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4-2-2019

Comfort in the Canons: A Review of Saving the Reformation

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Comfort in the Canons: A Review of Saving the Reformation

Abstract

"The centerpiece of this book is the Canons themselves, presented 400 years later in a translation that makes them feel as vital as they were when they were first composed."

Posting about the book *Saving the Reformation* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/comfort-in-the-canons-a-review-of-saving-the-reformation/>

Keywords

In All Things, book review, Saving the Reformation, pastoral theology, Canons of Dort, W. Robert Godfrey

Disciplines

Christianity

Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt College.



April 2, 2019

Comfort in the Canons: A Review of *Saving the Reformation*

Donald Roth

Title: *Saving the Reformation: The Pastoral Theology of the Canons of Dort*

Author: W. Robert Godfrey

Publisher: Reformation Trust Publishing

Publishing Date: January 24, 2019

Pages: 265 pages (Hardcover)

ISBN: 978-1642890303

What is the heart of the Reformed faith? Many of us grew up hearing Calvinism defined by “five points,” often in the form of the acronym “TULIP.” This acronym is a slightly rearranged summary of the heads of doctrine generated at the international synod held in Dordrecht in 1618-19. These heads of doctrine, collected as the Canons of Dort, are sometimes viewed negatively. How could the heart of Reformed doctrine be that God doesn’t love everyone or that we are “once saved, always saved”? Isn’t this the faith of a group of Christians who think they are better than everyone else and who don’t care about evangelism?

In *Saving the Reformation*, Ligonier Ministries Teaching Fellow W. Robert Godfrey seeks to revitalize our appreciation for the Canons of Dort as an important historical and theological document. The centerpiece of the book is a new translation that emphasizes readability and brings to life the pastoral dimensions of what was an international effort to respond to several serious challenges to traditional orthodoxy. Godfrey argues that the Synod of Dort served to articulate the doctrines of grace in a pastoral way that revived the Reformation for a new generation, and this book provides a few resources

for readers to similarly revive their own faith in a completely sovereign God who poured Himself out to rescue a fallen people.

Summary

The book is divided into four parts: three sections and a collection of appendices. Part I of the book introduces the historical context of the Synod of Dort. Godfrey situates the Synod in terms of both the theological controversy and political upheaval. Theologically, the Synod was a response to the controversy raised by the Remonstrance, a number of propositions raised by the followers of Jacobus Arminius. Politically, the Synod was part of the reorganization of Dutch society in the wake of independence and a truce with Spain. This peace eased some of the pressures that had held back dealing with numerous issues, especially theological divisions, in the interest of unity. As the external pressures eased, internal pressure grew, and Godfrey brilliantly illustrates the compromises and complexities that developed in a church that had close ties with different political factions. Ultimately, Dort was not just about responding to the Remonstrants, it was about a larger struggle for the soul and identity of both the Dutch people and the Reformed church.

The second part of the book is a new translation of the Canons' original Latin. By shortening sentences and transposing the Latin to follow more natural English speech conventions, Godfrey produces a remarkably more readable version of the Canons of Dort. This change allows the pastoral nature of the response to the Remonstrants to shine through more clearly. On its own, this section is worth the price of admission, and it pairs particularly well with the content summaries and outlines included in the appendices. In this way, *Saving the Reformation* is a remarkably good resource for anyone looking to wrap their head more clearly around the structure and key content of the Canons, perhaps especially in the context of catechism or small group environments.

The third section of the book is a bit of expository commentary on the Canons, reproducing sections from the heads of doctrine and interspersing them with short explanatory comments by the author. Frankly, I probably came to this portion of the book in the wrong way. As someone who grew up thinking very highly of Dr. Godfrey, I was excited for a more expansive commentary on the Canons, but the commentary is brief and aimed at a more general audience. This means I wanted more in this section; but, for a small group study setting, these short notes would likely help many readers connect even more fully with the document.

The last section of the book is a series of appendices. I have mentioned the outlines already, but the real highlight of this section for me is an essay challenging the historiography of Jacobus Arminius. Many of the first biographers of Arminius were

admirers of him, so he has historically received rather favorable treatment. Godfrey makes a compelling case that Arminius knew full well that he was departing from Reformed orthodoxy, and the opposition to him was not coming from a group of radical conservatives hell-bent on suppressing enlightened thought. Instead, Arminius was a bit of a troublemaker who repeatedly questioned and attacked Reformed orthodoxy in his lifetime, and his followers advanced that assault after his death, leaving it to the Synod of Dort to save the Reformation.

At the end of the day, the centerpiece of this book is the Canons themselves, presented 400 years later in a translation that makes them feel as vital as they were when they were first composed. Beyond a commendable translation, Dr. Godfrey keeps himself more to the background than other theologians might. He adds essays and commentary that contextualize and highlight the importance of the Canons, but also leaves ample room for them to speak for themselves, and this invites readers to reencounter the Canons of Dort on their own terms.

Conclusion

So how does this book help us think about the questions from my opening paragraph? For one, TULIP probably shouldn't be used as a shorthand for Reformed doctrine. In context, the Canons of Dort are a pastoral response to questions raised by who we know today as Arminians. They were a revitalization and defense of the doctrinal proposition that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, as revealed by Scripture alone, to the glory of God alone. These five "solas" are at the theological heart of the Reformation, but the idea of being "Reformed" is broader. It is not about being a "five-pointer" (although that would be included), it is about a posture toward Scripture, the church, and, ultimately, the recognition of both the depth of our sin and the greatness of our Savior that transcends cultural and national borders.

The Synod of Dort represents much of the best of what it means to be Reformed. It took on an international character in response to concerns that it not be run solely by the majority party in the Dutch church (who were opposed to the Remonstrants). Rather than being coldly dogmatic, the documents were written to the common believer, rooted in common Christian belief (not solely Reformed distinctives), and oriented toward matters of practical application and assurance.

The Canons should be a source of profound comfort to Christians: we are a pervasively broken people who are gathered up and held by our loving God despite our rebellion against Him, and He preserves us and breathes new life into us despite our weakness. Instead of cold indifference, the Canons should inspire a posture of exuberant gratitude toward our good God, a thankfulness that overflows in love and joy toward all the

people and things that He has created. Godfrey's book helps to reemphasize that for us at a particularly timely moment, and I highly recommend engaging with it.