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EDITORIAL: THE PASTORAL VALUE OF THE *CANONS OF DORDT*

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Introduction

It is a common misconception and slanderous assertion regarding the *Canons of Dordt* that they are dry, scholastic theology, the theological musings of scholars detached from the trials of life in their ivory towers. However, when the Synod of Dordt met some four hundred years ago this year, the delegates had two concerns: first, they desired to refute the Arminians, whose false doctrines had troubled the Dutch churches; and, second, they desired to proclaim the truth “to the glory of the divine name, to holiness of life, and to the consolation of pious souls,” as the “Conclusion” to the *Canons* states.

Chief among their aims, therefore, was “the consolation of pious souls.” Pious souls were troubled. Many simple believers were confused. The “consciences of the weak” were distressed (“Conclusion”). False doctrine does that: it distresses consciences; it troubles pious souls; it brings unrest into congregations and denominations. False doctrine did that in Galatia: “there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ” (Gal. 1:7). False doctrine did that in Thessalonica: the saints were “shaken in mind” and “troubled” at eschatological error (II Thess. 2:2). False doctrine did that in Crete, where “vain talkers and deceivers” “subvert[ed] whole houses, teaching things which they ought not” (Titus 1:10-11). And false doctrine did that in the Netherlands of the seventeenth century, when Arminius and his followers taught troubling errors that they ought not.

Therefore, the Synod of Dordt was convened not out of love for controversy but out of love for the truth. Men who were faithful Christians, pious men and compassionate pastors gathered together in Dordrecht between 13 November, 1618 and 9 May, 1619, in order to answer questions such as these: “Is God’s election of His people sure or is it conditional on man’s faith and perseverance? Is Christ’s atonement of His people effectual or does it depend on the exercise of man’s free will? What did Christ accomplish by His death on the

cross anyway? Is man actually a fallen creature so that he is wholly ruined or does he retain some power to cooperate with God's grace or at least the power not to resist God's grace when it is offered to him? Is God's grace effectual unto regeneration or is it dependent on the powers of man's free will? And what is the cause of the perseverance of God's people in grace and holiness? Does God effectually preserve His people so that they persevere or does man's perseverance, and, therefore, his final salvation, depend on his faithfulness to walk in good works?" And perhaps the most pressing of all questions: "Can I know that I personally am saved and that I shall in the end inherit eternal life?"

Those are not academic questions. They concern the salvation of God people. They concern *our* salvation. On the answer to such questions depends our comfort. The delegates at the Synod of Dordt understood that. The pious souls in the pew required clear answers. Therefore, the *Canons of Dordt*, like the other Reformed creeds, the *Heidelberg Catechism* and the *Belgic Confession*, have a pastoral theme.

By "pastoral," I mean that the truths set forth in the *Canons of Dordt* are presented in such a way so that they can be applied to the trials of the child of God as he makes his weary pilgrimage to heaven through "this valley of tears" (*Heidelberg Catechism*, A. 26). When a pastor conducts pastoral visitation, he brings the truth of God's Word, which he then applies to the saint in his distresses: he applies the comfort of the gospel to the saint on his sickbed; he brings the consolations of Christ to the saint grieving the loss of a loved one; he applies the soothing balm of Holy Scripture to the saint struggling with depression; he brings the warnings, admonitions and promises of God's Word to the saint beset with his sins; and he even prepares the saint for death so that he faces "the last enemy" with peace. The *Canons of Dordt* are pastoral in that sense too: they expound and apply the truth of Holy Scripture to the needs of the child of God.

The First Head: Of Divine Predestination

In the first head of doctrine, the issue is predestination. Perhaps the reader is tempted to imagine that there could not be a less practical or less pastoral subject than predestination. Surely, predestination belongs in the seminary or in dusty theological tomes, but not in the pulpit or the pew and certainly

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not in the thinking of the Christian. It is, however, impossible to ignore predestination. The Bible speaks about it and every Christian who reads Scripture devotionally must come across the term. The issue is not *whether* you believe predestination but *what kind* of predestination you confess. The Synod of Dordt recovered the truth of eternal, unconditional, gracious election from the distressing doctrine of the Arminians. “Men of perverse, impure, and unstable minds wrest [the doctrine of predestination] to their own destruction, yet to holy and pious souls [it] affords unspeakable consolation” (*Canons* I:6). At bottom, the issue of election is this: does God love me; if so, has God always loved me; does His love for me depend on anything in me; and, therefore, will God always love me; or will God’s love for me ever change? The Arminians taught that there are different kinds of election: “election ... unto eternal life,” which might be “particular and definite; or incomplete, revocable, non-decisive, and conditional” and “election unto faith and another unto salvation.” Not only is Arminianism incomprehensible, but it also breaks “the golden chain of our salvation” (*Canons* I:R:2). In addition, Arminians “make God to be changeable, and destroy the comfort which the godly obtain out of the firmness of their election” (*Canons* I:R:6). Moreover, Arminianism contradicts “the experience of the saints, who by virtue of the consciousness of their election rejoice with the apostle and praise this favor of God” (*Canons* I:R:7).

