QUESTION 1

Who Was Jacobus Arminius, and Who Were the Remonstrants?

Jacobus Arminius was born in 1559 in the city of Oudewater in the Netherlands and was named Jacob Harmenszoon, a Dutch name of which Jacobus Arminius is a latinized version.[1] His father died before he was born, and he and his brothers and sisters were raised by their mother. In 1575, Arminius went to study with Rudolphus Snellius, a professor at the University of Marburg. While Arminius was there, his family was killed in the Spanish massacre of Oudewater. The next year he enrolled in the new university at Leiden. It was there that he began his academic and ministerial career in earnest, as well as his serious interaction with the confessional theology of the Reformed Church in the Netherlands. After graduation from Leiden in 1581, he went to Geneva to study under Theodore Beza, Calvin's successor. He left there to study at Basel for a year but returned and studied at Geneva until 1586.

In 1587 Arminius began a pastorate in Amsterdam and was ordained the next year. Before assuming his pastorate, he traveled with his friend Adrian Junius to Italy and studied philosophy for seven months at the University of Padua. He said that the experience made the Roman Church appear to

1. Much of the brief summary information in this chapter relies on Carl Bangs, *Arminius: A Study in the Dutch Reformation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971); Bangs, "Arminius and the Reformation," *Church History* 30 (1961): 155–60; and Robert E. Picirilli, *Grace, Faith, Free Will: Contrasting Views of Salvation: Calvinism and Arminianism* (Nashville: Randall House, 2002), 3–17. For a valuable shorter introductions to Arminius's life, but longer than this sketch, see Stephen M. Ashby, "Introduction," *The Works of James Arminius,* 3 vols., trans. James Nichols and William Nichols (Nashville: Randall House, 2007). Some of the material in this chapter is adapted from J. Matthew Pinson, "Will the Real Arminius Please Stand Up? A Study of the Theology of Jacobus Arminius in Light of His Interpreters," *Integrity: A Journal of Christian Thought* 2 (2003): 121–39, reprinted in Pinson, *Arminian and Baptist: Explorations in a Theological Tradition* (Nashville: Randall House, 2015), chapter 1.

him "more foul, ugly, and detestable" than he could have imagined.[2] However, some of his later detractors used the trip to suggest that he had sympathies with Rome, "that he had kissed the pope's shoe, become acquainted with the Jesuits, and cherished a familiar intimacy with Cardinal Bellarmine."[3]

In 1590 Arminius married Lijbset Reael, a daughter of a member of the city council. About this time he became involved in theological controversy. He was asked to refute the teachings of Dirck Coornhert, a humanist who had criticized Calvinism, and two ministers at Delft who had written an anti-Calvinist pamphlet. The traditional view was that Arminius, in his attempt to refute these anti-Calvinist teachings, converted from Calvinism to anti-Calvinism. Yet Carl Bangs has shown that there is no evidence that he ever held strict Calvinist views. At any rate, he became involved in controversy over the doctrines of the strong Calvinists. In 1591 he preached on Romans 7, arguing (against many Calvinists' view) that the person described in verses 14–24 was regenerate.

A minister named Petrus Plancius led the charge against Arminius. Plancius labeled Arminius a Pelagian, alleging that he had moved away from the Belgic Confession of Faith and the Heidelberg Catechism, advocating anti-Reformed views on predestination and perfectionism. Arminius insisted that his theology was in line with that of the Reformed Church and its confessional standards, the Belgic Confession of Faith and Heidelberg Catechism, and the Amsterdam burgomasters sided with him. About a year later, after Arminius preached a series of sermons on Romans 9, Plancius again leveled accusations against him. The latter insisted that his teachings were in line with Article 16 of the Belgic Confession, and the consistory accepted his explanation, urging peace until the matter could be decided by a general synod.

