

Grace
and
Assurance

Grace

and

Assurance

THE MESSAGE OF THE
CANONS OF DORDT

MARTYN McGEOWN



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To the saints of the Limerick Reformed Fellowship,
Limerick, Ireland, who first partook of the fruit of my
study of the Canons and whose zeal for the truth makes my
ministry among them a joy and a privilege.

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Preface

In 1980 the Reformed Free Publishing Association published a commentary on the Canons of Dordt entitled *The Voice of Our Fathers* by Homer C. Hoeksema. This book, an invaluable exposition of the Canons, was revised and republished in 2013. Given that the Reformed Free Publishing Association already has a commentary on the Canons, the question might be asked, “Why a second commentary on the same subject?”

First, the timing is appropriate. Four hundred years ago (1618) the great Synod of Dordt met to counter the Arminian error that was threatening the peace and welfare of the Reformed churches in the Netherlands. Therefore, it is fitting, if not imperative, for the Reformed churches that subscribe to the Canons of Dordt to mark this important anniversary with speeches, conferences, and even a book.

Second, this new commentary is not intended to replace *The Voice of Our Fathers*, which is unquestionably a classic, especially in Protestant Reformed circles. This commentary is designed to be shorter and therefore more accessible to younger readers, and hopefully more attractive to those who find the size of Hoeksema’s commentary to be somewhat daunting. Indeed, I hope that non-Reformed people will read the book, so that they can see that much of what they have heard about the Reformed faith is based on caricature not the truth. In fact, unbelievers ought to read the book because they will find in it a clear explanation of the gospel and a clear call to believe in Jesus Christ, the only savior of sinners. Therefore, I aimed for simplicity and clarity while avoiding a superficial treatment of the subject.

Third, my approach to the Canons is not primarily that of a

scholar, but of a pastor. The basis of the book is a class that I taught to the Limerick Reformed Fellowship between January and September 2013. The reader will therefore find few references to the original Latin text of the Canons or extensive discussions on translation issues, except where this is absolutely necessary to clarify the meaning. Instead, the aim of the commentary is to explain from the text of the Canons the wonderful gospel of God's grace and the assurance, peace, and comfort that come to the believer through faith in that gospel. That, too, explains the title: *Grace and Assurance*. The theology of the Synod of Dordt defends the grace of God and promotes the personal assurance of believers, so that they enjoy assurance of their own eternal and unchangeable election, as well as assurance of their own personal perseverance in salvation by the grace of God. The theology of doubt is not the theology of the Canons—and therefore not the theology of this book.

Perhaps the reading of this shorter volume will whet your appetite so that you will pick up and read other books on the same subject, including Hoeksema's masterful work *The Voice of Our Fathers*. May God bless the author and reader with a greater appreciation of his grace and a deeper assurance of the same.

A Historical Introduction to the Synod of Dordt

Four hundred years ago in 1618, the Synod of Dordt, a synod of Reformed theologians, began to meet in the Dutch city of Dordrecht. The fruit of that great synod, which concluded in 1619, is the Reformed creed or confession, the Canons of Dordt.

The history behind the great Synod of Dordt begins with a Dutch orphan called Jakob Hermanszoon (James Arminius) (1560–1609). Having been orphaned in his childhood, Arminius was given a soundly Reformed education in Leiden, the Netherlands, and in Geneva, Switzerland, where he studied under John Calvin’s successor, Theodore Beza (1519–1605). In 1588 Arminius was ordained as a pastor in Amsterdam, where Pieter (Peter) Plancius (1552–1622) was also a pastor. In the 1590s when Arminius began a series of sermons on Romans, his theology began to alarm Plancius, the consistory in Amsterdam, and many of the members of the congregation. For example, Arminius taught contrary to Romans 5–6 that Adam would have died even without sin. Moreover, he taught that in Romans 7:19, where Paul wrote, “For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do,” the apostle is describing an *unregenerate* person. By teaching such doctrines Arminius implied—and even taught—that the unregenerate person has the will to do good and has a real, spiritual hatred of evil. Such a teaching contradicts the scriptures and the



James Arminius

creeds, which teach that the unregenerate sinner *cannot* desire to do good but is totally depraved. In his sermons on Romans 9, where the apostle clearly teaches sovereign predestination, Arminius undermined the teaching of unconditional predestination, proposing instead conditional predestination.

Arminius was given the task of refuting the writings of a Dutch heretic called Dirck Volckertszoon Coornhert (1522–90), who had attacked predestination. However, as Arminius studied the writings he found himself in agreement with Coornhert. Nevertheless, instead of admitting that he disagreed with the Reformed creeds on predestination, Arminius stalled by repeatedly delaying his promised refutation of Coornhert, a task that Arminius never accomplished.

