

# Revision of the Dutch Confession & Heidelberg Catechism

by James Arminius

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*The revision of the Dutch Confession and Heidelberg Catechism is necessary to ensure that these human writings align with the word of God and to prevent the spread of error.*

**Scripture:** Proverbs 2:6, Acts 17:11, Ephesians 4:14, Colossians 2:8, 1 Thessalonians 5:21, 2 Timothy 3:16, 2 Peter 1:20, 1 John 4:1

**Topics:** "Church Doctrine", "Theological Reform"

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## Description

James Arminius discusses the need for examination and revision of the Confession of the Dutch Churches and the Heidelberg Catechism, emphasizing the importance of aligning human writings with the word of God to ensure accuracy and avoid errors. He presents seven key inquiries to be made during this examination, including checking for doctrinal accuracy, necessity for salvation, and maintaining peace and unity within the Church. Arminius also addresses concerns about potential controversies and the fear of disturbing established doctrines, highlighting the significance of scrutinizing teachings to uphold truth and promote unity.

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## Transcript

### X. THE REVISION OF THE DUTCH CONFESSION, AND THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

But, besides these things, I had some annotations to make on the Confession of the Dutch Churches and on the Heidelberg Catechism; but they will be discussed most appropriately in our Synod, which at the first opportunity we hope to obtain through your consent, or rather by means of your summons. This is the sole request which I prefer to your mightinesses, that I may be permitted to offer a few brief remarks on a certain clause, subject to which their high mightinesses, the States General, gave their consent to the convening of a National Synod in this province, (Holland,) and the substance of which was, that in such Synod the Confession and Catechism of the Dutch Churches should be subjected to examination.

This clause has given great umbrage to many persons, not only because they account it unnecessary, but likewise unjust, to subject the Confession and Catechism to examination. They also suppose, that I and a certain individual of great reputation, are the persons who prevailed with the States General to have such a clause inserted. But it is by no means true that the revision of the Confession and Catechism is unnecessary and unjust, or that we were the instigators of their high mightinesses in this affair. With

regard to the last of these two suppositions, so far were we from having any concern with the origin of that clause, that, eleven or twelve years ago, at the pressing importunity of the Churches that prayed for a National Synod, the States of South Holland and West Friesland at last judged it proper to consent to it by their decree, on no other condition than that in such Synod the Confession of the Dutch Churches should be subjected to examination. Yet we, at that time, neither endeavoured by our advice, nor by our influence, to promote any such measure. But if we had with all our might made the attempt, we should have been doing nothing but what was compatible with our official duties; because it is obviously agreeable to reason as well as to equity, and quite necessary in the present posture of affairs, that such a measure should be adopted.

First. That it may openly appear to all the world that we render to the word of God alone such due and suitable honour, as to determine it to be beyond (or rather above) all disputes, too great to be the subject of any exception, and worthy of all acceptance.

Secondly. Because these pamphlets are writings that proceed from men, and may, on that account, contain within them some portion of error, it is, therefore, proper to institute a lawful inquiry, that is, in a National Synod, whether or not there be any thing in those productions which requires amendment.

1. The first inquiry may be, whether these human writings are accordant, in every part, with the word of God, with regard to the words themselves, the construction of the sentences and the correct meaning.

2. Whether they contain whatever is necessary to be believed unto salvation, so that salvation is, according to this rule, not denied to those things to which it appertains.

3. Whether it [the rule of these formularies] does not contain far too many particulars, and embrace several that are not necessary to be believed unto salvation, so that salvation is consequently attributed to those things to which it does not belong.

4. Whether certain words and forms of speech are not employed in them, which are capable of being understood in different ways and furnishing occasion for disputes. Thus, for example, in the Fourteenth article of the Confession, we read the following words, "nothing is done without God's ordination," [or appointment]: if by the word "ordination" is signified, "that God appoints things of any kind to be done," this mode of enunciation is erroneous, and it follows as a consequence from it, that God is the author of sin. But if it signify, that "whatever it be that is done, God ordains it to a good end," the terms in which it is conceived are in that case correct.

5. Whether things utterly repugnant to each other may not be discovered in them. For instance, a certain individual who is highly honoured in the Church, addressed a letter to John Piscator, Professor of Divinity in the University of Herborn in Nassau, and in it he exhorted him to confine himself within the opinion of the Heidelberg Catechism on the doctrine of Justification. For this purpose he cited three passages, which he considered to be at variance with Piscator's sentiments. But the learned Professor replied, that he confined himself completely within the doctrinal boundaries of the Catechism; and then quoted out of that formulary ten or eleven passages as proofs of his sentiments. But I solemnly declare, I do not perceive by what method these several passages can possibly be reconciled with each other.

