

## **Reformation Day 2021:**

### **The Gospel of Grace**

**Covenant Waterfall, 31 October 2021**

Pray

#### **Introduction**

Today marks the 504<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. Five-hundred and four years ago, on the 31 October 1517, a German monk named Martin Luther, in protest against the Roman Catholic Church, nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. That set off a series of events that forever changed the church.

What then sparked the Reformation? During that time, there was widespread corruption in the church leadership. It was forbidden for the Bible to be read by the masses in their mother tongue, and therefore the truth of the gospel had been obscured. People were taught by Rome that they had to earn their salvation through a mixture of good works and grace. In other words – you need to do your bit, and God does his bit – and through that, you might be saved.

Your bit? Paying indulgences (dead relatives out of Purgatory). Making sure go to confession, doing enough good works, prayers to the saints, give enough alms to the poor.

God's bit? God gives his grace to help you in your good works. Basically – God helps those who help themselves.

Because salvation is a mixture of your works and God's grace – never quite assured of your salvation. Sin badly, don't do enough good works – out of a state of grace, not sure where you stand with God. Ultimately makes salvation man-centred, dependent on us.

The Reformation began to change this. It was a return to a God-centred faith - a recovery of the gospel – of true grace – that salvation is an undeserved gift from God. That our salvation, from beginning to end is God's work: God the Father chose us before the creation

of the world for salvation. God the Son redeemed us by dying a death on the cross for our sins, freely forgiving us. God the Holy Spirit sealed us as his children for all eternity. Salvation is from the Lord – all him, we don't contribute anything to it, just receive it as a gift from God, and live obedient lives as a response to what God has given us in Christ.

Europe exploded with the preaching of Luther, Calvin, Zwingli and many others who proclaimed the truth of God's Word. The light of the gospel began to shine where there had been superstition and darkness.

Yet less than a hundred years after the Reformation, the Reformed church, which had been formed as a result of the Reformation, found itself in a crisis. A Dutch Reformed minister named Jakobus Arminius, started to revert back to teaching a man-centred gospel, like the Roman Catholic Church – you do your bit and God will go his bit – making salvation dependent on us, rather than God. He built up a following, called the Remonstrance, who started to directly challenge the God-centred gospel teaching of the Reformed church.

The followers of Arminius summarised his teaching in five points, known as the five points of the Remonstrance. These were: election is conditional (God saves people according to foreseen faith and merit within themselves), the atonement of Christ is universal (Christ died for every single person who has ever lived), man is sinful, not totally depraved, as he is still able to seek God despite sin, God's grace is resistible and believers can fall away from grace and lose their salvation.

The Remonstrance's objections to the theology taught in the Reformed churches all came to a head in the Synod of Dort which took place from 1618 to 1619 in the Dutch town of Dordrecht. This was a gathering of all the Reformed churches in Europe at the time. They met primarily to discuss the Arminian controversies.

The result of the Synod was that the Reformed churches unanimously rejected the Arminian five points of the Remonstrance as unscriptural and heretical. The Synod viewed the Arminian standpoint as making salvation rest on man's own work, and not on God. The Reformed position in contrast held that salvation was a work of God's grace from beginning to end. Man played absolutely no part in his salvation, it was all a gift of grace from God.

The Synod's response to the Arminians was formulated in the Canons of Dort, which constituted five points repudiating the Arminian ideas. These later became known as the doctrines of grace: the Five Points of Calvinism, or by the acrostic "TULIP". At heart – defence of the heart of the gospel of grace.

It's these doctrines of grace that we are going to look at this morning. Why? What relevance does a 400-year-old theological debate have for us? Lots! Firstly, we need to understand that the truth of the gospel needs to be defended in every generation. How come? Our sinful human tendencies are wired contrary to the gospel – instead to legalism – earn our own salvation, far more comfortable with a man-centred gospel, than with the true gospel of grace. The gospel doesn't come naturally to us!

Secondly, this idea – heart of the issue at Synod of Dort – gospel = "us doing our bit and God doing his bit" is still very much prevalent in the church today. Man-centred theology. Many of us are taught that God will only bless us (i.e. with money, a good life and material things) if we do certain things for him, whether it be tithing or fasting, miracles, or some other form of obedience.

Obedience to God is good, but it needs to flow from what God had already done for us in Christ. Otherwise our relationship with God becomes transactional – we work for his grace and strive for blessing. We're also taught that our disobedience and sin also threatens our standing with God. This means that it is possible for us to fall away from grace and lose our salvation if we sin too much. The result of this type of belief is that you are never assured of your salvation and are always insecure as to whether you are loved by God.

