more fundamental doctrines were openly attacked and denied as the years rolled by. Such basic truths as the infallibility of the Scriptures, the truth of the trinity, the doctrine of the divinity of Christ were called into question and publicly denied. Evil heresies that had been condemned by the Church a millennium before this at Nicea and Chalcedon were once again defended within the Reformed Churches.

And along with this doctrinal decline was also a spiritual degeneration in the lives of the people. Discipline all but disappeared in the Churches. The people became very worldly. Disgraceful practices were tolerated. Piety all but disappeared in many sections of the country. Materialism gripped the people with its icy and deadening clutches. It was a time of darkness with little that was commendable.

Before we enter into a little more detailed discussion of some of the errors that were taught in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands during this period, it might be well to try, if possible, to lay our fingers on the reasons for this swift and sorry decline. The question naturally arises how it was possible for the Churches which had so recently won such an astonishing victory over heresy now to fall so miserably into worse errors yet.

This question is not so easy to answer, for the reasons were complex. Especially it is difficult to determine how much each separate factor contributed to the general apostasy of the Church. What role did all these things have in the decline of the life of the Churches?

Nevertheless, the following factors were undoubtedly the main reasons why this period is best described as a period of decline.

1) First of all, the times were times of great material prosperity for the people inhabiting the Low Countries. The Netherlands had become a strong nation politically with a stable government, a powerful army and a mighty navy that sailed the seven seas. Colonists were being settled around the world, especially in the Dutch East Indies and in the New World in what is now New York. Trade was flourishing and the colonies were bringing in rich rewards. The industrious and talented Hollanders were making products that could readily be sold in all parts of the civilized world. The Netherlands had been famous for its craftsmen and artisans; a ready market could be found for its products. The country was becoming a world power of sorts.

But material prosperity is, as a general rule, not conducive to a strong Church. Usually when the Church flourishes materially, her spiritual life suffers. When the people of God have an abundance of material things, they tend to forget that they receive everything from the hand of their heavenly Father. They become so engrossed in accumulating earthly possessions that they lose interest in the treasures of the truth and in the spiritual wealth of the kingdom of heaven.

This was true in the Netherlands.

2) Secondly, there are some church historians who find another contributing factor in the immigration of many French Huguenots.

From the time of Calvin, a strong Reformed Church had been established in France and had written a strong Calvinistic Confession. But these French Calvinists (called Huguenots) were severely persecuted in France and many of them fled to the Netherlands which had become a bulwark of the Reformed faith. As the years went by however, and the immigration from France continued, the spiritual qualities of the Huguenots did not improve. Many of them had come under the influence of French rationalism. It was the time of the French Revolution when men bowed before the goddess of reason. Old philosophies were revived; Deism became the fashionable religion; Scripture was ignored and mocked. French Calvinists became tainted with these influences and carried them into the Dutch Reformed Churches when they moved their homes to the Low Countries.

How important a factor this is and how much this contributed to the decline is difficult to determine. Surely there is an element of truth in the contention that these things added to the general apostasy. But, at the same time, it must be remembered that many strong Calvinists also came from France (witness the many French names among our own people of Dutch background) and were a source of considerable strength to the Netherlands Churches.

3) Thirdly, we may find a reason for decline in doctrine in the fact that, after Dordrecht, a reaction set in. This is often the case in the history of the Church. After a prolonged and bitter struggle to defend the truth, the Church is tempted to rest on its laurels and sit back at ease. A great victory had been won over the forces of Arminianism and the people thought there were no more battles to fight. They were weary of struggle and became complacent and lethargic in a false sense of security.

This was not unique among the Churches in the Netherlands. This had happened before in the Church; and it has happened since. But the devil never accepts defeat. He attacks again even though he may have lost a battle. The war of faith goes on throughout all the ages and will cease only when the Lord returns. Each battle is only part of the long and bitter war of the history of the world. But the people of God sometimes are inclined to think that one battle won brings an end to the war. And this is dangerous, for then they are no longer watching and guarding the truth. Unnoticed then evil and heresy again creeps into the Church. And the saints, lulled to sleep, weary of fighting; do not see that the devil is not yet completely overcome, but that he has attacked again in his unrelenting determination to destroy the Church.

This happened in the Netherlands. Dead orthodoxy was a chilling reality. And the Church suffered on account of it.

4) There was however, one factor which probably more than any other contributed to the spiritual decline of the Churches. I refer to the unique relation that existed in the Netherlands between Church and State.

We have already noticed this relation in past articles. You will recall that the Churches could not call the Synod of Dordrecht until they had the approval of the States General. The

result was then that many years elapsed before a national Synod could meet, years in which Arminianism made deep inroads into the Church.

This same relationship continued to plague the Churches throughout this entire period and contributed considerably to the degeneration of that day.

I say it was a unique relationship. Not because the Netherlands was the only place where the Church and State had such close ties; this was true also in England, but because it is different from the relation between Church and State which we know in this country.

It is impossible to enter into this subject in detail in these articles; nor will that prove to be of any particular advantage. It will be sufficient to sketch the broad outlines of this aspect of the history of this period, if only the reader will bear in mind that it is difficult to overestimate the importance of this factor as it contributed to the sad state of affairs.

But this must wait till our next article.

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