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# The Worldview of the Synod of Dordt<sup>1</sup>

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by Richard Mouw

Not long after the conclusion of the Synod of Dordrecht, the Puritan party in the Church of England proposed that the Canons of Dordt be adopted as an official Anglican confessional standard. A series of conferences were held in 1626 to debate

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this proposal, and the debate gave rise to strong passions. At one point Francis White, a leader of the Arminian party, leaped to his feet and addressed the presiding officials with this urgent plea: "I beseech our Lordships that we of the Church of England be not put to borrow a new faith from any village in the Netherlands."<sup>2</sup>

Francis White was obviously either confused about demographics or carried away with sarcasm. Dordrecht was certainly no village in the 17th century—its population at the time was about 40,000. But even if the numbers had been significantly smaller, there is no good reason to assume that villages cannot produce good theology. And one of the Dordrecht Synod's strengths was that it did in fact shape the understanding of the Christian faith in many Dutch villages. Much more importantly, though, the theology of the Synod of Dordt has reached into thousands of villages around the world over the centuries. It has traveled well. Presently, for example, at least one hundred and ten church bodies in forty-eight nations have adopted the Canons of Dordt as one of their key confessional standards.

There is much to celebrate in all of that. And we can be grateful that the city of Dordrecht, having established itself in our own time as an important global center of manufacturing and trade, has hosted us for this conference focusing on the spiritual and theological legacy of what happened here four centuries ago. Indeed, we have seen evidence here that the 400-year-old message of Dordrecht continues to have a measure of spiritual and theological vitality.

## Thinking Globally

I chose for my title here “The Worldview of the Synod of Dordt” with two senses of “world” in mind. The first is geographical, the sense of setting forth ideas with a global consciousness that is not restricted to specific national borders. The Synod of Dordt was certainly focused on the larger church world in that sense. The Dutch Reformed Church was not content only to call for a national synod in that second decade of the 17th century. In preparing to address fundamental theological issues regarding God’s gracious dealings with human beings, the Dutch Calvinists wanted to consult with theological experts from beyond their own national borders.

To be sure, the international makeup of the Dordrecht gathering was still very much of a “Euro-centric” character. In itself, this is not due to a limited vision on the part of those who issued the invitations to the Synod. The Christian movement at the time—certainly the immediate post-Reformation Protestant movement—was in fact European in scope.

In recent years, however, the “Euro-centric” label has come to be used as a term of *theological* critique—it is meant to signal a stunted theological vision, a failure to comprehend genuine human concerns that emerge in parts of the world that differ greatly from what is taken for granted by those immersed in the Western world.

Again, no one can blame 17th-century Calvinists in the Netherlands for failing to focus in their theology on the diverse cultural contexts of what we refer to these days as “the Global South.” But it has been argued that when the Protestant movement *did* extend into those other regions—in the Dutch case, often following extensive mercantile trade routes—the “Eurocentric” theology of the immediate post-Reformation era was simply “exported” to those diverse cultures, where it often continues today in its original form.

The late missionary-theologian Kosuke Koyama offered a practical example in support of this kind of criticism, in his 1997 book, *No Handle on the Cross*, where he told about a recent visit to Christians among the Traija people, who live in the Central Celebes region of Indonesia. He discovered that the local congregations there were dominated in their

thinking by what he described as “Amsterdam Christianity, complete with the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession”—and he could have added the Canons of Dordt to that mix.

Koyama found this disappointing. Koyama did acknowledge that these Reformation-era documents deserve to be honored as “great monuments in the history of Christian theology and ministry.” But he puzzled how “they could have remained intact, in their original forms, in lands of such tremendous spiritual and cultural wealth. Wasn’t there any need to adjust them or at least to change expressions in a fundamental way?”<sup>3</sup>

Koyama’s basic point is well-taken. In the past half-century in the theological world, *missiology* has emerged as a significant sub-discipline in theology—a focus closely aligned to new theological sensitivities to matters relating to *cultural context*. These are important concerns, and celebrating the legacy of the Synod of Dordt is a good occasion for thinking about what is worthy of preserving in the legacy of the Synod for a global context. What do we hope that the Traija Christians will *not* let go of in adjusting their Eurocentric theological legacy to their own cultural context?