For the next ten years, Arminius enjoyed a relatively peaceful pastorate and avoided theological controversy. During this decade, he wrote a great deal on theology (many things that were never published in his lifetime), including extensive works on Romans 7 and 9 as well as a long correspondence with the Leiden Calvinist Francis Junius. In 1602, there was an effort to get Arminius named to a post at the University of Leiden, but Leiden professor Franciscus Gomarus led an opposition to Arminius's appointment. Still, the Leiden burgomasters appointed Arminius as professor of theology in May 1603. Soon he was awarded a doctorate in theology.

Arminius would spend the last six years of his life at Leiden, struggling with tuberculosis but always in a firestorm of theological controversy. The primary source of the controversy was predestination. Another issue of dispute

2. Arminius, *Works*, 1:26. This quotation is from Peter Bertius, "An Oration on the Life and Death of That Reverend and Very Famous Man James Arminius, D.D.," reprinted in the London edition of Arminius's *Works*.
3. Caspar Brandt, *The Life of James Arminius, D.D.*, trans. John Guthrie (London: Ward and Company, 1854), 28.

was the convening of a national synod. Arminius's side wanted a national synod convened with power to make revisions to the Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechism, while the strict Calvinists relied more on local synods. In 1607 the States General brought together a conference to prepare for a national synod. Arminius recommended the revision of the confessional documents but was voted down. He continued to be accused of false teaching, which resulted in his petitioning the States General to inquire into his case.

Eventually, Arminius and Gomarus appeared before the High Court in 1608 to make their respective cases. This was the occasion for Arminius's famous *Declaration of Sentiments*.[4] In that work, Arminius forthrightly argued against unconditional election. He concluded by asking again for a national synod with hopes for a revision of the Confession. Gomarus appeared before the States General and accused Arminius of errors on not only original sin, divine foreknowledge, predestination, regeneration, good works, and the possibility of apostasy, but also the Trinity and biblical authority. While the States General did not support Gomarus, the controversy became more heated.

In August of 1609, the States General invited Arminius and Gomarus back for a conference. They were each to bring four other colleagues. Yet Arminius's illness, which had been worsening, made it impossible for him to continue the conference, which was dismissed. The States General asked the two men to submit their views in writing within two weeks. Arminius never completed his, owing to his illness, and he died on October 19, 1609.

Arminius's Theological Context

To understand Arminius's life as a theologian, one must understand the historical background of confessional theology in the Reformed Church in the Netherlands during his lifetime. Most of the interpretations of Arminius's theology have been based on misconceptions about Arminius's life and context.[5] Carl Bangs noted that interpreters of Arminius commonly misunderstand basic facts about him and his context.[6] They mistakenly think that Arminius was reared and educated amidst Calvinism and accepted Genevan Calvinism. They also misunderstand that as a student of Theodore Beza he accepted supralapsarianism and that, while preparing to refute Dirck Coornhert, he changed his mind and went over to Coornhert's humanism and that thus his theology was a polemic against Reformed theology. None of these things, as Bangs has shown, are true.[7]

4. W. Stephen Gunter, *Arminius and His Declaration of Sentiments: An Annotated Translation with Introduction and Theological Commentary* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012).
5. The information in this section relies heavily on Bangs, "Arminius and the Reformation," 155–60.
6. These misconceptions arise from the Peter Bertius's funeral oration for Arminius and Caspar Brandt's *Life of James Arminius.*
7. See Bangs, *Arminius*, 139–42.

Arminius was not predisposed to a supralapsarian view of predestination. He rather shared the views of numerous Reformed theologians and pastors before him. The origins of the Reformed Church in the Netherlands were diverse, both historically and theologically. When Calvin published his views on predestination in the 1540s, many within the Reformed churches reacted negatively. When Sabastien Castellio disagreed with Calvin's view of predestination, he was banished from Geneva but was given asylum by the Reformed in Basel and soon offered a professorship there. It was said that, in Basel, "if one wishes to scold another, he calls him a Calvinist."[8]

