

DORDT'S DEFENCE OF THE GOSPEL: REJECTION OF ERRORS¹

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Introduction

By its ecumenical assembly held in Dordt, the Netherlands in 1618-1619, the Reformed church worldwide said yes to the five main elements of the gospel of grace, commonly called the five points of Calvinism, and to the doctrine of justification by faith alone. That was a significant act on the part of the Synod of Dordt, even a courageous act, in an environment in which leading theologians, many ministers and even powerful political rulers were denying the truth, ridiculing the truth and threatening those who confessed the truth with ecclesiastical, social and physical injury. There was at the Synod even a sizeable group of orthodox ministers who were advocating mutual toleration of Arminians and Reformed. They were suggesting that there need not be a loud and insistent yes to the truth but rather a strategic silence concerning the controverted truths of the gospel, in order to keep the peace in the Reformed churches.

Against the enemies of the gospel in the churches and against the peace-seeking compromisers, the Synod said yes to the gospel. It said yes loudly and clearly. The Synod said yes to the gospel of grace in a confession or creed of five "heads" or chapters (the third and fourth heads being combined), that proposes, explains and defends the gospel of grace positively. The name of the confession is *Canons of Dordt*. *Canons* (with one "n" in the middle) means authoritative doctrinal decision or declaration of the truth of the gospel. Because the Synod that met in the city of Dordt was an ecumenical gathering of Reformed churches from all of what is now Great Britain and Europe, the *Canons of Dordt* is the expression of what all Reformed churches everywhere and always believe and confess to be the truth of the gospel of grace. It is

¹ This is the expanded version of a lecture given celebrating the four-hundredth anniversary of the Synod of Dordt under the auspices of the Covenant Protestant Reformed Church (CPRC) in N. Ireland. The author gave three more lectures on Dordt and its *Canons*, all of which are available from the CPRC in audio and video format.

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authoritative for all Reformed churches, especially but not exclusively for the office-bearers. If a church that is Reformed in name teaches contrary to the *Canons*, it violates a sacred promise or vow and is guilty of deceit. Because the creed was adopted by an ecumenical synod, if a Reformed church teaches contrary to the *Canons*, that church, by virtue of that fact, sets itself outside the community of Reformed churches.

The creed that was drawn up and adopted by the Synod of Dordt—the *Canons*—is formulated in a unique, significant way. There are five heads or chapters that set forth and explain the truths of grace *positively*—the so-called five points of Calvinism. Each of these heads is immediately followed by a section called the rejection of errors. In these sections, the *Canons* describe and condemn certain errors that are in opposition to the truth set forth in the preceding, positive section of the head. These negative rejection of errors sections are also part of the *Canons*. These too are part of the Reformed confession of the truth of the gospel. It is a serious weakening, indeed a gutting, of the *Canons* that some Reformed churches elide the rejection of errors sections of the *Canons* from the creed.

Important as was Dordt's yes to the gospel of grace, it was not enough for the defence and preservation of the truth of the gospel. Indeed, the yes was not enough for the explanation of the gospel. There also had to be an emphatic no to the errors that were threatening the truth—a condemnation of the heresy of Arminianism. Dordt sounded such an emphatic no.

This is the way it is regarding important issues in everyday earthly life. It is not enough to say yes to the preservation of the life of the unborn. We must also say no to the murder of the unborn, that is, to abortion. It is not enough to say yes, even very loudly, to the sanctity of marriage. We must also say no to the adultery of remarriage after divorce and to the perversion of sodomite relations. Saying no is often difficult, very difficult. A pregnant, young woman in the church, who is unmarried, may be strongly tempted to abort the child, in order to escape shame and hardship. The mistreated married woman may be tempted, strongly tempted, to divorce her unloving husband in order to remarry the attractive “other man” (Rom. 7:2-3).

Saying no to the error of immorality proves the sincerity of the corresponding yes to the truth or godliness.

