

Church History (45): Dutch Puritanism

Dutch Puritanism as a movement overlapped English and Scottish Puritanism. "Dutch Calvinism did not flower profusely until it was cultivated by the Synod of Dort (1618-19) and fortified by the Dutch Reformation, a primarily seventeenth and early eighteenth-century movement paralleling English Puritanism both in time and substance" (Beeke).¹

I. Dutch Puritanism

1. *Its historical rise.* The Dutch Reformed Church was the dominant denomination in the Netherlands, since its start in the Protestant Reformation. As English Puritanism is at times called "a second-generation Reformation," so Dutch Puritanism is referred to "a further Reformation." Both of these movements, largely existed in the seventeenth century, and had their origin in the Protestant Reformation of the prior century. "The Further Reformation dates from Willem Teellinck (1579-1629), often called the father of the movement, to its last brilliant contributors, Alexander Comrie (1706-1774) and Theodorus Van der Groe (1705-1784)" (Beeke).² Joel Beeke said, the emphasis of Dutch Puritanism was "the working out of the Reformation more intensely in people's lives, in the church's worship, and in society."³ While Beeke isn't opposed to the phrase "Dutch Puritanism," he prefers the phrases "Dutch Second Reformation" or "Second Reformation," but argues mostly for the phrase "Dutch Further Reformation."⁴ "Despite similar outlooks, English Puritanism and the Dutch Second Reformation developed historically and theologically distinct identities. Though English Puritanism was a primary influence on the Second Reformation—particularly in its stress on the need for a personal and congregational life of practical godliness—it was not an exclusive influence. Non-English factors also contributed. In some respects, the Dutch movement was more Puritan than English Puritanism itself." (Beeke).⁵ He then quotes John Gerstner: "In England from an orthodox Reformed perspective, for all but a short period under Cromwell, there were always grossly unbiblical things to fight: the presence of bishops, superstitious rites in the Book of Common Prayer, vestments, etc. In the Netherlands none of these were present, and the task was all the more subtle. Defenders of the *status quo* were not so clearly unreformed as in England. In this context the true spirit of Puritanism came to the fore"⁶ "Divines of the Dutch Second Reformation were less interested in reforming the government and church than were their English brethren. Nevertheless, the essence of the Dutch Second Reformation does match the emphasis of English Puritanism on Reformed spirituality" (Beeke).⁷

Joel Beeke suggested several reasons why "the link between the two movements was strong, historically and theologically."⁸ First, "during the seventeenth century tens of thousands of Anglo-Scottish believers of Puritan persuasion lived in the Netherlands. Those believers represented about forty congregations and 350 ministers."⁹ Second, "the divines of English Puritanism and the Dutch Further Reformation respected each other. They enriched each other through personal contact and their writings, both their Latin treatises and the many books translated from English into Dutch."¹⁰ English Puritans were either read in English, Latin, or translated into Dutch. Beeke said this was especially true

¹ Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 741

² Joel Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality*, 289

³ Joel Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality*, 290

⁴ Joel Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality*, 290; *Meet the Puritans*, 742

⁵ Joel Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality*, 291-292

⁶ Joel Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality*, 292

⁷ Joel Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality*, 292

⁸ Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 742-743

⁹ Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 743

¹⁰ Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 743

of William Perkins, who was read in the Netherlands more than any other English divine. "More Reformed theological books were printed in the seventeenth century in the Netherlands than in all other countries combined" (Beeke).¹¹ Third, "English Puritan and Dutch Further Reformation divines also had similar aims: to foster God-glorifying experiential piety and ethical precision in individuals, churches, and nations" (Beeke).¹²

2. *Its major figures.* In his *Meet the Puritans*, Joel Beeke has an appendix on *Dutch Further Reformation Divines*, wherein he provides a brief biography of eleven men: Jean Taffin (1529-1602); Willem Teellinck (1579-1629); Gisbertus Voetius (1589-1676); Wilhelmus a Brakel (1635-1711); Johannes Boornbeek (1617-1666); Jacobus Koelman (1631-1695); Herman Witsius (1636-1708); Abraham Hellenbroek (1658-1731); Johannes Vanderkemp (1664-1718); Theodorus van der Groe (1705-1784); Alexander Comrie (1706-1774); Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen (1691-1747).¹³ All of these men were influential Dutch Puritans, and have at least one volume recently reprinted in English, most through the *Classics of Reformed Spirituality* series by Reformation Heritage Books. The editors of this series say: "This series offers fresh translations of key writings from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, making them accessible to the twenty-first century church. These writings from the Further Reformation in the Netherlands offer a balance of doctrine and piety, a mingling of theology and life that has seldom been equaled in the history of Christianity." We will limit our consideration to only two of the most popular (as the majority of their works have been reprinted recently in our day in the English tongue).

