

Dive into Doctrine | Canons of Dort Leader Guide

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Introduction

This is a draft leader guide to accompany the much cooler-looking student guide for our Dive into Doctrine curriculum on the Canons of Dort. We offer this in the hope that it can be helpful to churches who desire to study the doctrinal content of the Canons, whether as a celebration of their 400th anniversary in 2018-19 or as a regular congregational practice.

Dive into Doctrine developed out of our church's recognition that traditional catechism teaching was no longer working in our context. Parents stopped bringing their middle-school and high-school aged children to weekly catechism classes. Recognizing that the Reformed confessions are an important part of our heritage and identity, the council of Community Christian Reformed Church tasked the visioning team with re-imagining what catechetical instruction might look like in our context.

The visioning team identified a number of important principles that led to the development of this curriculum:

1. Reformed doctrine based on the Reformed Confessions is central to our identity as Reformed Christians.
2. Doctrinal education is needed not only for youth, but the entire congregation.
3. It is important for young people to learn why doctrine is important from their elders.
4. Doctrinal education ought to be accessible for all people at an age-and-ability appropriate level.

Based on these principles, our visioning team made the decision to develop a series of five-week curricula based on the Confessions and Contemporary Testimonies of the CRCNA, with the intention that our church *as a whole* would devote one month per year to studying these confessions. Our church is currently on a five-year cycle, alternatively studying the Canons of Dort, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, the Belhar Confession, and Our World Belongs to God.

We have designed the classes to appeal to a wide range of ages. A skillful leader will be able to adapt the lessons for any group of students ranging from grade 6 to mature adult. At Community CRC we held classes for the *entire* congregation and have found great profit in the practice of intergenerational sharing and storytelling. Some years we have separated youth and adults, using the same curriculum and encouraging families to discuss what they learned at home. Other years we have had combined classes in which the entire congregation learns together. We have often received feedback along the lines of "I came because I wanted my kids to learn. I stayed because I realized that if I wanted this to be important to them, it has to be important to me too." We have also found great benefit in having a team of pastors and elders lead these classes—it is a wonderful opportunity for pastors to connect with congregants of all ages, and also for youth to see that doctrine is not solely the purview of pastors, but is of great import for the entire believing body.

What follows is our lesson notes for our church. Churches should feel free to adapt them as they see fit. Please understand that these are in-house notes and are offered merely to be a helpful starting point, not as a definitive guide for how to teach an intergenerational class on the Canons of Dort.

—Rev. John C. Medendorp, November 12, 2018

Why Does Doctrine Matter?: (An Introduction to the Canons of Dort)

Lesson Goals:

Know what? The synod of Dort was convened to respond to important pastoral issues about who we are and who God is in the Netherlands in the 17th century.

So what? Doctrine can still help us with important pastoral questions about who we are and who God is today.

Do what?

Entry Activity (15 minutes)

Using an even number of index cards, make a set of disagreement cards. For example, one might say, "Organs are the only instruments that should be played in the church." Its matching card would start with "I disagree. Guitars and drums are the best for worshipping God."

Half of the sets should be disagreements that arise out of personal preference, and the other half that can be proven right or wrong by the Bible. Here are a few examples:

Opinion:

a. Organs are the only instruments appropriate for worship.

b. I disagree. Guitars and drums are the best for worshipping God.

a. The pastor should tell interesting stories to help people understand the sermon.

b. I disagree. The pastor should only tell stories from the Bible.

a. We should have a children's message every Sunday.

b. I disagree. Children can listen to a sermon just fine.

a. We should sing only songs from the Gray Psalter Hymnal.

b. I disagree. We should only sing new praise and worship songs.

a. New members should wear white robes when they are baptized.

b. I disagree. People should wear blue shirts when they are baptized.

Biblical:

a. The pope is the head of the church.

b. I disagree. Christ is the head of the church.

a. If you work really hard, you will get into heaven.

b. I disagree. Only God's grace gets people into heaven.

- a. Jesus was raised from the dead.
- b. I disagree. Jesus didn't really die, he was just badly hurt and got better.

- a. God created everything out of nothing.
- b. I disagree. God formed the world out of things that were already floating around in space.

- a. The Bible is the word of God, and has everything we need to know about God.
- b. I disagree. The Bible is just a bunch of books written by dead people.

- a. The church should be run by the government.
- b. I disagree. The church should not be controlled by the government.

Pass the cards out randomly to the class. If there are an odd number of people in the class, take a card for yourself as well, so that there will be an even number. Have someone whose card does not start with "I disagree" begin. He or she would read their card aloud. The person whose statement "disagrees" with it should go next until all the pairs are matched up.

Once all the pairs are matched up, discuss which disagreements are based on opinion and which can be settled by Scripture. Ask which disagreements are more important, and which are more divisive. Give people time to respond.

Creeds and Confessions in the 21st Century (25 mins)

Once there has been some time to discuss, explain that a lot of the things that people argue about in church are things that don't really matter. To demonstrate this, have everyone who had a card pair based on opinion put their cards back in a box. Explain that there are some things that people disagree about that *do* matter. To demonstrate this, have everyone who had a card pair that could be answered from the Bible put their cards up on a board. Explain that these are things that do matter, because of what the Bible tells us.

Explain that the creeds and confessions of the church are like summaries of the Bible, sort of like Cliffsnote (*do people know what this is here?*). They give a clear and simple summary of what the Bible teaches. And what the Bible teaches is different than what our culture teaches.

Ask the group for examples of what our culture teaches that is different from the Bible. These examples can come from ads, movies, popular music, politicians, books or

magazines. It might be helpful to bring a few examples along with you, to help get the discussion started. Ads from magazines or TV are especially helpful, as they often pose a materialistic and consumeristic worldview in which people deserve to have whatever they want, regardless of the cost or consequences. Many TV ads and movie clips can be found on YouTube.