So it is in the church with regard to the gospel. It is not enough to say yes; the church must also say no. It is not enough to say yes to predestination; she must also say no to every doctrine that teaches that God has a saving will for the salvation of all humans, which He then expresses by a well-meant offer of salvation to absolutely all who hear the preaching of the gospel. It is not enough to say yes to the doctrine of total depravity; the church must also say no to every doctrine that teaches that unsaved persons are capable of doing some good, pleasing to God.

Saying no proves the sincerity of the church's positive confession of the truth—the church's yes. Saying no is necessary for the preservation by the church of the truth itself: saying no, the church rejects the lie and keeps the lie out of her fellowship.

Having said yes to the gospel of grace in its five or six fundamental aspects,² the Synod of Dordt continued its confession of grace by saying no to the errors that were corrupting the gospel. These errors still threaten to corrupt the gospel in our day. The loud no of the Synod is the rejection of errors sections of the *Canons*.

Not only do these sections, following every positive head, say no to the errors that oppose the truth but they also give the biblical proof for the truths confessed in the positive heads. In addition, these sections add important elements to the truths confessed in the positive sections.

The Errors Rejected

I summarize the *Canons'* statement, explanation and refutation of the errors opposed to the doctrines of grace. To treat each of the articles in the rejection of errors sections even briefly would result in a good-sized book. Summarizing, however, will not mean overlooking important errors. For the articles of each rejection of errors section all refer to one, basic Arminian error. This one basic error, I will address. For example, the opening articles in the rejection of errors section connected to the first head of doctrine all have to do with the

² I refer to "six" because, although there is no separate head devoted to justification, the *Canons* devote several articles to the orthodox statement of justification by faith alone, which doctrine was corrupted by the Arminian heresy.

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error that teaches that God elects to salvation those whom He foresaw would believe. When a section of rejection of errors contains two or more distinct errors, I address all of the errors separately.

First in the *Canons* is the error regarding predestination, even as predestination is the first truth confessed in the first head. This error consists of several elements. One is the explanation of predestination as a decree to save believers—not sinners but believers. For Arminianism, election depends upon, or is conditioned by, faith. “Error 1” of the Arminian theology, which the *Canons* “reject,” is that of those

Who teach that the will of God to save those who would believe and would persevere in faith and in the obedience of faith is the whole and entire decree of election unto salvation, and that nothing else concerning this decree has been revealed in God's Word (*Canons* I:R:1).

The truth as confessed by the Reformed faith is that God elected some persons, not *because of* their faith but both *unto* faith and *unto* persevering in faith to the very end. The Reformed faith confesses that faith depends upon election, whereas Arminianism holds that election depends upon faith, which faith is the act of the sinner by his alleged free will. Quoted against the Arminian heresy in “Error 1” is Acts 13:48: “And as many as were ordained to eternal life believed.”

A distinct aspect of the Arminian error regarding predestination is the teaching of a *conditional* election: election depending upon, or conditioned by, faith. Repeatedly, in “Error 4” and in “Error 5,” there is mention of “conditions” of election, which the *Canons* repudiate. For example, “Error 5” condemns the teaching that

faith, the obedience of faith, holiness, godliness, and perseverance are not fruits of the unchangeable election unto glory, but are conditions which, being required beforehand, were foreseen as being met by those who will be fully elected (*Canons* I:R:5).

The truth is that election is unconditional. The object of election in the decree had no faith or ability to believe. He appeared before the electing God

as totally depraved. The Reformed judgment upon the doctrine of conditional election is that it “savors of the teaching of Pelagius” (*Canons* I:R:4).

From the error of a conditional election follows necessarily the error that election can be lost (*Canons* I:R:6). The truth is that election is certain. Every one whom God has elected shall certainly be saved.

Still another, and especially pernicious, aspect of the Arminian false doctrine concerning predestination is the teaching that there is no consciousness and assurance of election in this life. This is “Error 7.” The *Canons* reject the error of those “who teach that there is in this life no fruit and no consciousness of the unchangeable election to glory, nor any certainty, except that which depends on a changeable and uncertain condition” (*Canons* I:R:7). The truth is that the elect can be, and are, certain of their election. According to Luke 10:20, which the *Canons* quote in support of its rejection of the Arminian error, the elect “rejoice” that their “names are written in heaven.”