(1) Wilhelmus a Brakel (1635-1711). "Wilhelmus a Brakel was born on January 2, 1635, in Leeuwarden (a city in the province of Friesland), the only son of his parents (there were five daughters). His father was a Reformed pastor of extraordinary piety. Wilhelmus and his five sisters were reared in a remarkably God-fearing home. He was converted as a boy, probably under his father's preaching and his mother's prayers and pleading" (Beeke).¹⁴ "Following his childhood, Wilhelmus attended the Latin school in Leeuwarden. At that time his father pastored in the village of Beers, southwest of Leeuwarden. At the age of nineteen, in 1654, Wilhelmus enrolled at the academy of Franeker. His education was thorough and comprehensive. He studied languages, philosophy, history, and theology. Upon completion of his education, the twenty-four-year-old, was examined by Classis Leeuwarden (the equivalent of a presbytery), and was admitted to the sacred ministry" (Fieret).¹⁵ "Wilhelmus a Brakel served five congregations in the national church of the Netherlands during a ministry of nearly fifty years: Exmorra (1662-65); Stavoren (1665-70); Harlingen (1670-73); Leeuwarden (1673-1683); Rotterdam (1683-1711)" (Beeke).¹⁶ The first four cities are in the province of Friesland, whereas Rotterdam is in the province of Holland. "As a Brakel advanced in years, bodily ailments and weakness increased. He had difficulty in walking and also his memory decreased. Nevertheless, he continued to preach and exhort as long as he was able. Particularly his exhortations in a chapel in Rotterdam had considerable attendance. Upon conclusion of the service, the people would gather near the exit of the chapel and wait until 'Father Brakel' would come outside. He would address them and pronounce a benediction upon them as they embarked on their homeward journey. Thus, through the dark night, they would 'go on their way rejoicing'" (Fieret).¹⁷ "In the summer of 1711, a Brakel became very ill. When asked on his deathbed how his soul fared, he responded, 'Very well; I may rest in my Jesus. I am united to Him

¹¹ Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 743

¹² Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 743

¹³ Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 739-823

¹⁴ Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 745

¹⁵ Dr. W. Fieret, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, 1: xxxii-xxxiii

¹⁶ Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 745-748

¹⁷ Dr. W. Fieret, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, 1: lxxvii-lxxix

and I am awaiting His coming for me; meanwhile, I submit myself quietly to Him.' He died on October 30, 1711, at the age of seventy-six" (Beeke).¹⁸

Wilhelmus a Brakel was a popular leading representative of the Puritan-minded Dutch Further Reformation. He was so loved among his people for his fatherly ministry both from the pulpit and in pastoral work that many fondly called him 'Father Brakel.' That honorary title has stuck until today in the homes of many Dutch people in the Netherlands who still read his classic work and appreciate the Puritan, experiential, and pietistic tradition that he so ably represented.¹⁹

Though a Brakel wrote several works, he's best known for his three-volume treatise, *The Christian's Reasonable Service* (it's four-volume in English). This book was published in 1700, with a second and third addition quickly following. With regards to the third addition, a Brakel said: "this third addition has been enlarged considerably. If someone is displeased with the enlargement of the third edition, then let him transform his displeasure into generosity by giving this first or second edition to someone of humble means who could also be edified by it, and obtain a copy of the present edition for himself."²⁰ "This work was not, as was customary at that time, dedicated to people who had a high position in church or state, but to the 'Congregation of God in the Netherlands'" (Fieret).²¹ Wilhelmus a Brakel wrote in the first addition: "May this book particularly be of service to the congregation which I am currently serving, and the congregations which I previously served. I will also rejoice if my work may be useful in giving direction to theological students, student preachers, and young ministers. May it enable them to comprehend the unique, distinct nature of divine truths so that they may safeguard and practice these truths in need. May they present them to the congregation in such a manner that it results in the conversion and strengthening of souls and in the edification of the church of our Lord Jesus Christ."²²

