



WHY DO WE BELIEVE *THAT* ?
Introduction to Reformed Theology

Class 4

FINISHING CHURCH HISTORY
&
COVENANT THEOLOGY

Education Year 2024-2025

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Why Do We Believe That? - Class 4

REVIEW

- Ancient church councils
 - A lot of work done on Christological and Trinity matters.
- Perversions and distortions of the Gospel
- Medieval Times



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THE BELGIC CONFESSION

- The Low Countries (Belgium and the Netherlands today) were under the control of King Philip II of Spain.
 - In many cities the Reformed were experiencing terrible persecution and the city authorities were not protecting them, so they were protesting in the streets.
 - They also sang psalms during the protest!
 - The authorities were assuming that all the protests were because the people wanted to overthrow the government—which was the case for the Anabaptists.
 - The Reformed were thrown in the mix with the Anabaptists and not allowed to defend themselves.
 - The pastor of Doornik, Guido de Bres wrote a confession to summarize what the Reformed believed (and would not give up) and what they did not believe (that the government needed to be overthrown).



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THE BELGIC CONFESSION

- On November 1, 1561 the confession was prefaced by a letter and the whole package was thrown over the castle wall and addressed to the civil authorities.
 - The letter stated they would obey the government in all things lawful, but when it came to the truth of God's Word they would, "offer their backs to the stripes, their tongues to knives, their mouths to gags, and their whole bodies to the fire" rather than deny the truth contained in that confession.
 - Died a martyr for the faith in 1567, "making the Belgic Confession the only major Reformed confession sealed with the blood of its author."¹

¹ – W. Robert Godfrey, *Saving the Reformation*, 8.



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JACOB ARMINIUS

- A Reformed pastor in the Netherlands and teacher in the University of Leiden
 - Began to teach that God doesn't elect individual persons to be saved, but elects a condition: those who would believe in Christ.
 - Arminius died in 1609, but his followers took up his mantle and went further in their twisting and denying key truths of the Gospel.
 - They summarized their position in the Five Point of Remonstrance in 1610
- The situation surrounding the Remonstrants was threatening to cause a civil war so the civil government called for the church to take care of the problem.



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THE SYNOD OF DORT

- Not the first synod of the Reformed churches (there had been a number in the Netherlands previously), but this was to be an international synod to overcome any appearance of unfairness against the Arminians.
 - Eight foreign delegations (27 delegates) with 82 total delegates.
 - The French delegates were told by King Louis XIII that if they went they wouldn't be able to return to France. The synod left their chairs open in their honor.
- The synod answered the five points of the Remonstrants which is why there are five points.
 - This was never meant to summarize "Calvinism."
 - TULIP (or ULTIP) is great, but not exhaustive.
 - We will take up the Arminian doctrinal positions later.



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THE SYNOD OF DORT & BEYOND

- Also formed a Church Order for the Reformed churches.
 - In 1816, “1618 was reversed” by King William I and made the church governed by the state.
- Later Dutch Church History:
 - 1834 – The *Afscheiding* (separation) when five ministers and some families left the church because it wasn’t preaching the Reformed truth.
 - 1886 – The *Doleantie* (grieving) led by Abraham Kuyper because of the falling away of the state church
 - 1892 – Joined with the *Afscheiding* group
 - 1905 – Synod of Utrecht
 - Supralapsarianism vs. Infralapsarianism (supra is permitted)
 - Some other matters: Eternal justification, Immediate regeneration, presumptive regeneration



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COMING TO AMERICA

- 1628 – Dutch Reformed land in the New World and form the Dutch Reformed Church of America (now the RCA).
- 1846 – A group from the *Afscheiding* came to West Michigan and joined with the Dutch Reformed Church
- 1857 – The *Afscheiding* church split over:
 - Members allowed to join Masonic Lodges
 - Loss of psalm singing
 - No Christian day schools
- Beginning of the CRCNA, first synod 1865
- 1914 – Dutch Church order translated into English and adopted



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STRUGGLES IN THE CRC

- 1924 – split due to the controversy over common grace, formation of the Protestant Reformed Church
 - 1954 – some PR churches rejoin the CRC
- 1980s – Some congregations leave over liberal movements and form the Orthodox CRC.
- 1986 – Other congregations leave for similar reasons and in 1990 adopt the name Alliance of Reformed Churches.
- 1990-1996 – CRC synods finally settle the issue allowing women into all ecclesiastical offices.



