

Preaching the Canons of Dort: Blessings and Challenges

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Introduction

Over the last few years, I've been very thankful for the relationship that we've had with the United Reformed Churches. I've come to see that there are a good many things that the brothers and sisters in these churches have to offer us. However, through this relationship I've also come to appreciate the riches that we have in our churches. One of things for which we can be most thankful is that the vast majority of our members still attend both services. In some of the URCs I'm familiar with, this is definitely not the case. But in most Canadian Reformed churches, if not all, the majority of our members will be present morning and afternoon.

What a blessing! What an opportunity for the teaching and preaching ministry of the Church! Every Sunday, most of our congregation, including our children and young people, are gathered in God's presence twice. Let's not take this for granted!

What I'd like to develop in this presentation is our self-conscious recognition of what can be done with the teaching character of the second service. I'm not going to speak about the second service as such. My co-pastor recently wrote an editorial on this subject in *Diakonia* and I can defer to what he wrote.¹ Rather, what I'd like to do is speak about the possibilities for using the second service to teach what we confess from Scripture in a more comprehensive way. Specifically, I'd like to speak about the blessings and challenges of preaching through the Canons of Dort.

Let me start with some background. Earlier this year, the Langley co-pastors were discussing the preaching in our church. We were just about finished another round of the Catechism. For a number of reasons, we agreed that it might be helpful to our congregation to have a series of sermons on the Canons. We presented our proposal to the Council and it was met with enthusiasm. So, last February we set out to preach our way through the Canons and we finished up in the beginning of September. If I've counted correctly, between the two of us we preached 22 sermons in this series. It's fair to say that the consensus of the elders and pastors of Langley church was that this was indeed a beneficial undertaking for our congregation.

Why Preach the Canons?

That brings us to consider concrete reasons for deciding to preach the Canons. Here there might be a variety of answers, but I'm just going to mention five.

1) *Adult education turn out is often dismal*

I have written and spoken elsewhere about the need for continuing education in the church.² I'm young and I'm admittedly a bit idealistic, but I'd love to see more done for adult education in our churches. Of course, we sometimes do offer classes for our adults. I know that some of you have also offered instruction in the Canons of Dort. I'm glad and thankful that such instruction is offered and we shouldn't undervalue it. Unfortunately, my understanding is that the turn out for such classes is usually on the low side.

Of course, those who most need this education usually don't recognize their need and usually don't come to these sorts of things. For whatever reason, we can't reach them with what we have for adult education in many of our churches. So, while these brothers and sisters may have received comprehensive instruction in the doctrines of grace in their youth in Catechism or preconfession, the reality is that they may never be taught these doctrines again.

This is where our attendance at both services is an enormous blessing! Most of the brothers and sisters who might not be reached through an adult education class can still be reached through the afternoon worship service. They can still receive comprehensive and systematic instruction in the doctrines of grace confessed in the Canons of Dort.

2) *Concern that the doctrines of grace are not well-known*

A second reason why your church might decide to preach through the Canons is that there might be a concern that the doctrines of grace are not that well known. This could be the case not only within the regular members of the congregation, but also among the officebearers. I don't want to be negative, but the reality is that we have had or perhaps do have elders who know nothing or very little about the doctrines of grace. These are men who are supposed to be overseeing the preaching and teaching. As pastors, it's in our best interest, and most importantly, in the interest of our flocks, to have elders who are trained in basic theology. Preaching on the Canons of Dort can play a role in that.

Of course, it can also play a role among the regular members of the congregation. I know of members in our churches who did profession of faith without ever having studied the Canons of Dort, either in catechism or in preconfession. I don't mean to be negative or step on anybody's toes, but my observation is that, for whatever reason some of our colleagues in the past simply have not taught the Canons to their catechism students. The result is that we have some congregations where a segment of the members may have never been comprehensively and systematically taught the doctrines of grace.

This has several consequences, but I'll just mention one. The doctrines found in the Canons of Dort have enormous pastoral value. The title of Peter Feenstra's little commentary on the Canons says it all: *Unspeakable Comfort*. The doctrines of grace are a source of consolation and a refuge in times of trouble. When God's people are not taught these doctrines, they're being robbed of truth which can sustain and support them

through doubts, hardships, and difficulties of many kinds. Chapter 1, Article 14 expresses it this way:

Therefore, also today this doctrine [election] should be taught in the Church of God, for which it was particularly intended, in its proper time and place, provided it be done with a spirit of discretion, in a reverent and holy manner, without inquisitively prying into the ways of the Most High, to the glory of God's most holy Name, and for the living comfort of His people.

