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Empty Chairs at Empty Tables: Dort in French Protestantism



by Matthew Paul Harmon

Introduction:

*There's a grief that can't be spoken,
There's a pain goes on and on.
Empty chairs at empty tables,
Now my friends are dead and gone.*¹

The Rev. Matthew P. Harmon, Th.M., is Senior Pastor of Christ Presbyterian Church in Grove City, PA. Now in his tenth year of pastoral ministry, he previously served in Lawrenceville, NJ. A graduate of Dartmouth College, Pastor Matt received his M.Div. and Th.M. from Westminster Theological Seminary. He is co-author with Iain Duguid of *Living in the Light of Inextinguishable Hope: The Gospel According to Joseph and Zephaniah, Haggai, Malachi* (Reformed Expository Commentary). Pastor Matt grew up in Maine and remains an avid Boston sports fan. He and his wife, Rebecca, have lived in Philadelphia, Princeton, and Geneva, Switzerland. They have two children, Anastasia and Ransom, and enjoy walking, reading, movies, puzzles, and dancing in the kitchen.

The survivor's guilt of Marius, in the American musical adaptation of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, is a fitting anthem for French Protestantism within the larger story of the Reformation. The empty chairs famously reserved at Dort for the French delegates not only memorialize their absence at the Synod but also prophetically anticipate the future absence of the French Protestant church from the historical imagination of American Christianity.

Such oversight is anachronistic. At its peak in the sixteenth century, the French Protestant church in France may only have accounted for 10 percent of the French populace: 1.5 to 2 million people.² However, that figure easily eclipses the entire populations of most Protestant nations at the time. Even after the setbacks of the Wars of Religion, the rump Huguenot church matched the entire population of Scotland. In sheer size, the French church should be at the heart of Reformed Protestant history. But sadly, that's rarely the case.

Overlooking French Protestantism also impoverishes the contemporary church. French Protestant strategies for faithful endurance in a hostile society—some commendable, some lamentable; some successful, others not—are worth study by Christians today seeking to practice faithful presence in the sometimes hostile reality of a de-Christianizing West.

In this article, we can recover a bit of Huguenot history by simply doing two things. First, for context, I will briefly review the French reception of the Synod of Dort. Then, I will offer a deeper dive into the “purposefully prodigal!” theology of Moïse Amyraut.

Pierre du Moulin and French Reception of Dort³

At the center of the process of Dort's French reception is Amyraut's future opponent, Pierre du Moulin (1568-1658), a leading French minister and theological professor. Even before the synod, Du Moulin was advocating in 1613 for a pan-Protestant confession of faith that would even include Arminians. In 1617, the French National Synod appointed a committee of four to work on the plan. The committee members were Du Moulin, André Rivet, Daniel Chamier, and Jean Chauve.⁴

The Dutch States General requested that King Louis XIII send three or four French Protestant representatives. Some Protestants supported sending the previously established committee of four to fulfill the request, if the King allowed. The delegates themselves wanted to leave secretly, expecting the King to refuse the request (correctly). Louis briefly considered allowing two delegates to attend, insisting that the French delegation be given preferential seating at the Synod over the English delegation. Louis then reversed course and forbid participation. When the king's ordinance was delivered, du Moulin was away from home, probably intentionally, for fear of arrest. Chamier and Chauve were intercepted *en route* in Geneva and ordered home.⁵

Though disappointed, du Moulin corresponded with the Synod and, as moderator of the next French national Synod at Alais in 1620, used his influence to ensure that the Synod adopt the Canons of Dort in addition to the 1559 French Confession of Faith, together with an oath of subscription. Some thought Du Moulin heavy-handed. During a time of mutual censure, a custom at the close of each French synod, the synod's assessor (Laurence Brunier), rebuked him for "usurping a papal authority."⁶

Dissension over the oath soon surfaced. The provincial Synod of L'Île-de-France (which included Paris and the influential Charenton congregation) asked the next national synod to reconsider the oath, since it lacked precedent and required "a form of compliance more absolute" than that of the French Confession of Faith of 1559. King Louis also resented that the French church "had obligated pastors, by oath, to approve a doctrine that had been defined in a foreign state."⁷ The next French national Synod, at Charenton in 1625, confirmed

the adoption of the Canons but made the oath less stringent. Nonetheless, the French Protestants were the only church outside of the Netherlands to adopt the Canons of Dort.⁸

Amyraut and French Universalistic Particularism

The Canons of Dort provide the theological background to the universal grace controversy that unfolded in France starting in the 1630s. At the same time that the Synod of Dort was deliberating, Scottish theologian John Cameron was teaching theology at the Academy of Saumur from 1618-1620. Beloved by students, Cameron's influence was especially felt in the theology of Moïse Amyraut (1596-1664), who joined the Saumur faculty in 1633. In 1634, he published a "*Brief Traitté de la Predestination*/Brief Treatise on Predestination" to refute mischaracterizations of the Reformed doctrine of predestination. The particular framework and assumptions of Amyraut's hypothetical universalism aroused suspicions of incipient Arminianism from Pierre du Moulin, André Rivet and others.⁹

