

CHAPTER 46 : DECLENSION OF THE NETHERLANDS AND ITS ESTABLISHED PROTESTANT CHURCH 1648-1775

The era of the flourishing of the United Provinces of the Netherlands was from 1579, when the Union of Utrecht was formed, until 1672. After gaining formal independence from Philip II in 1648, the Republic of the Seven United Netherlands had become one of the major seafaring and economic powers of the 17th century. This period is referred to as the *Golden Age* in the Netherlands. It consisted of establishing colonies and trade posts all over the globe. Holland had become a naval power and Holland's navy sailed the seven seas. Colonies were established by these navies in the West Indies, the East Indies, America, and South Africa. Exotic silks, spices, and woods flowed in an unending stream into the country. The growing trade of Europe passed through its ports. Merchantmen and craftsmen filled the cities. The nation's navy could stand before the mighty sea powers of England and France without flinching.

Fostering the economic and political prosperity of the nation was its firmly established reformed Protestantism. The Dutch Reformed Church or Netherlands Reformed Church (in Dutch, Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk (NHK)) was formally founded in 1618. It was the *de facto* established church in the Netherlands as the provinces waged war with Spain. And it was formally recognized as the state church when the independence of the Netherlands was officially recognized. The States General of the Netherlands in the great Assembly of 1651 declared, "that each in his own province must keep and maintain the Reformed religion, as is presently preached and taught publicly in our Churches, as was established by the National Synod held at Dordt in 1619". They also decided that, "the afore mentioned religion, by the provinces, as well as by the States General in the provinces under their jurisdiction, shall be maintained with the laws of the land, without allowing anyone ever to make any changes."

One of the most prominent Dutch reformed theologians at the time was Gijsbertus Voetius (1588-1676). He had studied at Leiden, and in 1611 became pastor of Blymen, whence in 1617 he returned to Heusden. In 1619 he played an influential part in the Synod of Dort, and in 1634 was made professor of theology and Oriental science at Utrecht. Three years later he became pastor of the Utrecht congregation. He was a staunch advocate for Calvinism against heretical Arminianism. After the Synod of Dort serious heresies arose in the churches of the Netherlands which threatened her orthodoxy. Arminianism was the chief heresy, from which others multiplied.

During the years of his ministry, Voetius preached eight times a week. While it was the custom in those days for an elder to read the scriptures and for a precentor to lead the singing, Voetius often did this himself for the congregation. He was faithful in his pastoral labors, and the congregations he served came to love him deeply. But his ministry was not limited to the work of the congregation: he was intensely interested in evangelism and missions. While in Vlijmen, a village in which were still many Roman Catholics, he was instrumental in bringing a large number of Roman Catholics to the Reformed faith. And, while minister in Heusden, he was influential in persuading the

large trading companies to send missionaries with the Dutch ships to distant parts of the world so that mission work could be done in these far-off islands and lands.

Voetius hated Arminianism. He saw it for what it was: a wholesale attack on the very heart of the Reformed faith and, fundamentally, a return to Roman Catholicism and its doctrine of salvation by works. Although Dort was a might victory for the Reformed faith, Arminian poison continued to infect the churches, and Voetius spent all his life doing what he could to root out this pernicious evil.

Yet his interest in the Reformed faith was not merely in its intellectual coherence and internal harmony. Voetius was a godly and pious man. One of the first books, if not the first, was entitled "Proof of the Power of Godliness." His thesis in this book was that while Arminianism is destructive of Christian morality, the orthodox faith gives attestation to itself in a godly and upright life. The book was not the writing of a man who did not live what he believed. He was firmly convinced, and showed it in his own life, that the Reformed faith, when embraced wholeheartedly, led to Christian piety.

But Voetius did not do battle with Arminianism only. Other heresies appeared soon after Dort and Voetius took up the weapons of his spiritual warfare against them.

The philosophy of the French philosopher, René Descartes, was beginning to have an impact in Holland, even in the University of Utrecht. As previously noted, Descartes was allowed to reside in the Netherlands for many years. Voetius battled against Descartes' humanistic rationalism. Voetius worked to secure the dismissal of his own colleague in Utrecht who had embraced Descartes' errors. So biting was his attack against Regius that Descartes himself, in lonely isolation in France, but adored by all Europe, considered it necessary to respond to Voetius. Sadly, Voetius, while winning the battle in his own lifetime, lost it in the long run of the Dutch established church. Over time the established reformed church came to embrace first Arminianism and later full blown humanism.