The *Canons*, therefore, do not defend the doctrine of eternal, unconditional election only as a dogma, but they also defend it for the sake of the consolation of pious souls and the edification of the simple, who are otherwise liable to be laid astray: “election ... can neither be interrupted nor changed, recalled or annulled; neither can the elect be cast away, nor their number diminished” (*Canons* I:11); “election is the fountain of every saving good” (*Canons* I:9). Election implies God’s promise:

God hath decreed to give [His people] to Christ ... to bestow upon them true faith, justification, and sanctification; and having powerfully preserved them in the fellowship of His Son, finally to glorify them for the demonstration of His mercy and for the praise of His glorious grace (*Canons* I:7).

The doctrine of election gives God’s people certainty. Come what may, whether “tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword” (Rom. 8:35), we belong to Jesus Christ. Let Satan rage and

let the world mock, our names are written in the Lamb's book of life, not in pencil but in God's indelible decree.

But, more than that, the *Canons* teach the child of God to have personal assurance of his eternal, unchangeable and unconditional election. Nay, the *Canons* insist that every Christian must have—and does have—assurance. And the *Canons* speak soothingly to the troubled church member who struggles with the greatest fear of all, the fear of reprobation. The *Heidelberg Catechism* addresses the child of God in that temptation also: the German word is *Anfechtungen*, which are those deadly, spiritual struggles that a Christian has with Satan, when the foul accuser of the brethren seeks to convince the believer that his case is hopeless and that he must unavoidably perish in his sins: “in my greatest temptations [*Anfechtungen*], I may be assured, and wholly comfort myself in this, that my Lord Jesus Christ ... hath delivered me from the anguish and torments of hell” (A. 44).

In our day, prominent Calvinists deny the assurance of the saints, to which the pastors at Dordt would retort: “by this [Arminian] doctrine the sure comfort of the true believers is taken away in this life, and the doubts of the papist are again introduced into the church” (*Canons* V:R:5). The Synod expertly avoided distressing the consciences of the faithful, while faithfully warning the carnal and unbelieving, who refuse to walk in God's ways, of divine wrath.

Assurance of election, say the *Canons*, is of the essence of faith, which is one of election's “infallible fruits.” The elect—all of them—“attain” this assurance; the elect—all of them—attain this assurance “in due time, though in various degrees and in different measures” (*Canons* I:12). Assurance does not depend on good works, which are the fruit of an assured faith, although God does not grant assurance to those who walk in darkness. The *Canons* describe the assured believer: he has “true faith in Christ, filial fear, a godly sorrow for sin, [and] a hungering and thirsting after righteousness” (*Canons* I:12). The fruit of this assurance is very sweet and pleasing to our heavenly Father: “humiliation before Him,” “adoring the depth of His mercies,” self-cleansing and “rendering grateful returns of ardent love to Him” (*Canons* I:13). These are the spiritual fruit of an ordinary Christian, not the characteristics of a super-Christian, one with exalted, extraordinary, spiritual experiences. Special revelation of the deep things of God is unnecessary to have this kind

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of assurance. Every pastor can bring this consolation to the believer in the pew, which is exactly what the Synod of Dordt intended.

The doctrine of predestination should be preached “for the glory of God’s most holy name, and for enlivening and comforting His people” (*Canons* I:14). But what if some are “alarmed at the mention of reprobation,” so that they are tempted to “rank themselves among the reprobate” or to become “terrified” at the very idea of reprobation (*Canons* I:16)? The Synod of Dordt, in the interest of the comfort of God’s people, does not dismiss those concerns. They are real temptations or *Anfechtungen*. Tenderly, the *Canons* appeal to these distressed and possibly oversensitive souls to view themselves as the smoking flaxes and bruised reeds that the “merciful God” has promised neither to “quench” nor “break” (Matt. 12:20), and “diligently to persevere in the use of means, and with ardent desires devoutly and humbly to wait for a season of richer grace” (*Canons* I:16). Very far are the *Canons* from advocating a kind of inactive fatalism, by saying to distressed souls, “There is nothing you can do. You cannot know one way or the other.” That would be a depressing message indeed! At the same time, the *Canons* warn against “rash presumption” or “idle and wanton trifling with the grace of election” in those who “refuse to walk in the ways of the elect” (*Canons* I:13) or who “have wholly given themselves up to the cares of the world and the pleasures of the flesh, so long as they are not seriously converted to God” (*Canons* I:16).