Throughout the discussion, write a few of the cultural messages on the board as they come up in discussion or in the examples.

Examples: You deserve to have whatever you want—Your value is determined by how you look—Attraction is love—Lust is love—Money is happiness—Health is the most important thing in life—etc.

Explain that Scripture offers a different message, one of grace, and it is a message that is important for us to get right. Creeds and Confessions are tools that we can use to help us learn what the Bible says more clearly so that we can get the true story right.

The Decisions of the Synod of Dort (the five points) (25 mins)

Explain that in the Netherlands in the 17th century, there was a lot of conflict. The Netherlands was at war with Spain, which was Catholic, and it was very dangerous to be Reformed for a long time. But, eventually, more and more people became Reformed, until almost the whole country of the Netherlands was Reformed.

But then, people who called themselves the Remonstrants started challenging the Reformed interpretation of the Bible. (Remonstrance means “protest.” The Remonstrants were protesting the Reformed interpretation of the Bible). They said that the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism needed to be changed to fit their theology. They claimed to be following the teachings of Jacob Arminius, but Arminius had never said that the Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechism should be changed. The Remonstrants wrote up five points that they thought needed to be changed in Reformed theology:

1. God chooses people for salvation by looking into the future to see whether or not they will believe in him.
2. Jesus died for everyone, even though not everyone gets saved.
3. People are saved by working together with God.
4. God’s grace can be resisted.
5. Christians might be able to lose their salvation.

This caused a lot of conflict in the Netherlands. Since people had lived under persecution for so long when Spain (which was Catholic) controlled the Netherlands

(which was Protestant), their faith was really important to them. A lot of people throughout the country wanted a council to resolve this theological disagreement. It became important in other countries, too. Even James, the king of England, (the King James Bible guy) sent a letter to the Dutch government asking them to please hold a council to resolve this issue. So finally, in 1618, a council was convened at Dort where they would work out these issues. Delegates came from all over the Netherlands. There were also guests from England, Scotland, France, Germany, and Switzerland. The council lasted for six months, and did a lot of things. They created a church order for the Reformed churches (the CRC's church order is still based on the one from the Synod of Dort). They wrote up a Form of Subscription, which is like the Covenant for Officebearers that elders and deacons and pastors have to sign when they get ordained. They wrote a Dutch translation of the Bible. They made a new psalter-hymnal for the Dutch churches. And finally, they wrote the Canons of Dort, which responds to the five points of the Remonstrants.

Point 1: God chooses people for salvation because he wants to, not because of anything we have done or will do. If God decided whether to save us based on what we do, nobody would be saved, because we have all done bad things. The people God chooses to save are called **elect**, because God elected them for salvation.

Point 2: Jesus' death and resurrection doesn't just "open the door" to salvation, it *actually saves* the people God elected to salvation. Jesus' death is called **atonement** because it pays the debt that we owe for our sins.

Points 3-4: God created humankind to be good, but because the first humans disobeyed him, sin came into the world. Everything that we do is affected by sin. This is called **depravity**. Because of our depravity, there is nothing that we can do to help save ourselves. But thankfully, God's **grace** works in the elect through the Holy Spirit so powerfully that it totally transforms people.

Point 5: Believers can have confidence that God will keep them safe throughout their lives. Nothing can threaten their salvation because it depends on God, and not on them. This is called **perseverance**, because by God's grace, the elect persevere in salvation throughout their lives. Even though Christians still fall into sin, sometimes even serious sin, God still protects them and preserves them by his grace.

Making it Stick (15 mins)

Explain that what was at stake in the debate between the Remonstrants and the Reformed was the power of God's grace. The Remonstrants thought that Christians should work harder to make sure that they are saved, but the Bible teaches that our

salvation depends on God, not on us. Everything that we do should be out of gratitude for what God has done for us, not out of fear for our salvation.

Point 1: God's election

Point 2: Christ's atonement

Point 3-4: Sinful humanity is transformed by God's grace

Point 5: The Spirit preserves the saints.

Teach the group an acrostic to help them remember the five points made in the Canons of Dort.

F.A.I.T.H. (from *FAITH Unfolded* by Jim Osterhouse):

F Fallen Humanity
A Adopted by God
I Intentional Atonement
T Transformed by the Spirit
H Held by God

T.U.L.I.P. (from a 19th century handbook of doctrine):

T Total Depravity
U Unconditional Election
L Limited Atonement
I Irresistible Grace
P Perseverance of the Saints

We will spend the rest of the classes this year talking about each of these topics and why it is important.

Possible other topics for discussion:

1. What are current theological issues that people are debating? How should we go about these conversations?
2. What kinds of things are people arguing about in our church? Are these biblical or opinion issues?
3. How does the message of Scripture combat the attitudes of our culture? How can the creeds and confessions help us understand this message better?

Closing Prayer

What is ELECTION and why does it matter? (First Point of Doctrine)

Lesson Goals:

Know what? The doctrine of election teaches us three things: 1) that God gives us his grace as a free gift, not as something that we have to earn; 2) that we can know with certainty that God has elected us to salvation if we have faith; and 3) that our salvation is rooted in eternity, and cannot be undone.

So what? We can know for sure that we are saved, which is just awesome! Also, we know that being saved isn't because we are better than anyone else, which makes us humble.

Do what? Thank God for his gift of election by living a life of holiness and faith. Be humble, loving, and patient with people who do not believe in Jesus.

Entry Activity (15 minutes)

When people talk about "Calvinism," a lot of the time they talk about the issue of election or predestination. What have you heard about election? What criticism have you heard against it?

