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*Grace and Assurance: The Message of the Canons of Dordt*, by Martyn McGeown. Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association. Pp. xiv + 369. \$31.95 (hardcover). [Reviewed by Ronald L. Cammenga.]

This year marks the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Synod of Dordt, 1618-'19. Though not its only achievement, the Canons of Dordt were without question the greatest achievement of the Great Synod.

The Reformed Free Publishing Association and the Reverend Martyn McGeown are to be commended for this fine work, which explains article by article the contents of the Canons of Dordt.

The book is written by a pastor for his parishioners. It is written with the man or woman in the pew in mind. It is written in such a way as to make the Canons of Dordt accessible even to young people and to novices in the Reformed faith. The language throughout is clear and colorful. The thoughts are well organized. The style is direct and personal. Most importantly, the arguments are straight-forward and easy to follow. These features make the book an excellent choice for a study group, as well as for catechetical instruction for older teens or young couples in the church.

The book begins with two introductory sections. The first is entitled “A Historical Introduction to the Synod of Dordt.” In this section, the author traces the history of the Arminian controversy during the lifetime of James Arminius, the progress of the controversy following Arminius’ death, and the resolution of the controversy at the Synod of Dordt. In this historical overview,

he discloses the “dishonest and manipulative” shenanigans of Arminius and the Arminians—ever the mark of those who are intent on schismatic behavior in the church (4).

The second preliminary section discusses “The Importance of Creeds” in the church. The Canons of Dordt are an important part of the creedal heritage of Reformed churches world-wide. The Canons, along with the Belgic Confession of Faith and the Heidelberg Catechism, constitute the Three Forms of Unity. But are creeds necessary? What are the perennial objections raised against creeds? Do not creeds divide the church rather promote unity? What role ought the creeds to play in the life of a church and denomination of churches? What are the distinctive characteristics of the Canons of Dordt? These questions and more beside are answered in this introductory section of *Grace and Assurance*. Pastor McGeown does an outstanding job of pointing out how God has and does still today use the creeds profitably in the life of His church.

The actual chapters of the book follow the organization of the Canons of Dordt. All 58 articles are explained, along with

the 34 articles in the “Rejection of Errors” section that follows each of the heads, or chapters, of the Canons of Dordt. That is a total of 92 articles—the whole of the Canons of Dordt—that are explained. Each article and each “Error and Rejection” are titled. The titles are extremely helpful and provide excellent summaries of the contents of the individual articles in the Canons, as well as the errors that are rejected. This is one of the praiseworthy features of *Grace and Assurance*.

Chapter one deals with the first head of doctrine of the Canons, which treats sovereign predestination. The second chapter covers the truth concerning the death of Christ and the saving efficacy of His death. Chapter three treats the combined third and fourth heads of the Canons, which treat the fall of man, total depravity, original sin, and the grace of God in the sinner’s conversion. The fourth chapter develops the fifth head of the Canons, which deals with the perseverance and preservation of the saints. Each chapter provides an explanation of the contents of each of the articles in that head or chapter of the Canons successively.

Those who are familiar with the Canons of Dordt are aware of

the fact that at the end of the heads of doctrine, there is a section entitled “Rejection of Errors.” The articles in this section are concerned with the false teachings of the Arminians, which are opposed to the truths set forth positively in the preceding section of that head, as well as various Arminian distortions of the truth that the fathers of Dordt were concerned to reject. In *Grace and Assurance*, the errors are treated *immediately following* the chapter in which the positive teaching of the Canons is set forth, rather than after consideration of all the articles in each of the heads of doctrine. The result of this organizational structure is that the truths positively confessed in the Canons are placed directly alongside the negative—the errors that militate against the truth. In the estimation of this reviewer, this arrangement is altogether beneficial and is one of the strengths of *Grace and Assurance*.

