

BOOK REVIEW: *GRACE AND ASSURANCE*

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Grace and Assurance: The Message of the Canons of Dordt

by Martyn McGeown

Reformed Free Publishing Association (RFPA)

384 Pages, Hardback

No mean scholar and judge in matters of historical theology, William Cunningham, the nineteenth-century Free Church of Scotland worthy, boldly declared,

The synod of Dort [1618-1619], representing as it did almost all the Reformed Churches, and containing a great proportion of theologians of the highest talents, learning, and character, is entitled to a larger measure of respect and deference than any other council recorded in the history of the church.¹

The chief product of that great Synod, the *Canons of Dordt*, likewise command the deep honour and heartfelt interest of all Presbyterian and Reformed believers who love the doctrines of grace, and, indeed, all who believe the truth of the inspired Scriptures.

The chief characteristic of *Grace and Assurance: The Message of the Canons of Dordt* by the BRJ Editor, Rev. Martyn McGeown, is that it is expository. Pastor McGeown excels as a Bible exegete, as his two previous books testify: *Micah: Proclaiming the Incomparable God* in the Old Testament and *Called to Watch for Christ's Return* on Matthew 24-25 in the New Testament. These skills, finely honed as a preacher, are now applied to the church's greatest confessional document on God's sovereign grace in Jesus Christ.

Grace and Assurance is not only an exposition of all the 59 positive articles of the *Canons of Dordt* but also the 34 rejections of errors. Our author helpfully

¹ William Cunningham, *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation* (Edinburgh: Banner, 1967), p. 367.

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explains the various rejections of errors after the articles with which they are most closely related. Thus the truth that there is “Only one decree of election” (*Canons* I:8) (57-58) immediately precedes the lie that there are “Various decrees of election” (*Canons* I:R:2) (59-63). This serves to “make the contrast between the Reformed faith and Arminianism even sharper” (27), for the light stands out most clearly against the darkness. Unlike some commentaries on the *Canons of Dordt*, this one also expounds its “Conclusion” (325-334).

Second, besides being expository, *Grace and Assurance* is explicitly and profusely biblical. As well as being filled with many and appropriate Scriptures, Pastor McGeown’s book lists many proof texts for each of the *Canons’* five heads of doctrine, now commonly summarized as the five points of Calvinism: unconditional election (and reprobation), limited atonement, total depravity, irresistible grace and the perseverance of the saints (132, 186, 269, 323). He also deals with Bible verses to which Arminians and others wrongly appeal, such as John 3:16 (31-32), Matthew 23:37 (196) and II Peter 3:9 (196-197).

More generally, some will ask about those scriptural texts which speak of the “world” or “all” or “all men” in connection with our Lord’s atonement. The *BRJ* Editor’s list of 36 biblical passages, plus instances of everyday speech, that use these terms is highly effective in disposing of this Arminian and Amyraldian objection (188-191).

A third commendable feature of this new book is that it is pastoral. Given the frequent abuse of this word in twenty-first-century Christianity, I hasten to add that “pastoral” is not an excuse to dumb down or compromise the truth of the biblical and Reformed faith or to soften the Lord’s hard sayings (John 6:60). Instead, the idea of the word is that of showing care for Christ’s beloved sheep by enlightening, edifying and encouraging them.

This third point about *Grace and Assurance* flows from the first two. President Johannes Bogerman and the delegates at Dordt wrote the *Canons* not in the terminology of theological academia but in language endearing to the Lord’s blood-bought flock—and this is what the *BRJ* Editor expounds. The Scriptures themselves are written so as to “comfort” or, literally, “speak to the heart” of God’s people (Isa. 40:1-2).

Thus Pastor McGeown writes,

... 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 (xiv).

Fourth, in setting forth the pastoral, biblical theology of the *Canons*, our author ably provides us with the church historical background. *Grace and Assurance* begins with “A Historical Introduction to the Synod of Dordt” (1-8). This section succinctly sets forth the roles played by James Arminius, Jan Uytenbogaert, Johan van Oldenbarneveld, Simon Episcopius and others in the promulgation and defence of the lie, as well as the calling, composition and work of the great Synod. It even includes pictures of five of the main protagonists.

The three appendices provided in Rev. McGeown's book contain valuable historical materials which provide important aspects of the context of the *Canons*. First, “The Remonstrance of 1610” consists of five articles in which the Arminians teach the heresies of conditional election, universal atonement, partial depravity and resistible grace, and question the perseverance of the saints (339-340). These five Arminian articles explain the subjects and order of the five heads of the *Canons of Dordt*.