An especially vehement aspect of the Arminian error with regard to predestination is the repudiation of reprobation as an eternal decree appointing some humans to perish in their sins (*Canons* I:R:8). The truth is that, inasmuch as election is the decree ordaining some particular persons to salvation, those who are not ordained to salvation are eternally appointed to damnation. The *Canons* appeal to Romans 9:18: “He hath mercy on whom he will, and whom he will he hardeneth” (*Canons* I:R:8).

Finally concerning predestination, there is the error that denies that God sends the gospel to people with the intention to save those whom He has chosen and them only (*Canons* I:R:9). This error concerns the relation of election and preaching. The reason for the sending forth of the gospel to some, whereas God withholds the gospel from others, is not that some are more worthy than others. Neither is it the case that God desires to save all who hear the gospel. But the purpose of the course of the gospel in history and throughout the world is God’s gracious will to save the elect. The biblical passages brought forth in defence of the Reformed doctrine of the relation of election and the preaching of the gospel are compelling. Included is Matthew 11:21.

The error regarding predestination can be summarized thus: a conditional predestination unto salvation, of which the condition is faith, so that all of salvation is also conditional, implying that there can be no assurance of elec-

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tion or of salvation. To be noted is the prominence in the Arminian doctrine of predestination of conditionality. That election and, therefore, all of salvation, is conditional is a hallmark of Arminianism.

The second rejection of errors section concerns the atonement of Christ. The Arminian error is that Christ did not die for certain, particular persons, as their substitute, but rather died to make salvation possible for all, on condition that they believe (of course, by their alleged free will). The implication is that the cross might have saved no one at all, inasmuch as it is conceivable that no one might have believed. Again, underlying the Arminian doctrine of the death of Christ is the notion that the death of Christ with its saving benefits is conditional. The word is used in "Error 3": Christ died merely "to prescribe new conditions as He might desire, obedience to which, however, depended on the free will of man, so that it therefore might have come to pass that either none or all should fulfill these conditions" (*Canons II:R:3*). The error of a universal, conditional atonement implies also that the obedience required by the justice of God is a human's act of believing, rather than the life-long obedience and the suffering and death of the Son of God.

Another distinct error of the Arminian doctrine of the death of Christ is that this death accepted all humans into a state of reconciliation with God, having removed the guilt of original sin, but that forgiveness of actual sins and salvation itself still depend upon one's fulfilling the condition of believing. Another way of stating this aspect of the Arminian error is that the cross earned salvation for all but one must appropriate this salvation, that is, make it one's own, by fulfilling the condition of believing.

An implication of this error concerning the suffering and death of Christ, which Arminian theology sooner or later draws out of its theology of the death of Christ, is that His death was not even necessary for the salvation of sinners but was merely an example of love for others. This is sheer unbelieving, theological modernism! Already at the time of, and shortly after, the Synod of Dordt, the Arminian ministers and theologians inclined towards modernism. Some openly espoused the modernism that denies the substitutionary satisfaction of the justice of God by the death of Christ. A predecessor of Arminius in the Netherlands was one Dirck Volkertszoon Coornhert. This theologian taught that Jesus was merely an "example." He hated Calvinism. Calvin referred to

him as “the stupid Hollander.”³ An uncle of Arminius noted that his nephew was “corrupted with the libertine opinions of Coornhert.”⁴ The outstanding historian of the Synod of Dordt, Wagenaar, demonstrates that, after Dordt, many of the Arminians showed themselves to be rationalists and Socinians. Some returned to the Roman Catholic Church. Gerard van Velzen “broke with the public [i.e., instituted] Church” altogether.⁵

Basically, the Arminian heresy concerning the atoning death of Christ was, as it is still today, the denial that the death of Christ was satisfaction of the justice of God as the substitute in the stead of others, namely, the elect. Against this false doctrine, Dordt’s confession of the truth of the atonement is especially *Canons* II:8.

