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Spenser's Images of Grace and the Canons of Dort: Faerieland meets the Five Main Points of Doctrine



by Bob De Smith

In his great poem “The Windows,” George Herbert asks, “Lord, how can man preach his holy word?” (1). His central image, which provides the answer to his question, is the stain-glassed window of his title, leading him to consider “Doctrine and life, colours and light” (11): as light shines through a window, making its images striking and meaningful, so the preacher’s (and the believer’s) doctrine is made manifest in his or her life. Something of that distinction between “Doctrine and life” may help us out of the dilemma I set for myself in reading a portion of Book 1 of Edmund Spenser’s

The Faerie Queene alongside the Canons of Dort. At first glance, this is an untenable pairing. After all, Spenser’s long romance was first published in 1590 in London; the Synod of Dort, which we are celebrating at this conference, took place in the Netherlands in 1618-19. There is no direct influence in either direction. Furthermore, Spenser’s poem is an elaborate allegorical tale of “Fierce warres and faithfull loues” (to quote the proem to the first book [1.1.9]), while the Canons settle key doctrinal points in the context of controversy. One is imaginative fiction, one doctrine.

But perhaps this distinction, a version of Herbert’s “Doctrine and life,” may help us out of the woods (the hero of Spenser’s first book has his first adventure in “the wandering wood” [1.13.6], where he meets Error, who among other defilements, vomits many books—presumably books of religious controversy!). While the Canons were written to settle doctrine, they also imply a way of life.¹ The Canons work from doctrine to life.

Spenser, as a poet (by which I mean a writer of imaginative fiction), works the other way, from “life”—that is, from a narrative, a representation of life, which must be experienced, enjoyed, and interpreted—to what we may call doctrine. This scheme, I realize, distorts a bit the goal of the fiction writer, particularly one as rich and multivalent as Spenser.² Nonetheless, the reader is called upon to both apply and generalize—to find the meaning

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(doctrine) in the text.

I am not, by putting Spenser up against the Canons, attempting to save Spenser from Calvinism—or for Calvinism. Many have tried. Finding a middle ground, Andy Weiner remarks that Spenser is “writing for the profit and delight of all English protestants” (53). And John N. King notes that “*The Faerie Queene* treats central issues of the Reformation” and that “Protestant theology pervades the *Legende of Holiness* [the first book], where Spenser embodies in the quest of the Red Cross Knight the doctrine of salvation as derived by Protestants from the letters of St. Paul.” This perspective squares with the best, pithiest definition I know of the Reformation, one by Tyndale scholar David Daniell: it is “people reading Paul” (9). King’s emphasis on the doctrine (and process) of salvation will be the ground note of our analysis.³

So what do the Canons offer to the reader of Spenser? Mostly, I believe, a summative statement of Calvinist doctrine, one whose formulation had been in place since, say, the 1560s (*The Belgic Confession*, written 1561, with a slight revision, 1566) and is in accord with the *39 Articles* of the Anglican Church (1563). As the title of the Canons puts it, these points have been “Accepted Till Now in the Reformed Churches” (927). This is what Barbara Lewalski calls “the classic Protestant paradigm of sin and salvation” (13), regarding which she cites the Synod of Dort as offering “clear, rigorous, and sanctioned formulation” (20). So while Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*, cannot be said to be influenced by the Synod of Dort, a close interpretation of Redcrosse’s experience of grace in Book One, the Legend of Holiness, can shed light on a contemporary understanding of grace, regeneration, and sanctification which the Canons of Dort formulate. I do not argue for Spenser’s strict adherence to a formulation like the Canons, only for his creative engagement with its doctrines.

A difficulty I have been putting off is that Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* is not on most people’s bedtime reading list (and there is no mini-series), despite C.S. Lewis’s observation that “it is best to have made one’s first acquaintance with Spenser in a very large—and preferably, illustrated—edition of *The Faerie Queene*, on a wet day, between the ages of twelve and sixteen” (146). So perhaps

an introduction is in order. Spenser set out to write an epic poem in 12 books, publishing the first 3, dedicated to Queen Elizabeth (one analogue for his title) in 1590; in 1596, he published 3 more books, as well as some additional stanzas—but the scheme remained unfinished. Each book was to embody one of the “twelve moral virtues,” for which Spenser invokes (a bit inaccurately) Aristotle. These virtues are subsumed in King Arthur, whose quest for Glorianna (Queen Elizabeth again, and the Faerie Queene) represents England’s pursuit of excellence, the church’s quest for truth, and the person’s search for fulfillment—to oversimplify a bit. While Arthur is the macro-hero, each book has its own hero and quest, and the first book, suitable to our discussion, centers on the Knight of Holiness, named the Red Crosse Knight for the sign on his shield. Redcrosse, who is England’s patron, St. George (the dragonslayer), an aspect of Arthur, and the Christian knight, sets out with Una (the One, the Truth, the True Church) to rescue her parents from a dragon which besieges their castle. His quest, Spenser promises us, will illumine Holiness. All this is a summary from Spenser’s “Letter to Raleigh,” appended at the end of the first edition and addressed to his friend Sir Walter.

