

The inescapable implication is that there cannot be assurance of final salvation by the believer. Indeed, it is the determination of Arminian theology that there be no assurance of salvation, except in the rare and highly uncertain instance of a “special revelation” (*Canons V:R:5*). Assurance would lead to carelessness of life. It is characteristic of Arminian theology that the only motivation of a careful, godly life is the fear of perishing. Arminianism knows nothing of the motivation of a godly, holy life that consists of gratitude for a gracious salvation. It cannot have such motivation because salvation in the Arminian theology is not gracious. One cannot be grateful to God for a salvation that one accomplishes himself (*Canons V:R:5*).

Then, in a glaring error, indicating its wicked determination to deny the gospel of grace at any cost, Arminianism declares “that Christ has in no place prayed that believers should infallibly continue in faith.” In response to, and in refutation of, this obvious falsehood, the *Canons* quote Luke 22:32 and John 17:11, 15, 20 (*Canons V:R:9*).

### **Application to Errors of the Present Day**

The *Canons* say no, as well as yes. So must the sound Reformed church today say no, especially against the very same errors that were rejected by the *Canons* in 1618-1619. A commemoration of that Dutch Synod and its doctrinal declarations, while refusing or neglecting to apply the no of that Synod to contemporary forms of the very same errors that Dordt condemned, is mere hypocrisy. It is a form of the evil that Jesus condemned in the Pharisees: “ye build the tombs of the prophets, and garnish the sepulchres of the righteous” (Matt. 23:29), while themselves killing the contemporary prophets of God.

Very soon after the adoption of the *Canons* in 1619, this confession of grace fell into disfavour and was disavowed both in the Netherlands and throughout Great Britain and all of Europe by the very churches that cooperated in its adoption. This was the age of rationalism, which was sheer unbelieving modernism: the mind of man is supreme. By the early 1800s, the Reformed church in the Netherlands did not know of the *existence* of the *Canons of Dordt*. Significantly, when, in the early 1800s, God began moving the remnant in the Netherlands to reform the church with a view to the institution of a true church, a movement called the Secession, the very first thing the minister

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whom God used for the reformation, one Hendrik de Cock, did was to publish an edition of the *Canons of Dordt*!

Somewhat later, in the late 1800s and early 1900s, God further reformed the Dutch Reformed church largely by two ministers, Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck. They named their movement the *Doleantie*, that is, the grieving ones. This name, they borrowed from the churches that were suffering in the Netherlands in the years leading up to the Synod of Dordt.<sup>10</sup> In this way, the churches in the Netherlands in the early 1900s identified themselves with the true church of Dordt.

Today, the Reformed churches in the Netherlands in the tradition of Dordt, of de Cock, and of Bavinck and Kuyper are apostate. They are part of the false church that will support and serve the Antichrist. Recently, a leading theologian in the Dutch church has written that the death of Christ was not satisfaction but merely exemplary. He published the error that the *Canons* (which is the creed of the heretic, as of the church that tolerates the heresy) condemn in the rejection of errors section of the second head of doctrine:

The true doctrine having been explained, the Synod rejects the errors of those ... who teach that Christ neither could die, needed to die, nor did die for those whom God loved in the highest degree and elected to eternal life, and did not die for these, since these do not need the death of Christ (*Canons* II:R:7).

The rejection of errors sections of the *Canons* expose also the contemporary false doctrines of those that have the reputation of being sound Reformed churches in Great Britain, throughout Europe and in North America. I refer, first, to the false doctrine that calls itself the well-meant offer of the gospel, or the free offer of the gospel. This is the teaching—the popular, widespread teaching—that God loves all humans without exception with a love that desires their salvation, so that in this (would-be) saving love, He sincerely offers to them salvation. So popular is this doctrine that it passes for Reformed orthodoxy. Any church that rejects the teaching is cavalierly and routinely dismissed as hyper-Calvinist.

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<sup>10</sup> Wagenaar: “*eerlang had Rotterdam zijn ‘doleerende gemeente,’*” that is, in the years leading up to Dordt (*Van Strijd*, p. 148).

But the rejection of errors section of the *Canons* condemns the teaching as Arminian heresy: “[the error] 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). Also the *Canons* reject the error that “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 regeneration” (*Canons* III/IV:R:8).

Second, I refer to the false doctrine that the new covenant and its salvation are conditional, the condition being man’s faith with its works. This too is widespread in Reformed churches that have the *Canons* as their creed: a conditional covenant, which is to say a conditional salvation in the covenant. The very term “conditional” ought to expose the doctrine as rank heresy: a condition is an act of the sinner upon which God’s salvation depends. This is the denial of gracious salvation. The doctrine of a conditional covenant is explicitly condemned by the *Canons*: “Synod rejects the errors of those ... who teach that the perseverance of the true believers is not a fruit of election, or a gift of God gained by the death of Christ, but a condition of the new covenant” (*Canons* V:R:1).