Second, in 33 statements, “The Opinions of the Remonstrants 1618” (341-349) greatly elaborate upon the five Arminian articles published eight years before. Their development in heresy is also seen in that, by this stage, the Arminians not only question but deny outright God's preservation, and the perseverance, of all His true people (347-349).

The value of “The Opinions of the Remonstrants 1618” is not only that they provide us with a fairly concise record of the views of the Arminians in

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their own words but also the aid they provide to us in interpreting the *Canons* and especially the errors they reject. Thus, despite the claims ad nauseam of many who ought to know better, the well-meant offer was *not* the teaching of the fathers at Dordt. Instead, it was the Arminian false conception of God in preaching, which they stated in “The Opinions of the Remonstrants 1618”:

Whomever God calls to salvation, he calls seriously, that is, with a sincere and completely unhypocritical intention and will [or desire] to save; nor do we assent to the opinion of those who hold that God calls certain ones externally whom He does not will [or desire] to call internally ... Nor do we believe that God calls the reprobate ... to these ends: that He should the more harden them, or take away excuse, or punish them the more severely, or display their inability ... (346).

“The Judgment of the Synod of Dordt Concerning the Five Articles of the Arminians” (351-369) is a little-known but significant document, which constitutes the book’s third appendix. Indeed, the historical angle also provided the occasion for the writing and publication of Pastor McGeown’s book, for it marks the four-hundredth anniversary of the Synod of Dordt (xiii).

The value of *Grace and Assurance* is enhanced by a fine treatment of “The Importance of Creeds” (9-22) with sections on “The idea of creeds,” “Objections to creeds” and “The characteristics of the Canons.” Helpfully, this book includes the appropriate text of the *Canons* immediately prior to its exposition, thus obviating the need to have at hand another volume containing that creed.

The four main chapters of *Grace and Assurance* begin with fine introductions to the *Canons*’ five heads of doctrine (25-27, 133-140, 193-197, 271-274) and end with “discussion questions” (127-131, 183-185, 265-268, 321-322).²

As well as the *Canons of Dordt*, the *BRJ* Editor cites various Reformed creeds, including the *Westminster Confession* (198-199, 225). He provides fine quotes from Reformed authors, such as John Calvin (48, 88-89, 100-101, 310-311), Zacharias Ursinus (93-94), Jerome Zanchius (117-118), Herman Bavinck (140) and John Owen (204, 251).

² There are also “discussion questions” on the historical introduction and the importance of creeds (23-24), as well as the “Conclusion” to the *Canons* (335-336).

Rev. McGeown ably presents the heresies of modern Arminians, such as William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army (135-136); John Wesley (138); Dave Hunt (154-155) and Billy Graham (206-207). He also cites the authoritative, false teaching of the semi-Pelagian Church of Rome in the form of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (212) and Pope Benedict XVI (254).

There are many issues dealt with in this fine book. Is there an “age of accountability before which one is supposedly innocent” (28)? Must everyone have a “chance of salvation” (29)? Does God “discriminate”? Read *Canons* I:6 and pages 46-48 of *Grace and Assurance*.

What are infralapsarianism and supralapsarianism? The *BRJ* Editor clarifies (104-106). The Bible says that God loved Jacob and hated Esau (Mal. 1:2-3; Rom. 9:13); how do we refute to those who claim that “hated” here merely means “loved less” (107-108)?

Do you know what is meant by Jehovah’s “personal” election (*Canons* I:10) and how does it differ from Arminianism’s “impersonal” election (26, 74)? Rev. McGeown explains,

... the Arminians taught an impersonal election in which God did not choose persons in his decree of election, but God chose conditions that men must fulfil in order to be elected and saved. The Arminians declared that God could have chosen many different conditions of salvation, but that God’s election consists in this: he chose faith as the condition of salvation and election [*Canons* I:10; I:R:3] (76).

Do the Scriptures and the *Canons* teach that God’s covenant is entirely gracious and unconditional? Yes, for example, in Galatians 3 (vv. 16, 29) and *Canons* II:8 (176). As Pastor McGeown states, “Conditional covenant theology is Arminian, not Reformed, theology” (177).

Much more could be said but hopefully this is enough to whet your appetite for *Grace and Assurance*!³

³ This book is available from the RFPA in the US (www.rfpa.org) and the CPRC Bookstore, 7 Lislunna Road, Kells, BT42 3NR, N. Ireland (028 25 891851). The cost is £18.00 + £1.80 (P&P within the UK) = £19.80. Make cheques payable to “Covenant Protestant Reformed Church.”