Arminius' behavior became increasingly troublesome for the orthodox consistory and membership in Amsterdam, as well as for



Jan Uytenbogaert

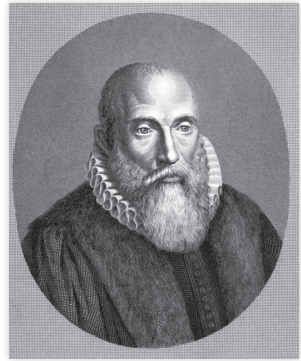
his Reformed colleague Plancius. Nevertheless, Arminius was evasive—he refused to be frank about his true beliefs. In addition, Arminius had friends in high places, which made censuring him difficult. One of his close friends, who had been a fellow student in Geneva, was Jan Uytenbogaert (1557–1644), shared the heterodox convictions of Arminius. Uytenbogaert was the chaplain of Johan van Oldenbarneveld (1547–1619), who was the governor in

the Netherlands. During that time in the Netherlands, the civil government wielded an inordinate amount of power over the church. For example, the state even interfered with discipline and funded the churches, paying for the buildings and the salaries of pastors. Therefore, although the church in Amsterdam greatly desired an official examination of Arminius' doctrine—and his suspension and deposition from office, if he should be condemned for his false

teachings—political conditions made it impossible to accomplish that. Arminius and his followers enjoyed the protection of the state.

The situation worsened further when in 1602 the theological professor at Leiden University, Franciscus Junius (1545–1602), died, leaving the chair of theology open. To the horror of the consistory of Amsterdam, but with the urgent recommendation of his good friend, Uytenbogaert, and with the approval of the civil magistrate, Arminius was appointed to the theological chair. If Arminius could disturb the sheep in the Amsterdam congregation, how much more havoc could he not cause in the theological school, where he would train future pastors for the Reformed churches in the Netherlands? (Unfortunately, the meddling of the state allowed such a wolf access to the theological students, for the appointment of professors to theological chairs was not under the authority of the church alone but required governmental approval.)

The other professor of theology in Leiden was Franciscus Gomarus (1563–1641), a staunchly Reformed theologian who resisted Arminius' appointment to the faculty. Gomarus only reluctantly agreed to the appointment after a meeting with Arminius in which Arminius claimed to be orthodox and promised to be faithful to the Reformed confessions.



Franciscus Gomarus

Arminius lied!

Soon Arminius began to undermine the Reformed faith in the theological school. He had to be careful, however, because Gomarus did not trust him and kept a careful eye on him. Arminius gathered a following among the students, teaching them one form of doctrine privately and in secret, while appearing orthodox in his public lectures. Gomarus and others tried multiple times to expose him, but Arminius responded with lies, equivocation, or delaying tactics. When put under pressure, Arminius would appeal to his friends,

Johan van Oldenbarneveld and Jan Uytenbogaert, in the Dutch government. Arminius' heresy spread through the churches like leaven. As his views spread, those who loved the Reformed faith began to ask for a national synod to examine the teachings of Arminius, but the government repeatedly refused to permit the convening of such a synod.

Arminius was like many heretics: sophisticated, likeable, friendly, and debonair. He was a brilliant scholar and a gifted preacher, but he was dishonest and manipulative. Gomarus, his opponent in the theological school, was the opposite: blunt, bad tempered, and unsociable, but a fierce defender of the truth.

Suddenly, Arminius died of tuberculosis on October 19, 1609, but his heresy did not die with him. In fact, after Arminius' death his followers, confident of the state's protection and even approval, became more outspoken in their views. On January 14, 1610, some forty-six Arminian preachers presented their Remonstrance in The Hague in the Netherlands. The Remonstrance, written by Jan Uytenbogaert, outlined five points of doctrine that the Arminian preachers, known as Remonstrants, wished to protest against the Reformed faith. It was in response to those five points of the Remonstrance that the great Synod of Dordt was assembled and against which the synod formulated five points, which have become known as the five points of Calvinism.

The five points of the Remonstrance are, briefly, as follows: conditional election; universal atonement; partial depravity; resistible grace; and conditional perseverance. I will examine these ideas in considerable detail as I explain the articles of the Canons of Dordt.

Theologians in the Netherlands continued to debate the doctrines presented in the Remonstrance for some time. What was needed—what was *urgently* needed—was a national synod. At such a synod the Arminian doctrine could be thoroughly examined. At such a synod doctrinal controversy could be settled from the word of God. Nevertheless, the Arminians, whose numbers and political

influence were growing, resisted the convening of a synod. The only kind of synod to which the Arminians would consent was a synod at which the creeds (the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession) would be revised and at which they, the Arminians, would be fellow-delegates, not defendants whose theological views would be examined. Enjoying growing political influence, the Arminians succeeded in shielding their party from ecclesiastical discipline, and even in orchestrating the suspension and deposition from office of orthodox and Reformed pastors. Some believers began to meet separately to hear the pure preaching of God's word in what were called the *doleerende Kerken* or mourning churches. Those in attendance at such unauthorized worship services were subject to persecution.