The Catechism is often rightfully preached under the rubric of comfort – the Canons present themselves to us in the same way. So, brothers, if the doctrines of grace are not well-known in your congregation, you might want to consider preaching through the Canons!

3) Desire to defend the congregation against false teaching

I am greatly concerned about the level of discernment in our churches; maybe you are too. We live in a time when many people are fat, lazy and comfortable when it comes to the faith. My generation and the one under me has never had to fight for anything. It's all been given to us. In this atmosphere, there is not a lot of discernible discernment. Popular Christian writers like John Eldredge and Philip Yancey promote open theism and many of our people lap it up without a second thought. Their books are found in Canadian Reformed church libraries across our country. Contemplative spirituality and spiritual warfare are finding homes in some of our churches. I've never been able to find one positive review of Rick Warren's *Purpose Driven Life* from a confessionally Reformed perspective, but yet it is in so many of our homes and people still speak of it in glowing terms. We support all sorts of organizations and groups without thinking in any meaningful way about what these people do or do not believe. I am deeply saddened and concerned by the number of times that people in our churches have basically told me in one way or another that doctrine is irrelevant. All that matters, we're told, is loving Jesus.

In all of this, the doctrines of grace are often at risk of being discarded. Why? Well, first of all, they're doctrines and doctrine is out. Rick Warren, whom I mentioned a moment ago, has been quoted as calling for a second Reformation, not a reformation of doctrine or creeds (the gospel!), but a reformation of deeds.³ According to the most influential Christian writers of our day, doctrine is passe, only to be spoken of in negative terms. And second, these doctrines are at risk because they are not natural for man to believe. The doctrines of grace give glory to God whereas the natural tendency of man is to glorify himself.

Preaching the Canons of Dort is one way that the congregation can be meaningfully equipped to discern and deal with any number of false teachings. Of course, there's Arminianism in all its shades and forms – a false teaching that's still alive and well. And, as Arminianism's consistent and logical conclusion, I've already mentioned open theism. There's also the idea that Christians are not sinners. I've heard this idea defended in a

number of corners in our churches across the country. It comes from the influence of certain evangelical writers. Some people in our churches read these writers and their wrong interpretation of Romans 7 and then get upset and offended when the minister prays a prayer of confession after the reading of the law. Then's there's also the value of the preaching of the gospel – greatly undermined in our day, but defended with the Scriptures in the Canons of Dort. Now I know that some of these errors can also be addressed through the preaching and teaching of the Catechism, but the Canons do bring some of these things into greater focus and show a clearer direction.

4) Reinforce the instruction of the youth

In our local ministerials over the last year or so, we've been discussing the dearth of church history instruction for our youth and what can be done about it. As I understand it, some discussion was supposed to take place with our high school. Now, hopefully church history is being taught and will be taught to our youth in a systematic way. Some church history can also be taught through the preaching of the Catechism. But this can be extended through the preaching of the Canons of Dort. Now it is true that the Remonstrants objected to certain points in the Catechism and perhaps at these places the history of the struggle with the Remonstrants can be reviewed. But the preaching of the Canons will allow the preacher to develop this in more depth and detail and in a more natural way.

Hopefully, our youth are also being taught the Canons in Catechism and preconfession. The preaching of this material will also reinforce that instruction in significant ways. Repetition is the mother of learning and hearing the material taught again in a sermon might be the extra help that some of our people need in grasping what we confess in the Canons.

5) The doxological reason!

This last reason is the most important of all. In a recent two-part series in *De Reformatie*, Dr. B. Kamphuis argued that the highest purpose of having confessions is doxological.⁴ Well, in both the Preface and the Conclusion to the Canons of Dort, the Synod made very clear that their greatest concern *was* the honour and praise of God. That had been endangered by the false teachings of the Remonstrants. Today, we too should be driven by a passion for the glory of God. The doctrines of grace push us along that trajectory. As we preach these beautiful and comforting doctrines, God gets more praise and glory! His people then realize the depth, width and height of their salvation in Jesus Christ and they're put into the right posture for worshipping and serving their God.

They also witness how this sovereign God has protected his church in times past. The Remonstrant controversy was not insignificant. There was a reason why the Synod had an international character. It was one of the most important Synods in the history of the church. When the Canons are preached and this history is unveiled, there too God is more praised by his people. This was also one of the intentions of the Canons as evidenced in the original Preface.⁵

How to Preach the Canons?

Well, let's move on now and consider some of the other issues surrounding the preaching of the Canons. If we've decided to go ahead and preach them, how should this be done? Let's just touch on four issues.

Scripture or Confession?