When I was studying theology at the beginning of my academic career, it was common to complain that even if the early Protestant movement had possessed a larger global consciousness, it did not have any strong sense of the importance of missional activity. While there is some legitimacy in that complaint, the Canons of Dordt actually provide one significant piece of counter-evidence to the charge. Indeed, I find what the Canons say on the subject to be a delightful affirmation of the global mission. The “the promise of the Gospel,” say the Canons in Article 5 under the Second Head of Doctrine, “ought to be declared and published to all nations, and to all persons *promiscuously and without distinction*” (emphasis mine).<sup>4</sup>

What is delightful about this statement of the church’s missional mandate is that it not only shows a robust missional awareness unusual for its time, but that it is likely the only occasion in any era where Calvinists recommend promiscuity! And indeed, the image—the original Latin text uses the adjective form *promiscuo*—is an apt one. Critics of the Reformed doctrines of election and predestina-

tion have often insisted that Calvinism by its very nature fails to provide an adequate motivation for the evangelistic task. The delegates at Dordrecht were denying the point of that criticism. The mission of the church must be carried out with passion, they insisted. The promise of the Gospel must be proclaimed everywhere, and with abandon. That does show an important kind of worldview sensitivity.

### Worldview Concerns

The American evangelical scholar Arthur Holmes once wrote about what he saw as the difference between what he described as “theologians’ theology” and “world-viewish theology.” The first kind of theology deals with the technical topics that professional theologians talk about when they are engaging other theologians: a modalistic understanding of the Trinity, for example, and the nature of a Logos Christology. The second, “world-viewish” variety explores questions that are posed to theology from the context of the practical living-out of a theological perspective in our daily lives—topics having to do with putting a theologically based worldview into practice: How do I relate to my Muslim neighbor? And what does Genesis 1 tell me, if anything, about the age of the earth?

Holmes was not meaning to denigrate either kind of theological endeavor. He himself devoted much of his writing to matters that emerge in professional philosophical and theological contexts. But he also wanted to highlight the importance of thinking theologically about the world-viewish implications of a robust theological perspective.

In good part, the Canons of Dordt grew out of debates regarding deep differences among professional theologians. The Synod addressed technical points of doctrine, as posed in the challenges to Reformed theology by the Remonstrants. And it is obvious that many passages in the Canons—and certainly in the background documents of the synodical proceedings—are of interest almost exclusively to those of us who are schooled in the fine

points of academic theological discourse. But there are also some clear “world-viewish” dimensions to the overall message of the Canons.

In one study of the concept of a worldview, the writers propose that a worldview typically addresses these four questions: Who am I? Where am I? What’s wrong? What is the remedy?<sup>5</sup> To have a worldview, the writers argue, is to operate with some sense of what the answers are to these questions. Even when people cannot adequately articulate their answers, they approach life with some grasp of what it means to flourish as a human being and why our actual lives are often so dysfunctional. And all of this serves to shape the decisions people make in guiding their lives.<sup>6</sup>

Cornelius Plantinga points us in a world-viewish direction when he observes that the Canons begin, not with theological abstraction, but with a focus on the present human condition. Dordt begins, he says, “not in eternity with God but in history with man”<sup>7</sup>—thus the Canons’ opening words: “All men have sinned in Adam, lie under the curse, and are obnoxious to eternal death” (First Head, I). Needless to say, that is—to put it mildly—a discouraging note on which to start. The next article, however, immediately declares words of hope: “But ‘in this the love of God was manifested, that he sent his only begotten Son into the world’” (First Head, II).

Those contrasting themes, stated at the beginning of the Canons, capture the heart of Calvinist soteriology: the desperate condition of sinful humankind, cut off from a positive relationship from the Creator by our shared rebellion, and the free and sovereign grace of God who sent the Son into the world.

But Calvinism has regularly addressed more general concerns. Reformed theology at its best not only tells us that our only hope for salvation is in God’s electing grace, but goes on also to answer the question *And what does God elect us for?* In addressing this question, Calvinism moves from the passive voice—God doing *to* us and *for* us what we could never accomplish on our own—to the active

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mode, to what it means for elected people to become *agents* of God's purposes in the world.