Read the following passages:

OT: Exodus 19:3-6; Deuteronomy 7:7-9; I Samuel 12:22; Psalm 65:1-4;

Gospels: John 6:37; John 6:44; John 10:25-29; John 15:16; John 15:19; John 17:2; John 17:9

NT: Acts 13:48; Ephesians 1:3-14; Romans 8:28-30; Romans 9:14-21; Romans 11:5-6; 2 Timothy 1:8-10; Titus 1:1; Titus 3:3-7; I Peter 2:4-10 (esp. 8-9)

So obviously, election and predestination are topics that Christians have to deal with, because the Bible talks about them. Even people who aren't from a Calvinist tradition can't just say "I don't believe in election" or "I don't believe in predestination," because the Bible talks about both of these topics. They might disagree with the Reformed perspective, or more likely with an overly-simple caricature of the Reformed perspective, but they have to deal with these passages, as well.

What is Election? (15 Minutes)

First Point, Article 7:

Election [or choosing] is God's unchangeable purpose by which he did the following:

Before the foundation of the world, by sheer grace, according to the free good pleasure of his will, he chose in Christ to salvation a definite number of particular people out of the entire human race, which had fallen by its own fault from its original innocence into sin and ruin. Those chosen were neither better nor more deserving than others, but lay with them in the common misery. He did this in Christ, whom he also appointed from eternity to be the mediator, the head of all the chosen, and the foundation of their salvation.

And so he decided to give the chosen ones to Christ to be saved, and to call and draw them effectively into Christ's fellowship through his Word and Spirit. In other words, he decided to grant them true faith in Christ, to justify them, to sanctify them, and finally, after powerfully preserving them in the fellowship of his Son, to glorify them.

God did all this in order to demonstrate his mercy, to the praise of the riches of his glorious grace.

As Scripture says, "God chose us in Christ, before the foundation of the world, so that we should be holy and blameless before him with love; he predestined us whom he adopted as his children through Jesus Christ, in himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, by which he freely made us pleasing to himself in his beloved" (Eph. 1:4-6). And elsewhere, "Those whom he predestined, he also called; and those whom he called, he also justified; and those whom he justified, he also glorified" (Rom. 8:30).

[*Activity:* Hand out this definition of election from Point I, Article 7 along with pens. Have the students (depending on the personality of the group, either in small groups or pairs or on their own) underline things that jump out at them and strike them and circle what they think are key words.]

[Emphases: God-Active Language, "Those chosen were neither better nor more deserving than others," idea of covenant faithfulness]

[Provide a guide/commentary to help teacher to be able to field questions]

Why does Election Matter? (15 min)

Remonstrants questioned traditional doctrine of election by God's good pleasure and tried to introduce a doctrine where election was based on God foreseeing whether or not people would have faith. This raised a couple of difficult questions:

-The Remonstrant position makes faith into a "work," meaning that we are not saved by grace (as Scripture tells us), but rather by our own work of faith. This continually raises the fear of not being "good enough" to be saved, because what if our faith isn't strong enough? In the Reformed perspective, faith is a gift from God, which God chooses to give to us. There is nothing we have to do to "earn" it. All we can do is accept it.

-The Remonstrant position raised doubts about whether the infant children of believers would be saved if they died in infancy. Under the Remonstrant perspective, we can't know whether an infant is saved or not, because we don't know whether the child would have grown up to be a person of faith. But this introduces a whole level of ridiculousness concerning a hypothetical reality that never happens. Under the Reformed perspective, we know that infant children of believers are saved because they are covered by the covenant promises of God.

- The Remonstrant position raises doubts about whether election can be changed. Under the Remonstrant position, we can never be sure of our salvation because it depends on us. Under the Reformed position, we can be absolutely sure of our salvation because of two things: first, God's decision of election is made before the foundations of the earth, which means that it is rooted in eternity, and so it can't be changed. Second, God gives us fruit in our lives to show us that we are saved: things like true faith in Christ, a childlike fear of God, godly sorrow for sin, a hunger and thirst for righteousness, a desire for holiness in life, etc. These things demonstrate to us that God has given us the gift of faith and filled us with his Holy Spirit, and that's something that nobody can ever take away from us.

Questions About Election (up to 30 min)

Usually people have a lot of questions about election, especially if they are friends with Arminians (Baptists, Mennonites, etc.). Here are a few questions that might be asked with some responses. We could do it either way: let the kids ask the questions and

answer them as the kids ask them, or ask the questions to the kids, let them discuss it, and then point them to relevant Scripture?

[Include a note about Calvin's hesitancy to teach this doctrine to immature believers]

1. Does election mean that people don't have free will?
2. What about the places in the Bible where God tells us to choose?
3. Isn't it unfair that God gives some people faith but not others?
4.

Making it Stick (15 min)

[Relate to infant baptism: sign and seal of the covenant]

Closing Prayer

What is the ATONEMENT and why should we tell everyone about it?

Lesson Goals:

Know what? The sacrifice of Christ is totally effective. It doesn't just open the door to salvation for some people, it actually accomplishes the salvation of all the elect.

So what? So we should tell everybody about it! Because this is good news!

Do what? Pray for your non-Christian neighbors, live a life that attracts them to the church, and be confident about your faith so that you can tell them about it when they ask.

Entry Activity (15 minutes)

Distribute a small piece of paper to each participant in your group along with a pen or pencil. Tell each person that what they write will not be collected or shared with anyone else. Ask them to write down as best they can when they were saved. Give a minute or two for people to think and write.

Ask: Have you ever been asked this question before? How does it make you feel to be asked when you were saved?

Does it matter if we don't know the exact date when we "made a decision for Christ"?

Why or why not? As Reformed believers, we know that it is important that we RESPOND to what Jesus has done, but that it does not all depend on "our decision".

Honestly we can say that when we were saved was 2,000 years ago, when Jesus took our sin and then rose again victorious over the grave. When he died he knew it was for you and me.

[Teacher note: Use your discretion depending on the demographic of the group to make it clear that we don't become Christians automatically by growing up in a Christian home. At some point what we have heard and learned needs to be personally embraced, but this is not always a lightning bolt moment. It is often a gradual process of growth and maturity through the Holy Spirit's leading.]