Chapter five of the book treats “The Conclusion to the Canons.” As important as the Conclusion is to the Canons, so important is this last chapter to the commentary on the Canons, which *Grace and Assurance* provides. In the Conclusion to the Canons, the fathers of Dordt summarized and rejected

the main errors of the Arminians, repudiated their slanderous accusations against the orthodox, and rebuked the behavior of the Arminians. One of the slanders rejected in the Conclusion was that the Reformed faith is destructive to piety and morality: “an opiate administered by the flesh and the devil” (Conclusion to the Canons). Another slander was that the Reformed faith makes God unjust, a horrible monster, and the author of sin. And, third, in the Conclusion the fathers rejected the Arminian appeal to human emotion, rather than to the Word of God. The Arminians caricatured the orthodox as teaching that “many children of the faithful are torn, guiltless, from their mothers’ breasts, and tyrannically plunged into hell” (Conclusion to the Canons). This, most emphatically is not the teaching of the Reformed faith. And finally, the synod urged all whether “in discourse [preaching], as in writing, [to handle the doctrines of sovereign grace] to the glory of the Divine Name, to holiness of life, and to the consolation of afflicted souls.” The synod called upon the ministers, professors, and teachers “to regulate, by the Scripture, according to the analogy of faith, not only their sentiments, but also

their language” (Conclusion to the Canons).

Each of the chapters in the book is followed by a list of discussion questions, which are intended to provoke discussion, as well as prompt other questions. Following the discussion questions, is a list of proof texts for that particular head of doctrine. After the chapter in which the articles of the second head are treated, not only are there proof texts provided, but all the biblical texts that speak of “atonement, redemption, reconciliation, propitiation, satisfaction and washing.” In this same section, texts of Scripture at listed that speak of “all men” and “world,” in order to demonstrate that “all men,” “world,” “all, every, anyone” cannot mean “the entire human race.” He also demonstrates that we use the words “all, every, and world” in our every day conversation, and we do not mean “every human being.” He cites expressions like: “The whole world looked in horror as the Twin Towers crumbled to the ground.” “Everyone is invited to the youth center for pizza after the meeting.” Denial that these words and expressions refer to every single human being is not far-fetched. For some strange reason, these sets of discussion

questions and lists of proof texts are not included in the table of contents of *Grace and Assurance*. In this reviewer's judgment, they ought to be. This is a matter for the publisher to note and revisit if there are future editions of the book published.

There are three valuable appendices included at the end of the book. "Appendix One" is "The Remonstrance of 1610." "Appendix Two" is "The Opinions of the Remonstrants of 1618." And "Appendix Three" is "The Judgment of the Synod of Dort Concerning the Five Articles of the Arminians." These three appendices are valuable, not only from a historical viewpoint, but also for a thorough understanding of the Arminian controversy.

In the judgment of this reviewer, *Grace and Assurance* lives up to its title. Lives up to its title splendidly! Pastor McGeown makes clear over and over again that it was grace, the very gospel of grace, which was at stake at the Synod of Dort. What was at stake was the gospel truth that sinners are saved by free and sovereign grace, the grace of God, and not at all on account of their own works, will, or worth. God is God! And God alone is able to and does save lost sinners. The

free-willism of Arminianism is the ungodly God. "Freewill theology make man omnipotent.... What blasphemy against the omnipotent God" (254). God's grace is on display in salvation inasmuch as fallen, guilty, damn-worthy sinners are the objects of God's predestination and salvation.

In the first head, grace is on display inasmuch as fallen, guilty, damn-worthy sinners are shown to be the objects of predestination and salvation. In the second head, God's grace is shown to be a grace that is in and on the basis of the cross of Christ. In the third and fourth heads, God's grace is shown to be the power that brings men (the elect) to faith and conversion. And in the fifth head, God's grace is the power that enables the saints to persevere unto the end. It is all of grace, and nothing of man.

"Beware of Arminian deceivers who would draw you away from the grace of God" (79). The teaching of Arminianism is that "God's grace or mercy is... not decisive to the question of whether one receives the benefits of the cross or not" (172). "Biblical grace is effectual and irresistible.... According to Arminianism, the grace of God

cannot and may not be effectual, lest the abilities of man should be insulted. Far be it from man that he should be so depraved that only effectual grace can save him” (248). “The fathers at Dordt objected that Arminianism denies ‘all the efficiency [efficacy] of God’s grace in our conversion.’ In other words, Arminianism denies God’s power, making the Almighty depend on finite creatures” (252). “God’s salvation is entirely gracious, for God is under obligation to confer this grace upon anyone. God is, therefore, under no obligation to elect anyone, to redeem anyone, or to regenerate anyone” (256). “The power of God’s grace overcomes [His people’s] sins, so that their sinful flesh can never ultimately prevail against them” (285).