Introduction to Amyraut's Six Sermons

Written 18 months after the *Brief Traitté de la Predestination*, Amyraut's *Six Sermons* are a helpful entry point into his theology.¹⁰ Amyraut is more careful with his expressions, avoiding some of the language deemed most offensive in the *Brief Traitté* by his Reformed brethren. Amyraut's sermons also double as theological treatises and defenses of his contested teachings. If preached as printed, each sermon likely lasted well over an hour. Here, we will primarily examine the first, second and sixth sermons 1, 2, and 6, with only the briefest summaries of the other three.

First Sermon on Ezekiel 18:23

In his first sermon, Amyraut's text is Ezekiel 18:23: "Would I in any way take pleasure in the death of the wicked,' says the Lord God, 'and not rather that he turn from his way and live?'"¹¹ But the text presents a puzzle. Despite this profession of mercy, God punishes many people past, present, and future for their sins. Further, from many of those he punishes, he withholds not only the efficacious Spirit that would enable them to repent but even

the gospel proclamation by which they might repent. In response to such questions, Amyraut offers the common solution:

If we say therefore, that this passage teaches that God in no way wishes the death of the sinner who converts; but that if he does not convert God necessarily wishes his death, because the Judge wishes the punishment of the one who is guilty; although we have spoken the truth, that neither exhausts the entire meaning, nor equals the whole emphasis of this passage.¹²

While Amyraut accepts this formula, his affirmation of it is, at most, qualified. He intends to offer an exposition that more faithfully plumbs the depth of the passage's teaching.¹³

In Amyraut's mind, there is not a strict parallelism between God's mercy and his justice, as the common interpretation may suggest. Rather, the passage highlights God's "greater vehemence" to show mercy than to execute justice. No one would say that because God loves and takes pleasure in his justice, he therefore loves the sin that allows him to exercise his justice. The rhetorical question of Ezekiel could not be recast to highlight God's justice in the same way that it highlights his mercy. God would never say, "Would I in any way take pleasure in the life of the righteous, and not rather that he turn from his way and be punished?"¹⁴ The rhetorical form and force of the question not only commends God's mercy but also, in some manner, elevates it above his justice. Ultimately, the pleasure that God takes in a sinner's conversion is of a different kind than that he takes in a sinner's punishment: "However inexorable the justice of God may be upon impenitent sinners, there is nevertheless a very notable difference between the inclinations that he has to exercise it, and those that bring him to desire the life of the sinner and his repentance."¹⁵

At this point, Amyraut suggests a twofold character to God's mercy, developed purportedly from Calvin's commentary on the passage. The first kind of mercy that God shows "requires in them a certain prior quality, without which it is impossible

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that his mercy pardon them."¹⁶ The impenitent sinner will suffer God's justice. But, the penitent sinner who believes and repents will find mercy from God. The other kind of mercy that God shows goes beyond requiring a condition fulfilled and creates the required condition within the recipient.¹⁷

Ultimately, this distinction of the two kinds of mercy found in God solves the apparent dilemma of two differing wills as far as God's saving intent. His desire to save all men comes from the first kind of mercy that requires that the condition of faith and repentance be fulfilled. God's will to save a few comes from the second kind of mercy that creates the required condition within men.

Here, Amyraut uses an illustration from marriage. A man seeking a wife may extend a proposal of marriage upon condition that the woman meet certain requirements. If the conditions are not met, it is quite possible that both the man and the woman may come to despise one another. However, the same man may subsequently set his affections on another woman in quite a different fashion. To the second woman, he may commit to bring about all that is necessary for her to be wedded to him, supplying every deficiency from his own resources. In this way, God has, in a manner of speaking, extended his offer of marriage to the entire human race while setting his special, unswerving affection upon the church. In his chosen people, he brings about every condition required to be his pure and spotless bride.¹⁸

The manner in which God engenders this faith and repentance rests upon two means: The internal efficacy of the Holy Spirit creating the required condition of faith and repentance, and the external preaching of God's word that flows from God's first general mercy that makes known the required conditions of faith and repentance to receive forgiveness and life.¹⁹