Another Reformed theologian who reacted negatively to Calvin's doctrine of predestination was Jerome Bolsec, who settled in Geneva in 1550. When Calvin and Beza sent a list of Bolsec's errors to the Swiss churches, they were disappointed with the response. The church of Basel urged that Calvin and Bolsec try to emphasize their similarities. The ministers of Bern reminded Calvin of the many biblical texts that refer to God's universal grace. Even Heinrich Bullinger disagreed with Calvin's soteriology. Bangs notes that "the most consistent resistance to [Calvin's] predestination theory came from the German-speaking cantons." Even in Geneva there was a fair amount of resistance. This is evidenced by the presence of Charles Perrot, whose views diverged from Calvin's, on the faculty of the University of Geneva even during Beza's lifetime.[9]

"From the very beginnings of the introduction of Reformed religion in the Low Countries," says Bangs, "the milder views of the Swiss cantons were in evidence." Because of Roman Catholic persecution, the first Dutch Reformed synod was held at the Reformed church in Emden. The church's pastor, Albert Hardenberg, who was closer to Philip Melanchthon than to Calvin on predestination, exerted great influence on the early leaders in the Dutch Reformed churches—most notably Clement Martenson and John Isbrandtson, who openly opposed the spread of Genevan Calvinism in the Low Countries. At the Synod of Emden in 1571, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession of Faith were adopted. Both these documents allowed room for disagreement on the doctrines of grace and predestination, but some Geneva-educated ministers began attempts to enforce a stricter interpretation of them.[10]

Thus two parties arose in the Dutch Reformed Church. Those who were less inclined to a Calvinistic view of predestination tended to prefer a form of Erastianism (in which the magistrates controlled discipline in the church) and toleration toward Lutherans and Anabaptists, while the Genevan elements wanted strict adherence to Calvinism and Presbyterian church government.

8. Bangs, "Arminius and the Reformation," 157.
9. Bangs, "Arminius and the Reformation," 158.
10. Bangs, "Arminius and the Reformation," 159.

The laity, including the magistrates, tended toward the former, while more clergy tended toward the latter. However, a significant number of clergy clung to non-Calvinistic views of predestination. As Johannes Trapman notes, the States General "never wished to define the Reformed Religion so strictly as to exclude those who accepted only conditional predestination, that is 'some' ministers, 'many' magistrates, and 'countless' church members."[11]

As late as 1586, Caspar Coolhaes, a Reformed pastor in Leiden, after being excommunicated by the national synod at the Hague, was supported by the magistrates at Leiden.[12] The provincial synod of Haarlem of 1582 deposed and excommunicated him, an action opposed by the magistrates and some ministers of Leiden, the Hague, Dort, and Gouda. The Synod also attempted to force the Dutch churches to accept a rigid doctrine of predestination but did not succeed. As Bangs says, Coohaes "continued to write, with the support of the States of Holland and the magistrates of Leiden. A compromise reconciliation between the two factions was attempted, but it was not successful. This indicates something of a mixed situation in the Reformed churches of Holland at the time that Arminius was emerging as a theologian."[13] Thus there was no clear consensus on the doctrines of grace and predestination in the Dutch Reformed churches of Arminius's time.[14]

The Remonstrants and the Synod of Dort

While Arminius was still living, some of the local synods required their ministers to state their views on the Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechism.[15] This move concerned the States General, which saw this as a challenge to its power. Thus it ordered that the ministers in question submit their views to the States General. In 1610, not long after Arminius's death, some of his followers, led by men such as Johannes Uytenbogaert, Simon Episcopius, and Hugo Grotius, and supported by political leaders such as Johan van Oldenbarnevelt, issued an entreaty to the States General known as a Remonstrance. Thus they came to be known as "Remonstrants," and the Calvinists were dubbed "Counter-Remonstrants."