The first issue is not a new one, for we face it when we preach the Catechism as well. Do we preach the Catechism or do we preach the Bible texts that support what the church confesses in the Catechism? A similar issue can be raised with the Canons of Dort. I don't think I need to rehearse this whole discussion.⁶ Let it suffice to say that I believe that, just like we can preach the Catechism, we can also preach the Canons of Dort. The Canons are a summary of God's Word and as such they can and must be preached in such a way that it is clear that these doctrines are grounded in God's Word. We don't have to busy ourselves with a false dilemma between Scripture and the Confessions. Thus, from the pulpit they can be expounded not only didactically, but also kerygmatically. They can be preached and preached as gospel.

Larger or smaller chunks?

A more practical issue deals with how to divide up the material. Unlike with the Catechism, there is no natural way to divide up the Canons for preaching. Initially, my approach was to take larger chunks of three or four articles. As I preached, I thought that my sermons were rather simplistic and I wondered whether people would actually be taught something new and challenged. The reality was that a lot of what I was preaching with the larger chunks was going over the heads of many in the congregation. I overestimated their knowledge and familiarity with the doctrines of grace.

As I became aware of this, I shifted gears and then began preaching smaller chunks, usually one article, sometimes two. This seemed to work better. There were some areas where articles were superficially similar where I would skip an article or two. There was important material there, but it would probably have taxed the congregation to attempt to explain it all. Like with preaching anything else, you do have to make certain homiletical choices when it comes to the Canons.

Preaching the Canons Christocentrically

Behind the pulpit of the Escondido United Reformed Church there is a chair. That in itself is nothing unusual. But as you're sitting on this chair at certain points during the worship service, you can't help but notice an eye-level plaque on the preacher's side of the pulpit. On it is a quote from John 12:21, "Sir, we would like to see Jesus." I think that should be on all our hearts as we prepare our sermons, if not actually on our pulpits.

The same holds true for preaching the Canons. We need to be careful to preach Christ. In some parts of the Canons this is easier and more obvious than in others, for instance in chapter 2. But how does one preach Chapter 1 Articles 15 and 16, the articles on reprobation, how does one preach *that* Christocentrically? That's a good question for which I don't readily have an answer, particularly since my co-pastor handled that section. What I do know is that we have to preach the Canons with Christ front and center. As we self-consciously do that, we also avoid the danger of giving abstract theological lectures.

How Often?

A related issue is with respect to how often the Canons should be preached. The Catechism should still make up the vast bulk of our confessional preaching. However, it might be worth considering doing a series of sermons on the Canons about once every five or six years. One might also consider alternating with the Belgic Confession. Do one round of 52 Lord's Days from the Catechism and then make your way through the Canons of Dort. Do another round from the Catechism and then make your way through the Belgic Confession. Of course, those are just suggestions.

Dealing with Objections

As you might expect, if your church decides to have you preach through the Canons of Dort, you can bet that there will be objections. Perhaps some of these objections are in your mind at this moment too. So let's have a look at them...

1) They weren't written to be preached

Someone might point out that the Canons were written to address a series of theological errors. This document was not prepared by the Synod of Dort with the vision that it would be preached from the pulpits of Reformed churches. I think we can concede that point. However, in response, I think it also needs to be pointed out that the Catechism was not originally written to be preached either. The original edition was not divided into 52 Lord's Days – that division came a short time later. It was quickly picked up for preaching, but it was not designed for that purpose. In fact, the Catechism is very well suited for that purpose, especially with its pastoral approach. Perhaps the Canons are not as well suited (and that could have some weight), but the fact that they were not designed to be preached should not be seen as a valid objection.

Furthermore, we should also remember what I mentioned at the beginning about the more didactic character of the second service. In that context, the intention of the Synod of Dort fits very well. I'm speaking of the intention mentioned in the Conclusion, namely that the doctrine laid out in the Canons would be taught in the churches. The Canons themselves insist on being taught! So, while the Canons may not have been designed for preaching, they were (like the Catechism) designed to be taught and that fits very well with the character of the second service.

2) *The Church Order does not allow it*

This is the argument most likely to be encountered. Article 52 of the Church Order states:

“The consistory shall ensure that, as a rule, once every Sunday the doctrine of God’s Word as summarized in the Heidelberg Catechism is proclaimed.”

So, the reasoning goes that when you preach from the Canons of Dort, you’re setting aside Article 52 of the Church Order. You really should go to Classis if you’re going to preach from the Canons of Dort and let the other churches know that you’re not keeping to what has been agreed upon.

A couple of comments on this objection. First of all, I think we all recognize that the Church Order is not the Law of the Medes and Persians. We do allow for some flexibility on certain points. I think we see this with vacant churches where sometimes what we have agreed upon regarding Catechism preaching is not always consistently maintained.