The *Canons* also address our attitude. Are you among God’s elect? Do you enjoy such assurance of election? Acknowledge it with a “humble and grateful” heart. Do not “curiously pry into the severity and justice of God’s judgments displayed to others” (*Canons* III/IV:7). You owe “eternal gratitude” to God, and you must “judge and speak” of others who make a similar confession of faith “in the most favorable manner,” while not conducting yourself with “haughtiness” to those outside the faith, as if you had made yourself differ from them (*Canons* III/IV:15; I Cor. 4:7). How abominable is a proud and haughty Calvinist!

The Second Head: Of the Death of Christ and the Redemption of Men Thereby

In the second head of doctrine, the *Canons* expound the comforting truth

of salvation in the blood of Christ, a truth that the Arminians had wickedly subverted by teaching that Christ died for everybody. The Arminian error is serious because it overthrows the efficacy of the atonement: if Christ died for everybody without exception but everyone is not saved, then the reason for salvation is not the cross of Christ: it must be in man. Not only is the locating of salvation in man robbery of God's glory but it also distresses the souls of the pious. If Christ died for me but He also died for the damned in hell, how can I be sure that I will not join the damned in hell? If His blood was not efficacious to deliver those who ultimately perish, will it really deliver me? In *Canons II:8*, the Synod of Dordt expounds the purpose of God in the cross of Christ: "the quickening and saving efficacy of [Jesus' death] should extend to all the elect" and He "should effectually redeem ... all those, and those only, who were from eternity chosen to salvation" and "purge them from all sin ... [and] bring them free from every spot and blemish to the enjoyment of glory in His own presence forever."

This is a practical subject full of pastoral warmth:

There may never be wanting [i.e., lacking] a church composed of believers, the foundation of which is laid in the blood of Christ, which may steadfastly love and faithfully serve Him as their Savior, who as a bridegroom for his bride, laid down His life for them upon the cross, and which may celebrate His praises here and throughout all eternity (*Canons II:9*).

No wonder the Synod of Dordt condemns Arminianism with such vehemence in this second head. Arminianism, in an attempt to universalize the cross, destroys its efficacy: "God the Father has ordained His Son to the death of the cross without a certain and definite decree to save any" (*Canons II:R:1*) and "Christ, by His satisfaction, merited neither salvation itself for anyone, nor faith" (*Canons II:R:3*). "These," exclaim the fathers at Dordt, "adjudge too contemptuously of the death of Christ, do in no wise acknowledge the most important fruit or benefit thereby gained, and bring again out of hell the Pelagian error" (*Canons II:R:3*). For the Christian who glories in nothing else except the cross of Christ (Gal. 6:14), the language of the *Canons* is not too strong.

Third and Fourth Heads: Of the Corruption of Man, His Conversion to God and the Manner Thereof

The Synod of Dordt combined the doctrines of sin and regeneration into one section, which they named the “Third and Fourth Heads of Doctrine.” The *Canons* are so arranged because the Remonstrants were much more refined than modern Arminians: they seemed to teach total depravity but they also confessed resistible grace. The believer must understand the depth of sin into which he has fallen, if he is rightly to appreciate the grace of God in saving him. The fruit of such understanding is humility. Salvation

results wholly from the sovereign good pleasure and unmerited love of God. Hence they to whom so great and so gracious a blessing is communicated, above their desert, or rather notwithstanding their demerits, are bound to acknowledge it with humble and grateful hearts (*Canons* III/IV:7).

If salvation is not entirely of grace but partly of merit, how can we avoid pride? If we are required to contribute something, even the cooperation of our free will, to salvation, how can we refrain from boasting? Moreover, how can salvation that depends at least partly on the sinner be sure? How can we have any confidence in such salvation, especially when Satan tries to shake our assurance, as he assuredly will? It is no wonder that the *Canons* encourage us to celebrate the great work of regeneration: “it is evidently a supernatural work, most powerful, and at the same time most delightful, astonishing, mysterious, and ineffable; not inferior in efficacy to creation or the resurrection from the dead” (*Canons* III/IV:12). Since Arminianism “tends to elevate the powers of the free will” (*Canons* III/IV:R:3), “is altogether Pelagian and contrary to the whole Scripture” (*Canons* III/IV:R:7), and is “the denial of all the efficiency of God’s grace in our conversion, and the subjecting of the working of Almighty God to the will of man” (*Canons* III/IV:R:8), it must be condemned in order to maintain the glory of God and the comfort of the believer.

