

***Grace and Assurance: The Message of the Canons of Dordt***, by Martyn McGeown. Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2018. Hardcover. 384 pages. [Reviewed by Derrick Span, a member of Immanuel Protestant Reformed Church]

Rev. Martyn McGeown's book, entitled *Grace and Assurance: The Message of the Canons of Dordt*, emphasizes the necessity, as Reformed Christians, to thoroughly understand our creeds and confessions. These creeds and confessions exhibit what heresies our fathers fought against and what they clung to with ardent zeal. We might ask what value there is in reading a book about the Canons, or we might object that the Canons, Belgic Confession, and Heidelberg Catechism are only creeds. Should we be spending our time studying these old creeds and confessions when we have big enough problems understanding our Bible? Are we not supposed to hold to sola scriptura? While these areas of concern are essential, they express a misunderstanding that we cannot learn from those who came before us. We must be careful in speaking in that way. Instead, we ought to read and listen to those who fought for the truth, seeking the truth from them. By hearing them, we will be better equipped to read God's word through an informed outlook. So I encourage the use of this book not just for informing us of what our fathers taught, but as a means to examine what we hold to and whether we maintain the understanding of God's word. To encourage this mindset, a brief explanation of the book is necessary.

The author's explanation of the Canons begins with the intent, namely to expose Arminianism as erroneous from the ground up. To accomplish this purpose, our fathers had to explain many different doctrines as clearly as possible to leave no room for Arminianism to stand. Where would they begin? Would they start with the main point that Arminian fought against, i.e., reprobation? As a reading of the Canons would illustrate, they did not begin with reprobation; in fact, they did not for some time. The Canons began with who God is and who man is in relation to God. McGeown and our forefathers teach us a crucial bit of wisdom by starting with God in their explanation.

Explaining the context surrounding the creeds, the author dives into the material, systematically explaining all five heads by showing that all the articles connect to create an excellent understanding of God's word. In chapter one head one is covered. Starting with the scriptures, Dordt formed its foundation for theology. The author explains in head one that the Canons' foundation includes the following: what kind of God we have; who we are to him; and God's purpose for predestination. After establishing a foundation on these topics, Dordt could confidently examine the objections the Arminians had towards election and reprobation including questions like: what kind of loving God would send people to hell?; and, alternatively, how does predestination not destroy any possibility of a personal decision? McGeown shows how the answers to these questions and more are developed further through all five heads.

In chapter two head two builds on head one in that it takes up the subject of Christ's death in relation to predestination. For example, why did Christ have to die for his people? Could God not have just "forgotten" their debt to him? Would he not have been merciful in doing that? The answers to these questions need to be developed from the foundation of head one because they are rooted in the character of who God is. Many Arminians explain that God is a loving God that loves all men, so he tries to persuade all men to believe. What a perversion of the truth!

The answers in chapter two prepare the reader for chapter three heads three and four, which explain the Arminian view of resistible grace, engaging in the hard topic of free will. The Canons do not stop with describing the Reformed view of free will though. Even if everyone understood that they were totally depraved and inclined to all wickedness, how would they obtain comfort in their

knowledge of that doctrine? How do they find comfort in the fact that they are unable to do any good? The author explains this by developing the relationship between the preaching and regeneration, showing that regeneration occurs not from goodness rooted in the sinful heart of believers, but from the inward workings of the Holy Ghost, which cannot end with believers being left comfortless. Chapter four furthers the explanation of this comfort.

Head five considers the preservation of the saints in chapter four. What does the preservation of the saints mean? McGeown develops Dordt's explanation of this doctrine, using very personal language. What would it mean if a believer could lose their salvation? He explains that this loss would imply losing faith, which means that they would need to become regenerated again and again. What are the implications of that Arminian view? The Canons explain the preservation of the saints by first delving into what a saint is and what their actions ought to be. In addition to teaching what a believer is, the Canons develop how to understand sin. How does God expect his people to understand concerning their sinful inclinations? Getting to the point more: why do believers fall into sin? These questions are quite relevant for our everyday lives, and the Canons explain these questions quite clearly. McGeown states, "the Canons are realistic and experiential in that they reflect the real experiences of God's children in this world."

The Canons explain who God and man are. Although the Canons are extensive and can be complicated, McGeown explains it as follows, "If you have ever wondered why theology is so complicated, blame the heretics." In other words, God's word is simple, but the lie of the devil tries to change that. The devil attempts to take away any form of comfort we have in Jesus, and to keep this comfort we need to know all assaults on the joy of the gospel and how to defend against any threat to it. This defense occurs when we study threats that arise that would destroy our comfort. A great way to keep on top of heresy is by staying sharp in our understanding of them. The Canons build a clear knowledge of salvation, so we are obligated to use it to further our knowledge of the truth. McGeown's exposition of the Canons is a valuable tool, and this book builds an excellent foundation for the truth. We have an obligation to read it and seek guidance from it. May it guide you as it did me.



