

Lecture 5 – Reformed Scholasticism and Debate

- **(I) Definitions**
- Orthodoxy: this term is used to refer to a certain period in the history of Protestantism after the Reformation – both in terms of Lutheran and Reformed developments. The period extends from the 16th into the 17th and 18th centuries. The content can refer to “correct doctrine”, and is often seen as referring to the close connection between systematic theology and confessional documents. The term orthodoxy is different from that of scholasticism as the former refers to correct content, the latter to method.
- Scholasticism: the term is derived from the Greek word “scole”, which originally meant “free time” – as instruction in philosophy was originally pursued in one’s free time. It came to refer to education, which is the meaning conveyed in the Latin equivalent “schola”; by the early Middle Ages the term “scholasticus” referred to a learned person, or one who had received education in a school; leaders of schools were often referred to with the same word. By the time of the Reformation the word was used in various ways – a Reformer might heavily criticize “scholastic theology” (the content of late medieval theology), but then turn to defend scholasticism, referring to theology as practiced at Reformed academies or universities.
- By the late eighteenth century the term scholastic was often used negatively, even derogatively of theological content. It is in the 20th century that we see a reevaluation of the use of the term with the proposal that scholastic really ought to refer to particular methodologies of research, writing, and instruction. By this use for instance, not all medieval theology would be properly termed scholastic, and scholastic method(s) was/were used extensively during and after the Reformation.
- Reformed scholasticism: we are focusing today very particularly on Reformed scholasticism, that is considering theological work and methodology which stands in the Reformed stream in the post-Reformation era, which was orthodox in content, and used scholastic methodologies in research, writing, and instruction.
- **(II) Introduction**
- William van Asselt argues that there are two reasons for considering the Synod of Dort (1618-1619) as a transition from the period of early orthodoxy to what has been identified as the period of “high orthodoxy” – the period of the flowering of Reformed scholasticism.
- Its beginning point is marked by this first, and only, international Reformed synod – its truly international character given expression in the presence of deputies from England, the Palatinate, Hesse, Geneva, Nassau and Wetterau, Switzerland, Bremen, and Scotland, who all gave their judgment... resulting, among other things, in the Canons of Dort.
- Consensus was reached at this Synod on defining the Reformed orthodox position of predestination, and its relation to the gospel, salvation, and the Christian life, in a detailed and thorough manner.
- Van Asselt argues that in the period of early orthodoxy (c.1560-1620) theology was worked out primarily on the basis of Reformed confessions.
- The period of high orthodoxy, or the era also often referred to as the period of Reformed scholasticism, saw comprehensive dogmatic works in which the results of exegesis, dogmatic formulations, polemical elements, and expositions of the practical implications of doctrine were combined into an imposing whole.
- This is of course not to say that none of this occurred in the Reformation era itself, yet there is a trend, a shift, a general tendency or change to be noted here.

- The Reformed scholasticism of high orthodoxy was also characterized by increasing precision in its theological apparatus; this allowed dogmatic material to be worked out further and increased the number of polemical topics.
- Yet, while there were certainly these polemical topics, areas of discussion and debate, Richard Muller notes that in the main high orthodoxy was not a time for developing new systems but rather for building up what had been inherited from the theology of early Reformed orthodoxy. As such Muller identifies the earlier systems as “the skeleton of the high orthodox dogmatics.”
- Turning back to the polemical aspects – these certainly did exist – and polemical theology took shape during this era particularly in debates with **Roman Catholics**, **Socinians**, **Remonstrants**, and representatives of federal theology. Also the philosophy of Rene Descartes evoked reactions/responses from the Reformed in the second half of the 17th century.
- Debates with **Roman Catholics** continued as they had in many respects since the Reformation; however, the debate became more detailed and nuanced – moving well beyond the work of Christ and the doctrine of the church and sacraments (which became much more expansive) to include other aspects of anthropology and soteriology, along with the debates over not only the teaching of the church fathers, but also their place in the debates.
- Debates with **Socinians** also hailed back to the Reformation; in some ways they became more acute in Germany and the Netherlands after the 1650’s when many of the Socinians were driven out of Poland by the Counter-Reformation. Dutch Reformed Synods noted in 1653 their concern over the proliferation of both Socinians and Socinian works in print in the Netherlands.
- Their rejection of the Trinity, the divinity of Christ and of the Holy Spirit, the satisfaction of Christ, the imputation of Christ’s obedience to justification, the power of the Holy Spirit in regeneration, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting received detailed responses from countless representatives of Reformed orthodoxy.
- Debates with the **Remonstrants** also continued – in part fueled by the development of Remonstrant dogmatic texts – resulting in works of polemical theology on the part of the orthodox Reformed.
- And then there were the **Cartesians**; Descartes had developed a new method for scholarly practice, and particularly in Utrecht Descartes and Voetius fought a fierce battle on this issue, which soon spread to all of the theological faculties of the Dutch Republic.
- Led by Voetius, Reformed scholastics saw in the acceptance of the basic principles of Descartes methodological skepticism the end of scholarship, and the undermining of Christianity.
- Voetius was particularly concerned by Descartes methodological division between philosophy and theology, between reason and revelation.
- According to Voetius, reason is not an independent source, but one to be subjected and obedient to biblical revelation; Descartes had reversed this relationship – it was no longer the revealed Word but the “knowing” subject that stood in the center, who was the foundation for reasonable thought.
- Not only that Voetius saw Descartes call to skepticism, the call to doubt, as inherently sinful, placing the individual in a state of sin by denying the first commandment, and as such by resisting the Holy Spirit.
- Doubt as a necessary step to find truth was to him as absurd as doing evil to attain good.