In addition, the *Canons* promote the assurance of the believer: we must know that we personally have received this wonderful gift of regeneration. We must know, we can know and we do know. “They rest satisfied” (despite the obvious mystery of God’s work) “with knowing and experiencing that by this grace of God they are enabled to believe with the heart, and love their Savior”

(*Canons* III/IV:13). Arminianism fatally wounds the believer's assurance when it ascribes powers to the free will of man:

man is not really nor utterly dead in sin, nor destitute of all powers unto spiritual good, but that he can yet hunger and thirst after righteousness and life, and offer the sacrifice of a contrite and broken spirit, which is pleasing to God (*Canons* III/IV:R:4).

Not only is that a bold attack on the doctrine of total depravity, but it also makes a believer question and fear for his salvation. If an unregenerate person hungers and thirsts after righteousness but still might perish, how can I know that my hunger and thirst are not signs of my unregenerate condition? Wherein do the hunger and thirst of an elect, regenerate believer differ from the same experience of the unregenerate or even of a reprobate person? And if an unbeliever can show true contrition and brokenness over his sins, is my sorrow over sin the fruit of regenerating grace or something else? The *Canons* expertly answer the believer's concerns: "to hunger and thirst after deliverance from misery and after life, and to offer unto God the sacrifice of a broken spirit, is peculiar to the regenerate and those that are called blessed" (*Canons* III/IV:R:4).

The *Canons* also make some practical applications to ward off any misuse of the doctrines of total depravity and irresistible (or efficacious and particular) grace. Surely, if grace is irresistible, men are robots, entirely unconscious of God's work or, to use the language of the *Canons*, they are "senseless stocks and blocks" (*Canons* III/IV:16)? Perhaps, God "takes away [man's] will and its properties." Perhaps, God even "does violence" to man's will by forcing him against his will into the kingdom of heaven? Nothing could be further from the truth: God "spiritually quickens, heals, corrects, and at the same time sweetly and powerfully bends" the will, the result being that "a ready and sincere spiritual obedience begins to reign, in which the true and spiritual restoration and freedom of our will consist" (*Canons* III/IV:16). The language is beautiful, comforting and pastoral, and it matches the experience of every believer. Do you not find yourself desiring to believe in Jesus Christ, to please Him and to worship Him? Do you not find yourself wonderfully attracted to the altogether lovely Jesus Christ, despite the fact that earlier you despised Him and wanted nothing to do with Him? Did you not formerly hate the light

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and flee from it? What accounts for such a change of heart? Surely, the *Canons* are right: God changed you; you did not change yourself.

Does this truth of efficacious grace not make the preaching of the gospel superfluous? That is the other great objection: if salvation depends entirely on God, why preach and why hear preaching? The *Canons* urge us not “to presume to tempt God in the church by separating what He of His good pleasure hath most intimately joined together,” for “the most wise God has ordained [the use of the gospel] to be the seed of regeneration and food of the soul” (*Canons* III/IV:17). God both begins and also “preserves, continues, and perfects” His work of grace in us “by the preaching of the gospel” (*Canons* V:14). A perennial pastoral concern is the tendency of some church members to neglect the means of grace, a concern the fathers of Dordt address here. There is no contradiction between the sovereignty of God in salvation and God’s use of means to achieve His purposes. To seek to separate them is spiritual folly.

The Fifth Head: Of the Perseverance of the Saints

In the fifth and final head, the *Canons* begin by describing what a saint is. Misunderstandings and misconceptions here are fatal for the Christian’s comfort. If I expect to be without sin as a Christian, what will I conclude when my struggles with sin continue; will I not conclude that I am not a true believer? The *Canons* accurately describe the Christian experience, proving that the theologians who penned these articles had first-hand knowledge of the struggles, sorrows and joys of the Christian life: God does not deliver His people “altogether from the body of sin, and from the infirmities of the flesh, so long as they continue in this world” (*Canons* V:1). Do you experience “daily sins of infirmity” and do “spots adhere” to your “best works”? These will lead you to “humiliation before God” and you will fly “for refuge to Christ crucified;” you will mortify “the flesh,” and you will press “forward to the goal of perfection” (*Canons* V:2), but you will not despair because you recognize this as the normal Christian life. However, if false teachers lead you to expect something else, the result will be either despair or pride. You will be puffed up in that you have (supposedly) attained to a higher spiritual plane than others or, because you “cannot yet reach that measure of holiness and faith to which [you] aspire,” you will be tempted to “rank [yourself] among the reprobate” (*Canons* I:16)!