Dordt addresses that agency question. The Canons tell us that we "are chosen to faith and the obedience of faith" (First Head, IX), in that electing grace empowers us for "the observance of the divine commands" (First Head, XIII).

### Our Shared Humanness

To be sure, the Canons do not do much to fill in the details regarding our active lives of service. But the Canons do imply much about what our faithful obedience to the will of the electing God should include. In one instance, for example, Dordt outlines a worldview concern in its brief account of "glimmerings of natural light" that remain in the human heart even after the devastation of the fall into sin. Of course, in making this point, the Canons quickly warn us against seeing these "glimmerings" as having any sort of salvific value. This is typical of the Reformed confessional statements of this era in dealing with the noetic remnants of our unfallen condition. The *Westminster Confession*, for example, says that whatever fallen people know about God and his purposes from general revelation simply serves to "leave men inexcusable" (Chapter 1); and similarly the *Belgic Confession* tells us that what fallen human beings can grasp about the glory of God serves mainly to "leave them without excuse" (Article 2). The Canons, however, while issuing the same stern warning, nonetheless fill in some quick details about what these "glimmerings" do make possible for depraved humans: they allow for "some regard for virtue, good order in society, and for maintaining an orderly external deportment." (Third and Fourth Head, IV).

As Suzanne McDonald has pointed out, this has implications for the active lives of the elect as well. What the Synod is saying, she observes, is that "the desire to do what we might call 'civic good,' is planted deep in what it means to be human. Unbelievers and believers alike share some sense of right and wrong, and want to at least appear to be doing the right thing." And this means, she continues, that "a shared awareness of injustice can be common ground for Christians and non-Christians as we seek to discern and do what is right."<sup>8</sup>

Even if it does so in a somewhat grudging theo-

logical manner, then, Dordt does affirm some positive aspects of our shared humanness. And there is one particular passage in the Canons which offers what I consider to be a profound basis for putting that affirmation into practice. Before citing that passage, though, I add a word about a recent personal experience.

During the time when I was preparing these remarks, I participated in a lengthy academic discussion with a group of Christian scholars, about the idea of "public justice." In exploring what it means for us as Christians to advocate for justice in political and economic matters, two themes loomed large: first, that Christians should see all human beings as persons, as centers of value—in Kantian terms, as ends and not means in shaping public policy; and second, that doing this means respecting fundamental human choices, even when those choices are regrettable from a Christian point of view—it is not our right, we agreed, simply to promote God-honoring behaviors by political or legal coercion.

After participating in that discussion, I went back to my study of the Canons. In re-reading this familiar passage—long a favorite of mine—it struck me that it was stating, in rather moving terms, the case that our group had been discussing with regard to the just treatment of our fellow humans. Here is the passage:

[T]his grace of generation does not treat men as senseless stocks and blocks, nor take away their will and its properties, neither does violence thereto, but spiritually quickens, heals, corrects, and at the same time sweetly and powerfully bends it ... [towards] a ready and sincere spiritual obedience. (Third and Fourth, XVI)

Similar language is used elsewhere in the Canons: God "graciously softens the hearts of the elect" (First, IX).

The point seems clear, and it is an important one to make here, that given a widespread impression that Calvinism fosters a kind of mechanistic determinism, we must emphasize, following the Canons, that God values the human will. And he values it so much that he approaches the work of regeneration in a manner much closer to courtship, wooing us rather than manipulating or coercing.

I do not think I am making an unreasonable proposal in urging us to think that this depiction of a divine “sweetness” and “softness” should have profound implications for the pursuit of public justice in today’s polarized world: that if Calvinists were to engage others, we would do so with a measure of the sweetness and softness that we have learned from our encounters with the mysteries of sovereign electing grace!

Such an approach can be further infused by the Christian humility that Dordt prescribes. We are, the Canons tell us, “by nature neither better nor more deserving than others, but with them involved in one common misery” (First Head VI). And this approach extends beyond a merely personal humility. In a time when nationalistic pride seems on the increase, along with renewed manifestations of racism and xenophobia, the Canons can sound very contemporary in reminding us that God “reveals himself to many, without any distinction of people,” and with no attention “to the superior worth of one nation above another” (Third and Fourth, VII).