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FORMATION OF THE URCNA

- During the early 1990s many CRC Consistories were concerned about the trajectory of the CRC and many meetings, forums, and conferences were held.
 - When Synod 1995 finally allowed classes to “declare the term *male* inoperative” the final straw was cast for many churches.
 - Some tried to stay in through 1996-1997
- 1996 – Synod Lynwood the federation of the United Reformed Churches in North America was formed.
 - Reasons beyond women in office:
 - Catechism preaching in decline
 - Liturgical innovations incorporated to “grow the church”
 - Ministers allowed to hold to non-Reformed doctrines
 - Loss of the authority of God’s Word (i.e. homosexuality)



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URCNA TODAY

- More on our polity later in the class
- Current stats (as of 12.31.23):
 - 140 churches (including church plants)
 - 25,004 souls
 - 206 ministers (including emeritated)
 - 8 classes



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Resources

- “Solo Scriptura”, Keith Mathison
- *Crisis in the Reformed Churches: Essays in Commemoration of the Great Synod of Dort, 1618-1619*, Peter Y. De Jong, Editor
- *Saving the Reformation: The Pastoral Theology of the Canons of Dort*, W. Robert Godfrey
- William Boekestein has authored three small books on each of the TFU’s historical context.



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Why Do We Believe That? - Class 4

Covenant Theology

- How do we read the Bible?
- The structure and foundation that upholds the grand drama of Scripture is the covenant.
 - “It is safe to say, therefore, that covenant is a vital aspect of Scripture. In fact, it is more accurate to state that covenant is the very fabric of Scripture. It is God’s chosen framework for the Bible.”¹
 - God is in control of history and uses the nations and cultures for his purposes.
- WCF VII.7, “The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which he hath been pleased to express by way of covenant.”

1 - Mike Brown and Zach Keele, *Sacred Bond*, 12.



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Definition of a Covenant

- Covenant – An oath-based union between parties given under stipulations and sanctions.
 - Parties
 - Stipulations
 - Sanctions
 - Testimony
- Objections to definition
 - Some include the idea of “grace” into the definition of covenant.
 - Hoeksema – calls this definition “mechanical”¹
 - “The idea of the covenant is certainly not a pact or agreement. . . It is the relation of the most intimate communion of friendship in which God reflects his own covenant life in His relation to the creature, gives to that creature life, and causes him to taste and acknowledge the highest good and the overflowing fountain of all good.”²
 - Some include the number of parties
 - Some include the shedding of blood

1 – Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 287.
2 – *Ibid.*, 322.



Two Overarching Types of Covenants

- Covenant of Works – “Do this and live, don’t do it and die.”
 - “International” Suzerain-Vassal Treaties of the ANE.
 - Work of George Mendenhall in the 1950s on Hittite treaties.
- Covenant of Grace – “God will do, his chosen will get the blessing.”
 - Royal Grant – “an outright gift—an inheritance to be passed down in perpetuity to a loyal servant’s descendants.”¹

1 - Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 44-45 n.19.



