



FOREWORD BY JOEL R. BEEKE

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SAVING *The*  
REFORMATION

THE PASTORAL THEOLOGY

OF THE

CANONS OF DORT

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W. ROBERT GODFREY

## ENDORSEMENTS

“W. Robert Godfrey is a gifted teacher. As a recognized historian, he helpfully sets the historical and ecclesiastical context for the writing of the Canons of Dort. As a trusted theologian, he clearly explains the exegetical and theological basis for each of the canons. As an experienced pastor, he carefully shows the practical nature of the doctrines of grace preserved in the Canons. In an age of constant change and theological amnesia, *Saving the Reformation* is an important contribution, an accessible treatment of one of the great documents of the Reformation.”

—REV. JOEL E. KIM

President and assistant professor of New Testament  
Westminster Seminary California, Escondido, Calif.

“*Saving the Reformation* is characteristic of Dr. Godfrey’s engaging, clear, pastoral teaching that has benefited so many over the years. Guiding us through the history and biblical truth confessed in the Canons of Dort, he brings us to the reality of the sovereign goodness and all-sufficient grace of God in Christ for us: we are hell-deserving sinners, saved, sanctified, and surrounded by God’s all-powerful love. This is worth reading about.”

—DR. WILLIAM VANDOOEWAARD

Professor of church history  
Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Mich.

“*Saving the Reformation* confirms Dr. Godfrey’s reputation as a premier student of the Synod of Dort and the Dutch Reformation. In a clear, accessible, and compelling way, Godfrey provides his readers with an account of the historical context and occasion for the convening of the Synod of Dort in 1618, as well as a helpful exposition of the teaching

of the canons. He also provides a fresh translation of the Latin version of the Canons of Dort, and several useful appendices on their order and arrangement. These features combine to make this book an excellent resource for church members and scholars alike.”

—DR. CORNELIS P. VENEMA

President and professor of doctrinal studies  
Mid-America Reformed Seminary, Dyer, Ind.

S A V I N G *The*  
R E F O R M A T I O N



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R E F O R M A T I O N

THE PASTORAL THEOLOGY

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CANONS OF DORT

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W. ROBERT GODFREY



LIGONIER MINISTRIES

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For my family,

Mary Ellen

William

Mari and Mark

Robert and Catherine

Katrina, Kellan, Anne, William, and Emmaline



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## FOREWORD

Reformed confessional theology is a statement of faith set within a story of faith. As statements of believed truths, confessions express the mind of God's people embracing God's Word. If we neglect the church's historic statements of faith, we end up with mindless and spineless Christianity—more fit to drift like a jellyfish than to swim against the stream of this world. Confession of faith is an essential act of courageous Christianity, as we see from the living history of the people who wrote these declarations. They made their confession out of personal faith in Christ and fervent love for God—sealed with their tears and sometimes their blood, as was the case with Guido de Bres, the martyred author of the Belgic Confession. Reformed confessional theology was written not to pick a fight but to protect the church in the battles she already faces and to nurture people in the truth, as we see in that pastoral masterpiece the Heidelberg Catechism.

This book is an exposition of the Canons of Dort, the third document, with the Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechism, in the Dutch Reformed triumvirate known as the Three Forms of Unity. Of course, *canon* does not refer to artillery but to a rule to direct the church. The word derives from the Greek term *kanōn*, which literally refers to a rod or rule such as one used by builders and hence came to signify a standard for belief or conduct. After Paul's exposition of justification by faith alone and sanctification by the Spirit, the Apostle said, "As many as walk according to this rule [*kanōn*], peace be on them" (Gal. 6:16, KJV). The Canons of Dort furnish those who build up Christ's church with important tools for constructing right beliefs (orthodoxy) leading to right action (orthopraxy), both by the grace of God.

Unlike the Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechism, the Canons of Dort do not present a complete summation of the teaching of the Bible and the faith of the Reformed churches. Instead, here we find the Reformed doctrine of salvation focused to a point of intense and brilliant clarity. The Synod of Dort (1618–19) wrote the canons as a specific response to the Arminian challenge against salvation by God’s grace alone—specifically, the objections to Reformed doctrine expressed in the five points of their Remonstrance. The synod was an international assembly of Reformed scholars who gathered to remedy the spreading infection of this false teaching that undermines the gospel.

Though an increasing number of Christians in the United States affirm the five points of Calvinism, few today have read the Canons of Dort, of which the five points are mere bullet-point summaries. The Synod of Dort produced one of the most mature and biblically balanced statements of the doctrine of salvation ever written. For example, the treatment of sovereign predestination begins with man’s sin and the good news of salvation to all who believe in Jesus Christ. The treatment of particular redemption opens with the necessity of satisfying God’s justice by the punishment of sin, which means that the salvation of sinners requires a substitute to die in their place. Thus, these distinctive Reformed doctrines are grounded in the gospel. It is important for all Christians to attain the biblical balance and gospel grounding that the Canons of Dort present, but it is particularly crucial for preachers and teachers of God’s Word to do so.