Amyraut concludes with a practical, homiletical lesson on these two kinds of mercy, each appropriate for particular and different occasions. Amyraut concludes with the exact kind of preaching he has just commended, vividly and passionately portray-

ing God's mercy in Christ as his congregation goes to the Lord's Table.²⁰

Second Sermon on Romans 1:19-20

"What can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made": Amyraut focuses upon two questions in his exposition of Rom 1:19-20. First, to what extent is God's mercy included in general revelation? Second, what is the result of this revelation? But first, Amyraut rejects, as contrary to the Scriptures, the notion that someone could successfully attain God's mercy by virtue of his or her unaided repentance. Rather, he is concerned with God's disposition toward humanity, not humanity's corruption that has rendered use of God's merciful disposition impossible.²¹

Here, Amyraut suggests a hypothetical situation. From creation, it should be apparent to us the duties God requires of his creatures. Would God condemn a person who observed all of these duties fully and was burdened only with original sin? By human power, no such person could exist, though God could miraculously bring it about. In Amyraut's mind, God is too merciful to allow such an individual to perish from ignorance of his mercy.²²

How? A soul not blinded by human corruption could reason to God's mercy from the attributes of his nature that are revealed in creation. Just as creation manifests God's goodness, so also his continued maintenance of creation *after* sin reveals the merciful nature of this goodness.²³

However, as the second major section of this sermon, Amyraut addresses the purpose or the result of this revelation of God's mercy. Is God's purpose in revelation simply to make human ignorance inexcusable? No, it is only the hardness in response to this revelation that, in a secondary way, results in the nations' inexcusability. Human obstinacy wrests the purpose of God's liberality, producing hypocrisy and self-righteousness where it had been intended to produce repentance.²⁴

Is it then possible for someone to be saved apart from Jesus Christ, because his name is not known among pagan nations? Amyraut adamantly rejects any such possibility. God's justice requires

satisfaction; and without it, constrains his mercy.²⁵ Without satisfaction for sin, God could not show mercy without violating his own nature, and salvation only comes by the efficacy of the Holy Spirit and the proclamation of God's word.

But, two observations demonstrate that the requirement concerning the knowledge of that satisfaction is less strict. First, God has differently dispensed his word in the past. The original promise of the woman's seed may implicitly contain the key doctrines of Christianity without that being clear to human intellect at the time. The clarity of God's revelation has increased in the movement from patriarchal sacrifices through the prophets to the gospel: "The other thing to consider is, that God is not so constrained to this distinct and particular knowledge of the satisfaction of Christ, that he absolutely cannot give salvation without it."²⁶ For example, infants may be saved without the knowledge of Christ's satisfaction, as Calvin says, by a special privilege. Likewise, another special privilege may be enjoyed by those who lack access to the knowledge that they require.²⁷

But salvation itself comes only from Christ's satisfaction. And special revelation alone proposes Christ as Redeemer, works by the efficacy of the Holy Spirit, and converts men: "the gospel does not go beyond the boundaries of preaching and is necessarily limited to where the voice of the Prophets and Apostles stops."²⁸ However, God has made something of his mercy known among nations beyond the Jews. By their natural faculties they could have received this offered mercy. But, as a result of the hardness of the human heart through sin, none have actually repented and received God's mercy. Thus, they are left without excuse.²⁹

Amyraut's Third Sermon on 1 Corinthians 1:21

Amyraut's third sermon demonstrates the absolute necessity of the gospel to lead men to salvation—a necessity that is also doxological. Since the fall, God has so demonstrated his justice and mercy to all, that the resolution of these two virtues in Christ's satisfaction for sin must also be proclaimed throughout creation. The glory of God and the glory of the person and work of Jesus Christ require the universal publication of salvation by Christ's death.³⁰

Fourth Sermon on 2 Corinthians 3:6

Amyraut contrasts the Mosaic legal covenant with the gospel covenant and draws implications for the Reformed church's distinctive witness in his day.

Fifth Sermon on Romans 11:33

From Paul's discussion of Israel and Gentiles in Romans 11, *Amyraut introduces another model of twofold election*. First, there is precise, absolute and unconditional election of particular people. Second, there is universal or general election of entire people groups and nations. The first kind of election is to the calling of the Spirit, and the second to the external calling of the word.³¹

Through history, God changes which nations he extends general election to. No merit, either actual or foreseen, provides a grounds for boasting over either our individual or national neighbors.³²

Sixth Sermon on John 6:45

Here Amyraut turns to the manner of the Holy Spirit's internal calling. Amyraut expounds three headings.³³

First, what is it to come to Christ? For Amyraut, it is mediation of knowledge. Faith is a light for the understanding. The knowledge of the death and resurrection of Jesus penetrates the soul and captivates our thoughts.³⁴

What is it to listen and learn of the Father? "If you look at the manner of speaking of which the holy Scripture makes use in order to represent the manner in which God works the conversion of men, you will see that it is almost always concerned with what we call the intelligence."³⁵ Amyraut then lists 28 biblical citations confirming the pre-eminently intellectual nature of conversion.³⁶ Amyraut states that "the operation of the understanding consists in contemplating, understanding, knowing, comprehending the truth of things, and to be persuaded in it after having understood it."³⁷

Finally, he reaches the crux of the controversy: What is the effect of this instruction? He rejects

the Roman assertion that instruction puts each person in a neutral position, free to believe or not to believe, placing the determining force within the freedom of the will. Amyraut believes the priority of the will represents a complete overthrow of reason.³⁸ For Amyraut, the understanding informs and directs the will, not vice versa. We do not believe something because we want to, and then the will commands the intellect to believe, though the will could spur the intellect to more attentive consideration of the truth and to firmer faith.