Third, I refer to the false doctrine now appearing openly in Reformed and Presbyterian churches that Christ did die for all humans without exception in order to make salvation a real possibility for all but that the application of the cross depends upon the sinner’s own will in deciding to believe. Defence of this form of universal atonement emphasizes a distinction between Christ’s meriting salvation for all and the sinner’s appropriating salvation. This error also is demolished by the hammer of the *Canons’* rejection of errors:

... the Synod rejects the errors of those ... who use the difference between meriting and appropriating, to the end that they may instill into the minds of the imprudent and inexperienced this teaching, that God, as far as He is concerned, has been minded of applying to all equally the benefits gained by the death of Christ; but that, while some obtain the pardon of sin and eternal life and others do not, this difference depends on their own free will, which joins itself to the grace that is offered without exception, and that it is not dependent on the

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special gift of mercy, which powerfully works in them, that they rather than others should appropriate unto themselves this grace (*Canons V:R:6*).<sup>11</sup>

A fourth contemporary form of the heresy condemned by the *Canons* in the rejection of errors sections is the false doctrine that some who were truly saved can nevertheless yet fall away and perish eternally. This is the explicit teaching of the powerful movement in North America that calls itself the Federal (i.e., covenant) Vision. This teaching has been approved by the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and by the Presbyterian Church in America. The United Reformed Churches have refused to condemn it in the teaching of ministers in their fellowship.<sup>12</sup> The basic doctrine is found in nominally evangelical churches in Great Britain and in Europe where the theology of N. T. Wright is embraced.<sup>13</sup> The *Canons* condemn the doctrine of those “who teach that the true believers and regenerate not only can fall from justifying faith and likewise from grace and salvation wholly and to the end, but indeed often do fall from this and are lost forever” (*Canons V:R:3*).

Fifth, there is the often subtle error regarding the perseverance of saints that none or only very few can know with certainty his perseverance. For this knowledge is not the certainty of faith alone but the knowledge that depends upon a “special revelation.” This is the error of those churches, theologians and church members that are influenced by a major current in the Puritans. Under the influence of this error, multitudes of confessing Reformed Christians live out their miserable lives in the terror of perishing at death in the flames of hell. Against this pernicious error, taught or tolerated by prominent Reformed theologians, stands the plain language of the *Canons*, which reject the error of those “who teach that without a special revelation we can have no certainty of future perseverance in this life.” This false doctrine is not le-

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<sup>11</sup> This distinction between meriting (for all) and appropriating (by some), the *Canons* judge to be “the destructive poison of the Pelagian errors.”

<sup>12</sup> For the evidence of these grievous charges, see my *Federal Vision: Heresy at the Root* (Jenison, MI: RFP, 2012) and *The Covenant of God and the Children of Believers* (Jenison, MI: RFP, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> For the theology of N. T. Wright and the New Perspective on Paul, of which Wright is a prominent spokesman, see my *Gospel Truth of Justification: Proclaimed, Defended, Developed* (Jenison, MI: RFP, 2017), pp. 26-44.

gitimately Reformed, “experiential” theology but rather the introduction into Reformed churches of “the doubts of the papist” (*Canons* V:R:5).

All of this says nothing of the application of the rejection of errors sections of the *Canons* to the abounding, openly Arminian theology over all the world in our day.

### **Can Reformed Churches Say No Today?**

This is the urgent question: Can Reformed churches and theologians say no, emphatically and without compromise, to the errors combatted by Dordt in the *Canons*?

There are some who still say yes to the *Canons* but whose yes is muted. Their confession and proclamation of predestination are less than vigorous. They show themselves nervous about limited atonement, if not embarrassed by the doctrine. For many, the *Canons* are not really the gospel. The doctrines of Dordt are seldom the content of their sermons or writings. If they appear at all, it is in a warning not to abuse the doctrines or to confuse them with the gospel itself. The danger for them is not the loss of the *Canons* but the uncompromising, strong confession of the *Canons*. The monotonous warning is always against hyper-Calvinism, as though this were the great danger to the faith of the *Canons* today. These churches and theologians regard the *Canons* as a kind of (dogmatic, academic) appendage to the gospel, rather than the gospel of grace itself.

There are others who would have sided with those men at Dordt who advocated tolerance of the Arminians and their doctrines. At Dordt, there were three parties, as there are always three parties in the church—the same three parties—when the gospel of grace is at stake. There were the avowed Arminian enemies of grace; there were the earnest, determined friends and defenders of grace; and there were those—a not inconsiderable number—who, although orthodox themselves, pleaded for tolerance of the Arminian heresy in the interests of peace in the churches and because they dreaded the misery of schism in the church.