The Arminian error with regard to the spiritual condition of fallen humans apart from regenerating grace, which the *Canons* expose in the rejection of errors section of *Canons* III/IV, is that the fallen, natural human remains somewhat good, retaining the image of God in which God created humans in the beginning. Therefore, fallen humans have a will that is capable of choosing Jesus Christ when they hear the gospel: “the will of itself is able to will and to choose, or not to will and not to choose, all manner of good which may be presented to it” (*Canons* III/IV:R:3). Implied is the error that the unsaved, natural man is not spiritually dead but only sick, and, therefore, is capable of choosing what is good and right, especially Jesus Christ and the salvation that is in Him: Arminian theology teaches “that the unregenerate man is not really nor utterly dead in sin, nor destitute of all powers unto spiritual good” (*Canons* III/IV:R:4).⁶

³ L. H. Wagenaar, *Van Strijd en Overwinning: De Grootte Synode van 1618 op '19, en Wat aan Haar Voorafging* [Of Struggle and Victory: The Great Synod of 1618 to '19, and What Led Up to It] (Utrecht: G. J. A. Ruys, 1909), p. 20. This and all subsequent quotations from this extraordinarily detailed, rich, and utterly fascinating account of the Synod of Dordt are my translation of the Dutch. The book has not been translated. The Dutch word translated “stupid” is often used in the Dutch for one who is under the influence of alcohol. We can only hope that this was not Calvin’s estimation of all Hollanders.

⁴ Wagenaar, *Van Strijd*, p. 42.

⁵ Wagenaar, *Van Strijd*, p. 402.

⁶ One observes that the clever, deceptive statement of the lie compels orthodoxy to resort to absurd language in the refutation of the lie: “is not ... utterly dead in sin.” One is either dead or he is alive and not dead at all. One cannot be partially dead. But Arminianism, forced

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Of especial significance to contemporary Reformed and Presbyterian churches is that aspect of the Arminian heresy that holds that there is a “common grace” of God that makes it possible for all men to be saved, if only they will. According to Arminianism, God desires to save all humans and stands ready to do so, if only they show themselves willing when the gospel is preached to them.

The true doctrine having been explained, the Synod rejects the errors of those ... who teach that the corrupt and natural man can so well use the common grace (by which they understand the light of nature), or the gifts still left him after the fall, that he can gradually gain by their good use a greater, namely, the evangelical or saving grace and salvation itself. And that in this way God on His part shows Himself ready to reveal Christ unto all men, since He applies to all sufficiently and efficiently the means necessary to conversion (*Canons III/IV:R:5*).

There is one, and one only, mention of “common grace” in the Reformed *Three Forms of Unity*, and this mention makes the teaching of common grace a form of the Arminian denial of total depravity, in order to make salvation dependent upon the will of the sinner. The nature of this common grace, which the Reformed faith of the *Canons* condemns and rejects, is worthy of note in light of the acceptance of it by most Reformed and Presbyterian churches today as Reformed orthodoxy. It is the spiritual ability on the part of the unregenerated sinner to avail himself of a readiness of God to save all humans without exception, evidently by accepting Christ when Christ is presented in the gospel as a well-meant offer to all: “God ... shows Himself ready ...” This “evangelical or saving grace” develops out of a grace in things natural and earthly: “the light of nature, or the gifts still left him [i.e., the natural man] after the fall.”

There could not be a more accurate description of the false doctrine of common grace as it has developed in the Reformed community of churches

by the explicit language of Scripture to acknowledge that the unregenerated sinner is dead (e.g., Eph. 2:1, 5), argues that the sinner is not *utterly* dead. The truth is logical and clear; the lie is absurd and murky.

in the twenty-first century. The *Canons* condemn this doctrine of common grace as Arminian heresy. Reformed and Presbyterian churches in our day condemn the condemnation of common grace as hyper-Calvinism. Whether they know it or not, whether they intend it or not, their condemnation falls squarely upon the *Canons* III/IV:R:5.