Part I: What is Atonement? (15 minutes)

The word "atonement" means that "God has provided a way for humankind to come back into harmonious relation with him," [Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology]. It is

God's work through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that makes it possible for us to be saved, redeemed, reconciled to God.

[Note to teacher: A number of the key words used in the Canons of Dort, Part 2 (wrath, satisfied, plan, faith, punishment Jesus endured) are echoed in the modern hymn "In Christ Alone".

Listen to a worshipful rendition of this hymn together.

With the words projected on a screen (or provide paper copies), highlight the following parts of the song

-verse 2. Discuss how Jesus came and faced the punishment we deserved. Note the line "the wrath of God was satisfied". Compare this to Article 2: "Since, however, we ourselves cannot give this satisfaction or deliver ourselves from God's wrath, God in boundless mercy has given us as a guarantee his only begotten Son, who was made to be sin and a curse for us, in our place, on the cross, on order that he might give satisfaction for us." What does this mean?

-verse 3 "As he stands in victory, sin's curse has lost its grip on me; for I am his and he is mine, bought with the precious blood of Christ." When we identify our lives with Jesus' life, we see that we really were saved at Jesus' death and resurrection.

-verse 4. "Jesus commands my destiny. No power of hell, no scheme of man, can ever pluck me from his hand". It is God's loving plan (Article 9) that "has been powerfully carried out and will also be carried out in the future, the gates of hell seeking vainly to prevail against it."

Part II: Why Should We Tell Everyone about It? (25 minutes)

Ask the group, "Raise your hands if you like wearing sandals or going about in bare feet in the summer time." Ask, "Have you ever had a stranger come up to you and remark that your toes and feet were beautiful?" Our feet usually keep a low profile and we tend not to be proud of what they look like. Maybe you know that there are a few times when the Bible refers to feet being "beautiful" and it's because they can carry the good news of God from one place to another.

While salvation/atonement is God's work, He has given us a task. We are responsible for telling our neighbors and living a life that attracts people to God. Have a volunteer read Romans 10:14-15.

Share Point II, Article 5: The Mandate to Proclaim the Gospel to All

Moreover, it is the promise of the gospel that whoever believes in Christ crucified shall not perish but have eternal life. This promise, together with the command to repent and believe, ought to be announced and declared without differentiation or discrimination to all nations and people, to whom God in his good pleasure sends his gospel.

[An older translation of this says we should announce and declare this message “promiscuously”: depending on the demographic of your group, you may wish to share this and reflect how this word can be used in a positive sense rather than the usual negative way]

Read the Parable of the Sower (Luke 8:4-15). When we hear the story of this farmer, we may think he is being wasteful to allow some of the precious seed to fall where he should know it will not grow. Pathways, rocky soil and weed infested ground are obviously not going to yield a crop. The story, however, is really about something more precious than seeds. It is about the Word of God. Why do we spread the word of God everywhere? Why don't we be more selective in who we share the message with? It is because we do not know people's hearts. We cannot tell from the outside who God will work in and who he won't, so we should just tell everybody. How can we be sensitive when sharing the message?

H. David Schuringa wrote an article called “Heidelberg Style Evangelism” in the *Banner* Oct. 2014. Provide a hard copy of this piece to the participants in your class and read through it together. Ask the group to share what stood out for them, regarding how we do outreach as Reformed Christians.

Making It Stick (15 minutes)

Option 1: Share the story of a missionary to India, William Carey, who was a Calvinist. On this You Tube video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vVgJAhQwBOY> an eight minute dramatization is given of the motivation and work of this pioneer missionary.

Afterwards discuss

-What was the initial response from an older pastor when Carey raised the idea of reaching the heathen? Is this a biblical attitude?

-William Carey went to India in 1793 because his trust was in God. His motto was “Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God.” How does this challenge you to missional living right where you are?

Option 2: Discuss the quiz on page 19 of the study guide (about missions at your church). As the quiz is discussed, it will help the participants see what is currently

being done to reach out and how they can be involved. Teachers will have to find the answers to these questions for their local context in advance.

Closing Prayer

What is Grace and why do we need it?

Know what? We need grace because we are fallen creatures and everything we do is tainted with sin. God's grace is the only way we can receive the incredible and amazing gift of salvation that can't be earned and isn't deserved.

So what? Sinners like us now have hope. Grace sets us apart from other faiths that rely on human merit. Grace is a foundation of the Reformation and the Canons of Dort

Do what? Recognize and appreciate the means of grace. Be willing to extend grace to others who have wronged us.

Entry Activity (15-20 mins)

Divide the class into pairs and provide each set with the interview questions below. (If you have an odd number of participants, then the instructor should join the pool.) You can use one of the following criteria to divide them into pairs:

- Count the number of participants and divide by two. Ask people to number themselves until you get to that half number and then start over again with 1. The 1's are partners, the 2's, 3's, etc.
- Ask the group to make their own partners. Request that family members not go together.
- Bring pairs of coloured items equal to the size of your group in a basket or bowl. (Lego bricks, smarties, marbles, beads, etc.). Have each person choose an item and then join up with the other person who chose the same colour.

Allow about 15 minutes for this part. When you regroup, ask if a few people would like to briefly share their answers to # 2 with everyone.

Interview Questions

Ask each other these questions so that each person has the opportunity to both ask and answer each question. It is not necessary to write down the answers.

1. What is the best birthday gift that you ever received? Why was it so special to you?

2. When you hear the word "grace", is there a person, song, Bible story or something else that you think of?

3. When you were a child, did you ever do something wrong at home or school and receive a second chance instead of punishment? Tell me a little bit about it.