Approaching a historic document can be somewhat intimidating, like hiking trails through the mountains. For the task, it helps to have an experienced trail guide, and few are more qualified to lead us through the canons than my friend W. Robert Godfrey. Having taught church history at Westminster Seminary, first in Philadelphia beginning in the 1970s and then in California since 1981, he brings to the task a wealth of wisdom as a historian and a theologian of the Reformed church. I have known Bob for decades and have always found his writings to be insightful and thought provoking. This book is no exception; in fact, Dutch Reformed church history and theology are two of his greatest strengths.

We experienced that firsthand at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary when he taught a Dutch Reformation church history class that emphasized the Canons of Dort and their value for the church today.

Dr. Godfrey's treatment of the canons will be very helpful to students of the canons as well as to those who teach in church or seminary classes. He tells us the history behind the Synod of Dort so we can understand the conflict that gave birth to this statement. He gives a fresh translation of the canons for the modern reader. He walks us through each article of faith or refutation of error in the canons, offering brief comments to illuminate each section's meaning in its historical and theological context.

Godfrey also includes historical and analytical appendices, of which the first, third, and fifth are particularly valuable. In the first appendix, he argues that Jacobus Arminius was not a moderate Reformed theologian who was offended by extreme supralapsarianism and fell victim to a new, intolerant form of Reformed orthodoxy. Rather, Arminius sought to replace mainstream Reformed teaching with an altogether different theology—while claiming to be faithful to the Reformed confessions. The third appendix is a detailed outline of the canons, which teachers will find illuminating for organizing their presentations of its doctrines. The fifth appendix consists of a translation of the synod's statement on the Sabbath, which offers much-needed insight into Continental sabbatarian theology and its agreement with that of the British Puritans.

The Canons of Dort have meant a great deal to me for half a century now, ever since I was first converted. When I was a teenager, I struggled with the doctrine of predestination for months until I realized that the canons are scripturally accurate in their biblical, pastoral, sensitive, and warm presentation of this doctrine. Through reading the Canons of Dort, I learned as a teenager that the great question to be answered is not, How could God reject anyone and send His own creatures to hell? but rather, How could God elect anyone and bring His fallen, hell-worthy creatures into heaven to be with Him forever? The canons helped me be more amazed by "amazing grace" than I had ever been before. Later on, when doing a doctoral dissertation on assurance of faith for Westminster Theological Seminary, I came to appreciate and treasure

the beauty and balance of the canons' treatment of this doctrine in head V. I saw as never before how the Canons of Dort paved the way for the Westminster Confession of Faith's magisterial treatment of assurance in its renowned chapter 18—a chapter that has codified the Reformed view of this doctrine ever since. More recently, the canons' Reformed stress on preaching, and its encouragement to pastors to boldly proclaim the lofty doctrines that it unpacks from a biblical, doctrinal, experiential, and practical vantage point, have moved me to write on this subject.<sup>1</sup>

In sum, though the Canons of Dort are a document worthy of historical and theological analysis, their value does not end with the intellectual or academic. The canons declare the redeeming love of God in Jesus Christ for fallen, corrupt, helpless sinners—the greatest love story of all. “We love him, because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19, KJV), and so the canons are a call to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves.

The Canons of Dort cannot be rightly received or understood without prayer to God and faith in His Word. The synod was convened with prayer, and the canons call for prayer. The canons conclude with a prayer that God's Son, seated at the right hand of God, would empower and sanctify His servants so that they may glorify God and edify men. The Synod of Dort closed not with an academic debate but with a worship service, where the delegates heard a sermon on Isaiah 12:2–3: “Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and not be afraid: for the LORD JEHOVAH is my strength and my song; he also is become my salvation. Therefore with joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation” (KJV).

Therefore, study the Canons of Dort with an open Bible, an open heart thirsting for Christ, and an open mouth proclaiming the praises of God.

—Dr. Joel R. Beeke

President, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary  
Pastor, Heritage Reformed Congregation of Grand Rapids, Mich.

## INTRODUCTION

Most meetings of church assemblies are neither interesting nor significant. But throughout the history of the church there have been notable exceptions. The great Council of Nicaea (325) powerfully defended the eternal divinity of Jesus. The Council of Trent (1545–63) sealed the Roman Catholic Church in its rejection of the Reformation. The Synod of Dort (1618–19), the greatest of the Reformed church assemblies, preserved the great heritage of the Reformation for the Calvinistic churches. This synod is both interesting and significant, and its decisions are a theological and spiritual treasure for Christians. On the occasion of the four-hundredth anniversary of the synod, it is good to remember and be renewed in an appreciation of its accomplishments. But studying the canons is much more than a historical exercise. It will be spiritually profitable for Christians and churches today.