- This area is particularly valuable for us to understand, as in popular understanding, and in the field of historical theology, there are some who characterize the theology of the era of high orthodoxy/Reformed scholasticism as rationalism.
- The reality is that while the Reformed orthodox/Reformed scholastics certainly made use of philosophical method in terms of organizing principles/structural methods in understanding theology with careful precision/definition in doing so they were using rational argumentation and not rationalist philosophy as a worldview.
- This in fact is part of what is characteristic about Reformed scholasticism – the willingness to use logical techniques, distinctions, and proposition analyses within a context that was established by revelation.
- Of course – this was nothing new, the Reformers did the same as has been abundantly shown by those, like Richard Muller, Carl Trueman, etc., arguing against the Reformers – post-Reformation scholastics dichotomy, promoted in a large part by those who have a dislike for both the later Reformed confessions and the theological works of this era.
- Let's now turn to examine a few of the regions of Reformed scholasticism and key developments within each:

- **(1) The Netherlands**

- First among the developments in Dutch Reformed scholasticism was what came to be known as the Leiden *Synopsis*, a collection of 52 disputations, theological essays/arguments which serve as a theological processing/elaboration on the Canons of Dort. These were positively stated theological position pieces, following a common educational genre at the time, following a topical and thematic approach.
- This Leiden manual came to be a popular, even dominant work in the theological sphere of the Canons; it was irenic, moderate, and widely appreciated – being reprinted as late as by Herman Bavinck in 1881.
- Following this there are three other currents/developments:
 - **(i) the *theologica traditva***
 - **(ii) the school of Voetius**
 - **(iii) the school of Cocceius**
- Of these three the first (*theologica traditva*) and second (school of Voetius), along with the earlier Leiden *Synopsis* would merge largely together as the 17th century progressed, particularly as they made common cause against the Cocceians.
- The difficulties the Cocceians would find themselves in were in part due to a growing receptivity within their ranks to Cartesian thought.
- **(i) the *theological traditva*** is a term coined in the 19th century to refer to a current of Reformed theology influenced particularly by the Calvin-Beza line of development. While there is significant similarity between this and that of Voetius, there were also differences. Key figures included **Samuel Maresius** (1599-1673) and Friedrich Spanheim, the elder (1600-1649), and F.S. the younger (1632-1701). These men were known as moderates, more mild in their polemics than their Utrecht (Voetian) counterparts. Like Maresius they took a somewhat more liberal view of Sunday observance, and were hesitant towards other similar aspects of English Puritan influence. While the Voetians were determinedly for independence of church from state, the men of this movement tended to be willing to tolerate, and even acknowledge varying degrees of Erastianism; the younger Spanheim was supportive of the Episcopal systems found among the Lutherans and Hungarian Reformed.
- These men wrote significant works defending and expositing Reformed confessional theology. Maresius wrote a commentary on the Belgic Confession, and a key systematic theology, along with writing strongly against the Socinians.

