

Preface to the Canons of Dort

The Canons of Dort, being the Five Articles against the Remonstrants or Judgment of the National Synod of the Reformed Churches of the United Netherlands, held in Dordrecht in the years 1618 and 1619 concerning the well known Five Heads of Doctrine about which controversy has arisen in the Reformed Churches of these United Netherlands.

Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ has given very many consolations to his Church Militant in this wretched pilgrimage. However, the one he left before he entered the heavenly sanctuary to go to his Father is justly considered to be the most important one: "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." The truth of this kind promise is evident in the Church of all ages. She has been attacked from the beginning, not only by the public force of enemies and the ungodly violence of heretics, but also by the masked subtleties of seducers. Truly, if the Lord had at any time left her naked without the beneficial consolation of his promised presence, she would have long ago been oppressed by the force of tyrants or led to her ruin by the subtlety of deceivers. But there is a good Shepherd who most steadfastly loves his flock and gave his life. He has always at the appropriate time by his outstretched hand, often in miraculous ways, put down the raging of persecutors. He has uncovered and destroyed the crooked ways and deceitful counsels of seducers. In all these ways, he has proved that he is truly present with his Church. Of this we have very clear proof in the histories of the God fearing Emperors, Kings and Princes whom the Son of God raised up so often to the aid of his Church. They were kindled with holy zeal for his house. By their service, he not only subdued the raging of tyrants, but also provided his Church, when she had to fight against false teachers, with means to healing and with holy Synods. In these Synods, faithful ministers of Christ, with their combined prayers, counsel and labour, placed themselves courageously in defence of the Church and the truth of God over against the servants of Satan (even though these had changed themselves into angels of light). The holy Synods removed the seed of error and of discord, preserved the Church in the unity of the pure religion, and passed on the genuine religion unblemished to posterity.

With the same kindness our faithful Saviour proved his gracious presence in these times to the Church of the Netherlands which has been sorely oppressed for some years. This Church was delivered by God's mighty hand from the tyranny of the Roman Antichrist and the abominable idolatry of the Papacy. This Church was saved so many times in miraculous ways during the long war. It flourished most marvellously in the unity of the true doctrine and discipline to the honour of God, to the wonderful growth of the Republic, and to the joy of the whole Reformed world. This Church has been attacked, first secretly and then publicly, by Jacobus Arminius and his followers (bearing the name of Remonstrants). They did this by means of various old and new errors. These flourishing churches, being persistently disturbed by offensive disputes and schisms, have been brought into such grave peril that they were in danger of being consumed by a dreadful fire of discord. This would have happened if the compassion of our Saviour had not interceded at the appropriate time. Praise be to the Lord forever! After he had hidden his face from us for a moment (for we had in many ways kindled his wrath), he proved before the whole world that he does not forget his covenant or despise the sighing of his own people. It seemed that, according to human opinion, there was hardly any hope of

restoration. But then he put it into the hearts of the illustrious and most almighty rulers, the States General of the United Netherlands that, with the advice of the illustrious Prince of Orange, they decided to meet these raging difficulties with legal means. These means have been generally well known by the example of the Apostles themselves and of the Christian church after them. Before this time, they were also used with a rich result in the Church of the Netherlands. So, by the authority of the States General, a synod was convened at Dordrecht out of all the provinces of their territory. They had also previously requested and obtained many excellent theologians by the favour of the Great and Mighty King James, King of Great Britain, and of other illustrious princes, counts and mighty republics. This was done so that, by their joint judgment in a renowned Synod, a great many Reformed theologians would maturely consider the teachings of Arminius and his followers. They would judge from God's Word alone, confirm the true doctrine, reject the false doctrine and then by God's blessing, unity, peace, and tranquility would be restored to the Dutch churches. It is because of this blessing of God that the Dutch Church rejoices and humbly acknowledges and gratefully praises the faithful mercies of her Saviour.

The Magistrates first called for and conducted a time of general fasting and prayer. This was done in order to placate God's wrath and to obtain his gracious assistance. Then the reverend Synod was convened at Dordrecht, kindled in love to God and for the well being of the Church. They called upon God's Name and were bound by a holy oath to judge only after the rule of Holy Scripture and to act with a good conscience in the examination and judgment of this matter. Having done that, they laboured most diligently and with great patience to persuade the main advocates of these teachings (who had been summoned to appear) that they would fully explain their sentiments regarding the well-known Five Heads of Doctrine along with the arguments for them. However, they rejected the judgments of the Synod and refused to answer the points in question in an equitable fashion. No admonitions of the Synod, nor resolutions of the honourable deputies of the States General, nor even the illustrious members of the States General themselves could make progress with them. At that point, the Synod was compelled to follow another course. Following the instruction of the States General and in harmony with the customs of the ancient Synods, the Synod examined the writings, confessions, and declarations regarding the aforesaid Five Heads of Doctrine. The Synod examined both those documents issued beforehand and those delivered to the Synod. Now, by the grace of God, this examination has been completed. It has been done with very great zeal, faithfulness, conscientiousness, and the unity of all involved. To the honour of God, for the preservation of the uprightness of the saving truth, for the security of the consciences, for the peace and well-being of the Dutch churches, the Synod has decided to proclaim openly and publicly the following judgment. In this judgment, the true sentiment regarding the Five Heads of Doctrine is declared and the false sentiment which conflicts with God's Word is rejected.

This translation is a revision of that found in Acts of Synod Cloverdale of the Canadian Reformed Churches 1983, pp.141-142. The revision was made with reference to the original Latin found in J.N. Bakhuizen van den Brink's De Nederlandse Belijdenisgeschriften (pp.226-228).

Wes Bredenhof – July 2006