With the death of Arminius in 1610, the theological chair in Leiden again became vacant. The Arminians pushed for the appointment of Conrad Vorstius (1569–1622) as Arminius' replacement. In that the Arminians overplayed their hand, for Vorstius was a worse heretic than Arminius had been—Vorstius was a Socinian. Socinianism denies fundamental doctrines of Christianity such as the Trinity, the substitutionary atonement of Christ, and justification by faith alone. In disgust Gomarus resigned from the theological faculty in 1611. The appointment of Vorstius also caused international unrest, for King James I of England protested his appointment, so that Vorstius was dismissed in 1612.

Calls for a national synod increased, but Johan van Oldenbarneveld and Jan Uytenbogaert still refused to authorize such a gathering of the church. With a change in direction in the blowing of the political winds in the Netherlands, the situation in the church suddenly took a turn for the better when in 1617 Prince Mauritz (Maurice) of Orange (1567–1625) openly sided with the *doleerende Kerken* against the Arminians. From 1618 Maurice ruled the Netherlands, while his rival, Johan van Oldenbarneveld, was arrested, imprisoned, tried, and finally beheaded on May 13, 1619, supposedly for treason. Whether Van Oldenbarneveld was guilty or was

fairly tried or not is hard to determine, but God used the political situation for the welfare of his church. Finally, a national synod could be called to examine the Arminian question and bring peace to the church.

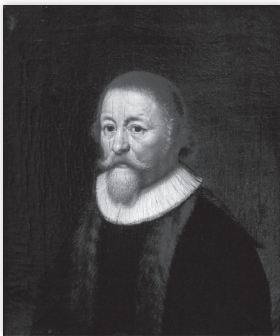
The great Synod of Dordt (1618–19) saw the gathering together of delegates from the Netherlands and from Reformed churches throughout Europe, making it a truly international synod. Present at the synod were thirty-eight ministers, twenty-one elders and five professors (from the Dutch churches), eighteen representatives of the state, and twenty-eight foreign delegates from the Palatinate, Hesse, Nassau, Emden, Bremen, Switzerland, and Great Britain. The French Reformed Church appointed delegates, but the king of France refused to let them attend the synod, so the French delegates submitted their opinions to the synod in writing.



Johannes Bogerman

The Brandenburg delegates declined to come because of the opposition of the Lutherans.

The opening of the synod took place on November 13, 1618, with Johannes Bogerman (1576–1637) appointed as the president. On December 6, 1618, the Arminian party appeared at synod, represented by their leader, Simon Episcopius (1583–1643). Immediately, the Arminians attempted to disrupt the synod, refusing to recognize its authority, attempting to delay its proceedings, engaging in procedural wrangling, and seeking to curry favor with the foreign delegates, who, of course, were not as familiar with the duplicity of the Arminians as the Dutch were. The Arminians wanted the synod to recognize them as



Simon Episcopius

delegates instead of defendants in a theological trial. The Arminians were required to explain and defend their views from the scriptures, something they refused to do. Episcopius, for example, in his speech before the synod on December 7, 1618, strongly condemned the Reformed teaching of predestination, seeking to prejudice the minds of the delegates, especially the foreign delegates, against reprobation in particular.

After enduring months of wrangling by the Arminians, the president, Bogerman, exasperated by the Arminians' behavior, rose to his feet, and dismissed the Arminians with a fiery speech.

The foreign delegates are now of the opinion that you are unworthy to appear before the Synod. You have refused to acknowledge her as your lawful judge and have maintained that she is your counter-party; you have done everything according to your own whim; you have despised the decisions of the Synod and of the Political Commissioners; you have refused to answer; you have unjustly interpreted the indictments. The Synod has treated you mildly; but you have—as one of the foreign delegates expressed it—“begun and ended with lies.” With that eulogy we shall let you go. God shall preserve His Word and shall bless the Synod. In order that she be no longer obstructed, you are sent away!¹

“Thereupon the undeniably wrathful president thundered: ...‘You are dismissed, get out!’”²

With the departure of the Arminians, the synod could begin its work. Its procedure was simple. First, the delegates studied the writings of the Arminians, including the Opinions of the Arminians that they had submitted to the synod. Then, various articles were written

1 Homer Hoeksema, *The Voice of Our Fathers: An Exposition of the Canons of Dordrecht* (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1980), 27.

2 *Ibid.*

in response to the Arminians, these being crafted in committees and then openly debated on the floor of synod. Finally, the wording of the articles was finalized and approved. The result was the Canons of Dort, which consist of fifty-nine positive articles setting forth the truth from the word of God, alongside thirty-three negative articles, or errors and rejections, arranged under five heads of doctrine.

The five heads of doctrine are a direct response to the five points of the Remonstrance of 1610. Against conditional election the synod set forth unconditional election and reprobation; against universal atonement the synod expounded the truth of limited, effectual, or particular atonement or redemption; against partial depravity and the heresy of free will the synod defended the truth of total depravity; against resistible grace the synod taught irresistible grace; and against conditional perseverance of the saints the synod insisted on the truth of unconditional perseverance of the saints.