What is grace? (10-15 mins)

Building on the answers given by the group, discuss what grace means. Use the following questions to guide the discussion: (teacher hints follow each one)

-When did God's grace begin? (God's grace began right at creation. God's nature is to give, so that is why he made the world in the first place. It continued even after humanity fell into sin.)

-Why do we need grace? (The Bible teaches: "No one is righteous; not even one" Romans 3:10. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" Romans 3:23. In the Canons of Dort, the idea of "total depravity" is explained in Point 3 & 4. Read together Article 3. Every part of us as humans [our will, reason, our consciences, etc] are tainted by sin and without God's grace we cannot come to a saving knowledge of the truth. Obeying laws can't achieve this saving knowledge either.)

-How is the doctrine of grace unique among other faiths? (Every other religion is based on being good enough, earning the favour of a deity. Salvation in Islam is based on doing good works and balancing out one's misdeeds. Salvation in Hinduism comes by generating good karma and then advancing to a better being in the next life. Various cults tell people that if they get rid of eating and drinking the wrong things and be a "good" person they will be accepted. Other faiths have rituals that if you follow them to a T, then you can be assured of the favour of the deity. In Christianity we know that there is no way for us to earn our own way. We trust that Jesus made a way and that this gift is freely available through the means of faith in him.)

-Why do those outside the faith not always see the grace aspect of our faith? What makes that difficult? (Many Christians come across emphasizing behaviour and morals when they speak in the public sphere [family values, anti-abortion]; grace is not natural to any of us, so our habits of thinking in terms of merit and deserving are hard to break. Think of the adages "The early bird gets the worm" and "No pain, no gain" and "You get what you pay for." These do not make room for grace, do they?)

Show and Tell (15 mins)

Use one of the following methods to dive into a Biblical story of grace

- 1) Read the Parable of the Prodigal Son from Luke 15, discuss the different ways the father showed grace to his son, and then view these paintings of the story. <http://keehuachee.blogspot.ca/2013/07/the-return-of-prodigal-son-in-paintings.html>
- 2) Watch/Listen to Keith Green's song "The Prodigal Son". Some video versions are available on You Tube. You should preview anything you will show first. The song itself is about 10 minutes long and the singing begins about 2 minutes in, but it brings the story across in a powerful way.
- 3) Do a case study on the Apostle Paul, using the following passages: Acts 9:1-19

I Timothy 1:12-17, Ephesians 2:8-10. Discuss the following:

- What kind of life had Saul lived prior to his conversion?
- Why does Saul say he had been shown mercy? (I Timothy 1:16)
- How did God's grace transform Saul?
- What does Saul's story tell us about God's character?
- How does his story give hope to sinners?

- 4) Listen to a contemporary song e.g. Newsboys "Real Good Thing" or Big Daddy Weave "I'm Redeemed". Provide lyrics for people to follow along. Discuss afterwards how "grace" is described in the song.

Grace Under Attack (5-10 mins)

Review this context of the Canons of Dort:

The meetings of the synod in 1618-19 began with an oath to use "no human writing, but only the Word of God, which is an infallible rule of faith." In the end, they countered Point 3 & 4 of the Remonstrants with the statement that God's grace is effectual. That is, when God extends his saving grace to an individual, it will not fail to produce saving faith in that person. Read from Canons of Dort, Parts 3 & 4, Articles 14-15. This can be read by a member of the class or in unison.

**The term "Irresistible Grace" is sometimes used for this "point" in the Canons of Dordt, but this terminology was not original to the Canons. It can be misleading and imply coercion, so theologian Michael Horton recommends the term "effectual calling". That is, God's call WILL be answered. It is adequate/capable of accomplishing God's purposes. (p. 257 *Pilgrim Theology*)

Means of Grace (10 mins)

How does the grace of God come into our lives? Ask the class to tell you what the ways are. They are the WORD and the sacraments. It is pretty obvious that God's word is the way we come to know God's grace, through the working of the Holy Spirit. But how do the Sacraments bring grace into our lives? Discuss.

(The sacrament of baptism reminds us each time that it is God who makes the first move in showing grace to a human being born with a sinful nature. It is not because there is anything worthy or deserving in the person being baptized! God's grace comes to us through Jesus' cleansing work through his death and resurrection.)

(The sacrament of communion reminds us that we have no merit of our own that allows us to come to the table, but that we are invited by a gracious and loving God to have this fellowship of sharing a meal with him. We see once again that He gave his only son for our sakes. Refer to the hymn "Ah, Holy Jesus, How Have You Offended" [P.H. #386].)

Living Grace (15 minutes)

Three options for making grace more practical for our daily lives

- 1) (Bring a paper shredder to class, but keep it hidden under a cloth or blanket until the right time.) Ask the members of your class to think about someone who has hurt them recently or in the past who is still in their lives. It could be a neighbour, a family member, or someone else. Give each person an index card to write down what this person did that hurt them. (Fill out an index card yourself) Assure them that nobody else will see it and that they will not have to show it to anyone else. They can write as much or as little detail as they want to. When finished, have them put the card face down in front of them. Ask these general questions: “Do you think somebody in this world could write an index card about something you have done to hurt them?” “Do you think God could write a book about all the things you have done to hurt Him?” Yet, God extends grace to you and will forgive you through Jesus’ finished work. Now you have a choice. Will you hold onto your index card, keep it in your wallet and look at it regularly to remind you of the hurt someone has done to you? Or will you let go of this offence, extend grace to this person and put the card in the shredder? (Put your own card into the shredder.) When God gives grace to us, it is not just “Hooray, God saved me.” There is a responsibility to extend that grace to others. Read the line from the Lord’s Prayer: “Forgive us our debts AS WE FORGIVE OUR DEBTORS”. Do not pressure anyone to publicly shred their card; in fact don’t even suggest it. Let it sit with them as a visual lesson.
- 2) There is something called “common grace” in the Reformed tradition. It basically means that God extends a level of grace to all human beings, but it cannot save them. Read from (Acts 14:16-17; Acts 17: 16-31). Discuss what are some things God gives graciously to believers and unbelievers alike. Through God’s common grace, what are some “points of contact” in mainstream culture that Christians can address to bring across the message of salvation? (some examples may be a song that seems to call out to a divine being, news articles, gardening, dates on the calendar [e.g. “Good Friday”], and many more.)
- 3) Discuss how parenting or relationships become different if they are grace-based. How do we keep the right balance between consequences for wrongdoing with forgiveness and second chances? Invite participants to share examples from their own lives (when they were children or when they were parents).