McGeown underscores the fact that Arminian theology is *conditional* theology. All conditional theology is inherently Arminian in nature. “The Arminians gutted election of any essential meaning. For the Arminians, God’s decree did not concern persons but conditions. God has determined to save all those who fulfill certain conditions....” (56). Article 9 of the first head “is a very important article because it condemns the concept and the

word *condition*. The Arminians used that word and championed that concept, but the fathers of Dordt refused to use it. We would be wise to avoid it also” (63). “This is not to deny that faith is the necessary means of salvation, nor is it to deny that unbelievers perish.... But this is to deny that faith is the condition that the sinner must fulfill in order to receive salvation or even to be elected” (65). “The Arminians love conditions....” (68). “In contrast, Arminianism teaches that faith is the *condition that man must fulfill* in order to receive salvation, for faith is supposedly man’s part or contribution to salvation” (153). “Remember that this article [2.8] was framed with the conditional covenant of Arminianism in mind, which was a covenant with all men on condition of faith” (176). “Arminianism, therefore, severs the cross from God’s eternal decree. The Arminians did not believe in a certain and definite decree, but in an indefinite and a conditional decree” (180). “The crux of Arminianism is this—any profitableness depends on man. Christ merited redemption for all, but the application of redemption depends on faith, man’s faith, which is the condition that he fulfills” (181-2). “Arminianism

teaches conditional salvation, conditional election, conditional redemption, conditional regeneration, and, you should not be surprised, conditional perseverance” (271-2).

This is one of the outstanding features of Arminianism, its reliance upon conditional theology. At the same time, this is a marker of Arminian influence on much of what passes today for “Reformed” theology. Conditions and man’s fulfillment of conditions is always an indication of the influence of Arminian thinking. Those in Reformed churches and denominations where there is embrace of conditional theology, are guilty of allowing the nose of the Arminian camel into the tent. And where his nose is, the whole camel is soon to follow.

Throughout the book, McGeown underscores the saving efficacy of Christ’s death, that by His death He accomplished everything that His death was intended to accomplish. It was real redemption, reconciliation, atonement, and propitiation. This, in the end, as he consistently points out, is the issue that divides the Reformed from the Arminians, in the days of Dordt and still today. The issue in the end is not numbers, the Arminians

claiming that Christ died for every human being, while the Reformed claim that Christ died for some only, for the elect. But the issue between them is the very nature of the atonement itself. The Arminian teaches that the efficacy of the atonement depends on man, exercising the power of his free will. He must accept Jesus Christ, “close” with Christ, open his heart to Jesus as Savior. The result is that many, even the majority of those for whom Christ died, although he died for them, go lost and perish everlastingly. That is blasphemous, altogether blasphemous! On the contrary, the clear teaching of Scripture is that all for whom Christ died are actually and effectively saved by His death. His death was not in vain for any for whom He died. “God intends the sacrifice [of Christ] to expiate the sins of only the elect” (162). “[A]rticle 8 teaches us the *particularity* of the cross. God did not intend, will, desire, or purpose to save any but the elect by the death of Christ. It is God’s purpose that the benefits purchased on the cross should ‘extend to all the elect.’ (Matt. 1:21)” 174).

Pastor McGeown is to be commended for his bold defense of Dordt’s robust doctrine of

double predestination, that is, both election and reprobation. “This decree is not the invention of speculative theologians, but declare the Canons, it is ‘that decree of election and reprobation, revealed in the Word of God’ (45). “Reprobation occurs because of God’s good pleasure, for God is pleased to reject the reprobate wicked in order to glorify himself in the exercise of his just wrath” (107). McGeown does not shy away from, walk delicately around, or water down the truth of sovereign reprobation. And, he contends, the truth of reprobation must be preached. To be sure, it must be handled (preached) with care. But it must be preached. “Article 16 [of the first head] presupposes that reprobation is being preached, for it speaks of ‘the mention of reprobation.’ This is a condemnation of many preachers and churches where the doctrine of reprobation is buried in guilty, cowardly silence” (113).