Let's now look at each of these five points of the Canons of Dort (the doctrines of grace) – all key to our understanding of the gospel of grace. At heart - that salvation is entirely a gift of grace from God, that "Salvation belongs to the Lord." (Jonah 2:9):

### **Point 1: Total depravity**

Last week, looked at sin in Genesis 3. Saw that conventional wisdom tells us that "people are mostly good." All have some defects, but ultimately good by nature. We only do bad things because we pick up bad habits from our environment. We're born a blank slate,

having free will to choose between good or evil. It's therefore up to us whether we choose to follow God or not.

This is pretty much what the Arminians taught. Though he agreed that mankind was born into sin, he didn't view sin as something serious enough to affect our free will, nor did he believe that Adam's sin was enough to condemn all mankind to hell. Sinful man is still able to choose God out of his own free will, as he still has some spiritual good in him.

In stark contrast to this, the Synod of Dort defended the biblical view that our fall into sin has touched every part of our being, causing us to be totally depraved. Sin has affected us so seriously that, as Ephesians 2:1-3 says, we are **“dead in our sins and trespasses... following the power of the prince of the air... only carrying out the desires of the flesh... by nature children of wrath.”** And as Romans 3:11-12 declares, **“None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. <sup>12</sup> All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.”**

In our natural sinful state, things are so bad that we are actually dead, we cannot even seek after God, we're incapable of choosing him as our hearts are under the bondage of sin, only able to do evil, by nature deserving of God's wrath.

The Canons of Dort stated in this regard, echoing Scripture: “So all men are conceived in sin. They are born children of wrath, incapable of any saving good, prone to evil, dead in sin, and servants of sin. Without the regenerating grace of the Holy Spirit, they neither can nor want to return to God, correct their depraved nature, or dispose themselves to such correction.”

## **Point 2: Unconditional election**

You often hear it said in Christian circles that because God has given us free will, it's up to us whether or not we choose Christ. Our salvation then is really our own choice. This is basically what the Arminians taught too. They believed that God looks down the halls of time to see who will choose him, and those that choose God, God will then save. So the logical conclusion of this then is that man is the cause of his salvation.

The Synod of Dort completely rejected this man-centred theology, and stood strong on biblical truth of unconditional election. It's simply impossible for us to choose God, because

in our sinful state we are dead and incapable of doing so. No one can even seek God (Rom 3:11). Instead of us choosing God, it's God who has to choose us / elect and have mercy on us. He chose, or unconditionally elected those of us for salvation in Christ, not because of anything within us (works, foreseen faith etc.) – no conditions to our salvation - but purely because he chose to set his love upon us. Clear, consistent teaching of Scripture from OT to NT. E.g. Ephesians 1:4-5:

**“he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.”**

Jesus says in John 15:16, **“You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit...”**

Canons of Dort – “God chose his elect, according to his most free good pleasure of his will, out of mere grace. Those chosen were neither better nor more worthy than others, but were like others fallen into the common human misery...”

See here, God's unconditional election of us – demonstration of his pure, undeserved grace. None of us merited our salvation, no, despite ourselves, God chose us in Christ by his good pleasure and out of mere grace. Nothing more, nothing less!

### **Point 3: Definite atonement**

Conventional Christian wisdom = Jesus died for the sins of the whole world. It's our act of choosing Christ that makes his death on the cross effectual in our lives to forgive our sins. This was essentially the teaching of the Arminians too. They taught that Jesus' atoning work only has potential to save people. Because he died for the sins of the whole world, it doesn't effectively save everyone, as that means that everyone who has ever lived would be saved. Christ's atonement only becomes effective to a person once that person chooses Christ. Again, we see man-centred theology here – cause of salvation is us, not God.

Synod of Dort rejected this and affirmed, along with the Bible that Jesus' atoning death and resurrection actually achieved our salvation, it was effective for our salvation. Jesus died

specifically for the sins of his chosen people, not for the sins of every single person that has ever lived. If that was the case, then every single person would be saved. As only God's elect are saved, it is only for them that Jesus died.

Matthew 1:21, **"She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save *his people from their sins.*"**

John 10:14-15, **"I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, <sup>15</sup> just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; *and I lay down my life for the sheep.*"**

Canons of Dort – "It was the most free counsel and most gracious will and intention of God the Father that the living and saving efficacy of the most valuable death of his Son would extend to all the elect. To the elect alone he gives justifying faith and infallibly produces salvation through faith."