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11. Johannes Trapman, "Grotius and Erasmus," in *Hugo Grotius, Theologian: Essays in Honor of G. H. M. Posthumus Meyjes*, eds. Henk J. M. Nellen and Edwin Rabbie (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 86.
12. Linda Stuckrath Gottschalk, *Pleading for Diversity: The Church Caspar Coolhaes Wanted* (Göttingen: Vandenhoek and Ruprecth, 2017), 106–10; Bangs, *Arminius*, 54–55. Coolhaes taught at the University of Leiden while Arminius was a student there. The first rigid predestinarian did not teach at the University until the arrival of Lambert Daneau.
13. Bangs, "Arminius and the Reformation," 160. See also Gottschalk, *Pleading for Diversity*, 114–15.
14. Bangs, *Arminius*, 51–55.
15. Much of this material about the Remonstrants relies on Picirilli, *Grace, Faith, Free Will*, 3–17.

Tensions continued to heighten after the publication of the Remonstrance. The States General desired peace, and the Remonstrants were protected by many in positions of political power. The Remonstrants continued to call for a national synod, as Arminius had, that would rationally and peacefully resolve the issue. Maurice, Prince of Orange, who had been mentored by Oldenbarnevelt, came increasingly to see the Calvinists as his political allies. Maurice wanted to go to war with Roman Catholic Spain, and he began to convince people that the Arminians were Roman Catholic sympathizers. This stacked the deck of the national synod, called in 1618, against the Arminians.

The States General called together this synod to begin May 1, 1618. Soon Oldenbarnevelt and Grotius were arrested, thus further predisposing the synod to oppose the Arminian party. The synod finally convened in Dordrecht—thus the name "Synod of Dort"—in November of 1618 and lasted to May of 1619. Although most of the delegates were from the Low Countries, twenty-seven of them came from elsewhere on the European continent as well as from the British Isles. Though it was directed that Remonstrants not be selected as delegates, three were initially, though they were required to yield their places to Calvinists. Thus the Synod essentially treated the Remonstrants as defendants, charged them with heresy, and required them to appear before the Synod and respond to the charges.

Episcopius, speaking for the Remonstrant party, attempted to work their strategy of starting with a refutation of Calvinism, especially reprobation, hoping to gain support. Yet the Synod would not allow him to do so, instead ordering the Remonstrants to "justify themselves, by giving Scriptural proof in support of their opinions." However, the Remonstrants would not give in to this method and were forced to withdraw from the proceedings of the Synod, which continued without them present.[16]

In January of 1619, the Synod dismissed the Remonstrants and denounced them as heretics.[17] The Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechism were officially adopted. However, a third document, the Canons of Dort, was added, which crystallized what are often known as the "five points of Calvinism" as the official teaching of the Reformed churches. Thus these three documents, which came to be known as the "Three Forms of Unity," formed the

16. Herman J. Selderhuis, "Introduction to the Synod of Dort (1618–1619)," in *Acta et Documenta Synodi Nationalis Dordrechtanae (1618–1619)*, vol. 1, *Acta of the Synod of Dort*, eds. Donald Sinnema, Christian Moser, and Herman J. Selderhuis (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2015), xvii–xviii; Thomas Scott, *The Articles of Synod of Dort* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1856), 5.

17. Th. Marius Van Leeuwen, "Introduction: Arminius, Arminianism, and Europe," in *Arminius, Arminianism, and Europe*, ed. Th. Marius van Leeuwen, Keith D. Stanglin, and Marijke Tolsma (Leiden: Brill, 2009), xvii–xviii; see also R. Scott Clark's insightful essay, "Are the Remonstrants Heretics?" at https://heidelblog.net/2017/05/are-the-remonstrants-heretics-1. Accessed February 27, 2020.

confessional basis of the Reformed Church from that point forward. As will be argued in Question 8, the Canons of Dort were needed because neither the Belgic Confession of Faith nor the Heidelberg Catechism clearly taught the five points of Calvinism.