It is in connection with his treatment of reprobation in Canons 1:15 that McGeown explains the difference between infralapsarianism and supralapsarianism. The interested reader should confer pages 104-106 of *Grace and Assurance*. For any who are interested in a concise

and helpful treatment of what for some, at least, is a puzzling distinction, it would be a help to read these pages and this discussion.

Of special note is McGeown’s consideration of Canons 3-4, 4 (216-22). In this chapter, he explains the “glimmerings of natural light,” to which the fathers of Dort referred. He carefully and properly explains this article and demonstrates that the use made of this article by the Christian Reformed Church Synod of 1924 in its defense of the doctrine of common grace was altogether improper.

This reviewer very much appreciated the careful and pastoral treatment of Canon 1, 17.

Since we are to judge of the will of God from His Word, which testifies that the children of believers are holy, not by nature, but in virtue of the covenant of grace in which they, together with the parents, are comprehended, godly parents, are comprehended, godly parents have no reason to doubt of the election and salvation of their children whom it pleaseth God to call out of this life in their infancy.

McGeown makes very clear that it is neither biblical nor Reformed to teach that all children who



die in infancy go to heaven. He is also adamant in maintaining that election and reprobation cut right through the generations of believers. At the same time, on the basis of Scripture, such as II Samuel 12:22-23, Reformed parents “have no reason to doubt of the election and salvation of their children.” On the basis of this article, McGeown writes: “Nevertheless, article 17 stands firm, for God does not call reprobate children of believers out of this life in their infancy. God causes reprobate seed to grow to maturity, so that they can fill up the cup of iniquity and so that God can be justified in their destruction” (124). I might also add to this, that this is true because God has ordained that the reprobate must serve the elect. That can hardly be said if they die as infants. If the reprobate *in the sphere of the covenant* must serve the elect, it would seem that that would demand that they grow up, at least to some age.

One last strength of *Grace and Assurance*, which I wish to point out, is its extensive treatment of the preaching of the gospel, both as to its content and its use by God as the chief means of grace and salvation. Throughout the book, McGeown exalts the of-

fice of preaching, both as a means to work faith and to strengthen faith. Also in connection with the assurance of election and the assurance of preservation, God is pleased to use the means of the preaching of the gospel. At the same time, the truth of the preaching of the gospel stands opposed to the view of the preaching as a well-meant offer of the gospel.

I have one criticism of the book. This is not a criticism of the author, but of the publisher, the Reformed Free Publishing Association. I have voiced this criticism in connection with other RFPA books that I have reviewed. There are no indices in the back of the book—no textual index, and more especially a subject index. There is no good reason for this deficiency in a book that is published in the twenty-first century. Such indices would greatly enhance the enduring value of *Grace and Assurance*. With a subject index, the book would be consulted time and time again; without such an index the book is not nearly as likely to be used as a reference work. The RFPA would be well served by seeing to it that its future publications contain such helpful indices.

I heartily recommend *Grace and Assurance*, whether for per-

sonal profit, use as a basis for church discussion groups, or for catechetical instruction. Pastor McGeown has done Reformed churches the world over, who love and defend the doctrines of sovereign grace, a great service in writing this fine exposition of the Canons of Dordt. Our readers could do little better in observing the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Synod of Dordt than to purchase and read this fine book explaining its Canons.

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grew up in County Tyrone. He is a graduate of the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary in Wyoming, Michigan. He is currently laboring as the missionary-pastor of the Limerick Reformed Fellowship in Limerick, Republic of Ireland, where he and his wife, Larisa, worship. He is the author of *Called to Watch for Christ's Return, Micah: Proclaiming the Incomparable God*, and is a contributor to *Here We Stand: Commemorating the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Reformation*.