Closing Prayer

What is PERSEVERANCE and how does it help us?

Lesson Goals:

Know what? Even though Christians still sometimes fall into sin, God preserves them by his Word and Spirit so that they can persevere in faith throughout this life.

So what? We should never be afraid to confess our sins to God because we know that he has already forgiven us and will give us the strength to overcome it.

Do what? Live confidently, both in terms of being honest in confessing your sins and in pursuing holiness in all of life.

Entry Activity (15 minutes)

["If you died tonight, would you go to heaven?" This was a popular style of evangelism in the 80s and 90s. How could Christians (think about people who are Reformed and also people from other denominations) answer that question? How would people of other faiths answer that question?]

Perseverance vs. Preservation (15 minutes)

[Big idea: The perseverance of Christians is possible because of the preservation of God.]

[Perseverance is like a marathon runner. Perseverance is about pushing through to the end. ... Preservation is like a jar of jam (the jam doesn't really have an important role to play in its preservation, it's all accomplished by someone else). Preservation is about protecting someone or something, about keeping it something safe or alive.]

Sin in the Christian Life (20 minutes)

[Big idea: Christians who have the Holy Spirit still sin, but sin doesn't rule our lives anymore]

[Examples from Scripture: (leader should pick a couple)

Peter in Antioch (Gal. 2:11-13)

Paul and Barnabus fight over John Mark (Acts 15:36-41)

I Corinthians is all about the effects of sin in the lives of believers:

Divisions in the church (1:10-12)

Sexual immorality (5:1-13)

Abuses at the Lord's Supper (11:17-34)

Letters to the churches in Asia Minor (Rev. 2-3)

All of these stories demonstrate that even true Christians who have been given the Holy Spirit still have sin in their lives that they need to confess and fight.]

[Point V, Article 1: The Regenerate Not Entirely Free from Sin

Those people whom God according to his purpose calls into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord and regenerates by the Holy Spirit, he also sets free from the reign and slavery of sin, though in this life not entirely from the flesh and from the body of sin.]

[Point V, Article 7: Renewal to Repentance

For, in the first place, God preserves in those saints when they fall his imperishable seed from which they have been born again, lest it perish or be dislodged. Secondly, by his Word and Spirit he certainly and effectively renews them to repentance so that they have a heartfelt and godly sorrow for the sins they have committed; seek and obtain, through faith and with a contrite heart, forgiveness in the blood of the Mediator; experience again the grace of a reconciled God; through faith adore his mercies; and from then on more eagerly work out their own salvation with fear and trembling.]

Assurance of Salvation (20 minutes)

[Big Idea: The fact that we can know for sure that God saves us and preserves us throughout life should inspire us to live in a way that pleases God every day.]

[Article 12: This Assurance as an Incentive to Godliness

This assurance of perseverance, however, so far from making true believers proud and carnally self-assured, is rather the true root of humility, of childlike respect, of genuine godliness, of endurance in every conflict, of fervent prayers, of steadfastness in crossbearing and in confessing the truth, and of well-founded joy in God. Reflecting on this benefit provides an incentive to a serious and continual

practice of thanksgiving and good works, as is evident from the testimonies of Scripture and the example of the saints.

Article 13: Assurance No Inducement to Carelessness

Neither does the renewed confidence of perseverance produce immorality or lack of concern for godliness in those put back on their feet after a fall, but it produces a much greater concern to observe carefully the ways of the Lord which he prepared in advance. They observe these ways in order that by walking in them they may maintain the assurance of their perseverance, lest, by their abuse of his fatherly goodness, the face of the gracious God (for the godly, looking upon his face his sweeter than life, but its withdrawal is more bitter than death) turn away from them again, with the result that they fall into greater anguish of spirit.]

Making It Stick (10 minutes)

- Rubber band illustration: Christians are like a rubber band. God may let us wander, but he always pulls us back
- Have students share a text or experience that assured them that “nothing can snatch you from God’s hand”
- Memorize a verse together

Closing Prayer

Appendix: Resources on THE CANONS OF DORT

Print Resources

William Boekestein & Evan Hughes, *The Glory of Grace: The Story of the Canons of Dort* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).

An illustrated introduction to the history and theology of the Canons of Dort. Good for kids and adults.

Jim Osterhouse, *F.A.I.T.H. Unfolded: A Fresh Look at the Reformed Faith* (Grand Rapids: Faith Alive, 2011).

Offers F.A.I.T.H. as an alternative to the traditional T.U.L.I.P. acronym for understanding the five points of Calvinism set forth in the Canons of Dort.

“F is for Fallen Humanity. A is for Adopted by God. I is for Intentional Atonement. T is for Transformed by the Holy Spirit. H is for Held by God.” (11)

Michael Horton, *For Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).

From the Introduction:

“Many people have certain assumptions about what Calvinism will lead to on the basis of misunderstandings about what it teaches and therefore where it logically leads. Calvinism ranks knowing above feeling and doctrine above doing, it is often assumed. Underscoring God’s sovereignty, human sinfulness (even that of believers), justification by an imputed righteousness, and utter dependence on grace surely undermines personal responsibility. And if you stress God’s sovereignty and grace too much, you’ll not only stop evangelizing; you’ll stop praying, praising, and pursuing holiness. It’s a recipe for disaster.

