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This powerful and willing divine care and turning-to-my-good of which question 26 (in the *Heidelberg Catechism*) speaks is God's providence, *providentia Dei*. Providence means not only to "foresee" but, according to the old translation, to "over-see." *Dominus providebit*: God will provide. Over and in all creatures in one way or another—quietly or actively, known or unknown, always according to the decision of his wisdom—there is the "almighty and ever-present power of God," the same power in all the differences and contradictions, light and dark sides, of creation. At this point all arbitrary optimism and pessimism err in their evaluation of creation because they believe that from a freely chosen standpoint they can judge how God's power orders both sides in the direction of his final goal, in the service of his coming kingdom, looking forward to the revelation of his majesty. Everything is very good, because everything is created and destined and therefore also suitable, whether we see it or not, for *his* service. God the Creator who is also Redeemer, the Father of Jesus Christ, makes no mistakes. God's power is God's "fatherly hand," "The Head of his church, through whom the Father governs all things."

KARL BARTH, *LEARNING JESUS CHRIST THROUGH THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM* (61-62)

## THE BELGIC CONFSSION OF FAITH AND THE CANONS OF DORDT

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*Joel R. Beeke*

The oldest of the doctrinal standards of the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands is the *Confession of Faith*, most commonly known as the *Belgic Confession*, taken from the seventeenth-century Latin designation *Confessio Belgica*. "Belgica" referred to the whole of the Low Countries, both north and south, today divided into the Netherlands and Belgium. Variant names for the *Belgic Confession* include the *Walloon Confession* and the *Netherlands Confession*.

The *Confession's* chief author was Guido de Brès (1522-1567), a Reformed itinerant pastor. During the sixteenth century the Reformed churches in the Netherlands experienced severe persecution at the hands of Philip II of Spain, an ally of the Roman Catholic Church. As an apology for the persecuted band of Reformed believers in the Lowlands who formed the so-called churches under the cross, de Brès prepared this confession in French in 1561. De Brès was most likely assisted by fellow pastors who, together with himself, desired to prove to their persecutors that the adherents of the Reformed faith were not rebels as was charged, but law-abiding citizens who professed biblical doctrines. The *Confession* was modeled after the *Gallic Confession*, a 1559 French Reformed confession, which, in turn, was dependent upon Calvin's design.

Basically, the *Confession* follows what has become the traditional doctrinal order of the six loci of Reformed systematic theology: the doctrines concerning God (theology

proper, articles 1-11); man (anthropology, articles 12-15); Christ (Christology, articles 16-21); salvation (soteriology, articles 22-26); the church (ecclesiology, articles 27-35); and the last things (eschatology, article 37). Article 36 addresses the theocratic nature of civil government. Despite following an objective doctrinal order, the *Confession* breathes a warmly experiential and personal spirit, facilitated by its repeated use of the pronoun "we."

The year after it was written, a copy of the *Confession* was sent to King Philip II together with an address in which the petitioners declared that they were ready to obey the government in all things lawful, but that they would "offer their backs to stripes, their tongues to knives, their mouths to gags, and their whole bodies to the fire, well knowing that those who follow Christ must take his cross and deny themselves," rather than deny the truth expressed in this *Confession*. Neither the *Confession* nor the petition, however, bore the desired fruit of toleration for Protestants with the Spanish authorities. In 1567, de Brès became one martyr among thousands who sealed their faith with blood. Nevertheless, his work has endured as a convincing statement of Reformed doctrine.

The *Belgic Confession* was readily received by Reformed churches in the Netherlands after its translation into Dutch in 1562. In 1566 it was revised by the Synod of Antwerp. Subsequently it was regularly adopted by national Dutch Synods held during the last three decades of the sixteenth century. After a further revision of the text, the Synod of Dordt (1618-1619) adopted it as one of the doctrinal standards to which all office-bearers in the Reformed church had to subscribe.