The work is divided into 103 chapters. Chapters 1-29 concern the doctrines of God (1-9), man (10-15), Christ (16-23), and the church (24-29); chapters 30-99 concern the doctrine of salvation; and chapters 100-103 concern the doctrine of last things. There's an appendix added to the work entitled, *The Administration of the Covenant of grace in the Old and New Testaments*, wherein a Brakel traces the history of redemption from Adam to Abraham, from Abraham to Sinai, and from the birth of Jesus Christ to the Revelation of John. Concerning the section on salvation, Joel Beeke said: "It is the largest and most fascinating section of a Brakel's work, packed with salient applications on a variety of topics related to loving as a Christian in this world" (Beeke).²³ On the work as a whole, Beeke said: "*The Christian's Reasonable Service* represents, perhaps more than any other work, the Puritan heartbeat and balance of the Dutch Further Reformation. Here systematic theology and vital, experiential Christianity are scripturally and practically interwoven within a covenantal framework, the whole bearing the mark of a pastor-theologian deeply taught by the Spirit. Sweeping in coverage, nearly every subject treasured by Christians is treated in an unusually helpful way, always aiming for the promotion of godliness. If one could only possess one multi-volume set of books, this set would be a wise choice."²⁴

(2) Herman Witsius (1636-1708). "Herman Wits (Latinized as Witsius) was born on February 12, 1636, in a town in West Friesland, to God-fearing parents who dedicated their firstborn to the Lord. His father

¹⁸ Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 750

¹⁹ Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 750

²⁰ Wilhelmus a Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, 1: cxv – cxvi

²¹ Dr. W. Fieret, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, 1: lxxiv

²² Wilhelmus a Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, 1: cxiv - cxv

²³ Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 751

²⁴ Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 752

was an elder for more than twenty years, and his mother's father (Herman Gerard), was pastor of the local Reformed Church for thirty years. Herman was named after his grandfather with the prayer that he might emulate his godly example" (Beeke).²⁵ "By the time Witsius took up theological studies in Utrecht at age fifteen, he could speak Latin fluently, read Greek and Hebrew, and had memorized numerous Scriptures in their original languages. At Utrecht, he studied theology under Johannes Hoornbeek, whom he called 'my teacher of undying memory'" (Beeke).²⁶ But it was the pastor of the local church in Utrecht (Justus van den Bogaerdt), that influenced Witsius most. "From his sermons, conversation, and example, Witsius learned the deeper mysteries of the kingdom of God, and of mystical and spiritual Christianity. From him he understood how great the difference is between any superficial knowledge, and that heavenly wisdom which is acquired by meditation, prayer, love, familiar converse with God, and by the very relish and experience of spiritual things."²⁷ Witsius was ordained into the ministry on July 8, 1657. "In 1660, Witsius married Aletta van Borchorn, daughter of a merchant who was an elder in Witsius's church. They were blessed with twenty-four years of marriage. Aletta said she could not tell what was greater—her love or her respect for her husband. The couple had five children—two sons, who died young, and three daughters" (Beeke). In total, he served four churches: Westwoud (1657-1661); Wormer (1661-1666); Goes (1666-1668); Leeuwarden (1668-1675).

"In 1675, Witsius was called to be professor of theology. He served in this capacity the rest of his life, first at Franeker (1675-1680), then at Utrecht (1680-1698), and finally at Leiden (1698-1707). While at Franeker, Witsius published, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man*, and while at Utrecht he published a two-volume work entitled, *Sacred Dissertations on the Apostles' Creed* (1681) and a one-volume work, *Sacred Dissertations on the Lord's Prayer* (1689). These books were second in importance only to his *Economy of the Covenants*" (Beeke).²⁸ He was forced to retire in 1707 because of ill health "In his last six years he suffered painful bouts of gout, dizziness, and memory lapses. After a serious attack on October 1708, he told friends that his homecoming was near. Four days later, he died at the age of seventy-two, after nearly fifty-two years of ministry. During his last hour, he told his close friend, that he was persevering in the faith that he had long enjoyed in Christ" (Beeke).²⁹ "John Duncan described Witsius as 'perhaps the most tender, spiritually-minded and richly evangelical as well as one of the most learned of the Dutch divines of the old school.' Witsius' influence continues today, 'Learned, wise, mighty in the Scriptures, practical and experimental,' J.I. Packer wrote in 1990, 'Witsius was a man whose work stands comparison for substance and thrust with that of his British contemporary John Owen, and this writer, for one, knows no praise high than that'" (Beeke).³⁰