Many [in the Reformed Church in the Netherlands] purposed the freedom for the anti-Reformed to cast off the deeply hated

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Confession as an intolerable yoke ... Gomarus and his allies were ... men who were ready to fight. But there was also in the Church a sizeable group of kindhearted-earnest ministers who very gladly had desired ... a compromise ... [These were] the moderates.<sup>14</sup>

The danger today is that churches and theologians, Reformed in name, cannot say no to what is fundamentally the Arminian heresy, the threats in new forms to the gospel of grace. “New forms,” it must be emphasized, both inasmuch as the heresy that is as old as Pelagius, indeed as old as the Galatian heretics, always adopts new forms and inasmuch as all theologians are bound by a sacred oath to oppose “heresies ... *especially of the new day*.”<sup>15</sup> Their inability to say no to contemporary forms of the corruption of the gospel of grace severely silences the yes of these “moderates” to the truth. In any case, their muted yes is inadequate. Without the rejection of errors, the gospel of Dordt is compromised and lost.

The following are concrete instances of the consequences of the inability of Reformed theologians and churches in our day to say no to the lie that compromises grace. Reformed churches teach a love of God for all humans that desires to save all. Reformed churches defend the error that after the fall, apart from the regenerating grace of God in Jesus Christ, there is still some real goodness in fallen humans, even the retention in some degree of the image of God. Reformed churches tolerate, if they do not themselves confess, the teaching that in some important respects Christ died for all humans without exception. Reformed churches teach that there is a grace of God, saving in nature and desirous of saving, that can be, and is, in fact, resisted. And there is, in reputedly conservative Reformed churches, the doctrine that the covenant of grace with its salvation is, among all the children of believers without exception—the Esaus as well as the Jacobs—indeed among all those who have been baptized, universal. All who are baptized begin to enjoy the salvation of regeneration and justification, but this salvation can be lost because it is conditional, that is, dependent upon the faith and good works of the one who is baptized. This last is the heresy of the Federal Vision.

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<sup>14</sup> Wagenaar, *Van Strijd*, p. 86.

<sup>15</sup> “Form for the Installation of Professors of Theology,” in *Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: PRCA, 2005), p. 297; emphasis added.

All of these doctrines compromise—*fatally* compromise—the gospel of grace as confessed by the *Canons*. Reformed and Presbyterian churches are unable to say no to these heresies. Unable to say no, neither do they any longer utter a clear, convincing, clarion call to confess the truth positively.

## **Conclusion**

It is often overlooked or forgotten that the Synod of Dordt brought the *Canons* to an end with a fitting “Conclusion.” This “Conclusion” makes some important reflections on the *Canons* itself, as well as giving important instruction concerning the proper use of the *Canons*.

First, the *Canons* are biblical: “drawn from the Word of God.”<sup>16</sup> The Synod gladly yielded to the demand of the Arminians that the document drawn up to settle the controversy be based on Scripture, and Scripture alone, not on the *Belgic Confession* and the *Heidelberg Catechism*. Throughout the entire *Canons*, all the proof put forward for the doctrines that are confessed is exclusively biblical.

Second, the content itself of the *Canons*, the “Conclusion” suggests, exposes as false the slanders cast against the Reformed faith by the Arminians, namely, that this faith makes men careless and profane; that it makes God the author of sin; and that it makes reprobation the cause of unbelief “in the same manner” as election is the cause of faith.

Third, the “Conclusion” calls on Christians to judge the faith of the Reformed churches from their confessions, particularly the *Canons*. The Reformed faith is not to be judged from the charges lodged against it by the enemies of this faith. It is not even to be judged from the private expressions of some Reformed theologians.

Then the “Conclusion” issues a warning to the “calumniators,” that is, those who blaspheme the biblical gospel of the *Canons*. These blasphemers today include those who damn the sound confession of the doctrines of the *Canons* as hyper-Calvinism. Well may those theologians who amuse themselves today by dismissing the sound, uncompromising confession of the sovereignty of

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<sup>16</sup> This and all following quotations are taken from the “Conclusion” of the *Canons*, unless otherwise noted.

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God in reprobation as well as in election as hyper-Calvinism take to heart the warning of the *Canons* against such “calumniators”:

Moreover, the synod warns calumniators themselves to consider the terrible judgment of God which awaits them for bearing false witness against the confessions of so many churches, for distressing the consciences of the weak, and for laboring to render suspected the society of the truly faithful.

There is also an exhortation to Reformed ministers to handle the doctrines of the *Canons* “piously and religiously.” The exhortation contains an admonition “to abstain from all those phrases that exceed the limits necessary to be observed in ascertaining the genuine sense of the Holy Scriptures.” The warning was occasioned by the “hard sayings,” as Wagenaar describes them, of an orthodox theologian named Maccovius. For instance, Maccovius taught that “the reprobate sin and go lost *necessarily*,” thus, contrary to Maccovius’ own intention, tending to make God the author of sin.<sup>17</sup>

The “Conclusion,” and therefore the *Canons*, closes with a calling upon Jesus Christ to bless the ministers who teach the truth of the gospel as confessed by the *Canons* and to use their testimony for “the glory of God, and the edification of those who hear them. AMEN.”

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<sup>17</sup> Wagenaar, *Van Strijd*, p. 371.