But do not imagine that the Synod of Dordt is soft on sin. Never do the *Canons* allow the saint to believe that his sins are God's fault. Always the Synod lays the blame for sin and unbelief at the sinner's feet, while it attributes faith and good works to the operation of God's grace (*Canons* I:5; II:6; III/IV:9; V:4). In *Canons* V:4, the Synod explains the falls of true believers into sin: They deviate sinfully "from the guidance of divine grace" and they are "seduced by and comply with the lusts of the flesh." While this happens "by the righteous permission of God," when neglectful saints fall into "great and heinous sins," they have only themselves to blame. Moreover, the *Canons* describe the effects of such "lamentable fall[s]" and "enormous sins" (*Canons* V:4-5). What an incentive to continue in watching and prayer! Let nobody suggest that the Synod of Dordt, by its emphasis on divine grace, fails to sound urgent warnings against sin!

Nevertheless, the neglectful saint can fall only so far: we can undergo painful, devastating, life-changing chastisement, but God does not abandon us in our "melancholy falls" so that we "lose the grace of adoption and forfeit the state of justification" (*Canons* V:6). The reason for this certainty, however, is not found in the power of the saint, who remains a sinner. Instead, the *Canons* list the powers and purposes of God as the bedrock on which we place our trust (*Canons* V:8). Is it any wonder, then, that the Synod of Dordt condemns Arminianism with its soul-destroying and comfort-annihilating doctrine of the falling away of true saints! Listen to the opinions of the Arminians: "perseverance ... is ... a condition ... which ... man ... must ... fulfil through his free will" (*Canons* V:R:1); it "depends on the pleasure of the will [of man] whether it will persevere or not" (*Canons* V:R:2); "true believers ... often do fall ... and are lost forever" (*Canons* V:R:3). In response, the fathers at Dordt demolish these devilish delusions from the Word of God: "this idea contains an outspoken Pelagianism ... it makes [men] robbers of God's honor" (*Canons* V:R:2); "this conception makes powerless the grace, justification, regeneration, and continued keeping by Christ" (*Canons* V:R:3).

Having come this far, you will not be surprised that the *Canons* also address the believer's assurance of his own future perseverance and, therefore, his guaranteed inheritance of eternal life. Given the propensity of the believer to sin, can he have any confidence that he will finally be saved? The Arminians argued that "the certainty of perseverance and of salvation ... is a cause of

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indolence and is injurious to godliness, good morals, prayers, and other holy exercises,” even that “it is praiseworthy to doubt” (*Canons* V:R:6). Therefore, “without a special revelation we can have no certainty of future perseverance in this life” (*Canons* V:R:5). By this error of the Arminians, complained the fathers at Dordt, “the sure comfort of the true believers is taken away ... and the doubts of the papist are again introduced into the church” (*Canons* V:R:5). Moreover, the error shows that the Arminians “do not know the power of divine grace and the working of the indwelling Holy Spirit” (*Canons* V:R:6). The true doctrine is rather this: “Of this preservation ... true believers for themselves may and do obtain assurance” (*Canons* V:9), which certainty “springs from faith in God’s promises” (*Canons* V:10), and which certainty “is the real source of humility, filial reverence, true piety, patience in every tribulation, fervent prayers, constancy in suffering and in confessing the truth, and of solid rejoicing in God” (*Canons* V:12). This assurance, however, sometimes comes with struggles, which the *Canons* call “various carnal doubts,” “carnal” being doubts of the flesh against which we are called to fight by faith. It is neither spiritual, nor praiseworthy, but sinful, to doubt. Nevertheless, our merciful Father delivers us from our doubts and fears “by the Holy Spirit [who] again inspires [us] with the comfortable assurance of persevering” (*Canons* V:11).

This “doctrine of the perseverance of the saints and the certainty thereof” is the church’s “inestimable treasure,” a truth that she has defended from the beginning and a truth that God will “dispose her to continue” to defend to the end (*Canons* V:15). She will defend this truth, and the related truths of the *Canons*, “to the glory of the divine name, to holiness of life, and to the consolation of afflicted souls” (“Conclusion”).

Suffering, struggling, trembling, doubting saints would do well to read the *Canons*. Pastors, elders and deacons, who, as physicians of souls, are called to minister to such saints, should bring the doctrine and even the personal, experiential language of the *Canons* to the comfort, strengthening and edification of such pious souls under their care. In this four-hundredth-anniversary year, let us use the *Canons* not only as a sword to slay the heresy of Arminianism, but also as a refreshing cordial for our own souls and the souls of our fellow saints in the church.