And here we recall King’s earlier suggestion that in Book 1 “Spenser embodies in the quest of the Red Cross Knight the doctrine of salvation as derived by Protestants from the letters of St. Paul.” Thus in the letter to Raleigh, we are introduced to Redcrosse as a Christian, one who puts on “the armour of a Christian man specified by Saint Paul v. Ephes.”—armor supplied for him by Una. Donning the armor transforms Redcrosse from “tall clownish young man” to one that “seemed the goodliest man in al that company” (the best guy around). Before the journey begins, Spenser presents us with a little image of grace: Redcrosse is chosen and redeemed—“effectively reborn,” to use the language of the Canons (3-4.12).

During his adventure, Redcrosse, accompanied by Una and her Dwarf, encounters a succession of foes, and, if this were a traditional narrative, the young hero would be gaining strength, wisdom, and experience. He seems to, but as he racks up jousting victories, he gains only in pride and self-reliance. When he wins he loses,⁴ a lesson for

Redcrosse—and his readers—that is made explicit later in the book when the narrator declares,

What man is he, that boasts of fleshly might,
And vaine assurance of mortality,
Which all so soone, as it doth come to fight,
Against spirituall foes, yeelds by and by,
Or from the field most cowardly doth fly?
Ne let the man ascribe it to his skill,
That thorough grace hath gained victory.
If any strength we haue, it is to ill,
But all the good is Gods, both power and eke will.
(10.1)⁵

Holiness, it seems, has nothing to do with our actions, or even our will, but is a matter of grace alone.

To return to Redcrosse's quest, he soon—separated from Una—visits the House of Pride with his new companion, Duessa (the inverse of Una, her name suggests duplicity), where he barely escapes. Una faithfully seeks Redcrosse, but does not find him until it is almost too late. Redcrosse, weakened by his previous encounters in both love and warfare, finds himself in Canto 7 lying next to a stream, having taken off his armor. Duessa finds him there, with the result that Redcrosse is “Poured out in loosnesse on the grassy grownd” (7.2). Having laid down the Ephesians armor and having given over his true love for an enemy of the gospel (Duessa is soon discovered as the “woman arrayed in purple and scarlet color” [Rev. 17:4]). Redcrosse is immediately assaulted by the Orgoglio, “An hideous Geaunt horrible and hye” (8.4). His name means “pride” in Italian, and he represents Redcrosse's own self-indulgence and pride.⁶ Orgoglio imprisons Redcrosse (“And in a Dongeon deep him threw without remorse” [15.9]) and, in the kind of symbolic move Spenser relies on, replaces him as Duessa's lover. The Dwarf reports all this to Una, who nearly despairs but is recovered by the arrival of Arthur. Arthur, with the help of his Squire, defeats Orgoglio and Duessa in

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battle, the latter now mounted on the beast with seven heads.

Arthur's victory is one of those images of grace that characterize the book. In the fight with Orgoglio, who is apparently 9 feet tall, Arthur has fallen under a massive blow from his enemy, whose club is a tree: “What mortall wight could euer beare so monstrous blow?” (8.18.9). But then,

And in his fall his shield, that couered was,
Did loose his vele by chaunce, and open flew;
The light whereof, that heauen's light did pas,
Such blazing brightnesse
through the ayer threw,
That eye mote not the same
endure to vew. (8.19.1-5)

“[B]y chaunce” alerts the reader to what it is not—namely chance or happenstance. By grace—or providence (grace in action?)—better describes it, a sense reinforced by the heavenly, overwhelming brightness of the light from his shield.⁷ Irresistible grace? Here are the Canons:

Regeneration (saving grace) “is an entirely supernatural work, one that is at the same time most powerful and most pleasing” (3-4.12).