The synod completed its examination of Arminianism when the Canons were officially adopted and signed on April 23, 1619. On May 29, 1619, after the synod dealt with other ecclesiastical issues of interest to the Dutch churches, the great Synod of Dort came to a close, having defended the Reformed faith to the glory of God and the comfort of pious souls.

I thank God for preserving the truth of the gospel through the work of the Synod of Dort. In this book, I will explain the individual articles of the Canons of Dort.

The Importance of Creeds

THE IDEA OF CREEDS

Before beginning an exposition of the Canons of Dordt, I will examine the matter of creeds in general, for the Canons of Dordt, like the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession that preceded them, are a *creed* or a *confession*. Why do churches, especially Reformed churches, adopt creeds, and why would anyone want to study a creed such as the Canons of Dordt? In this introductory essay, I will explore some of these questions to prove to the reader the value of the creeds and of the Canons of Dordt in particular.

I will begin with some definitions. The word *creed* comes from the Latin word *credo*, which means I believe. Therefore, a creed is a statement of faith. For example, one of the earliest Christian creeds, the Apostles' Creed, begins with these words: “*I believe in God the Father, Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.*”¹ The Belgic Confession begins this way: “*We all believe with the heart, and confess with the mouth, that there is one only simple and spiritual Being, which we call God.*”² Since every Christian believes, every Christian is credal, and if a Christian is credal, he must speak what he believes: “I believed, therefore have I spoken” (Ps. 116:10).

A creed answers the questions: *What* exactly do you believe? What do you believe about the many important doctrines revealed in

1 Apostles' Creed, in *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005), 9 (emphasis added).

2 Belgic Confession 1, in *ibid.*, 23 (emphasis added).

scripture? A creed explains the details of a person's faith. Thus a creed is a kind of identifying mark, a banner, or a flag that declares something about the one carrying it and about the church displaying it. But a creed is more than that, for it is not merely a personal statement of faith; it is also an official, ecclesiastical statement of faith. Therefore, a creed is committed to writing so that others can read and study it. Moreover, a creed is the fruit of the deliberation of the church, for an individual does not write a creed by himself in isolation from other believers, but believers study the word of God together and record it in a formal statement of faith, which, when the church officially adopts it, becomes a creed. Such was the Nicene Creed on the deity of Christ adopted by the Council of Nicea (AD 325/381); such was the Creed of Chalcedon on the two natures in the one person of Christ adopted by the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451); and such are the Canons of Dordt adopted by the Synod of Dordt (1618–19).

A confession is like a creed. If the Latin word *credo* means I believe, the word *confession* comes from a Latin word that means to say with or to speak with, while the Greek word *homologeoo*, translated as confess, means I say the same thing.

To confess means, first, to say the same thing as, or to say with, God. For example, when a believer confesses his sins, he says the same thing as God with respect to his sins. When God declares, “You are a sinner,” the confessing believer does not retort, “No, I am not a sinner,” but he says, “Yes, Lord, I agree with your assessment: I *am* a sinner. Forgive me in the blood of Christ.” This principle is then applied to every other truth of the Bible, for to confess is to say the same thing as God, or to say with God, on any subject. God says in his word, “In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). Therefore, the confessing Christian says, “I believe that God is the creator.” God says in his word, “The Word was made flesh” (John 1:14). Thus the confessing Christian says, “I believe in the incarnation of Christ.” God says in his word, “Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3), to which

the confessing Christian responds, “I believe in the substitutionary atonement of Christ.” A confession, therefore, could be understood as a kind of echo—God speaks, and believers echo what God has said, even employing their own words and adopting their own theological terminology, confessing the truth in opposition to the world and the false church that refuse to confess the truth.

Second, a confession is corporate, for in making a confession all those who believe the confession say the same thing together. Remember the idea of a banner or a flag: you might wave a flag alone, but it is much more meaningful and effective when you wave it with your fellow citizens, perhaps on a public holiday, for example. The citizens of a country *together* hold aloft the flag; the soldiers of an army march *together* under a banner; Christians *together* hold up the truth as their confession in the world; the members of the church *together* constitute the pillar and ground of the truth (1 Tim. 3:15). “Who is she that looketh forth as the morning, fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners” (Song of Sol. 6:10)? When a church adopts a confession, such as the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, or the Canons of Dordt, she says, “We say this about God, Christ, salvation, and we confess this truth *with* God and *with* other saints, and *with* other churches.” We are not alone in our confession. We share the Nicene Creed with others; we share the Creed of Chalcedon with others; and we share the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of Dordt with others. Such a shared confession is part of what it means to enjoy the communion of the saints. Thus a creed or confession has a unifying effect—it is not for nothing that the Reformed creeds (the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of Dordt) are called the three forms of unity!

Third, there is a historical aspect to the confessions, for in adopting a confession believers are confessing, “We say the same thing as” or “we say with” saints and churches *of the past*. We do not ignore the work of the Spirit of Christ in his church: for some

two thousand years he has been leading the church into all truth. Wisdom, therefore, does not begin and end with us or in our generations. It would be foolish and terribly prideful to say, “I will ignore what the church of the past has discovered from the word of God. I will ignore her struggles and I will disregard her battles. With my Bible alone, I will begin from scratch, and I will reinvent the wheel.” That is what non-creedal Christians do when they reject creeds and confessions.