- Others in the stream wrote against developments at Saumur in France (where Moise Amyraut was teaching), and against Arminianism.
- Maresius engaged in some debate with Voetius, particularly early on. He was infralapsarian, and believed that the Canons precluded supralapsarianism; Voetius meanwhile sought to argue that in certain respects both positions held true, which Maresius criticized as being a result of overly scholastic in his methodology.
- They also debated over prayer – Maresius (with Ames and others) arguing that it was permitted to pray directly to Christ as Mediator, Voetius and others arguing that Christ could be prayed to and worshipped only according to his divine nature (ie. as God).
- In 1669 the two men would reconcile through the need to join together to deal with the challenges presented by Cocceius.
- **(ii) the school of Voetius**
- In 1636 the newly founded school of Utrecht was remade into an academy/university; the preacher at the occasion was Gijsbertus Voetius, professor of theology, Hebrew, and oriental languages. His sermon was entitled: "On the Usefulness of Academies and Schools, together with the Sciences and Arts taught in the same" which he based on Luke 2v46, Jesus visit to the temple at the age of 12.
- Voetius saw theology as the queen of the sciences, a universal science that must lay the foundation for a common method of instruction and research in all fields of learning.
- In his lectures he often referred to the Leiden *Synopsis*, Thomas Aquinas' *Summa*, along with the works of numerous Reformers. His work was a massive synthesis of exegesis, dogmatics, polemics and ethics. He wrote both works of piety as well as extensive theological writings, including a 5 volume set of 358 disputations on systematic theology and practical ethics, and a significant work on church polity.
- Voetius synthetic approach and scholastic methodology would become typical as well of a number of his students: **Johannes Hoornbeeck**, **Petrus VanMastricht**, **Herman Witsius**, and others. Probably closest to Voetius of these three was VanMastricht in his *Theologia theoretica-practica* (1682-87) which held closely to the basic positions and example of his teacher, particularly in the synthesis of exegesis, dogmatics, polemics and practical theology into one package of theology. Among the students of Voetius there was significant appreciation for the work of Francis Turretin.
- **(iii) the school of Cocceius**
- Johannes Cocceius (1603-1669), though a key figure in the development of federal theology in this era, particularly via a biblical redemptive-historical line of thought, was also very much a theologian who used scholastic methodology.
- VanAsselt notes that it is incorrect to posit these as incompatible, or inherently opposite.
- The conflict that developed between Cocceius and Voetius, and their respective followers, concerned primarily his redemptive-historical view of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments and the consequences of this for Christian ethics (for example, the fourth commandment and Sabbath/Sunday observance), along with his views on justification in the Old (passing over of sins) versus the New (forgiveness of sins).
- Cocceius essentially argued that the covenant of works established with Adam was more and more abrogated through redemptive history, while the influence of the covenant of grace proportionally increased.
- Herman Witsius, while deeply opposed to the errant aspects of Cocceius work, which was carried beyond him by some of his disciples, was nonetheless appreciative of some of the aspects of his thought, and would develop something of a mediating stance between Voetius' dogmatic, synthetic approach and Cocceius biblical-theological, while retaining a much more thorough-going Reformed orthodoxy.

PAC
Voetius

PPT
Cocceius

- **(2) France and Geneva**
- To very briefly mention some of the developments beyond the Low Countries on the continent during this period:
- Reformed scholasticism/orthodoxy also flourished amongst the French Reformed prior to the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 by Louis XIV.
- At the Academy of Sedan theologians like Daniel Tilenus and Pierre du Moulin taught, battling both Roman Catholicism and the Amyraldianism of Saumur.
- Tilenus in his latter years defected to the Remonstrant cause, leading to his being removed from his post and replaced by du Moulin who had previously taught at Leiden.
- At the Academy of Saumur, established in 1589 and running to 1685, there would be a significant influence exerted, albeit not all in positive ways.
- There was an increasing tendency to take positions difficult to reconcile with those of the Synod of Dort.
- This was particularly the case with the teacher John Cameron (c.1579-1625), a Scot, and his student Moise Amyraut, who taught a so-called hypothetical universalism, a supposed middle road between Calvinism and Arminianism.
- Amyraut taught a double divine decree, giving two kinds of election – first God determined to save all those who have faith, thus electing the entire human race to salvation (universalism). Next because God through foreknowledge knows that no one can come to faith by their own strength, he makes a second decree to grant faith to some (particularism). Therefore, in reality – spite of God's universal but hypothetical or conditional decree – not all are saved. Behind this lay Amyraut's conviction that God intended to save everyone, provided that they believe.
- While Amyraut posited that Christ hypothetically died for all, the Dort theologians taught that the sacrifice of Christ was sufficient for all, but efficient to only the elect. According to the Dort theologians therefore, Christ died only for the elect.
- Amyraut and Saumur were challenged by du Moulin within France, by the Leiden theologians, and Voetians and Cocceians in the Netherlands, and by Francis Turretin in Geneva.
- Turretin stands as a particularly influential Genevan theologian in this period, and one of the last Reformed orthodox of Geneva, his major contribution being his massive systematic theology, thoroughly reflective of scholastic methodology, at times to the point of asking and answering somewhat speculative questions, though at the same time answering many many important questions well.

PPT
Amyraut

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Turretin