Let us take a closer look at Arthur's next action, in which he rescues Redcrosse from the dungeon. Having entered the castle, he calls out to Redcrosse:

Therewith an hollow, dreary, murmuring voyce
These pitteous plaintes and dolours did resound;
O who is that, which bringes happy choyce
Of death, that here lye dying euery stound.”
(8.38.1-4)

Arthur is struck with “pitty deare” (*dear* here means “profound,” with a hint of “precious” and “costly”), then responds with “furious force, and indignation fell,” but when he enters the keep, he “his foot could find no flore” (39.2, 6, 7). He has entered the bottomless pit of Rev. 9, but he is also doing what can't be done. Here is the next stanza:

But neither darknesse fowle, nor filthy bands,
 Nor noyous smell his purpose could withhold,
 (Entire affection hateth nicer hands)
 But that with constant zeale, and corage bold,
 After long paines and labors manifold,
 He found the meanes that Prisoner up to reare;
 Whose feeble thighes, vnhabable to vphold
 His pined corse, him scarce to light could beare,
 A ruefull spectacle of death and ghastly drere. (40)

It is not difficult here to read Arthur as a manifestation of grace—he seems even to enact the salvific work of Christ, who goes down and comes up again, who suffers “long paines,” is constant, and, with a note of profound understatement that points to mystery beyond words, “He found the meanes” to redeem Redcrosse. Or as the Canons put it, “believers cannot fully understand the way this work occurs” (3-4.12).⁸ But what work? It sure reads like a moment of redemption, of a turn from death to life, from darkness to light, from prison to freedom. Here is the Canons on conversion:

it must be credited to God: just as from eternity he chose his own in Christ, so within time he effectively calls them, grants them faith and repentance, and having rescued them from the dominion of darkness, brings them into the kingdom of his Son. (3-4.10)

Particularly the language of darkness here, and the emphasis on these acts as God’s alone, suggest that Redcrosse is here becoming one of the redeemed.⁹

But here is the problem. Hasn’t Redcrosse been one of the redeemed already? Here we recall that Spenser describes Redcrosse as having put on the “armour of a Christian man” (779) before his journey began.¹⁰ Spenser is also careful to remind us of Redcrosse’s status, even as he seems to fall deeper and deeper into sin and disobedience. In the opening, preview stanza that begins Canto 7—immediately before Redcrosse gives into Duessa and is imprisoned by Orgoglio—the narrator calls Redcrosse “The guiltless man” (7). Likewise, the next Canto, reflecting on Redcrosse’s imprisoned state (the opening stanzas often look both forward and back), the narrator exclaims,

Ay me, how many perils doe enfold
 The righteous man, to make him daily fall?

Were not, that heauenly grace doth him vphold,
 And stedfast truth acquite him out of all.
 Her loue is firme, her care continuall,
 So oft as he thorough his own foolish pride,
 Or weaknes is to sinfull bands made thrall:
 Els should this *Redcrosse* knight in bands haue dyde,
 For whose deliverance she this Prince doth thether guyde. (8.1)

Una is the faithful one, pursuing her love like Christ his church—and the Prince is Arthur. Both are images of grace. The tension here—and it’s the central tension of Spenser’s Legend of Holiness—is that one can be righteous and sinful at the same time, that the believer can be assured of salvation and yet subject to weakness, failing, and sin (to the world, the flesh, and the devil, invoking, as the Canons do, the old triad; see 5.4). In this way, Spenser aims to reframe righteousness in peculiarly Protestant terms. By insisting that this “ruefull spectacle of death and ghastly drere” (8.40.9) is also “the righteous man” (7.1.2), Spenser emphasizes both the difference between our own point of view and God’s and the radical nature of grace, which does not depend on our actions or feelings. And this truth, Spenser implies, is good news: the righteous are graced, upheld, cared for even when they fall.

In terms laid out at the Synod of Dort, we are talking about the perseverance of the saints, the Canons’ fifth point. Thus article 8 affirms, “so it is not by their own merits or strength but by God’s undeserved mercy that they [believers who sin] neither forfeit faith and grace totally nor remain in their downfalls to the end and are lost.” In this fifth point of doctrine, the Canons explain that “daily sins of weakness arise, and blemishes cling to even the best works of God’s people” (Art. 2); also “Because of these remnants of sin dwelling in them and also because of the temptation of the world and Satan, those who have been converted could not remain standing in this grace if left to their own resources” (Art. 3). Spenser’s handling of Redcrosse’s fall into sin serves as a gloss, if not on the specific language of the Canons, still on the theological concepts which they lay out.