### THE CANONS OF DORDT

*The Decision of the Synod of Dordt on the Five Main Points of Doctrine in Dispute in the Netherlands* is popularly known

as the *Canons of Dordt* (or *The Five Articles Against the Remonstrants*). It consists of doctrinal statements adopted by the great Synod of Dordt which met in the city of Dordrecht in 1618-1619. Although this was a national Synod of the Reformed churches of the Netherlands, it had an international character. It was comprised of twenty-seven foreign delegates representing eight countries, in addition to its sixty-two Dutch delegates.

The Synod of Dordt was held to settle a serious controversy in the Dutch churches initiated by the rise of Arminianism. Jacob Arminius (1560-1609), a theological professor at Leiden University, differed from the Reformed faith on a number of important points. After Arminius's death, forty-three of his ministerial followers presented their heretical views to the States General of the Netherlands on five of these points in the *Remonstrance of 1610*. In this document and even more explicitly in later writings, the Arminians, who came to be called "Remonstrants," taught (1) election based on foreseen faith; (2) the universality of Christ's atonement; (3) the free will and partial depravity of man; (4) the resistibility of grace; and (5) the possibility of a lapse from grace. They asked for the revision of the Reformed church's doctrinal standards and for government protection of Arminian views. The Arminian-Calvinism conflict became so severe that it led the Netherlands to the brink of civil war. Finally in 1617 the States General voted four to three to call a national Synod to address the problem of Arminianism.

The Synod held 154 formal sessions over a period of seven months (November 1618 to May 1619). Thirteen Remonstrant theologians, led by Simon Episcopius, tried several unsuccessful tactics to delay the work of the Synod and to divide the delegates. Under the leadership of Johannes Bogerman, the Remonstrants were dismissed. The Synod then developed the Canons which thoroughly

rejected the Remonstrance of 1610 and scripturally set forth the Reformed doctrine on these debated points, now popularly called "the five points of Calvinism:" unconditional election, limited atonement, total depravity, irresistible grace, and the perseverance of saints. Though these points do not embrace the full scope of Calvinism and are better regarded as Calvinism's five answers to the five errors of Arminianism, they certainly lie at the heart of the Reformed faith, particularly of Reformed soteriology, for they flow out of the principle of absolute divine sovereignty in saving sinners. They may be summarized as follows: (1) Unconditional election and faith are sovereign gifts of God. (2) While the death of Christ is abundantly sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world, its saving efficacy is limited to the elect. (3, 4) All people are so totally depraved and corrupted by sin that they cannot exercise free will toward, nor effect any part of, their salvation. In sovereign grace God irresistibly calls and regenerates the elect to newness of life. (5) God graciously preserves the redeemed so that they persevere until the end, even though they may be troubled by many infirmities as they seek to make their calling and election sure.

Although the Canons have only four sections, we speak of five points or heads of doctrine because the Canons were structured to correspond with the five articles of the *1610 Remonstrance*. The third and fourth sections were combined into one because the Dordtian divines considered them to be inseparable, and hence designated them as "Head of Doctrine 3/4."

The Canons are unique because of their role as a judicial decision on the doctrinal points in dispute during the Arminian controversy. The original preface called the Canons a "judgment, in which both the true view, agreeing with God's Word, concerning the aforesaid five points of doctrine is explained, and the false view, disagreeing with

God's Word, is rejected." The Canons are limited, however. They focus only on the five points of doctrine in dispute. Each of the main heads consists of a positive and a negative part, the former being an exposition of the Reformed doctrine on the subject, the latter, a rejection of corresponding Arminian errors. In all, the Canons contain fifty-nine articles of exposition and thirty-four rejections of errors.

The Canons form a remarkably scriptural and balanced document on the specific doctrines expounded. They are the only Form of Unity that was written by an ecclesiastical assembly and that represented a consensus of all the Reformed churches of their day. All Dutch and foreign delegates without exception affixed their signatures to the Canons, whether of supralapsarian or infralapsarian persuasion. A service of thanksgiving was held upon the Canons' completion to praise the Lord for preserving the doctrine of sovereign grace among the Reformed churches.

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