The Remonstrants were punished mercilessly. Two hundred ministers were stripped of their livelihood as ministers, and many were exiled. Many of the Remonstrants were imprisoned, yet some escaped to other countries that extended them more tolerance. Hugo Grotius, for example, escaped to England. As Th. Marius van Leeuwen says, however, this hostility backfired, causing many to have sympathy for the Remonstrants. Many of the English delegates to the Synod came to it against Arminianism but left in favor of it. One English visitor, reflecting on when he heard Episcopius speak, said, "There I bid Calvin good-night." The English "were shocked by the way in which the Remonstrants had been expelled from the church." After Prince Maurice's death in 1625, however, the Remonstrants were tolerated in the Netherlands. They started a school at which Episcopius and Grotius served as faculty members.[18]

Even at this early stage, Remonstrant theology had begun to move away from the more Reformed theology of Arminius.[19] Grotius's and Episcopius's views represented departures from the more Reformed views on original sin, atonement, and justification Arminius had taught, and later thinkers such as Philipp van Limborch diverged even farther from Arminius.[20] However, an approach more like that of Arminius would continue. During the seventeenth century, General Baptists such as Thomas Helwys and Thomas Grantham

18. Van Leeuwen, "Introduction," xviii–xx; G. J. Hoenderdaal, "The Debate about Arminius outside the Netherlands," in *Leiden University in the Seventeenth Century: An Exchange of Learning*, ed. Th. H. Lunsingh Scheurleer and G. H. M. Posthumus Meyjes (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 153.
19. See, e.g., William den Boer, *God's Twofold Love: The Theology of Jacob Arminius (1559–1609)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2010), who explains that there was a "significant theological shift from Arminius to Episcopius. This shift can be characterized as one from 'faith and justification' to 'repentance, sanctification and good works'" (39).
20. In addition to den Boer, *God's Twofold Love*, 38–39, see also, e.g., Mark A. Ellis, *Simon Episcopius' Doctrine of Original Sin* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006); W. Stephen Gunter, "From Arminius (d. 1609) to the Synod of Dort (1618–1619)," in *Perfecting Perfection: Essays in Honour of Henry D. Rack*, ed. Robert Webster (Cambridge: James Clarke and Company, 2016), 8–28; John Mark Hicks, "The Theology of Grace in the Thought of Jacobus Arminius and Philip van Limborch: A Study in the Development of Seventeenth Century Dutch Arminianism" (Ph.D. diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1985); Sarah Mortimer, *Reason and Religion in the English Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 25–26, 119–25; Moses Stuart, "The Creed of Arminius," *Biblical Repository* 1 (1831): 303–4. As Gunter argues, "it was an altered form of Arminius's theology that we find on trial at Dort" (Gunter, "From Arminius (d. 1609) to the Synod of Dort (1618–1619)," 8n2).

were teaching views on the doctrine of salvation that were very close to those of Arminius.[21]

Summary

Arminius was a self-consciously Reformed pastor and professor who represented a broader approach to Reformed soteriology that was tolerated in his day but came under increasing scrutiny as Reformed theology began to be increasingly influenced by Genevan Calvinism. Arminius's theology must be pieced together from his scattered theological writings. He was not able to produce a fully formed theological system, which he could have perhaps produced had his poor health not cut his life short in 1609. Thus some of Arminius's theology is incomplete and ambiguous and does not answer all the questions that would be fleshed out in later Arminian theological systems. The Remonstrants soon began moving away from the Reformed caste of Arminius's theology.

One wonders, had Arminius lived another decade, if his conciliatory spirit and Reformed sensibilities might have brought about a different outcome in the theo-political situation of the Netherlands in the early seventeenth-century and thus the Synod of Dort. One wonders if Dort may have, in that case, allowed for more diversity in expressions of Reformed theology than it did.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What were Arminius's detractors' primary accusations regarding his theology?

2. Was Arminius reared and educated amidst Calvinism in a Calvinist country?

3. What does Arminius's being asked to refute Dirck Coornhert say about his alleged former commitment to Genevan Calvinism?

4. What became of Arminius's followers after his death?

5. Who in the seventeenth century were closer to Arminius's theology, the Remonstrants or the General Baptists?

21. For more on this stream of soteriology, see J. Matthew Pinson, *Arminian and Baptist: Explorations in a Theological Tradition* (Nashville: Randall House, 2015).