But why does Arthur’s rescue of Redcrosse from the pit read like a redemptive moment? Well, be-

cause it is—just not in the sense that it represents a moment in the process of Redcrosse’s salvation. Better put, the incident is about sanctification, not justification. One fruitful way to understand this is in terms of typology, an important way of both understanding and applying Scripture for sixteenth-century Protestants. In this way, David’s experience, say, becomes our experience as a kind of template.¹¹ Carol V. Kaske, borrowing from A. C. Charity, points to a “distinctly biblical ‘applied typology’—recapitulating an event in salvation history on the smaller state of a private life.” So we might say that Redcrosse is in this scene reminded of his redemption—or experiences its effects as applied to him.

The key, of course, is repentance, as the Canons point out (5.7), and Redcrosse spends time (in Canto 10) in the House of Holiness, where he undergoes a process of repentance, renewal, and strengthening that squares with the description in Article 7 of the 5th point.¹² This is what Calvin calls the “race of repentance, which [Christians] are to run throughout their lives” (602).¹³

But before he can get there, he does confront Despair, which the Canons characterize as “various doubts of the flesh”—that classic (if overrated) concern of Protestants. Redcrosse’s encounter with Despair is a complex, searing dialogue—an inner dialogue, really, though the character is represented as a gaunt, melancholic, “Disordred” (9.35.5) man. In some ways, the recently imprisoned Redcrosse is looking in a mirror. More so, he is reflecting on his constant failures, which lead him to question God’s care for him. What is remarkable for our purposes is that Despair seems to have read the Canons, or another summary of Calvinist doctrine, for he twists it to his purposes in a way that reminds readers not to misuse their theological musings. Despair’s “But he should dye, who merites not to liue” (38.4) suggests the first article: “Since all people have sinned in Adam and have come under the sentence of the curse and eternal death, God would have done no one an injustice if it had been his will to leave the entire human race in sin.” In the next stanza, Despair coopts a central concept of Protestant the-

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ology, calling it, in a grim pun, “great grace” if one helps another hasten to his “wished home” (4, 2). That stanza begins with another perversion of the truth, attempting to reframe Redcrosse’s quest in terms of the weariness and disappointments of the earthly life (Hamlet is not far to seek here): “Who trauailes by the wearie wandrring way, / To come vnto his wished home in haste” (1-2) will take every opportunity to achieve that goal. Suddenly, it sounds like Redcrosse can fulfill his quest by killing himself!¹⁴ The Canons do not convey a sense of world-weariness, but they do reference those “daily sins of weakness” and the “blemishes” which attach to even “best works” (5.2). Notably, the Canons map out a path away from despair in humility, mortification of the flesh, and “by holy exercises of godliness.” Redcrosse, we might say, has stopped reading the Canons too early.¹⁵ Despair later mentions “frayle flesh” (40.5), which he could have read 4 times in the last section of the Canons.

In stanza 42, Despair strikes at the heart of Calvinist doctrine, turning the comfort of God’s providence into fatalism. He begins, “Is not his [God’s] deed, what euer thing is donne / In heauen and earth” (1-2) and later adds, “Who then can striue with strong necessitie...Or shunne the death ordaynd by destinie?” (6, 8). If you kill yourself, it was God’s will! This logic, compelling as it is, is countered in (among other places) the Canons’ discourse on how to treat election, namely, with humility, assurance, and discretion. Finally, for our purposes, Despair utters gospel truth: “For life must life, and blood must blood repay” (43.6). This central truth of satisfaction for sin in Christ’s sacrifice is turned into an inexorable call to pay for one’s sin on one’s own. Article 2.1 says, “We cannot escape these punishments unless satisfaction is given to God’s justice,” but article 3 explains that the “death of God’s Son is the only and entirely complete sacrifice and satisfaction for sins.” Despair, it seems, is withholding information. Una responds later with “where iustice growes, there grows eke greter grace” (53.6). Redcrosse nearly succumbs to these arguments, which are all the more effective

because they seem to come out of the truths of the gospel and of doctrinal statements. He is spared by Una's—grace's!—intervention as she calls him back to his quest, to "heavenly mercies" and his status as "chosen" (53.4-5). The conclusion, cited earlier in this paper and beginning the next canto, is clear: "If any strength we haue, it is to ill, / But all the good is Gods, both power and eke will" (10.1), a clear echo of Paul's "for my strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9, KJV).

What I have tried to make clear is how Spenser actively engages not only key doctrines of the Reformation, summarized in the Canons of Dort, but also his readers as he enlivens these doctrines with images of grace. The Canons and the *Faerie Queene* live, in some ways, in very different worlds. But *soli gratia* connects them.

