

The Pastoral Character of the Canons of Dort

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based on an article originally published in the *Standard Bearer*
Vol. LVIII, No. 1; October 1, 1981

Creeds are not popular in today's church world. Many churches do not and will not have them, and this reflects the attitude of most church members. If believers are not completely opposed to creeds, then they are deeply suspicious of them, blaming many of the churches' ills on creeds. Even those churches that have a formal creedal basis have neglected and set aside their own creeds, so that those creeds are hardly known and rarely referred to.

One argument against creeds is that the creeds we have are not useful. They were written, so it is said, at a time when cold, abstract discussion of obscure doctrinal points was the order of the day, but now the Church has progressed from such dogmatic argumentation to real, meaningful activity. The creeds, it is suggested, are full of scholasticism, and are far removed from simple, practical teaching of Scripture, and are therefore, all but useless in the Church of Jesus Christ.

The strange thing is that this attitude is often fostered by those who want nothing to do with the very practical teaching of Scripture and the creeds on such matters as women in church office, homosexuality, the keeping of the Lord's Day, church discipline, and many other such matters. Nonetheless, this attitude does find fertile soil in the ignorance of the creeds which so widespread, even among those of Reformed or Presbyterian background.

Among those who subscribe to the "Three Forms of Unity," the *Heidelberg Catechism*, the *Belgic Confession*, and the *Canons of Dort*,¹ this attitude is found especially in regard to the *Canons*.² So generally are the *Canons* considered to be "outdated" that there are few any more who know anything about them.

There are few who know that the *Canons*, in five chapters or "heads," defend and prove from Scripture, the so-called "Five Points of Calvinism." They do not know, therefore, that rather than speaking of errors which vanished from the church hundreds of years ago, the *Canons* deal pointedly and Biblically with the very errors that are troubling the church today. But perhaps the most surprising thing of all to those who to a greater or lesser degree are ignorant of the, is the fact that the *Canons*, perhaps more than any other creed, are deliberately, deeply, and warmly pastoral in their presentation of these great truths of the Christian faith.³

When we speak of the pastoral character of the *Canons*, we mean that they not only set forth sound doctrine, but that in the *Canons* these doctrines (including the doctrines of election and reprobation) are applied in a very practical and personal way to the difficulties and problems of the Christian life. That is, after all, what pastoral work is all about - the personal private application of the Word of God to the needs of God's people. The *Canons* are very really, a "Pastor's Handbook," and can be used with much profit by the leaders and members of the church in dealing with pastoral matters.

One pastoral matter addressed in the *Canons* is lack of assurance of salvation, very troubling to those who are seeking such assurance, and a problem which ministers of the gospel and elders often face in pastoral counseling. The *Canons* have much to say about this matter, all of it of great help and comfort to struggling believers. The doctrines of grace themselves are of great comfort to believers in their struggles, but the *Canons* address the matter of assurance much more personally and practically than just by way of setting out the truth that salvation is of grace alone.

It tells us, on the basis of Christ's admonition in Luke 10:20, that God's people not only may but do obtain the assurance of election, forgiveness and eternal life (I, 12; V, 9), and

they reject the error of those who teach "that there is in this life no fruit and no consciousness of eternal election to glory, nor any certainty (I, B, 7).⁴ This is important as a counter to the discouraging teaching of Rome and of some Protestants that a real assurance of salvation is, ordinarily, not possible for believers. It is some comfort already to those who are plagued with doubts to know that assurance is not only possible, but that it is one of the gifts of grace purchased by Christ for His people.

The *Canons* do not forget, however, that assurance is not given to all in the same measure (I, 12) and that there are always some "who do not yet experience a lively faith in Christ, an assured confidence of soul, (and) peace of conscience," "who cannot yet reach that measure of holiness and faith to which they aspire" (I, 16), and who struggle with various carnal doubts (V, 11). To such the *Canons* speak with comfort. Such persons must not be alarmed at the mention of reprobation, nor rank themselves among the reprobate, but they must persevere in the use of the means of grace and humbly wait for a season of richer grace. They are reminded of the promise of a "merciful God" that He will not quench the smoking flax or break the bruised reed (I, 16).

So, too, the *Canons* remind us that this assurance of salvation does not come in the way of some kind of extra-biblical, subjective "revelation," but always through the Word of God and the work of the Spirit as He applies that Word to us (V, 10, 14). At the same time the *Canons* do not let us forget that this assurance is very closely connected with a sanctified walk, and warn against all carnal security, licentiousness, rash presumption, wanton trifling with the grace of election, and stubborn refusal to walk in the way of the elect, as things that will inevitably damage and destroy our assurance.