Witsius' treatise, *Economy of the Covenants*, consists of four books: Book I: The Covenant of Works; Book II: The Covenant of Redemption; Book III: The Covenant of Grace in Time; Book IV: Covenant Ordinances Throughout the Scriptures. "For Witsius, the doctrine of the covenants is the best way of reading Scripture" (Beeke).³¹ Witsius defines a covenant in the beginning of the work: "A covenant of God with man, is an agreement between God and man, about the way of obtaining consummate happiness."³² "Covenants between God and man are essentially unilateral covenants in the sense that they can only be initiated by God. Though initiated by God, these covenants call for human consent to the

²⁵ Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 807

²⁶ Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 807

²⁷ Taken from, *The Life of the Author, The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man*, 1:28

²⁸ Joel Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality*, 334-336

²⁹ Joel Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality*, 336-337

³⁰ Joel Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality*, 349

³¹ Joel Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality*, 339

³² Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man*, 1:45

covenant" (Beeke).³³ Thus, divine covenants are a condescension of God and are always gracious in nature. For Witsius, Scripture speaks of two divine covenants called the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace. "In scripture, we find two covenants of God with man: The Covenant of Works, otherwise called the Covenant of Nature; and the Covenant of Grace. The apostle teaches us this distinction in Romans 3:24, where He mentions the law of works, and the law of faith; by the law of works, understanding that doctrine which points out the way in which, by means of works, salvation is obtained; and by the law of faith, understanding that doctrine which directs by faith to obtain salvation."³⁴

With respect to the Covenant of Grace, Witsius understood this to be based upon the Covenant of Redemption between the Father and Son in eternity, promised throughout the Old Testament historical Covenants, and revealed in the New Covenant and Christ's blood. Thus, Witsius could speak "of the oneness of the Covenant of Grace, as to its Substance."³⁵ "If we view the *substance* of the covenant, it is but only *one*, nor is it possible it should be otherwise. There is no other way worthy of God, in which salvation can be bestowed on sinners, but that discovered in the Gospel." It's for this reason, the Scripture refers to the Covenant of Grace as everlasting (Heb.13:20). "This is because it was settled from eternity, published immediately upon the fall of the first man, constantly handed down by the ancients, more fully explained by Christ Himself and His apostles, and is to continue throughout all ages, and, in virtue of which, believers shall inherit eternal happiness."³⁶ "We therefore maintain, agreeable to the sacred writings, that to all the Elect, living in any period of time, 1st. One and the same *eternal life* was promised. 2dly. That Jesus Christ was held forth as the *one* and the same *author* and bestower of *salvation*. 3rdly. That they could not become partakers of it any other way, but by a true and lively *faith* in Him. If we demonstrate these three things, none can any longer doubt, but that the covenant of grace must be, as to its substance, only one from the beginning. For, if the salvation be the same, and the author of it the same, the manner of communion with Him the same, it is certain the covenant itself cannot be more than one."³⁷

(a) The Covenant of Grace is based on the Covenant of Redemption. "When I speak of the compact between the Father and the Son, I thereby understand the will of the Father, giving the Son to be the Head and Redeemer of the elect; and the will of the Son, presenting Himself as a Sponsor or Surety for them; in all which the nature of a compact and agreement consists."³⁸ "Christ Himself speaks of this compact in express, Luke 22:29, 'and I engage by covenant unto you a kingdom, as My Father hath engaged by covenant unto Me.' In which words the Lord Jesus says, that, by virtue of some covenant or disposition, He obtains a kingdom, as we also obtain it by virtue of the same."³⁹ (b) The Covenant of Grace is promised in the OT historical Covenants. For Witsius, there's a sense in which the OC began after the fall. "We begin the economy of the Old Testament immediately upon the fall, and the first promise of grace, and end it in Christ; as both the nature of the thing and scripture direct us to do."⁴⁰ While the Covenant of Grace, which is first revealed in the promise of Genesis 3:15, was administered within the Old Testament or Covenant, the types and shadows, through which grace was given, belonged not to the Covenant of Grace, but the Old Covenant. "We do not reckon the promise of the seed of the woman bruising the serpent's head, and of the enmity established between the seed of both,

