**The Canons of Dort – a gospel tract**

Text: John 3:16-21

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:16-21

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 121, 444, 119:41-48, 439, 523

**Series:** Canons of Dort (#1)

**Theme:** The opening articles of the Canons of Dort set forth the need for the gospel of God’s love in Christ, the consequences of receiving the gospel, or rejecting it, and the cause of unbelief in mankind.

**Proposition:** The opening articles of the Canons of Dort clearly set forth the gospel so that we can be better equipped to proclaim the good news.

**Introduction**

The word ‘tract’ is often associated with a leaflet containing a small amount of writing, generally of a religious or political nature. The ‘Fellowship Tract League’ has printed over 4 billion gospel tracts since 1978 which are available in over 70 different languages, distributed in more than 200 countries. Whilst tracts were utilized by the Reformer Martin Luther after the invention of the Gutenberg printing press, their history goes back at least as far as the 7th century AD. Tracts written by a group of Anglican ministers (including John Henry Newman, John Keble, Henry Edward Manning and Edward Pusey) were learned works which varied in length from 4 to over 400 pages.

The Canons of Dort are within that size range, comprising five ‘heads of doctrine’ with theological errors listed and corresponding refutations (statements proving these heresies to be wrong). The name “Canons of Dort” sounds a little strange today. The word ‘canon’ refers here not to a large gun firing metal balls, but to a body of rules, principles or standards. We use this word to describe the Bible as the “Canon of Scripture”. The little preposition word ‘of’ means belonging to/originating in. ‘Dort’ is a shortened form of the name of the city of Dordrecht in the Netherlands where a church synod was held between 1618-19.

At this wider church meeting there were delegates, not only from the Reformed Church of the Netherlands, but from other countries too. They met during 154 sessions to consider the views of the followers of Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609) who had been a gifted student of Theodore Beza, John Calvin’s successor in Geneva. These followers of Arminius were called the ‘Remonstrants’ and the doctrine they believed is now called ‘Arminianism’. Arminianism is a system of belief that attempts to explain, in ways that can be understood by human beings, the relationship between God’s sovereignty and mankind’s free will, especially in relation to salvation.

While Calvinism emphasises the sovereignty of God, Arminianism emphasises the responsibility of man. The Canons of Dort contain what we now know as the ‘five points of Calvinism’.

These are often expressed in the acronym TULIP:

1. Total depravity
2. Unconditional election
3. Limited atonement
4. Irresistible grace
5. Perseverance of the saints

The five ‘heads’ of the Canons of Dort are actually ordered U.L.T.I.P. Originally the third and fourth heads were combined so there were really only four points. Something like ULTP. Tulip is easier to remember! The Canons of Dort have been translated into more than 30 languages. My aim in this message is to show us that the Canons of Dort are a gospel tract, but more importantly to help us to be better equipped to proclaim the glorious gospel of our God and King. We’ll do this under three headings:

1. Good news – everyone needs it
2. Good news – God sent His Son
3. Good news – your decision to receive or reject it
4. **Good news – everyone needs it (Article 1:1)**

We could accurately say today that everybody needs some good news in the midst of this global pandemic, changes in the climate, wars, domestic abuse, sickness and death. There is a much more fundamental reason why every human being needs the good news that Jesus saves. A common question with which people in the ancient world greeted one another was “Have you any good news for me today?”. The Greek word here translated ‘good news’ is the word ‘gospel’. In ancient secular Greek language this word described good news of any kind.

As a whole, the Bible is good news, the gospel being expressed in single verses like John 3:16. In writing about the gospel, John explains that ‘*God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him*’ (John 3:17). Why would the ‘world’ be condemned by God? John answers this question “*And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil*” (John 3:19). The judgement of God comes upon all human beings.

This is the truth that the Canons of Dort begin with under the ‘first head of doctrine: divine election and reprobation’. Article 1:1 is summarised by the title “All mankind condemnable before God’. It reads as follows: “*Since all men have sinned in Adam, lie under the curse, and deserve eternal death, God would have done no one an injustice if it had been his will to leave the whole human race in sin and under the curse, and to condemn it on account of its sin, according to these words of the apostle: “So that … the whole world [may be] held accountable to God … all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:19, 23); and, “The wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23).”*

God would have been completely fair to leave the whole of mankind under the curse of His judgement. This is the starting point of the good news. God is not cruel, unkind, unloving or unjust in sending people to Hell – the state of unending separation from Him. He is under no obligation to save anyone. If God were merely a God of justice, eternal death in Hell would be the fate of all mankind. The good news is that God is not only perfectly just, He is also perfectly kind, compassionate and merciful.

When you and I begin our explanation of the gospel as part of the way we live amongst an unbelieving world, it is good to begin with who God is. Everyone can relate to injustice – it abounds in this fallen world. Everyone can relate to justice. To some degree everyone wants it – upon their enemies, on those who commit crimes, on those who cause them trouble.

However, few people truly desire justice upon themselves if this means paying a penalty. If you or I receive a speeding ticket surely what we most likely want is to be let off so that we don’t have to pay the fine. Few of us welcome paying the fine because we love justice so much!