In temptation, the *Canons* say, we are not always sensible of the full assurance of faith, but we must not forget that God, Who is the Father of all consolation, does not suffer us to be tempted above what we are able, but always makes a way of escape that we may be able to bear it. To this promise of Scripture the *Canons* add the reminder that by His Holy Spirit God always renews that "comfortable assurance" (V, 11) in His people.

As far as temptation and sin are concerned, the *Canons* speak powerfully to our own experience. Not only is it possible for God's people to sin, and not only do they sin daily (V,2), but it is even possible for believers, when watching and prayer are neglected, "to be drawn into great and heinous sins." Nevertheless, we are assured that God preserves His people so that they persevere to the end and do not lose their salvation. We are even assured that it is impossible for God's people to commit the "sin unto death" (V, 6).

In setting out that doctrine of perseverance, the *Canons* speak very warmly and pastorally of the fact that our sins and the possibility of falling into grievous sins furnishes us "with constant matter for humiliation before God and flying for refuge to Christ crucified; for mortifying the flesh more and more by the spirit of prayer and by holy exercises of piety (V, 2). That God preserves and renews His people in their "lamentable falls" (V, 4), the *Canons* say, does not produce carelessness and pride, but "renders them much more careful and solicitous to continue in the ways of the Lord ... lest by abusing His fatherly kindness, God should turn away His gracious countenance from them, to behold which is to the godly dearer than life ... and they in consequence ... should fall into more grievous torments of conscience" (V, 13).

In connection with the doctrine of election, the *Canons* address another soul-wrenching question, that of the salvation of the children of believers who die in infancy. Also here the *Canons* bring rich comfort, quoting I Corinthians 7:14 and assuring us on the basis of God's covenant of grace, His family covenant, that "godly parents have no reason to doubt of the election and salvation" of such infants (I, 17). What could be more comforting than that to godly parents who must bring a little one to the grave, and what more pastoral on the part of the minister or elders than to bring them that confession of the church?

Another "pastoral" matter addressed in the *Canons* is our attitude toward others, both toward those who make a profession of faith and live "regular lives," and toward those who have not yet been called. They warn against the sins of pride and judging (III & IV, 15). This is all grounded in the truth that "God is under no obligation to confer grace upon any." "How can He, the Canons ask, "be indebted to man, who had no previous gifts to bestow, as foundation for such recompense? Nay, who has nothing of his own but sin and falsehood?" We may never conduct ourselves, therefore, "as if we had made ourselves to differ."

These are few examples. There are others as well. The *Canons* have much to say about the importance of preaching and hearing the gospel as the God-appointed means of grace and salvation, the neglect of which is always and again a matter of "pastoral" concern (I, 3; III & IV, 6 and V, 14), and they warn that it is "tempting God" to separate His grace from the means that He in His wisdom has chosen to use in order to bring that grace to His people.

So too, the *Canons* warn those who believe the doctrines of grace to "regulate, by the Scripture ... not only their sentiments, but also their language, and to abstain from all those phrases which exceed the limits necessary to be observed in ascertaining the genuine sense of the Holy Scriptures, and furnish insolent sophists with a just pretext for violently assailing, or even vilifying, the doctrine of the Reformed churches" (Conclusion). How important, but also how pastoral!

Other examples of the pastoral character of the *Canons* can easily be found, but the point is that they are not a cold, scholastic statement, characterised by hair-splitting and abstraction, but a very personal and warm exposition of some of the fundamental truths of the Christian faith, and of great use in the application of those truths to believers. They are not out-dated, but relevant to the problems and trials we face every day as we struggle to live a faithful and godly Christian life here in the world.

There is comfort even in knowing that it is the same truth, expounded and set forth in the confessions, which builds up the Church of Jesus Christ today as well as 400 years ago. There is reassurance, too, for those who bring that Word. They are not facing new problems, but problems that have always been found in the Church, the solution to which the Church has always found in God's holy Word. Without our creeds, or in ignorance of them we have every reason, when we face these problems, to feel that we stand alone, and reason also, therefore, to be afraid. But through the some knowledge of them and use of them, including the *Canons*, we stand in living connection with the Church of all ages, "more than conquerors through him that loved us" (Rom. 8:37).

NOTES

1. These creeds belong, generally speaking, to those churches that identify themselves in name as "Reformed."
2. "Canon" means "an official declaration" or "rule" of the church.
3. It is sad that the *Canons* are so little known and appreciated, because of all the Reformation creeds, they come closest to being a creeds that belongs to all the Reformed and Presbyterian churches. Though they are an official creed of the Dutch Reformed Churches, they were written and signed at a Synod (held in the city of Dort) attended by delegates from Holland, Great Britain, France, Switzerland and Germany.

4. In the references to the *Canons*, "B" refers to the second part of each chapter or "Head of Doctrine." This second part of each chapter is a "Rejection of Errors," in which various denials of the Five Points of Calvinism are pointed out and refuted from Scripture.