Prodigal Love of God Conference

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What changed me and shocked me about Reformed doctrine was the overwhelming picture of grace,” said Tish Harrison Warren, a plenary speaker at Dordt’s Prodigal Love of God Conference in April. “Honestly, I’m still not over it.”

“The grace of original sin for us is a leveling reality in a sense,” said Marilynne Robinson, Pulitzer Prize-winning author, in a different plenary discussion. “It brings us all to an equal footing with respect to God’s mercy and our brokenness and infallibility.”

That overwhelming picture of grace came up time and again at the conference, which celebrated the 400th anniversary of the Synod of Dort and sought to remind attendees about the importance and legacy of the Canons of Dort.

“It wasn’t just a conference in honor of the Synod of Dort, it was really about the Canons,” says Dr. Justin Bailey, professor of theology at Dordt and conference committee member. “I think the conference really helped to clarify the larger theological vision of the Canons. This is not because the participants at the Synod of Dort said or did everything perfectly, but because the vision of God they were fighting to preserve has real pastoral application.”

The conference gave Dr. Leah Zuidema, associate provost at Dordt, and conference committee member, a deeper historical understanding of the Canons of Dort and the larger context of the Synod of Dort itself.

“The Canons focus on a very small set of doctrines related to Calvinism, but they were important for the Synod to spend months on,” says Zuidema. “Again and again, the Canons come back to God’s grace—the idea that we are always running away from God and that he’s chasing after us and pulling us back. He reshapes our hearts. The Canons make clear that we believe only because of God’s work in us, whereas the Arminians, who the Canons were a reaction against, were saying, ‘I’m taking a step or two toward God.’ As Christians, if we’re honest with ourselves, we know we’re not doing that.”

For Caitie Fagen, a junior theology major, the conference renewed her interest in church tradition, particularly after hearing Harrison Warren’s talk “The Dogma is the Drama.”

“Her talk made me want to learn more about creeds and confessions as well as the Canons,” says Fagen.

The Prodigal Love of God Conference served as a reminder of the value of examining the past and considering how it can impact the future, particularly for Dordt and its namesake.

“History matters. Theology matters. Deep reflection on Reformed identity with an eye to catholicity is important,” says Bailey.

“I hope this conference reenergized the Dordt community about the treasure that the Canons are and the beauty that they expose of God’s grace to us in Jesus Christ,” says Dr. Erik Hoekstra, president of Dordt.