Here again, some excellent counsel from Suzanne Mc Donald. Because, she writes, “[t]he Canons remind us that election is founded on God’s sovereign grace and not based on who might seem (to us) to be ‘better’ or ‘more deserving,’” and because “[w]e can never ever say of any individual, or of any group of people, that they cannot be saved,” then “this can help us to realize that neither are we allowed to decide for ourselves that this kind of person but not that kind of person deserves justice.”<sup>9</sup>

### Taking Vows

I have been emphasizing some implications of the Canons’ call for Calvinists to respond to God’s electing grace by active service in the larger human community. I do this not to promote a specific agenda—there is certainly much to debate about in spelling out what active obedience means in our contemporary world. But this is not debatable:

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that the Canons’ insistence that we are completely unworthy to receive the blessings of divine grace that come to us through Jesus Christ has profound implications for our attempts to glorify God in our present world. The message of the Synod of Dordrecht is not merely words addressed to the past. It rings true for us in many ways in this 21st century.

The call to engagement with the world has to be seen against the background of the Canons’ warnings against “inquisitively prying into the secret and deep things of God” (First Head, XII), and “vainly attempting to investigate the secret ways of the Most High” (First Head, XIV). Of course, there are times when the Canons border on violating their own warning in this regard. There is often a fine line between that pretentious kind of “prying” and the more laudable contemplative practice of, as the Canons nicely phrase it, spending time “in holy admiration of these mysteries” of sovereign grace (First Head, XVIII).

This recognition in the Canons of the need for a Calvinism that combines both spiritual practices of healthy contemplation of the mysteries with a humble pursuit of the goals of Christ’s Kingdom leads me to make a concluding practical proposal.

I take my specific cue on this from studies of the history of Catholic “special vow” communities.<sup>10</sup> Throughout the centuries, when some Catholics have felt that things were going seriously off the track spiritually or theologically, they did not leave the Catholic church—they formed new religious orders bound together by the taking of special vows. The Benedictines, for example, did not expect every Christian to take vows that required living under as strict communal discipline, as set forth in the Rule of St. Benedict, but they themselves *did* make vows to do so, in the hope that the larger world would learn from the example of people who chose to live out a commitment to serious beliefs and practices.

This special celebration of the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Synod of Dordt is, or so it seems to me, an appropriate time for some of us to take a special

vow to submit to what we might think of as “the Rule of Dordrecht.” The vow in this case is to be, as Calvinists, committed to embodying and defending at all costs those teachings that center on the sovereign grace that alone can deliver us from the depths of our sinful state—but doing so also with a desire to show the world what a “sweeter” and “softer” Calvinism would look like.

And like the vows taken by the special religious orders founded in the past, we would recognize that to pledge to live under the Rule of Dordrecht is to decide to be out of step with much that goes on these days, not only in the larger culture, but even in the Christian community. It is also in recognition, though, of the desperate need in this 21st century to put into practice a world-viewish theology that treats our fellow human beings—including, needless to say, fellow Christians with whom we disagree—with the generosity and respect that is worthy of those who have heard the mandate to promote the call of the Gospel in the whole world, “promiscuously and without distinction.”

#### Endnotes

1. This was the concluding plenary address given at the conference “The International Synod of Dordt (1618-1619): Contents, Contexts, and Effects,” Dordrecht, December 14-16, 2018.
2. Irvonwy Morgan, *Prince Charles’s Puritan Chaplain* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1957), 162.
3. Kosuke Koyama, *No Handle on the Cross: An Asian Meditation on the Crucified Mind* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1977), 34.
4. All citations from the Canons and other Reformed confessional documents will be from (ed.) Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom, with a History and Critical Notes*, Vol. III (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996).
5. Brian J. Walsh and J. Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian World View* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 35.
6. Walsh and Middleton, *The Transforming Vision*, 31-32.
7. Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., *A Place to Stand: a Reformed Study of Creeds and Confessions* (Grand Rapids: Bible Way, 1979), 138
8. Suzanne McDonald, “The Canons of Dort: No Line Between ‘Deserving’ and ‘Undeserving,’” <http://dojustice.crcna.org/article/canons-dort-no-line-between-deserving-and-undeserving>
9. A good recent study is Elizabeth Rapley, *The Lord as Their Portion: The Story of the Religious Orders and How They Shaped Our World* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2011).