6. Whether every thing in these writings is digested in that due order in which the Scripture requires them to be placed.

7. Whether all things are disposed in a manner the most suitable and convenient for preserving peace and unity with the rest of the reformed Churches.

Thirdly. The third reason is, because a National Synod is held for the purpose of discovering whether all things in the Church are in a proper state or right condition. One of the chief duties which appertains to such an assembly, is, the examination of doctrine, whether it be that which is admitted by unanimous consent, or that for which particular Divines contend.

Fourthly. The fourth reason is, because an examination of this description will obtain for these writings a greater degree of authority, when after a mature and rigid examination they shall be found to agree with the word of God, or shall be made conformable to it in a still greater measure. Such an examination will also excite within the minds of men a greater value for Christian ministers, when they perceive that these sacred functionaries hold in the highest estimation that truth which is revealed in Scripture, and that their attachment to it is so great as to induce them to spare no labour in order to render their own doctrine more and more conformable to that revealed truth.

Fifthly. The fifth reason why at this, if at any period, it is necessary to adopt the suggestion which we have mentioned, is, (1.) Because there are several individuals in the ministry who have certain views and considerations respecting some points contained in these writings, which they reserve in secret and reveal to no one, because they hope that such points will become subjects of discussion in a National Synod. Because such a convention has been promised, some of them have suffered themselves to be persuaded not to give the least publicity to any of the views or considerations which they have formed on these subjects.

(2.) Besides, this will be the design of a National Synod -- That their high mightinesses the States General may be pleased to establish and arm with public authority certain ecclesiastical sanctions, according to which every one may be bound to conduct himself in the Church of God. That this favour may be obtained from their high mightinesses and that they may execute such a measure with a good conscience, it is necessary that they be convinced in their own understandings, that the doctrine contained in the formulary of union is agreeable to the word of God. This is a reason which ought to induce us spontaneously to propose an examination of our Confession before their high mightinesses, and to offer either to shew that it is in accordance with the word of God, or to render it conformable to that Divine standard.

Sixthly. The sixth reason is drawn from the example of those who are associated together under the Augustan Confession, and from the conduct of the Swiss and the French Churches, that have within two or three years enriched their Confessions with one entirely new article. And the Dutch Confession has itself been subjected to examination since it was first published: some things having been taken away from it and others added, while some of the rest have undergone various alterations.

Numerous other reasons might be produced, but I omit them; because I consider those already mentioned to be quite sufficient for proving, that the clause concerning examination and revision, as it is termed, was with the greatest justice and propriety inserted in the instrument of consent of which we have made previous mention.

I am not ignorant, that other reasons are adduced, in opposition to these; and one in particular, which is made a principal subject of public conversation, and is accounted of all others the most solid. To it, therefore I consider it necessary to offer a brief reply. It is thus stated: "by such an examination as this, the doctrine of the Church will be called in question; which is neither an act of propriety nor of duty.

"I. Because this doctrine has obtained the approbation and suffrages of many respectable and learned men; and has been strenuously defended against all those who have offered it any opposition.

"II. Because it has been sealed with the blood of many thousand martyrs.

"III. Because from such an examination will arise, within the Church, confusion, scandal, offenses, and the destruction of consciences; and, out of the Church, ridicule, calumnies and accusations."

To all these I answer:

1. It would be much better, not to employ such odious forms of speech, as to call in question, and others of that class, when the conversation is only respecting some human composition, which is liable to have error intermixed with its contents. For with what right can any writing be said to be called in question or in doubt, which was never of itself unquestionable, or ought to be considered as indubitable?

2. The approbation of Divines, the defense of a composition against its adversaries, and the sealing of it with the blood of martyrs, do not render any doctrine authentic or place it beyond the limits of doubt: because it is possible both for Divines and martyrs to err -- a circumstance which can admit of no denial in this argument.

3. A distinction ought to be made between the different matters contained in the Confession. For while some of them make a near approach to the foundation of salvation and are fundamental articles of the Christian religion, others of them are built up as a superstructure on the foundation, and of themselves are not absolutely necessary to salvation. The doctrines of this former class are approved by the unanimous consent of all the Reformed, and are effectually defended against all gainsaying adversaries. But those of the latter class become subjects of controversy between different parties: and some of these are attacked by enemies not without some semblance of truth and justice.