Against the doctrine of common grace, the *Canons* quote Psalm 147:19-20, Acts 14:16 and Acts 16:6-7. The last passage obviously refutes the Arminian doctrine that the preaching of the gospel expresses and carries out a desire of God for the salvation of all humans.

One of the errors condemned in the rejection of errors pertaining to the third and fourth heads of doctrine of the *Canons* is the doctrine that all humans remain good after the fall, either by retaining something of the image of God or by possessing a grace of God that is common. The error is the denial of total depravity.

The other error condemned in the third and fourth heads of doctrine concerns the irresistibility, or sovereignty, of grace. It is the error that grace is merely a persuasion, an “advising grace,” so that salvation depends on the sinner’s acceptance of grace.⁷ Thus the sinner cooperates with grace in his salvation.

The Arminian error concerning salvation defames God. His grace, that is, He Himself, who is the personal perfection of grace, is resistible by the sinner. God’s accomplishment of the salvation of the sinner waits upon the sinner’s not resisting Him and His saving work. The very beginning of the work of salvation, regeneration, lies in the power of the sinner, not of the Holy Ghost! The Reformed faith rejects the heresies of the Arminians:

Who teach that God in the regeneration of man does not use such powers of His omnipotence as potently and infallibly bend man’s will to faith and conversion; but ... man may yet so resist God and the Holy Spirit when God intends man’s regeneration and wills to regenerate him, and indeed that man often does so resist, that he prevents entirely his regen-

⁷ This is the language with which the *Canons* describe the Arminian doctrine of grace in *Canons* III/IV:R:7.

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eration, and that it therefore remains in man's power to be regenerated or not (*Canons III/IV:R:8*).⁸

Arminian soteriology has divine grace and human free will cooperating in salvation, with the sinner's will being decisive, for they "teach that grace and free will are partial causes, which together work the beginning of conversion, and that grace, in order of working, does not precede the working of the will." This, the *Canons* rightly charge, is the modern resuscitation of the "doctrine of the Pelagians" (*Canons III/IV:R:9*).

Essentially, the Arminian doctrine of salvation is that, since God's salvation of the sinner is conditioned by the sinner's will, the sinner saves himself by fulfilling the condition of faith, which faith is viewed as human obedience.

The fifth Arminian error corrupts the Reformed doctrine of the perseverance of saints, as this doctrine is explained is the fifth head of doctrine of the *Canons*. The error is the denial that perseverance is a "fruit of election," based upon "the death, the resurrection, and intercession of Christ." Rather, according to the Arminian heresy, perseverance unto eternal life in the day of Christ is a "condition of the new covenant" that the believer fulfils by his own "free will" (*Canons V:R:1*).⁹ God gives what is necessary for persevering but the reality of perseverance is the accomplishment of the believer. This Arminian doctrine is not a minor deviation from the gospel, that allows for sweet ecumenical relationship between the Reformed and Arminians, but "an outspoken Pelagianism" (*Canons V:R:2*).

Implied by this error of a conditional perseverance is the terrifying error that regenerated believers can fall from grace, and do fall from grace and from salvation into hell (*Canons V:R:3*). Believers can, and do, commit the sin against the Holy Ghost (*Canons V:R:4*).

⁸ In light of the deliberate comparison of the Bible of the new birth with natural birth, the implication of the Arminian doctrine of salvation is that one can prevent his natural conception and birth and that his natural birth is his own doing. This is the wisdom that adorns vast multitudes of Protestants and their theologians today.

⁹ To be noted once again is the prominence in Arminian soteriology of conditionality. All of salvation and every aspect of salvation are conditioned by the will and work of the sinner. One would suppose that a Reformed theology that opposes conditionality in salvation would commend itself to the wider Reformed and Presbyterian community of churches as Dordtian orthodoxy. Sadly, one would be mistaken.