OBJECTIONS TO CREEDS

The objection of many to creeds is the sufficiency of the Bible—is the Bible not enough to define doctrine and to define what a Christian or a church believes? Of course, the Bible is sufficient, and those who compiled and adopted the Reformed creeds believed in the sufficiency of scripture (Belgic Confession 3–7). The creeds are never a replacement for scripture, nor are they above the scriptures, nor are they even of equal authority with the Bible. The Bible alone is the word of God—the supreme judge of all the writings of men, including the judge of creeds and confessions, is the Bible, which alone is the word of God. We believe the creeds *because* they are faithful summaries of the teaching of the Bible.

Nevertheless, those who are anti-creedal and who cry (often sincerely), “No creed, but Christ!” have missed something. The Bible itself requires the writing of creeds, for it is written in such a way as to compel the church to compose creedal statements. The word of God does not come to us in the form of a theological dictionary, or a textbook of systematic theology, or dogmatics, with a glossary and indices. Instead, we might use the illustration of a seed—everything necessary to be believed is contained in the holy scriptures, but the truth must be developed, arranged, organized, and systematized. As we dig into the scriptures, we discover the riches of the truth of God, which we must place in opposition to the lies that the devil ceaselessly attempts to introduce into the church. As the church has dug

into the scriptures, she has developed creedal statements in order to define what the scriptures teach.

When Jesus promised the Holy Spirit in John 16:13, “Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth is come, he will guide you into all truth,” he taught the disciples to expect such a development of the truth. This promise of “all truth” is not a promise of omniscience—the Spirit will not cause us to know everything, not even everything religious and theological, and not even everything in the Bible, for the Bible is inexhaustibly rich. You might study the Bible for a lifetime, and you will not understand everything in it. The church has reflected on the Bible for thousands of years, but she has not mined all its riches. The promise of “all truth” is not a promise of infallibility—the Bible is infallible, but the church, the vain pretensions of the popes notwithstanding, is not infallible. The church has been led into all truth stumbling, struggling, and making numerous mistakes along the way, the result of which has been greater clarity in her understanding of the truth. The promise of “all truth” is not even a promise of all truth *at once*—the church was given the truth gradually, as the canon of scripture, first the Old Testament, and then the New Testament, was committed to her. Over two millennia the church has gradually come to see the many rich implications of the truth given to her. This process of development has been long, slow, and even painful at times. And what the church has discovered through careful study and development she has written down and confessed, “I believe; I confess.”

Nevertheless, despite the great importance of creeds and confessions, many reject them in our day. Some reject them because they want to be free to believe and teach whatever they desire, including error. The Arminians desired to revise the creeds because they detested the Reformed faith taught therein. While they pretended to believe the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession, they objected to many statements in the creeds. Today theologians cry academic freedom in order to be liberated from the creeds and

confessions so that they can teach contrary to the confessions without fear of ecclesiastical discipline. Some denominations have creeds and confessions, but they are little more than relics of a more faithful, bygone age, for they are never used, never mentioned, and never taught. If a church member asks about the creeds, the mention of such documents is an occasion for embarrassment: “We *used to* believe those creeds. Our ministers *once* subscribed to those confessions. Some of the ministers might still believe them, but we have modified the formula of subscription, so that we do not *really* have to subscribe to the letter of the creeds. We respect the creeds, of course, but only as venerable documents of the past, dusty with age.”

A faithful Reformed church must not view her creeds, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of Dort, in that way. A faithful Presbyterian church must not view her creeds, the Westminster Confession and catechisms, in that way. Faithful Reformed believers love the creeds; they preach the creeds, especially the Heidelberg Catechism; and they teach the creeds to their children, lest a generation should arise that is ignorant of the creeds and thus ignorant of the faith of their fathers.

Nevertheless, some have genuine difficulties with the idea of creeds, especially if they come from churches where creeds are not used. When they encounter the Reformed faith, they are puzzled—why do these churches use creeds? Such people should be instructed about the value and importance of creeds, the desire of which instruction is that they also come to love the creeds.

Imagine that you enter a place of worship where creeds are rejected. Out of curiosity about the beliefs of the church, you ask one of the members or the pastor, “What do you believe in this church?” The answer comes back, “We believe the Bible.” What have you learned from that answer? Precisely nothing. Every Christian group (and even the cults) will give the same answer, but if the questioner now reads through the sixty-six books of holy scripture, he will not discover what that church believes. Therefore, it is insufficient to say,

“We believe the Bible.” Mark well—it is not insufficient to believe the Bible, but it is insufficient to *say* that you believe the Bible. The issue is not whether you claim to believe the Bible, but what do you believe the Bible teaches?