The blood of martyrs has sealed those of the former class but by no means those of the latter. In reference to this affair, it ought to be diligently observed, what was proposed by the martyrs of our days, and on what account they shed their blood. If this be done, it will be found, that no man among them was even interrogated on that subject which I consider it equitable to make a prominent part in the deliberations of a Synod, and, therefore, that no martyr ever sealed it with his blood. I will produce an example: when a question was raised about the meaning of the seventh chapter of the epistle to the Romans, one individual said, "that the passage was quoted in the margin of the Confession exactly in the same sense as he had embraced it, and that the martyrs had with their own blood sealed this Confession." But, in reply to this, it was stated, "that if the strictest search be instituted throughout the entire large history of the martyrs, as it is published by the French, it will be discovered, that no martyr has at any period been examined on that passage, or has shed his blood on that account."

To sum up the whole: the blood of the martyrs tends to confirm this truth, that they have made profession of their faith "in simplicity and sincerity of conscience." But it is by no means conclusive, that the Confession which they produced is free from every degree of reprehension or superior to all exception; unless they had been led by Christ into all truth and therefore rendered incapable of erring.

4. If the Church be properly instructed in that difference which really does and always ought to exist between the word of God and all human writings, and if the Church be also rightly informed concerning that liberty which she and all Christians possess, and which they will always enjoy, to measure all human

compositions by the standard rule of God's word, she will neither distress herself on that account, nor will she be offended on perceiving all human writings brought to be proved at the touch-stone of God's word. On the contrary, she will rather feel far more abundant delight, when she sees, that God has bestowed on her in this country such pastors and teachers, as try at the chief touch-stone their own doctrine, in a manner at once suitable, proper, just, and worthy of perpetual observance; and that they do this, to be able exactly and by every possible means to express their agreement with the word of God, and their consent to it even in the most minute particulars.

5. But it is no less proper, that the doctrine once received in the Church should be subjected to examination, however great the fear may be "lest disturbances should ensue, and lest evil disposed persons should make such revision an object of ridicule, calumny or accusation," or should even turn it to their own great advantage, [by representing the matter so as to induce a persuasion,] "that those who propose this examination are not sufficiently confirmed in their own religion ;" when, on the contrary, this is one of God's commands, "search and try the spirits whether they be of God." (1 John iv, 1.) If cogitations of that description had operated as hindrances on the minds of Luther, Zuinglius, and others, they would never have pried into the doctrine of the Papists, or have subjected it to a scrutinizing examination. Nor would those who adhere to the Augustan Confession have considered it proper to submit that formulary again to a new and complete revision, and to alter it in some particulars. This deed of theirs is an object of our praise and approval. And we conclude, that, when Luther towards the close of his life was advised by Philip Melancthon to bring the eucharistic controversy on the sacrament of the Lord's Supper to some better state of concord, (as it is related in the writings of our own countrymen,) he acted very improperly in rejecting that counsel, and in casting it back as a reproach on Philip, for this reason, as they state his declaration, "lest by such an attempt to effect an amicable conclusion, the whole doctrine should be called in question." Besides, if reasons of this kind ought to be admitted, the Papists with the best right and the greatest propriety formerly endeavoured to prevent the doctrine, which had for many preceding centuries been received in the Church, from being called in question or subjected again to examination.

But it has been suggested, in opposition to these reasons, "that if the doctrine of the Churches be submitted to an entirely new revision as often as a National Synod shall be held, the Church would never have any thing to which it might adhere or on which it might fully depend, and it will be possible to declare with great justice, concerning Churches thus circumstanced, that, they have an anniversary faith: are tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine. (Ephes. iv, 14.)

1. My first answer to these remarks, is, the Church always has Moses and the Prophets, the Evangelists and the Apostles, that is, the Scriptures of the Old and of the New Testament; and these Scriptures fully and clearly comprehend whatever is necessary to salvation. Upon them the Church will lay the foundation of her faith, and will rest upon them as on an immovable basis, principally because, how highly soever we may esteem Confessions and Catechisms every decision on matters of faith and religion must obtain its final resolution in the Scriptures.

2. Some points in the Confession are certain and do not admit of a doubt: these will never be called in question by any one, except by heretics. Yet there are other parts of its contents which are of such a kind, as may with the most obvious utility become frequent subjects of conference and discussion between men of learning who fear God, for the purpose of reconciling them with those indubitable articles as nearly as is practicable.