Endnotes

1. They are general, making propositions about the life of those called by God, usually in the third person, but consider this statement from 3-4.16:

...if the marvelous Maker of every good thing were not dealing with us, man would have no hope of getting up from his fall by his free choice, by which he plunged himself into ruin when still standing upright.

While the Canons are not a catechism, a passage like this invokes the metaphor (rare in the Canons, I know, and intentionally biblical) of falling and standing—as well using the first person—to call readers to a certain kind of life. I will add, as a relevant aside, that the central trope of Spenser's book is the knight's wandering journey, one characterized by many falls.
2. Thus regarding an incident in the book we will examine, Anthea Hume writes,

During Canto viii the Recrosse Knight has simultaneously represented the individual sinner rescued by heavenly grace, the unfaithful man brought back from spiritual whoredom, and probably...the English nation released from captivity to the Church of Rome by Spenser's own monarch. (96)
3. King's next sentence reads, "This paradigm included the categories of election, calling, justification, adoption, sanctification and glorification." He cites Lewalski (see text below).
4. As Weiner puts it, "Up until now [his defeat by the giant Orgoglio; see below] he has lost every battle because he seemed to himself to have won, thus feeding his pride and encouraging himself to put his faith in himself and in his own strength" (48).
5. Weiner comments, "all of Book I is a gloss upon this stanza" (49).
6. It is interesting in this context that the Canons call Pelagianism "a proud heresy," presumably because Pelagius believed one was capable of choosing good or evil. Orgoglio is sometimes glossed as "spiritual pride."
7. We have earlier been told that the shield is a single piece of diamond, symbolic of perfection, beauty, power, and, in sum, divine grace (Leslie). The theme of light and darkness is one of the most pervading in the book. Whitaker, writing about this incident, says Arthur "is identified by many signs as the grace of God" (161-62).
8. Arthur is not Christ here, but an analogue, symbolic of the action of Christ. In the terms of The Canons, "supernatural work of God by which he regenerates us in no way rules out or cancels the use of the gospel" and goes on the commend preaching, the sacraments, and discipline (the marks of the true Church). Mallette argues that Spenser's portrayal of Arthur earlier in canto 8 (as he relieves Una's despair) "is firmly bound to Reformation ideas about the role of the preacher in the Protestant *ordo salutis*" (3). If so, we are prepared to see Arthur as a minister of the word in the scene we are considering.
9. This is how Hume, in a chapter titled "Sola Gratia," reads the incident. She writes,

The central theme of the episode is the central theme of sixteenth-century Protestantism—the radical dependence of the individual on unmerited grace for his conversion or justification. This intervention of free grace in the life of a sinner was taken to be the most important event of his spiritual history. (91)

Kessler, though writing about Book II, is among those who see this Book I incident as "concerned with the action of regeneration in the salvation process" (24).
10. Whitaker suggests that in this description "the process of justification is allegorized" (155). Weiner, using William Perkins's scheme of salvation, associates this scene with "effectual preaching and hearing" (54).

11. William Tyndale, in his preface to the Pentateuch, advises his readers, "As thou readeest therefore, think that every syllable pertaineth to thine own self" (8). So too with what Lewalki calls the "Protestant paradigm of salvation" (13).
 12. The article reads in part, "by his Word and Holy Spirit [God] effectively renews [his saints] to repentance so that they have a heartfelt and godly sorrow...seek and obtain...forgiveness...experience again the grace of the reconciled God...and from then on more eagerly work out their own salvation with fear and trembling."
 13. 3.3.9. In the previous section, Calvin elaborates:

And indeed, this restoration does not take place in one moment or one day or one year; but through continual and sometimes even slow advances God wipes out in his elect the corruptions of the flesh, cleanses them of guilt, consecrates them to himself as temples renewing all their minds to true purity that they may practice repentance throughout their lives and know that this warfare will end only in at death. (601)
 14. Una later chides him, "Is this the battaile, which thou vaunst to fight / With that fire-mouthed Dragon, horrible and bright?" (9.52.8-9).
 15. The entire article reads,

Hence daily sins of weakness arise, and blemishes cling to even the best works of God's people, giving them continual cause to humble themselves before God, to flee for refuge to Christ crucified, to put the flesh to death more and more by the Spirit of supplication and by holy exercises of godliness, and to strain toward the goal of perfection, until they are freed from this body of death and reign with the Lamb of God in heaven. (5.2)
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