Voetius also had to engage in theological battle with mystics such as Jean de Labadie, who also preached and practiced separation from the instituted church. It was the valiant efforts of Voetius who held these miserable mystics at bay, at least for a time.

Another theological battle was with Cocceius, a colleague in the ministry. In the course of his work Cocceius made such a sharp distinction between the Old and New Testaments that he denied the validity of the New Testament Sabbath. Although Voetius attacked him for this, the controversy involved other points as well, including various political questions. Voetius promoted strongly the need for Holland to be ruled by the royal House of Orange, while Cocceius wanted a more Republican form of government. At the time there was a bitter political battle between Orangeists (who wanted the House of Orange on the throne of Holland) and Republicans (who wanted nothing resembling a monarchy). The divisions were deep and bitter. The church itself was divided into a Voetian Party and a Cocceian Party. In fact, the controversy was never settled and continued beyond the death of the two opponents, and only gradually died out.

After producing three sons, two of whom became professors and one a minister, and after seeing even a grandson become a professor, Voetius died in 1676. Few men have in any age exercised greater influence over the Church of their time and country.

Though less influential than Voetius, Herman Witsius also was a mighty instrument for God during this period. He was born in Enkhuizen, West Frisia, Holland in 1636. His father was a magistrate, and later burgomaster of the town. He received classical training from his uncle Peter Gerhard until he was about sixteen years old, at which time he could speak Latin fluently, as well as read Greek and Hebrew. In 1651 he entered the University of Utrecht. In 1654 he entered the University of Groningen. While at school he was privileged to study under some of Europe's most well known theological teachers, including Voetius, as well as Johannes Hoornbeeck, Andreas Essenius, and Samuel Maresius. In 1656 he passed examinations with honors. Between 1657 and 1675 he would pastor in the cities of Westwoud, Wormeren, Goesen and Leedwarden. In 1675 he was installed as professor of theology -- first at Franeker (1675-1680), subsequently at Utrecht (1680-1698), and finally at Leyden (1698-1707). During his first professorship at Franeker he produced his most famous work, *The Economy of the Divine Covenants Between God and Man*. In 1685 he was appointed chaplain to the Dutch embassy for the court of James II of England. While there, he was invited to take the role of Moderator in the great Antinomian - Neonomian Controversy as he was respected by both sides. In 1698, at sixty-two years of age, he was called to the University of Leyden as professor of theology. In 1699 he was appointed regent of the State college and held that position until he retired in 1707 because of ill health. He died in 1708, having maintained and fought for the historic reformed faith throughout his life.

So we see how the Netherlands at this time was still blessed by some godly religious leaders, while yet plagued with rising humanism that first manifested itself in Arminianism.

In the year 1666 we find Holland and her sister states forming the Netherlands at the acme of their prosperity. They are populous in men; they have a revenue of 40,000,000 florins; they possess a land army of 60,000 men, a fleet of above 100 men-of-war, a countless mercantile navy, a world-wide commerce, and, not content with being one of the great powers of Europe, they are contesting with England the supremacy of the seas.

It is hardly possible not to ask what led to the decline and fall of so great a power? Sir William Temple, who had studied with the breadth of a statesman, and the insight of a philosopher, both the rise and the fall of the United Provinces, lays their decay at the door of the Arminian controversy, which had parted the nation in two. Maurice, the stadtholder who succeeded William the Silent, had properly banished the Arminian leaders. But Prince Frederick Henry, who had succeeded his brother Maurice in 1625 as stadtholder, allowed the Arminian remonstrants to return. They led the remonstrant church in the Netherlands, which became popular with some of the nation's wealthiest and most prominent citizens. Their heresies tended to corrupt the nation over time, leading to ever greater humanist tendencies. And they urged even more heretics to be let in and given influence. She opened her doors not only to godly French Huguenot

immigrants, but also to wicked Portuguese and Spanish Jews. The latter, like Spinoza, had a strong corrupting effect.

Prince Frederick Henry was succeeded by his son, Prince William II, in 1647. His death in 1650 signaled the opponents of the house of Orange to reassert the power of the provinces and the States-General. Among the gravest sins of the Netherlands at the time were these, recorded by Abraham Van De Velde:

1. "The four prominent vices of the kingdom of antichrist which are still found among us. In the first place the carnivals, Three Kings and the St. Nicholas days, and other feast-days which are held among us, not without a show of public idolatry.
2. The unlimited meetings of Jews and other sectarians.
3. The theaters with their unchaste comedies and tragedies that tempt good citizens to idolatry and impiety.
4. Condoning the idolatrous meetings of papists.
5. Allowing Jesuits, monks, and anti-christian priests to roam the country and deceive its citizens, and hold collections, for which some laws were established, but not in a manner as required by the Word of the Lord.
6. The cursing, blaspheming and taking in vain of God's name, even by children. Lev. 19: 12; Matt. 5: 37.
7. The irregular publishing of blasphemous and seditious books, against which some laws were made, but not maintained.
8. The desecration of the Sabbath, against which some edicts were enacted, but not executed, with the result that only one half of the Day is kept, while God will have all of His Day kept.
9. The murders which happen in great number among us, that are pardoned, directly against the Lord's commandment; Numbers 35: 31.
10. The existence of so many brothels and whorehouses; Deut. 13: 17; 1 Cor. 10: 8.
11. That whoredom is not, or only lightly punished, and fornication is punished by fines, which God the Lord wants punished by death; Deut. 22: 23."

Jan de Witt, the political leader of the estates of Holland, was chosen (1652) grand pensionary and led the Dutch republic for the next 20 years. He did nothing sufficient to rectify the sins of the nation. To prevent Prince William III of Orange (son of William II) from regaining the authority of his father, de Witt by the Eternal Edict (1667) abolished the office of stadtholder in Holland and secured the virtual exclusion of the house of Orange from state affairs.

De Witt represented the mercantile interests of the Netherlands, which had generally taken less care of the Reformed interests in comparison to the House of Orange. Accordingly, De Witt encouraged industry and commerce, but did not sufficiently protect the reformed gospel and the reformed church. Indicative of his religious condition was his friendship with the Jewish philosopher Spinoza. Influenced by the rationalism of Descartes, Spinoza was a rank humanist. De Witt readily fell prey to humanism.

Such morally questionable leadership as this did not bode well for the long term prospects of the Netherlands. De Witt led during a disastrous war with England during the time of Cromwell. Though he brought this war (the first of the Dutch Wars) to an end in 1654, the Restoration in England was considered a danger to Dutch maritime and political freedom and led to the renewal of the war in 1665. The favorable (to the Dutch) terms of the Treaty of Breda (1667) was largely due to Jan de Witt. But then he helped form the Triple Alliance of 1668 against Louis XIV of France. In 1672, Louis XIV invaded Holland and began the third of the Dutch Wars. Jan de Witt sought to negotiate peace, but his offer was spurned by the French. The Netherlands were in difficult straights.

Popular feeling suddenly turned violently against De Witt and in favor of William of Orange (later William III of England), who by popular acclaim was made stadtholder. De Witt resigned, but was exonerated of treason charges. However, when he visited his brother, Cornelius de Witt, in prison, a mob gathered outside, fought its way into the prison, and hacked the two brothers to pieces, hanging their scattered limbs on lamp posts. While this mob action was deplorable, nevertheless, we must condemn De Witt for his poor administration.

The stadtholderate was restored to William III in 1672, and he took the helm in the Dutch war against France. The war devastated the provinces, but in the Treaty of Nijmegen (1678–79) the Dutch obtained important concessions from France.

William III sought more diligently than De Witt to uphold the Reformed faith and maintain the prosperity of the Netherlands, in the face of very difficult circumstances. When the cause of God's church and religion was commended to him, William III answered, "that he not only would keep what was left in the provinces by the arms of the State, but he hoped to restore what was lost; and concerning the church, he would keep, maintain and defend all that was established by his forefathers and the Synod of Dordt." While the administration of William III was an improvement over De Witt, the corruptions that marred his administration, as well as his keeping of a mistress, are shameful.

The Netherlands again fought Louis XIV in the War of the Grand Alliance (1688–97) and in the War of the Spanish Succession. In 1689 William III became king of England, while retaining the stadtholderate of the Netherlands. The combination of wars and spiritual declension in the Netherlands resulted in the ever declining prosperity and status of the United Provinces.

On the death in 1702 of William III the stadtholderate was again suspended and the States-General resumed control of the government, but in 1747 the republican party lost power, and William IV of Orange became hereditary stadtholder. Overall in the 18th century the relative commercial, military, and cultural positions of the United Provinces in Europe declined as those of England and France ascended.

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J. Parnell McCarter, *Sabbath Bible Survey Tests and Assignments* (PHSC: Grand Rapids, MI, 2003). (see electronic version at <http://www.puritans.net/curriculum/>)

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The on-line resources of Historicism Research Foundation at <http://www.historicism.net/> also proved invaluable for my understanding of Biblical prophecy. Biblical prophecy concerning Christian church history, especially as revealed in the book of Revelation, serves as the foundation upon which all church histories should be based.

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