The questioner might persist in his pursuit for truth by making some further queries: “Do you believe that God is triune and that Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God, true God and true man, one divine person in two distinct natures?” If he receives honest answers, he will discover something about the church’s theology and Christology, but it would have been easier if the church had simply adopted the Creeds of Nicea and Chalcedon, for these questions have already been answered in the church’s historic creeds. I challenge the reader—explain your (I hope, orthodox) theology and Christology without using the theological and creedal (extra-biblical) terms of *essence/being*, *person*, and *nature*. You will discover why the early church felt compelled to define the relationships between the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit using precise, albeit extra-biblical, theological terminology. If “I believe the Bible” is the only criterion for the church’s doctrine, for church office, or for church membership, anyone could join, anyone could believe whatever he wants, and anyone could teach anything he desires, even someone espousing the worst of heresies, for the only thing he needs to claim is that he believes the Bible. “I believe the Bible” is no guard against heresy.

Moreover, such an anti-creedal position is rarely implemented with consistency. If a person tries to promote the Reformed faith, requests baptism for his child, or denies the rapture of the church, he will often discover that the Reformed faith and infant baptism are not part of the anti-creedal church’s creed, while premillennial dispensationalism with its belief in the rapture is zealously promoted as part of the church’s creed. Such churches—indeed, all churches—have a creed: the issue is simply whether they are honest enough to publish their creed so that others can see what they believe and teach.

Besides, such an attitude against the creeds ignores the history of

the church. Given the development of both the truth and the lie, and given Satan's many attacks on the church, the church needs creeds to identify orthodoxy and to ward off heresy. In Acts 8:37 the Ethiopian eunuch is baptized on confession of his faith, which consisted in a simple declaration, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." That beautiful confession is absolutely true, but it is surely insufficient for church membership today. A church does not baptize a person and receive him as a member today based merely on that confession.

Therefore, as the truth developed, so did the confession required of the believer. The early church after the death of the apostles required members to confess the twelve articles of the Apostles' Creed. For a while, that confession was sufficient, but soon the church required a more detailed confession. Some historical examples will make this point clear.

In AD 325 controversy was swelling in the church, for Arius (c. AD 250–336) taught that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, which certainly *sounds* orthodox. However, Arius meant by the term *Son of God* the *created* son of God, or the first and highest of all God's creatures, a heresy espoused by the cult of the Jehovah's Witnesses today. The church in Arius' day understood that the simple confession "Jesus is the Son of God" was insufficient because Arius could confess it while maintaining his heresy. Therefore, the church adopted a confession called the Nicene Creed in order to distinguish orthodoxy from heresy and insisted that to be orthodox a church member must also confess that Christ is *homoousion*, of the same essence with the Father. In other words, the church required a more precise definition of the term *Son of God*. Arius and his followers objected to the word *homoousion* on the grounds that it is not a biblical term, but they agreed to confess a similar word: they agreed that the Son is *homoiousion*, of a similar essence to the Father. One word, *homoiousion*, is heresy; the other word, *homoousion*, is orthodoxy, with only one letter, the Greek *iota*, distinguishing between them.

In AD 451 controversy again swirled around the identity of

Christ. Some taught that Christ is not a true man (he only appeared to be human); others denied that he is a complete man (he has human flesh, but he does not have a human soul); still others viewed Christ as two persons (a human and divine person); while others saw Christ as having one nature, a mixture of human and divine. The church did not say, “We have no creed but Christ,” for everyone’s creed was Christ, but the issue was, who is Christ? The church studied the relationship between the humanity and divinity of Christ and adopted another confession, the Creed of Chalcedon, in which the truth is sharper and even more precisely defined. With the development of the truth it was no longer enough to confess, “I believe that Christ is the Son of God,” or even “I believe that the Son is of the same essence with the Father, *homoousion*.” Then a member of the church had to confess one eternal Christ, in one divine person, *homoousion*, in two distinct natures, human and divine, and in the words of Chalcedon, “without confusion, without change, without division, without separation.”³ The simple statement, “Jesus is Lord,” while absolutely true and biblical, had been unfolded and developed in order to rule out a number of serious heresies, while at the same time the church enjoyed a richer, deeper understanding of the identity of her Savior and Lord.

At the time of the Reformation, additional doctrines such as justification by faith alone and the doctrine of predestination were developed and defined from the scriptures, with the result that a person had to make an orthodox confession of soteriology, the doctrine of salvation, as well as an orthodox confession of theology and Christology, in order to be a member of the church. As truth develops, more, not less, is required of church members.

Therefore, to the objection that creeds are divisive Reformed believers respond that the creeds are designed to be divisive, for they divide orthodox believers from those who refuse to confess what

3 Creed of Chalcedon, in *ibid.*, 17.

the word of God teaches. The Nicene Creed deliberately excluded the false confession of Arius; the creed of Chalcedon deliberately excluded various Christological heresies; the Reformed confessions deliberately excluded Roman Catholicism and Anabaptism; and the Canons of Dordt deliberately excluded Arminianism. Creeds are a distinguishing mark, just as an army has a distinguishing banner. Only the soldiers of King Jesus march under his banner. It would be chaos and confusion if all soldiers, both the soldiers of Jesus and the soldiers of the devil, marched under the same banner. It would cause chaos and confusion if all churches marched under the same banner without confessing the same truth.