The universal condition of mankind - who fall short of God’s glory by sinning against Him - is the starting point of the Canons of Dort. This is also a good starting point for us as we explain the good news to everyone we can. The heart of the gospel though is Jesus Christ, who brings us to our second point:

1. **Good news – God sent His Son (Article 1:2-3)**

The single Bible verse that is a ‘go to’ for any small gospel tract is John 3:16, and that is exactly what we find as the next article in the Canons of Dort: Article 1.2: The sending of the Son of God: “*But in this the love of God was made manifest, that “he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).”* God could have left everyone under His righteous condemnation, but instead He acted in love and gifted His Son to the ‘world’. He did not exclude any category of person, but included people from every ‘*tribe and language and people and nation*’ (Rev 5:9).

The church leaders who met at the Synod of Dort, included people from non-Dutch speaking nations, discussed the theology of the Remonstrants, comparing this to Scripture. If we summarise the teaching of Arminius under five points similar to TULIP, they would be:

*(1) Partial Depravity – humanity is depraved but still able to seek God. We are fallen and tainted by sin but not to the extent that we cannot chose to come to God and accept salvation, with the help of prevenient grace from God. Given such grace, human will is free and has the power to yield (or not to yield) to the influence of the Spirit. Note: many Arminians reject partial depravity and hold a view very close to Calvinistic total depravity.*

*(2) Conditional Election – God only “chooses” those whom He knows will choose to believe. No one is predetermined for either heaven or hell.*

*(3) Unlimited Atonement – Jesus died for everyone, even those who are not chosen and who will not believe. Jesus’ death was for all of humanity, and anyone can be saved by belief in Him.*

*(4) Resistible Grace – God’s call to be saved can be resisted and/or rejected. We can resist God’s pull toward salvation if we choose to.*

*(5) Conditional Salvation – Christians can lose their salvation if they actively reject the Holy Spirit’s influence in their lives. The maintenance of salvation is required for a Christian to retain it.*

It’s worthy of note that before engaging with the details of this theology, the writers of the Canons of Dort firstly laid out the gospel of grace. That is very instructive for us. We can enter conversations with Christians and non-Christians about a wide range of topics including:

* The role of the church in historical conflicts and abuses
* Homosexuality and gender
* Abortion and euthanasia
* The baptism of infants
* Supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit
* When civil disobedience is permissible
* Calvinism and Arminianism

These can be good and helpful subjects to discuss with others as we present a Biblical worldview. However first and foremost, before delving into any of these topics, we do well to present the gospel clearly. That is the good news that God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16).

Article 1.3 of the Canons of Dort highlights the means by which God is pleased to bring people to faith in Christ: the preaching of the Gospel. By the ministry of the gospel, both from ordained preachers and from the proclamation of the good news to those we come into contact with, the Lord is pleased to call people to repentance and faith in Christ. This ministry of the proclamation of the gospel is our main aim as a church, as expressed in our ‘mission statement’: “*To make and equip disciples of Jesus, our Saviour, who joyfully serve and glorify God*”.

As the Synod of Dort met in the 17th century the key question they wrestled with, in light of the teaching of the Remonstrants, was ‘ultimately who makes the decision about which people will be saved and who will not?’ Does God decide, or do people? This brings us to our final point:

1. **Good news – your decision to receive or reject it (Article 1:4-5)**

The Canons of Dort do not deny the human decision of those who hear the gospel, either to receive the good news or to reject it. Article 1.4 is entitled “A twofold outcome” and states that: “*The wrath of God remains upon those who do not believe this gospel. But those who receive it and embrace Jesus the Saviour with a true and living faith are delivered by him from the wrath of God and from destruction, and are given eternal life*”.

These words draw from the clear teaching of Scripture:

* “*Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him*” (John 3:36).
* “*Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned*” (Mark 16:16).
* “*If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved*” (Romans 10:9).

The Canons of Dort fully affirm the sovereignty of God in salvation as expressed in the ‘five points of Calvinism’, but the responsibility of man is also fully upheld in Article 1:5 which states: “*The cause or guilt for this unbelief, as well as for all other sins, is by no means in God, but rather in man. Faith in Jesus Christ and salvation through him, however, is the free gift of God*”.The Canons of Dort uphold what is called the ‘free offer of the gospel’.

As we’ve seen the gospel is good news that everyone needs. It is the message that God, out of His great love, sent His only Son to die in the place of sinful people like us. It is the message that each person who hears it must make a decision about: whether to receive it or reject it. Yet, the Canons of Dort will go on to outline the sovereign election of God whereby, ultimately, He has already decided who will be saved and who will be left by the perfectly fair God to their just fate. **The Canons of Dort do not attempt to explain in detail how the sovereign will of God and the responsibility of mankind work together**.

The core error of the Remonstrants was in attempting to make this mystery understandable to finite, limited human minds like yours and mine. In doing so, Jacobus Arminius undermined the gospel of grace in which God is pleased to save people by faith alone in Christ alone. The Synod of Dort carefully and prayerfully wrestled with the teaching of the Remonstrants and compared this to Scripture. The result was a gospel tract which equips us to proclaim the wonderful saving work of God in Christ.

Here is the gospel in a nutshell; following the pattern of the first five articles of the Canons of Dort:

1. All mankind are naturally condemned before God
2. God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life
3. The preaching and proclamation of the gospel is the means God uses to call people to repentance and faith in Christ
4. There are two possible responses of people to the gospel: unbelief or receiving and embracing Jesus the Saviour by faith
5. The cause of unbelief is not with God but with people and yet salvation is the free gift of God

May our Lord give you the courage, strength and desire to proclaim this glorious gospel in the weeks to come.

AMEN.