Clear – Jesus died on the cross for his chosen people, and thereby actually forgiving our sins. Means that Jesus' work on the cross doesn't potentially save people, but effectively saves all of God's people.

#### **Point 4: Irresistible grace**

You would have heard it said that the Holy Spirit is a gentleman, he never violates our free will or conscience. In other words, God never turns a person's will by his sovereign power, from being in rebellion to him, to coming to faith. Our faith in Christ is our own choice – it's our decision. This was also the teaching of the Arminians. God's grace is just a bit of gentle persuasion, so it can be resisted. Again, salvation is our choice, man-centred theology.

Dort rejected this and affirmed what the Bible teaches. Because of our sinfulness and hard-heartedness, our hearts have to be softened first by God's Spirit before we are able to have faith in Christ. Regeneration comes before faith. God first draws us to him by his Spirit – he makes the first move – and changes our hearts so that we are able to receive Christ. In this way, his grace is irresistible to us. Those whom God calls to himself, indeed come. His calling is always effective.

John 6:37, **“All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.”**

Romans 8:30, **“And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.”**

Canons of Dort – “Faith is the gift of God. It is not a gift in the sense that it is offered by God for human choice. Rather, it is really conferred on, breathed into, and infused in man. It is not a gift in which God confers a power to believe, leaving it to the choice of man whether he will consent and perform the act of believing. Rather, God, who works both to will and to do, effects in man the will to believe and the believing itself. Indeed, he works all in all.”

God’s grace is indeed irresistible – he effectually calls us to faith in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Thank God for that! Left to our own, we would never even seek him, nor be able to have faith in him.

#### **Point 5: Perseverance of the Saints**

Commonly taught in our church culture that you can fall away from your faith in Christ. Genuine, born again Christians can lose their salvation. How? Repeated sins and doubts. It’s up to us to ensure that we live in perpetual obedience to God, in order that we don’t fall out of grace. This is precisely what the Arminians taught as well – can lose your salvation. Man-centred theology again – it’s on us to live properly so that we’ll be saved.

Dort rejected this, held to biblical truth. Those whom God has chosen before the foundation of the world, those whom Christ has died for, and whom he has drawn unto himself by his Spirit, he will empower them to persevere in our faith in Christ, until the end. If we’re in Christ, God is faithful to preserve us for eternal life. If we are indeed born again, raised from death to life in Christ as a new creation, we can’t become “unborn again”. Even though we may struggle with sins and doubts, he preserves us through these. In Christ, we always belong to God. Nothing can ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Rom 8:38-39, Rom 8:30, Jn 10:27-28, Php 1:6, 1 Cor 1:7-9).

Romans 8:38-39, **“For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers,<sup>39</sup> nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”**

Philippians 1:6, **“And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”**

Canons of Dort, “God, who is rich in mercy, because of his immutable purpose of election, does not utterly take away the Holy Spirit from the converted even in their sad falls. Neither does he let them fall so far that they lose the grace of adoption or the state of justification. He does not let them commit the sin unto death or the sin against the Holy Spirit or be so utterly deserted by the Spirit as to rush into eternal destruction.”

Incredibly comforting! If we’re in Christ now, we have absolute assurance – despite our ups and downs, God remains faithful to his covenant promise to save us, never leave nor forsake us! Sheer, undeserved grace!

## **Conclusion**

504 years on from the Reformation and it’s clear that the truth of the gospel that the Reformers recovered, that the Synod of Dort defended, that our salvation from beginning to end, belongs to the Lord – we receive this by gift from God in Christ by grace alone; that this remains the most important, and life-changing truth for everyone on the planet.

Though we are grateful for what God did in the Reformation and Synod of Dort back then; we need to pray for a modern-day reformation of the gospel right here in our own land.

That the true God-centred gospel would be proclaimed in all churches. That the beauty of the gospel of grace would be boldly proclaimed, that pastors would preach the whole counsel of God unashamedly and that above all Jesus Christ would be exalted! This is why a church like ours exists – preach the gospel!

Yes – see reformation in our land, but also in our hearts. Think you can get right with God on your own terms – futile exercise.



Can only receive God's grace in Christ as an undeserved gift. Trust in Jesus, in his saving work on the cross, that he died in your place, facing the wrath that you deserved, forgiving you your sins in order to restore you to God for all eternity.

Amen