Therefore, creeds and confessions *must* distinguish Christians and churches from one another, so that a person can know what a church believes before he joins. This can only occur, however, when a church is honest about what she believes. Creeds are divisive because of man's sin: it is not the truth's fault, but the fault of men who do not confess the truth. If all were faithful to God in equal measure, all would have the same confessions and creeds. Nevertheless, the main function of creeds is not to divide but to unite, for the Reformed creeds are called the three forms of unity. They are a rallying cry to call Reformed believers together, not to scatter them. This is why the Belgic Confession begins, "*We all believe with the heart, and confess with the mouth*" (emphasis added).

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CANONS

The Canons of Dordt are a creed with some distinct features.

First, the Canons of Dordt are explicitly *biblical*. This is obvious from the number of direct biblical citations in many of the articles, especially in the sections of errors and rejections. The delegates swore an oath at the beginning of the synod that their deliberations would be strictly biblical. The Canons, therefore, make no direct appeals to any of the earlier confessions, such as the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession. Instead, the Reformed fathers

worked directly with the scriptures. It is clear from their work that they were faithful to their promise:

I promise before God, in whom I believe, and whom I worship, as being present in this place, and as being the Searcher of all hearts, that during the course of the proceedings of this Synod, which will examine and decide, not only the five points, and all the differences resulting from them, but also any other doctrine, I will use no human writing, but only the word of God, which is an infallible rule of faith. And during all these discussions, I will only aim at the glory of God, the peace of the Church, and especially the preservation of the purity of doctrine. So help me, my Saviour, Jesus Christ! I beseech him to assist me by his Holy Spirit!⁴

Second, the Canons are also beautifully *pastoral*. Those who have never read them, and who perhaps have unfavorable impressions of the Reformed faith, might be surprised when they read them. If they were expecting a cold, academic treatment of the Reformed faith, they will be struck by the warm, pastoral approach of the Canons, as they address not merely theologians, but the ordinary child of God in his doubts, fears, and struggles with sin. Read especially the sections on assurance of election and salvation, the pastoral advice to the doubting saint, and the whole fifth head on perseverance. In this personal, pastoral approach, the Canons follow the experiential emphasis of the Heidelberg Catechism.

Third, the Canons are deliberately *antithetical*, for not only do they clearly set forth the truth, but they also contrast the truth sharply with the Arminian lie. Perhaps no creed does this so clearly, for few creeds have a separate section of errors and rejections of

4 Samuel Miller, introductory essay, in Thomas Scott, ed., *The Articles of the Synod of Dort: Translated from the Latin, with Notes* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1841), 37.

errors, every article of which begins with this line: “The true doctrine concerning...having been explained, the Synod *rejects* the errors of those: who teach.” The synod not only refuted the Arminian error, but it also explicitly rejected it.

Fourth, the Canons constitute the original five points of Calvinism, as these have been officially defined and adopted by a Reformed synod at which not only delegates from the Dutch Reformed churches, but also delegates from across the then Reformed world were present. The Synod of Dordt was practically a Reformed *ecumenical* synod, where almost all Reformed churches were represented. Therefore, if one wants to define what true Calvinism and the Reformed faith are, one must look to the Synod of Dordt and its authoritative Canons. True Calvinism, for example, includes election and reprobation and insists on limited (or effectual) atonement. Compromise on these issues constitutes a departure from the Reformed faith. Adherence to the Canons is not hyper-Calvinism but genuine Calvinism or the genuinely Reformed faith.

Fifth, the Canons are not, or were not initially designed to be, a third creed. The Formula of Subscription, which all officebearers in Reformed churches must sign, expresses the relationship between the Canons of Dordt, the Belgic Confession, and the Heidelberg Catechism in these words:

We, the undersigned...do hereby sincerely and in good conscience before the Lord declare by this, our subscription, that we heartily believe and are persuaded that all the articles and points of doctrine contained in the Confession and Catechism of the Reformed Churches, together *with the explanation of some points of the aforesaid doctrine made by the National Synod of Dordrecht, 1618-'19*, do fully agree with the Word of God.⁵

5 Formula of Subscription, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 326 (emphasis added).

Notice these words, which are binding upon all officebearers in Reformed churches. We declare that everything in the creeds “fully agree[s] with the Word of God.” The Formula, therefore, binds officebearers “diligently to teach and faithfully to defend the aforesaid doctrine,” and especially to keep the churches free from the errors condemned by the Synod of Dordt. In the officebearer’s preaching, teaching, and writing, he must especially refute Arminianism.