That brings me to the second point: the letter of the Church Order itself allows for flexibility when it says, “as a rule.” Preaching from the Catechism is to be the general guideline. But if one really wanted to be a stickler for rules and regulations, one could have a Catechism sermon in the morning and a sermon on the Canons of Dort in the afternoon. Then you would certainly be following the Church Order.

3) *There are no Arminians around anymore (if there ever were)*

If the previous two objections come from the so-called right, the next two could be described as coming from the so-called left. There are those within our churches who believe for some reason that the Canons of Dort erected a straw Arminian man. They believe that there never have been Arminians and there certainly are no real Arminians today, at least not as they are described in the Canons of Dort. The problem then is not so much with the preaching of the Canons of Dort as with the Canons themselves. But since the Canons are disingenuous about Arminianism, they should certainly not be preached upon.

What needs to be explained more often, I believe, is that the Rejection of Errors section at the end of each Head of Doctrine contains quotes from actual Remonstrant writings. The errors are not straw men. These quotes were what the Arminians of the 16th century actually wrote and believed. This is especially important to point out when you get someone who happens to read the Remonstrance of 1610 and wonders what all the fuss was about.⁷ Because of the Arminians’ use of language and logic, it may seem orthodox at first glance. But when you read the Remonstrance of 1610 in the context of the other writings of the Remonstrants, then it becomes clear that the Synod was dealing with real and very serious errors.

That brings one to the objection that there are no real Arminians today anymore. Anyone who believes this needs to read the book *Debating Calvinism* by Dave Hunt and James White (Sisters: Multnomah, 2004). The book is an extended debate between a Calvinist (White) and a classic Arminian (Hunt). Classic Arminian theology is undoubtedly alive and well. It's also found in certain Statements of Faith of certain evangelical organizations. For instance, in the Statement of Faith of Samaritans' Purse you find this classic Arminian formulation:

We believe that, for the salvation of lost and sinful man, repentance of sin and faith in Jesus Christ results in regeneration by the Holy Spirit...

That very position was stated by the Arminians of old and rejected by the Synod in Chapter 3-4. So the idea that Arminian theology doesn't really exist anymore is naïve at best.

4) *We're fed-up with any mention of the confessions, let alone the preaching of them*

Then there are those in the congregation who may be dissatisfied with any mention of the confessions, let alone the preaching of them. These are the folks who would love to see Catechism preaching fade away and so they're not too enthusiastic about preaching the Canons of Dort either. I'm not going to spend any time dealing with this objection. But nevertheless, you should be aware that should your church decide to preach the Canons of Dort, these people will often come out of the woodwork.

Conclusion

Brothers and fathers, whether we realize it or not, we live and minister in a broader context where the doctrines of grace are either ignored or maligned. At the 2006 National Pastors' Convention in the US, 77% of those surveyed denied that salvation is based entirely on God's sovereign election of believers.⁸ Among those 77% are many authors, radio hosts and others who are influencing our people – sometimes our people spend more time listening to these folks than they do listening to us. Furthermore, as I've already noted, we live in an age where doctrine itself is being increasingly regarded as irrelevant. It may sound negative, but I think the reality is that many of our people are becoming theologically and spiritually lazy and complacent. Part of the solution is to strengthen the robust preaching of doctrine by also opening up the riches of the Canons of Dort for our churches. We are heirs of such a wonderful heritage. Let's help our congregations recognize that fact so that more praise is brought to the throne of the sovereign God of grace and his Son Jesus Christ.

¹ "The Second Sunday Service and the Catechism," J. Visscher in *Diakonia*, March 2006, pp.89-91.

² "Continuing Education: A Pressing Need for the Church Today," W. Bredenhof in *Diakonia*, June 2006, pp.17-23.

³ http://www.biblicalrecorder.org/content/news/2005/7_28_2005/ne280705warren.shtml (Accessed Feb.1, 2007).

⁴ "Omgang met de belijdenis in de kerk – 1," B. Kamphuis, *De Reformatie*, 30 Sept. 2006.

⁵ A copy of this can be found at my website, www.bredenhof.ca under "Translated Articles/Books/Booklets."

⁶ For such a rehearsal, see “Catechism Preaching – Parts 1 and 2”, by N.H. Gootjes, in *Proceedings of the International Conference of Reformed Churches, September 1-9, 1993, Zwolle, the Netherlands* (Neerlandia: Inheritance Publications, 1993).

⁷ The Remonstrance of 1610 can be found in *Credo*, J. DeJong (Winnipeg: Premier, 1997), pp.175-177 and in *Lest Any Man Should Boast*, Arthur van Delden (Kelmscott: Pro Ecclesia, 2004), pp.319-320.

⁸ “By the Numbers,” *Modern Reformation*, September/October 2006, p.15.