But the actual history of Calvinism—including what Calvinists have consistently written, preached, prayed, sung, and witnessed—doesn’t fit the stereotypes.” (13)

Richard Mouw, *Calvinism in a Las Vegas Airport: Making Connections in Today’s World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004).

“My main focus here is not on what Calvinists believe. To be sure, I will actually get into some Calvinist specifics here and there. But ... I am more interest here in questions about Calvinist character and mood. I want to focus here on how to be a Calvinist in the twenty-first century.” (17)

Cornelius Planginga, Jr., *A Place To Stand: A Study of Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions*, (Grand Rapids: CRC Board of Publications, 1981): 132-159.

A straightforward, Reformed interpretation of the Canons that avoids the TULIP breakdown and instead deals with each section as written up in the Canons in order (Chs 27-31. “27:

Introduction to the Canons," "28: Divine Election and Reprobation," "29: The Death of Christ and Our Redemption," "30: Corruption and Conversion," "31: The Perseverance of the Saints").

Kenneth Stewart, *Ten Myths About Calvinism: Recovering the Breadth of the Reformed Tradition* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2011).

Goes through misconceptions about Calvinism, both from within and from without. For example, he claims that people who identify as Calvinists falsely claim that they follow only the teachings of John Calvin and that they follow John Calvin's teachings completely, that TULIP is the best expression of the Reformed faith, and that Calvinists don't care about revival. On the other side, he critiques non-Calvinists who falsely claim that Calvinists are anti-missionary, antinomian, theocratic, anti-art, against gender equality, and an agent of racial inequality.

Richard Muller, "The Canons of Dort," *CTS Forum* (Winter 2013): 11-12.

Offers a more helpful way of thinking about the Canons than TULIP by presenting the four article headings under which the Canons are organized. And it's short :)

Michael Horton, "Chapter Ten: Chosen and Called" in *Pilgrim Theology: Core Doctrines for Christian Disciples* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011): 245-270.

Chapter 10 of *Pilgrim Theology* covers issues of election and predestination throughout Christian history and theology, helping to put the Canons of Dort in historical and theological perspective.

David Steele and Curtis Thomas, *The Five Points of Calvinism: Defined, Defended, Documented* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1963).

Three parts: 1) History and content of the Canons of Dort. 2) Biblical defense of the "five points" of Calvinism. 3) Bibliography of books and articles that deal with Calvinism and Arminianism.

Edwin Palmer, *The Five Points of Calvinism: A Study Manual* (Grand Rapids: Guardian Press, 1972).

"The title *The Five Points of Calvinism* can be misleading. For Calvinism does not have five points; and, neither is Calvin the author of these five points. ... Calvinism is not restricted to five points: it has thousands of points. ... It is as broad as the Bible." (5)

A helpful resource in that in going through each of the five points it first explains what the points are not, getting confusing misunderstandings and misinterpretations out of the way before expositing what they are.

Other Resources

From the Denominational Website (2011):

The Decision of the Synod of Dort on the Five Main Points of Doctrine in Dispute in the Netherlands is popularly known as the Canons of Dort. It consists of statements of doctrine adopted by the great Synod of Dort, which met in the city of Dordrecht in 1618-19. Although this was a national synod of the Reformed churches of the Netherlands, it had an international character, since it was composed not only of Dutch delegates but also of twenty-six delegates from eight foreign countries.

The Synod of Dort was held in order to settle a serious controversy in the Dutch churches initiated by the rise of Arminianism. Jacob Arminius, a theological professor at Leiden University, questioned the teaching of Calvin and his followers on a number of important points. After Arminius's death, his own followers presented their views on five of these points in the Remonstrance of 1610. In this document and in later more explicit writings, the Arminians taught election based on foreseen faith, the universal application of Christ's atonement available to all who freely choose to accept it, limited human depravity, the resistibility of God's grace, and the possibility of a fall from salvation. In the Canons the Synod of Dort rejected these views and set forth the Reformed teaching on these points with the purpose of offering a deeper assurance of salvation to believers in accordance with the teaching of the Scriptures.

The Canons are thus unique among the Reformed confessions because of their original purpose as a judicial decision on the doctrinal points in dispute during the Arminian controversy. The original preface called them a "judgment, in which both the true view, agreeing with God's Word, concerning the aforesaid five points of doctrine, is explained, and the false view, disagreeing with God's Word, is rejected." The Canons also have a narrower scope than the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism in that they do not cover the whole range of doctrine but focus on the five points of doctrine in dispute.

Although in form there are only four points in the Canons of Dort, we speak properly of five points, because the Canons were structured to correspond to the five articles of the 1610 Remonstrance. Main Points Three and Four were combined into one, always designated as Main Point Three/Four. Each of the main points consists of a positive and a negative part, the former being an exposition of the Reformed doctrine on the subject, the latter a repudiation of the corresponding errors. While the Reformed Church in America does not give confessional status to the Rejection of Errors, it nevertheless recognizes that the rejections help interpret the Canons by highlighting the specific errors addressed.

The biblical quotations in the Canons are translations from the original Latin and so do not always correspond to current versions. Though not in the original text, subheadings have been added to the positive articles and to the conclusion in order to facilitate study of the Canons.

From the Gray Psalter Hymnal (1987):

The Decision of the Synod of Dort on the Five Main Points of Doctrine in Dispute in the Netherlands is popularly known as the Canons of Dort. It consists of statements of doctrine adopted by the great Synod of Dort which met in the city of Dordrecht in 1618-19. Although this was a national synod of the Reformed churches of the Netherlands, it had an international character, since it was composed not only of Dutch delegates but also of twenty-six delegates from eight foreign countries.