The Synod of Dort was in the first place theological in its concerns. It met to answer the Arminian doctrines and articulate the biblical alternative. One scholar said that the Arminian challenge was “the greatest crisis in dogma since the age of the first reformers.”<sup>1</sup> As vital and central as that theological work was, the synod was significant for other reasons as well. Ecclesiastically, the synod expressed a clear vision of the church, its ministry, and its life. Politically, the synod met in cooperation with the state and in the context of wars to resolve tensions that might have threatened the very survival of the Dutch Republic. Ultimately, however, and most importantly, the synod was concerned with the deepest issues of the Christian religion.

The synod expressed the most profound religious truths: the absolute sovereignty of God, the effectiveness of the work of Christ and of the Holy Spirit, and the comfort Christians find in the gospel. This book will

explore great matters—theological, ecclesiastical, and political—but we must be careful never to lose sight of the underlying religious concern, which was always of greatest consequence. This book will concentrate on the fundamentally religious convictions of the synod and the canons.

In a profound sense, this synod saved the Reformation for the Reformed churches. While Lutherans would reject several elements of the canons, Calvinists saw clearly that a proper understanding of election was necessary to protect the Reformation’s “grace alone.” The proper understanding of Christ’s atoning work was necessary to protect the Reformation’s “Christ alone.” A proper understanding of the regenerating and preserving work of the Holy Spirit and of the Christian’s comfort in these doctrines was necessary to protect the Reformation’s “grace alone” and “faith alone.” Implicit in the canons’ conclusions is their commitment to the Reformation’s “Scripture alone” as the only source of religious truth.

As the Reformation was a revival of a biblical Augustinianism, so the Synod of Dort stands in the great Christian heritage that rejects Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism. It stands in the tradition of Jesus against the Pharisees, Paul against the Judaizers, Athanasius against Arius, Augustine against Pelagius, and Luther against Erasmus. Dort against the Arminians continues that great commitment. The canons became the official teaching and sincere conviction of many churches and millions of Christians through the last four centuries.

The synod also met on the eve of a profound shift in Western thought. Increasingly after the synod, culminating with the Enlightenment, Western thought adopted a positive view of human nature and human abilities. The biblical view of fallen human nature and of a sovereign, personal God who acted in Christ, which was articulated by the Calvinists at Dort, increasingly seemed old-fashioned and wrong to modern thinkers. Yet Dort remained an invaluable witness to the truth of the Bible and of the Reformation. It also is a great resource to contemporary Christians for instruction and direction in understanding God’s truth and Christian faith and living.

This book is intended to help churches and Christians appreciate and study the synod and its canons. The central part of the book is part

II, a new translation of the Canons of Dort. The canons were written for the church in a form designed to make them understandable for church members. This translation seeks to fulfill that aim. The translation does not simplify the vocabulary. Its main difference from earlier translations is to break the long Latin sentences of the original into shorter English sentences. A little of the precision of the Latin is lost in this process, but the result is a faithful translation that is much easier to read and understand for contemporary readers of English.

Part I of the book presents the historical and theological background to the synod. This material significantly helps with the understanding of the teaching of the canons in their original setting. Part I goes on to review the character and work of the synod itself. This section shows not only the situation for the writing of the canons, but also the broader work of the synod for the life and ministry of the church. Part III follows on the translation by presenting an analysis and exposition of the canons to help the reader understand the teaching of the canons. The aim is to see the general form of the canons as a whole and the meaning of each of the articles in itself and in relation to the other articles.

For those interested in more detail in these matters, this book contains several appendices. The first and longest is on the life and teaching of Jacobus Arminius. It challenges the dominant interpretation of Arminius' biography and as a result suggests an understanding of his role in the controversy in the Netherlands that is different from the one generally held today. The second appendix presents the general pattern of teaching in each of the heads of doctrine. The third appendix is a detailed outline of the teaching of the canons. The fourth appendix shows the relationship in each head of doctrine between the positive articles and the rejections of errors. Finally, the fifth appendix presents the statement of the Synod of Dort on the doctrine of the Sabbath.

Taken as a whole, this book seeks to help church members and pastors appreciate the important work of the Synod of Dort in the history of the church. But it aims even more at helping contemporary Christians to deepen their faith by seeing the greatness and goodness of God in His electing love and saving work in Christ.