Covenant of Redemption – *Pactum Salutis*

- Parties: Father representing the Trinity; Son representing the elect
 - Father representing the Trinity
 - Son voluntarily becomes a man and representing the elect
 - Rom 5:12-21
 - Phil 2:6-9
 - Heb 7:22 (A surety takes the legal obligations of another onto himself)
 - Psalm 2:7-9 (Used in Acts 13:33; Hebrews 1:5; 5:5 to refer to Christ)
 - Psalm 40:7-9 (Used in Hebrews 10:7 to refer to Christ)
- Stipulations: Humiliation, perfect obedience
 - Psalm 110:1
 - John 6:38-40
 - John 10:17
 - John 17:4-6
 - Phil 2:8



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Covenant of Redemption – *Pactum Salutis*

- Sanctions: Blessings for obedience
 - John 17:5-6, 24
 - Phil 2:9-11
- Testimony: A covenant from eternity past.
 - Is 42:6 – Christ is the testimony!
- Confessional Support:
 - BC 21; CD I.7; II.7-8; WCF VIII.1, 5, 6; WLC 21
- Objections
 - Hoeksema really doesn't like the *pactum salutis* as it had been defined by many Reformed theologians.¹
 - Synod of Utrecht (1905): "...all our churches sincerely believe and confess that Christ from eternity in the Counsel of Peace undertook to be the Surety of His people..."

¹ See Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Part 4.1 - "The Pactum Salutis."



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Covenant of Works in the Garden

- Parties: God and Man – Gen 2:15-17
 - Hosea 6:7
- Stipulations:
 - “Keep/guard” – – שמר priestly language.
 - Used in Gen 3:24 of the cherubim.
 - Num 3:5-10 – the priests were to guard the sanctuary of God
 - Adam was to guard the sanctuary of God—kick out the serpent!
 - Perfect obedience.
 - Still in effect today – Rom 2:13; Gal 3:12



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Covenant of Works in the Garden

- Sanctions:
 - Disobedience: Death – Romans 3:20; 6:23 (the free gift of God of eternal life now is in the context of the Covenant of Grace).
 - Obedience: Eternal life – implied by the alternative of death for sin
 - Adam was created good, but he was still not as Berkhof says, “above the possibility of erring, sinning, and dying.”
 - Seen, though, in the Tree of Life, which reappears in Rev 2:7 and 22:2, 14
 - Christ as the Second Adam—Accomplishing that which the first Adam couldn’t do.
- Testimony: Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil
 - The law is written on man’s heart



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Covenant of Works in the Garden

- Different names / terms:
 - Covenant of Life (WSC 12)
 - Covenant of Creation (WSC 12)
 - Commandment of Life (BC 14).
- Confessional Support
 - BC 14, WCF VII.2; WLC 20-22, 30; WSC 12
- Objections
 - Word בְּרִית (*berit*) is not used. Yeah, well it isn't used in 2 Samuel 7 either!
 - Berkhof, "All the element of a covenant [the CoW] are indicated in Scripture; and if the elements are present, we have not only the right, but also the duty to combine them and to give the doctrine so construed an appropriate name."¹

1 - Louis Berkhof, *Manual of Christian Doctrine*, 130.



Necessity of the CoW

- To reject the CoW leads to the following questions:
 - What is the standard God requires, and how is that absolute / objective?
 - What did Christ fulfill in our place as our representative?
 - Why did Christ need to be our propitiation?
- Problems with mono-covenantalism:¹
 - Principle of Periodicity. Multiforimity represented by different periods and dispensations. Recognizing the difference pre- and post-fall.
 - Rejection of a covenant of works in Paul leads to an assimilation of both works and grace into the same covenant.
 - Leads to a rejection of forensic justification.
 - This rejection undermines the Biblical doctrine of Justification and imputation is then unnecessary.

1 - From NT602 - Pauline Epistles class notes



Necessity of the CoW

- Not to overgeneralize, but those that have followed a mono-covenantal understanding have led to confusions concerning:
 - The Law / Gospel distinction
 - Leads to the “New Perspective on Paul”: That is, Paul was concerned about “boundary markers” of the covenant community (adhering to “works of the law”) and how Gentiles can be included.
 - Leads to Federal Vision theology and their teaching of the ability for us to lose our salvation if we are not faithful enough to the covenant (our “covenant faithfulness”).



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Resources

- Michael Brown and Zach Keele, *Sacred Bond*
- Michael Horton, *God of Promise*
- Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* and *Manual of Christian Doctrine*



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Next Week

- Continue with Covenant Theology
- Perhaps start with the Doctrine of Scripture