³³ Joel Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality*, 340

³⁴ Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man*, 1:48-49

³⁵ Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man*, 1:291

³⁶ Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man*, 1:291

³⁷ Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man*, 1:292

³⁸ Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man*, 1:165

³⁹ Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man*, 1:166

⁴⁰ Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man*, 1:308

as belonging to the Old Testament, for these things absolutely belong to the Covenant of Grace in general, but the sacrifices, which were added, and by the blood of which that Testament was confirmed, belong indeed to the Old Testament."⁴¹ Simply put, the Old Testament in and of itself saved no one, but merely administered the sacrifices, through which believers received grace promised in Christ. (c) The Covenant of Grace is fully revealed (or completed) in the New Covenant. "As the darkness of the night is only dispelled by the beams of the rising morn, so the Old Testament was abrogated only by the introduction of the New."⁴² Witsius then suggested several benefits of the New Testament.⁴³ "The first is the exhibition of the Messiah made perfect. He who was promised from the beginning, shadowed forth by so many types, so ardently longed for, and for so many ages expected, came forth in the fulness of time, in that place, from that tribe and family, in that manner from a virgin, and appeared in the flesh, just as the holy prophets had long before prophesied, He should come." "The second is that gospel is made clearer. The gospel of the New Testament has the following excellencies above the Old: 1st. That it sets forth Christ as come, and declares that all those things are fulfilled, which were formerly foretold to come to pass long after. 2^{dl}. That it declares, in clear terms, every thing relating to the common salvation, without the covering of figures. 3^{dly}. That it now allures the hearts of believers with the sweetest and most abundant consolations, and without that severity, which according to the old legal dispensation, mixed the words of grace with so much rigour. 4^{thly}. That it dwells now more abundantly in us, and is preached more fully and frequently, and with a great demonstration of the Spirit, and a deeper insinuation or sinking into the conscience." "The third benefit is the calling of the Gentiles by the gospel, which followed upon the Messiah's being made perfect." "The fourth benefit is a more abundant and delightful measure of the Spirt, frequently foretold by the prophets, to be sent together with, and poured out on the church by Christ." "The fifth benefit is Christian liberty, which Paul, the most diligent interpreter of, and warmest advocate for, usually so considers, that he makes it generally to consist in a freedom from that bondage which the Jews were under; and he rarely treats of it, unless when he compares Christians with Jews, and sets the Old dispensation in opposition to the New."

I consider three periods, as it were, of this Covenant of Grace. Its commencement was in the eternal counsel of the adorable Trinity: in which the Son of God was constituted by the Father, with the approbation of the Holy Spirit, the Savior of mankind; on this condition, that in the fulness of time He should be made of a woman, and made under the law; which the Son undertook to perform. The Second period of this Covenant I place in that intercession of Christ, by which, immediately upon the fall of man, He offered Himself to God, now offended, in order actually to perform those things to which He had engaged Himself from eternity; saying, Thou hast given them to Me, and I will make satisfaction for them: and so He made way for the word of grace to be declared to, and the Covenant of Grace to be made with them. Thus Christ was actually constituted Mediator, and revealed as such immediately upon the fall; and having undertaken the suretyship, He began to act many things belonging to the offices of a Mediator. The third period of this Covenant is that, when on His assuming human nature, He suffered His ears to be bored; that is, engaged Himself as a voluntary servant to God, from love to His Lord the Father, and to His spouse the church, and His spiritual children, 'was made under the law,' by subjecting Himself to the law: which He solemnly testified by His circumcision on the eighth day after His birth, whereby He made Himself 'a debtor to do the whole law.'⁴⁴

⁴¹ Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man*, 1:309

⁴² Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man*, 1:405

⁴³ Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man*, 1:405-421

⁴⁴ Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man*, 1:177-179