Some Reformed churches today are revising the wording of the Formula of Subscription to provide wriggle room for those who do not believe the confessions and who do not wish to be bound to them. (The Arminians wanted wriggle room to deny the truth too, something the Synod of Dordt refused to grant.) They do so by having signatories of the Formula declare that they believe all the articles and points of doctrine contained in the Confession *insofar as they agree with the word of God*. While that might sound pious, it is really a form of subterfuge—they subscribe to the confessions, pretending to believe them, while allowing themselves to entertain reservations about them and even to hide disagreements with them. Such an officebearer, who subscribes to the Confession only *insofar as it agrees with the word of God*, is not required to explain where he believes the confession does not agree with the word of God.

The original Formula of Subscription addresses such reservations and differences in a forthright manner and requires honesty from all officebearers:

And if hereafter any difficulties or different sentiments respecting the aforesaid doctrines should arise in our minds, we promise that we will neither publicly nor privately propose, teach, or defend the same, either by preaching or writing, until we have first revealed such sentiments to the consistory, classis, and synod, that the same may be there examined, being ready always cheerfully to submit to the judgment of the consistory, classis, and

synod, under the penalty in case of refusal to be, by that very fact, suspended from our office.⁶

This is exactly what Arminius had refused to do. He had difficulties with the doctrines of the confessions, but when asked about those difficulties he equivocated and lied. He had taught, especially in private, contrary to the confessions, and when challenged, he equivocated and lied. He refused to submit to the judgment of the ecclesiastical authorities, and when challenged he appealed to his influential friends in the civil sphere. Officebearers today must not be guilty of such duplicitous behavior in the churches. If they have difficulties with the confessions, they must make that plain, and they may not hide behind the word “insofar.”

In other words, the Canons of Dordt constitute the authoritative interpretation and explanation of the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism. When, for example, the Heidelberg Catechism states, “[Christ] sustained in body and soul the wrath of God against the sins of all mankind,”⁷ this must be interpreted in light of the entire second head of doctrine of the Canons of Dordt, which teaches that Christ died *only for the elect* “out of every people, tribe, nation, and language.”⁸ Far from revising the creeds, the fathers at Dordt strengthened the churches’ adherence to the precious truths found in the creeds, further defined the truth contained in them, and countered the Arminianism that attacked them.

It is with thankful hearts that in 2018 the Reformed churches commemorate the four hundredth anniversary of God’s preserving of his truth through the great Synod of Dordt. It is the prayer of the author and the publisher that this commentary on the Canons might cause us to appreciate even more deeply the sovereign grace of God in our salvation.

6 Formula of Subscription, in *ibid.*

7 Heidelberg Catechism A 37, in *ibid.*, 98.

8 Canons of Dordt 2.8, in *ibid.*, 163.

*Discussion questions on the introduction
and the importance of creeds*

1. What lessons about false teachers can be learned from the behavior of Arminius and his followers? Can you think of any biblical examples of this?
2. Read through the Canons of Dordt, preferably in one sitting. What strikes you about them? Do they make a favorable or unfavorable impression on you? Explain.
3. What do the Canons of Dordt add to your understanding of the truths contained in the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism?
4. Which objections have you heard from Christians, both in your own church and from other churches, against the creeds? How would you respond to them?
5. Before you started reading this book, how would you have described your attitude toward the creeds in general and toward the Canons of Dordt in particular? (a) I have never heard of them; (b) I am opposed to them; (c) They are a mere historical curiosity to me; (d) I accept them as authoritative in the church, but they mean nothing to me personally; (e) I find them a useful summary of the teachings of my church; (f) They express what I believe; (g) I love the creeds and I strive to know them more, preserve them in the church, and teach them to my children.
6. How could you promote the use of creeds in your own life and in your church; and how could you instill in your children an appreciation for the creeds?
7. Are creeds only important for the officebearers of the church? Explain.

8. Could the church have preserved the truth without the creeds? Explain.
9. Why is the insertion of the word *insofar* into the Formula of Subscription a dangerous and deceptive subterfuge?
10. The Canons are biblical, pastoral, and antithetical. Produce examples to prove this assertion. Why are these important features of the Canons?
11. Which statements from the Canons comfort your heart? Why do think this is so?

The First Head of Doctrine on Divine Predestination

INTRODUCTION

The Canons of Dordt begin with predestination. Therefore, the traditional acronym TULIP (total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and preservation of the saints) is actually ULTIP with the *U* being a reference to unconditional election. The TULIP acronym is good, however, for memorization purposes, and because it is a Dutch flower, a tribute to the fact that the location of the great Synod of Dordt was the Netherlands.

Dordt began with predestination because that was the focal point of the Arminian assault on the truth. However, the Reformed fathers wisely did not permit the Arminians to determine the approach. The Arminians wanted to begin with reprobation in order to portray the Reformed faith in as negative a light as possible. Dordt refused to begin there because that is not where the Bible begins. Reprobation is always subservient to election in the Bible (Isa. 43:3–4). To begin with reprobation is, therefore, unwise because it gives occasion to the enemy to blaspheme. It is foolish, for example, to begin a discussion with an Arminian today by telling him that God has made some men vessels of wrath fitted to destruction. We are never ashamed of the truth, but the truth must be presented wisely.