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PART I

HISTORICAL  
AND THEOLOGICAL  
BACKGROUND

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## THE NEW CHURCH AND THE NEW STATE

Interest in the Reformation appeared early in the Low Countries. The first Protestant martyrs—monks who adopted the views of Martin Luther—died there in the early 1520s. By the later 1520s, Anabaptism attracted a much larger following there than Lutheranism. These Anabaptists in the Netherlands were quite diverse in their convictions, ranging from pacifist Mennonites to the violent and revolutionary followers of John of Leiden. All of the Anabaptists were severely persecuted by the civil government.

Still later, in the 1540s, Calvinist preachers from Geneva and France began to enter the Low Countries from the south. Calvinism spread as a popular movement first in the French-speaking south and then more slowly in the Dutch-speaking north. The government strongly opposed this advance with vigorous persecution. The Reformed churches, however, grew steadily even while suffering “under the cross” as the persecuted.

These churches were like other Reformed churches throughout Europe in doctrine and worship. They organized themselves much like the Reformed churches of France. Local congregations were governed by ministers, elders, and deacons. The local churches assembled in regional meetings called classes. Delegates from each classis formed provincial synods (or in the case of the province of Holland with its large

population, the particular synods of north Holland and south Holland). These regional synods at times met together as national synods.

The character of this church was from the beginning staunchly Calvinistic. Some ministers dissented, but they encountered strong disciplinary reaction from the church. The church adopted as its confessional standard the Belgic Confession (1561), written by the preacher Guido de Bres and modeled after the French Confession (1559), written largely by John Calvin. Beyond the material in the French Confession, de Bres expanded especially on the doctrine of the church and sought to distinguish clearly the Reformed teaching from both the Roman Catholic and the Anabaptist teaching. De Bres in his rejections of Anabaptism had the violent side of the movement particularly in mind. He died a martyr for his faith in 1567, making the Belgic Confession the only major Reformation confession sealed with the blood of its author. The other doctrinal standard adopted by the churches was the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), originally prepared for the Reformed churches of the Palatinate, an important part of the Holy Roman Empire. This catechism became a key teaching tool for spreading a thorough knowledge of the Reformed doctrines. The church required subscription to these standards by all ministers, elders, and deacons.<sup>1</sup>

The growth of the Reformed churches in the Low Countries took place at the same time that the state there was undergoing fundamental changes. The Low Countries had been composed of seventeen provinces that had passed to the sovereignty of the Holy Roman emperor Charles V. When he abdicated, in 1555, the Low Countries passed to his son, who had become King Philip II of Spain. By 1568, a revolt against Philip had begun, sparked by his insensitivity to historic liberties in the Low Countries and by his severe persecution of the Anabaptists and Calvinists. (This revolt in the Netherlands became known as the Eighty Years' War since it was not finally settled until 1648, when the Thirty Years' War in Germany also ended.) After decades of war in the Low Countries, the conflict reached a stalemate that in effect divided the land into two parts.

The southern part of about ten provinces remained under Spanish control and Roman Catholic in faith, and it ultimately became the country

of Belgium. The northern part of about seven provinces organized itself on the basis of the Union of Utrecht (1579) into what became known as the United Provinces. These northern provinces, basically comprising what is today the Netherlands, were dominated by Protestants, although the Reformed church did not become the majority religion there until the later seventeenth century. After abjuring the rule of King Philip in the 1580s, the United Provinces tried to find a monarch, particularly hoping that Queen Elizabeth of England would rule over them. She was not willing, because she feared that they would ultimately be defeated by Spain. In time, the United Provinces became a republic and survived in that form until the Napoleonic era in the late eighteenth century. The United Provinces were formally governed by a legislative body called the States General. In this body, each of the seven provinces had one vote, and most important matters had to be decided unanimously.

The leading Protestant in the revolt against Spain was Prince William of Orange, who provided careful and heroic counsel to church and state until his assassination in 1584 by an agent of King Philip. After his death, executive leadership in the state passed to Jan van Oldenbarnevelt, an official from the province of Holland. William's son, Prince Maurits (sometimes rendered Maurice in English histories), became the military leader and a very successful strategist and warrior against Spain. He became the other dominant figure in the politics of the United Provinces in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

Weary of war, the United Provinces arranged with Spain an armistice now known as the Twelve Years' Truce, which was signed in Antwerp on April 9, 1609. That year was significant also because on October 19 the Dutch Reformed minister and professor Jacobus Arminius died.

While the war with Spain raged, that external pressure had kept the strains in the state and church of the United Provinces somewhat in check. But with the truce, those strains came more to the fore. In the state, the merchants of Holland led by Oldenbarnevelt wanted a permanent peace for the sake of trade and commerce. But others, led by Maurits and supported by many Calvinists, wanted the war to continue. They wanted to keep the whole of the Low Countries united and to

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