Nevertheless, the first action of belief comes *not* from the will but from the understanding. A man may discover what he believes to be a very good diamond. But this conviction comes not from the will wanting it to be a good diamond but from

the understanding. The will may then stir the man to take action so as to confirm its quality. To think otherwise overturns the order God has put among human faculties. The understanding commands the appetites. As the Greeks taught, reason is the governor among the faculties of the soul.³⁹

Amyraut's final sermon is most notable for his exposition of faculty psychology. Amyraut gives pride of place to the understanding or intellect. For Amyraut, intellectual understanding is the primary avenue of the work of the Holy Spirit in conversion.

Concluding Observations on Amyraut's Six Sermons

In summary, *Six Sermons* demonstrates both Amyraut's Reformed theological commitments as well as his innovative developments within that tradition. Amyraut's fundamental two-mercy/two-will structure approximates earlier Reformed distinctions between God's revealed will and secret counsels, while elevating God's mercy as his pre-eminent attribute. Amyraut affirms the impossibility of salvation by natural revelation, but he offers a maximalist, rather than minimalist, content to natural theology. So, by rejecting God's self-revelation in nature and providence, sinful humanity rejects the expression of God's mercy and his invitation to repentance. No one is ever saved apart

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from Christ's sacrifice, but by a special privilege, God is not so strict in requiring clear knowledge of that sacrifice. Amyraut firmly rejects Roman and Arminian attempts to magnify the freedom of the will and its importance in salvation, but he does so through a significantly different approach to faculty psychology that elevates the role of reason and the intellect. In each instance, Amyraut affirms key elements of classic Reformed theology while, at the same time, innovatingly refashioning it.

Whether or not we agree with his formulations, Amyraut sought to work within a distinctively Reformed theological system and confessional tradition that undergirded the preaching of the gospel "to all persons promiscuously and without distinction."⁴⁰

Endnotes

1. *Les Misérables*: lyrics by Herbert Kretzmer; music by Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schönberg; based on the novel by Victor Hugo.
2. Philip Benedict, *Christ's Churches Purely Reformed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 137.
3. Donald Sinnema, "The French Reformed Churches, Arminianism, and the Synod of Dort (1618-1619)" in *The Theology of the French Reformed Churches*, edited by Martin Klauber (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), 98-136.
4. *Ibid*, 100-106.
5. *Ibid*, 106-109.
6. *Ibid*, 123.
7. *Ibid*, 125.
8. *Ibid*, 126, 134.
9. Brian G. Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy: Protestant Scholasticism and Humanism in Seventeenth-Century France* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), 80-88.
10. Moyses Amyraut, *Six Sermons de la Nature, Estendue, Necessité, Dispensation, et Efficace de l'Évangile*, (Saumur: Girard & de Lerpiniere, 1636). The edition cited subsequently comes from a later compilation that includes the *Six Sermons* in their entirety: Moyses Amyraut, *Sermons sur divers Textes de la Sainte Ecriture. Prononcés en divers lieux*, (Saumur: Desbordes, 1653).
11. Amyraut, *Sermons sur divers Textes*, 37-40.
12. *Ibid*, 41.
13. *Ibid*, 40-41.
14. *Ibid*, 42.
15. *Ibid*, 46-47.
16. *Ibid*, 55-56.
17. *Ibid*, 55-59.
18. *Ibid*, 61-62.
19. *Ibid*, 63.
20. *Ibid*, 69-73.
21. *Ibid*, 74-77.
22. *Ibid*, 78-79.
23. *Ibid*, 80-83.
24. *Ibid*, 92-97.
25. *Ibid*, 104-106.
26. *Ibid*, 108.
27. *Ibid*, 107-110.
28. *Ibid*, 116.
29. *Ibid*, 110-117.
30. *Ibid*, 138-141.
31. *Ibid*, 224-226.
32. *Ibid*, 240-244.
33. *Ibid*, 250-251.
34. *Ibid*, 251-254.
35. *Ibid*, 261.
36. *Ibid*, 261-264.
37. *Ibid*, 262.
38. *Ibid*, 264-265.
39. *Ibid*, 266-269.
40. The Canons of Dort II,5.