3. Let it be attempted to make the Confession contain as few articles as possible; and let it propose them in a very brief form, conceived entirely in the expressions of Scripture. Let all the more ample explanations, proofs, digressions, redundancies, amplifications and exclamations, be omitted; and let nothing be delivered in it, except those truths which are necessary to salvation. The consequences of this brevity will be, that the Confession will be less liable to be filled with errors, not so obnoxious to obloquy, and less subject to examination. Let the practice of the ancient Church be produced as an example, that comprehended, in as brief a form of words as was practicable, those articles which she judged necessary to be believed.

Some individuals form a distinction between the Confession and the Catechism with respect to revision; and, since the Confession is the peculiar property of the Dutch Churches, and is on that account found in the hands of comparatively few people, they conclude, "that it is possible without any difficulty to revise it in a Synod and subject it to examination., But since the Catechism belongs not only to us, but likewise and principally to the Churches of the Palatinate, and is therefore to be found in the hands of all men, the same persons consider the examination of it "to be connected with great peril." But to this I reply, if we be desirous of constituting the Heidelberg Catechism a formulary of concord among the teachers of the Churches, and if they be obliged to subscribe it, it is still necessary to subject it to examination. For no Churches whatever ought to hold such a high station in our esteem, as to induce us to receive any writing of their composition without, at the same time, reserving to ourselves the liberty of submitting it to a nice scrutiny. And I account this to be the principal cause, why the Churches of different provinces, although at perfect agreement with each other on the fundamental points of Christian doctrine, have each composed for themselves their own Confessions. But if the Heidelberg Catechism be not allowed, to become a formulary of this kind, and if a suitable liberty be conceded in the explanation of it, it will not then be necessary either to revise it or subject it to examination; provided, I repeat, that the obligatory burden of subscription be removed, and a moderate liberty be conceded in its explanation.

This is all that I had to propose to your mightinesses, as to my most noble, potent, wise and prudent masters. While I own myself bound to render an account of all my actions, to the members of this most noble and potent assembly, (next after God,) I at the same time present to them my humble and grateful acknowledgments, because they have not disdained to grant me a courteous and patient audience. I embrace this opportunity solemnly to declare, that I am sincerely prepared to institute an amicable and fraternal conference with my reverend brethren, (at whatever time or place and on whatever occasion this honourable assembly may judge proper to appoint,) on all the topics which I have now mentioned, and on any other concerning which it will be possible for a controversy to exist, or at some future period to arise. I also make this additional promise, that I will in every conference conduct myself with equanimity, moderation and docility, and will shew myself not less actuated by the desire of being taught, than by that of communicating to others some portion of instruction. And, since in the discussion of every topic on which it will be possible to institute a conference, two points will become objects of attention. First, "Whether that be true which is the subject of the controversy," and, secondly, "Whether it be necessary to be believed unto salvation," and since both these points ought to be discussed and proved out of the Scriptures, I here tender my sacred affirmation, and solemnly bind myself hereafter to observe it, that, however cogently I may have proved by the most solid [human] arguments any article to be agreeable to the word of God, I will not obtrude it for an article of belief on those of my brethren who may entertain a different opinion respecting it, unless I have plainly proved it from the word of God and have with equal clearness established its truth, and the necessity unto salvation that every Christian should entertain the same belief.

If my brethren will be prepared to act in this manner, as far as I know the complexion of my own opinions, there will not easily arise among us any schism or controversy. But, that I may on my part remove every cause of fear that can possibly invade this most noble assembly, occupied and engaged as its honourable members now are with important concerns on which in a great measure depends the safety of our native country and of the Reformed Churches, I subjoin this remark, "that to hinder my toleration of any matters in my brethren, they must be very numerous and very important. For I am not of the congregation of those who wish to have dominion over the faith of another man, but am only a minister to believers, with the design of promoting in them an increase of knowledge, truth, piety, peace and joy in Jesus Christ our Lord."

But if my brethren cannot perceive how they can possibly tolerate me, or allow me a place among them, in reference to myself I indulge in no hope that a schism will on this account be formed. May God avert any such catastrophe, since far too many schisms have already arisen and spread themselves abroad among Christians. It ought rather to be the earnest endeavour of every one, to diminish their number and destroy their influence. Yet, even under such circumstances, [when I shall be rejected from the communion of my brethren,] in patience will possess my soul; and though in that case I shall resign my office, yet I will continue to live for the benefit of our common Christianity as long as it may please God to lengthen out my days and prolong my existence. Never forgetting this sentiment, *Sat Ecclesæ, sat Patriæ datum*, Enough has been done to satisfy the Church of Christ and my country!

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