The Synod of Dort was held in order to settle a serious controversy in the Dutch churches initiated by the rise of Arminianism. Jacob Arminius, a theological professor at Leiden University, questioned the teaching of Calvin and his followers on a number of important points. After Arminius's death, his own followers presented their views on five of these points in the Remonstrance of 1610. In this document or in later more explicit writings, the Arminians taught election based on foreseen faith, universal atonement, partial depravity, resistible grace, and the possibility of a lapse from grace. In the Canons the Synod of Dort rejected these views and set forth the Reformed doctrine on these points, namely, unconditional election, limited atonement, total depravity, irresistible grace, and the perseverance of the saints.

The Canons have a special character because of their original purpose as a judicial decision on the doctrinal points in dispute during the Arminian controversy. The original preface called them a "judgment, in which both the true view, agreeing with God's Word, concerning the aforesaid five points of doctrine is explained, and the false view, disagreeing with God's Word, is rejected." The Canons also have a limited character in that they do not cover the whole range of doctrine, but focus on the five points of doctrine in dispute.

Each of the main points consists of a positive and a negative part, the former being an exposition of the Reformed doctrine on the subject, the latter a repudiation of the corresponding errors. Although in form there are only four points, we speak properly of five points, because the Canons were structured to correspond to the five articles of the 1610 Remonstrance. Main Points 3 and 4 were combined into one, always designated as Main Point III/IV.

The new translation of the Canons, based on the only extant Latin manuscript among those signed at the Synod of Dort, was adopted by the 1986 Synod of the Christian Reformed Church. The biblical quotations are translations from the original Latin and so do not always correspond to current versions. Though not in the original text, subheadings have been added to the positive articles and to the conclusion in order to facilitate study of the Canons.

From Wikipedia (2014):

The Canons of Dort, or Canons of Dordrecht, formally titled The Decision of the Synod of Dort on the Five Main Points of Doctrine in Dispute in the Netherlands, is the judgment of the National Synod held in the Dutch city of Dordrecht in 1618–19. At the time, Dordrecht was often referred to in English as "Dort."

Today the Canons of Dort form part of the Three Forms of Unity, one of the confessional standards of many of the Reformed churches around the world, including the Netherlands, South Africa, Australia, and North America. Their continued use as a standard still forms an unbridgeable problem preventing close cooperation between the followers of Jacob Arminius, the Remonstrants, and Dutch Reformed Churches.

These canons are in actuality a judicial decision on the doctrinal points in dispute from the Arminian controversy of that day. Following the death of Arminius (1560–1609), his followers set forth a Remonstrance (published in 1610) in five articles formulating their points of departure from the stricter Calvinism of the Belgic Confession. The Canons are the judgment of the Synod against this Remonstrance. Regardless, Arminian theology later received official acceptance by the State and has since continued in various forms within Protestantism.

The Canons were not intended to be a comprehensive explanation of Reformed doctrine, but only an exposition on the five points of doctrine in dispute. The five points of Calvinism, remembered by the mnemonic "TULIP" and popularized by a 1963 booklet, are popularly said

to summarize the Canons of Dort. However there is no historical relationship between them, and some scholars argue that their language distorts the meaning of the Canons.

The Text of the Remonstrance (in English):

Article I — That God, by an eternal, unchangeable purpose in Jesus Christ, his Son, before the foundation of the world, hath determined, out of the fallen, sinful race of men, to save in Christ, for Christ's sake, and through Christ, those who, through the grace of the Holy Ghost, shall believe on this his Son Jesus, and shall persevere in this faith and obedience of faith, through this grace, even to the end; and, on the other hand, to leave the incorrigible and unbelieving in sin and under wrath, and to condemn them as alienate from Christ, according to the word of the Gospel in John iii. 36: "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life; and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him," and according to other passages of Scripture also.

Article II — That, agreeably thereto, Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, died for all men and for every man, so that he has obtained for them all, by his death on the cross, redemption, and the forgiveness of sins; yet that no one actually enjoys this forgiveness of sins, except the believer, according to the word of the Gospel of John iii. 16: "God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life"; and in the First Epistle of John ii. 2: "And he is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world."

Article III — That man has not saving grace of himself, nor of the energy of his free will, inasmuch as he, in the state of apostasy and sin, can of and by himself neither think, will, nor do anything that is truly good (such as having faith eminently is); but that it is needful that he be born again of God in Christ, through his Holy Spirit, and renewed in understanding, inclination, or will, and all his powers, in order that he may rightly understand, think, will, and effect what is truly good, according to the word of Christ, John xv. 5: "Without me ye can do nothing."

Article IV — That this grace of God is the beginning, continuance, and accomplishment of a good, even to this extent, that the regenerate man himself, without that prevenient or assisting, awakening, following, and co-operative grace, can neither think, will, nor do good, nor withstand any temptations to evil; so that all good deeds or movements, that can be conceived, must be ascribed to the grace of God in Christ. But, as respects the mode of the operation of this grace, it is not irresistible, in as much as it is written concerning many that they have resisted the Holy Ghost,—Acts vii, and elsewhere in many places.

Article V — That those who are incorporated into Christ by a true faith, and have thereby become partakers of his life-giving Spirit, have thereby full power to strive against Satan, sin, the world, and their own flesh, and to win the victory, it being well understood that it is ever through the assisting grace of the Holy Ghost; and that Jesus Christ assists them through his Spirit in all temptations, extends to them his hand, and if only they are ready for the conflict, and desire his help, and are not inactive, keeps them from falling, so that they, by no craft or power of Satan, can be misled, nor plucked out of Christ's hands, according to the word of Christ, John x. 28: "Neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand." But whether they are capable, through negligence, of forsaking again the first beginnings of their life in Christ, of again returning to this present evil world, of turning away from the holy doctrine which was delivered them, of losing a good conscience, of becoming devoid of grace, that must be more

particularly determined out of the Holy Scriptures before they can teach it with the full persuasion of their minds.