

# Discussion on the Canons

*This discussion is reprinted from the first issue of Beacon Lights, January, 1941. It asks and answers some very important questions about creeds and confessions that we must know. This discussion is continued in the four installments of Beacon Lights following January 1941. You can see them at [beaconlights.org](http://beaconlights.org). A couple of typing mistakes found in the original are corrected in brackets [ ].*

## Questions

1. What are Standards or Confessions?
2. Should a church have Confessions? What is their value and purpose?
3. Do Confessions have the same authority as Scripture?
4. Do they not bind the conscience of the Christian?
5. Can Confessions be altered? In what way?
6. Which are the Standards of the Reformed Churches?
7. What is the difference between the Christian Reformed and the Protestant Reformed Churches as to their Confessions?
8. What is the meaning of the word Canon?
9. What was the occasion of the formulation of these Canons of Dordrecht?
10. What are Pelagians? Arminians? Remonstrants ? Contra-Remonstrants?
11. How many chapters do the Canons contain? What is the subject of each?
12. What do you understand by divine predestination? By election? By reprobation?
13. Can you prove the doctrine of election from the Bible? Reprobation?
14. Why does chapter I begin with a statement of the sin of all men in Adam? See art. 1.
15. What, according to this first article is the standpoint of the Canons, Supra- or Infra-lapsarian?

16. Of what does art. 2 speak?
17. Can men be saved outside of the sphere of the preaching of the gospel?
18. To whom is the gospel preached? See art 3.
19. Why is the gospel preached to all men? Why not only to the elect?
20. What distinction is caused by the preaching of the gospel? See art. 4.
21. What is the significance of the preaching of the gospel for the reprobate unbeliever?
22. Are children also saved by means of the preaching of the gospel if they die before the age of discretion?
23. What does it mean to receive and embrace Christ? See art. 4.
24. Whose is the guilt of unbelief? Whence is the gift of faith? See art. 5.
25. Why do some receive the gift of faith, others not? See art. 5.

### **Answers**

1. Standards or Confessions (creeds, rule of faith, symbol) are comprehensive formulas, expressing with ecclesiastical authority what a church or group of churches believes to be the truth of the Word of God. They are called standards or symbols, because they are criteria of what is taught and confessed in the church or churches uniting around them; and because they declare publicly the faith of that church or those churches. They are called Creeds or Confessions from the viewpoint that their contents are the object of the faith of the church.

2. A church should have standards or confessions, chiefly because it is the calling of the church as well as of the individual Christian to confess the name of Christ and the truth as it is in Jesus and to preserve the truth in generations even over against every attack of error and false doctrine.

Their value and purpose:

a. As summaries of the truth revealed in Scripture they are an aid to the understanding of the Word of God.

- b. They preserve the labor of the church of the past in expounding the Scriptures under the guidance of the Spirit.
  - c. They are a basis and bond of union among believers and churches that subscribe to them.
  - d. They are a means for the instruction of the children of the church in sound doctrine.
  - e. Their purpose is to declare unto the world the faith of the church and preserve the church from error.
3. They certainly do not have the same authority as Scripture. Scripture has original and absolute authority; confessions have derived authority, i.e. only as they are in harmony with Scripture and relative, i.e. it is admitted that a standard or creed may be changed and expanded, according as the church gains a fuller insight in the Scriptures.
4. This is the indictment brought against creeds by all their opponents, such as Unitarians, Socinians, Quakers and Rationalists. They claim that creeds interfere with the free interpretation of the Bible and bind the conscience of the believer by the doctrines and institutions of men.

This would be true if the creed is placed above Scripture instead of being subordinated to it; and if subscription to creeds were not the free choice and act of every believer. Any Christian is at any time at full liberty, should his conscience so dictate in the light of the Word of God to break with a creed, which implies that he breaks with the church professing the same.

5. Confessions certainly can be altered and often are altered, either because the church develops and grows in the knowledge of the truth, or because the faith of the church must be defended against new errors that arise.

The alteration must be based on the Word of God. If it is not it is a corruption.

The alteration may be suggested or requested in the regular ecclesiastical way by an individual member or group of members.

The alteration must be officially approved and adopted by the largest representative gathering of the church.

The alteration even so must be submitted to approval or tacit acquiescence by the members of the church.

6. The standards of the Reformed churches are: The Heid. Catechism, The Netherland or Belgic Confession [, and The Canons] of Dordrecht.

7. The difference between the Christian Reformed Churches and the Protestant Reformed Churches with respect to their Confessions is, that the [latter] merely acknowledge the Three Forms of Unity, the [former], since 1924 have added Three Points of doctrine to the Reformed Confessions, which are essentially corruptions of the Reformed Symbols.

8. The meaning of the word Canon is rule. Applied to a Confession it is a rule of faith, or of the truth. This is, therefore the meaning in the title: Canons of Dordrecht.

9. The occasion of the formulation of the Canons of Dordrecht was the teaching of James Arminius and his followers in the last part of the sixteenth and the first part of the seventeenth century, which implied a denial of the truth of predestination and related doctrines.

10. Pelagians are followers of Pelagius, a heretic of the fifteenth century, who taught that man has a free will to do good by nature, denying original sin and total depravity.

Arminians are followers of Arminius of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, who taught that God's election and reprobation depended on foreseen faith and unbelief and related errors.

The Arminians of the sixteenth century are called Remonstrants because a representative group of them in 1610 drew up a document which they called a remonstrance, in which they briefly set forth their belief in five formulas of doctrine.

Contra-remonstrants is a name applied to the Reformed fathers of the sixteenth century, because they formally answered and opposed the Remonstrants.

11. The Canons contain five chapters, as follows :

I. Of divine predestination.

II. Of the death of Christ and the redemption of men thereby.

III-IV. Of the Corruption of man, his conversion to God and the manner thereof.

V. Of the perseverance of the saints.

12. Predestination is God's eternal counsel with respect to the eternal destiny of his rational-moral creatures; men and angels.

Election is God's sovereign, eternal, and gracious decree to ordain and save some to eternal glory in Christ and in the way of faith.

Reprobation is God's sovereign, eternal and righteous decree to ordain some to eternal damnation as punishment for their sin.

13. Election: Rom. 8:29, 30; Eph. 1:3, 4, 11; II Tim. 1:9; II Thess. 2:13-15; John 6:37, 39, 65; 10:27-30; Rom. 9:15, 16, 23.

Reprobation: Prov. 16:4; John 10:26; Rom. 9:17, 21, 22; I Pet. 2:8.

Both: Matt. 11:25, 26; Rom. 9:13, 16, 18.

14. Because the Canons present the doctrine of election as the decree of God according to which he chose some to eternal life out of the fallen human race. It is the purpose of the Canons to maintain that God could righteously do so, because he might have left all in their sin. It follows, that the doctrine of reprobation is presented as meaning that God left others in their sin.

15. It is evident, then, even from this first article, that the standpoint of the Canons is Infra-lapsarian.

Infra- and Supra-lapsarian are two views, both acknowledged to be Reformed, of the decree of Predestination. The terms are derived from the Latin: *supra*, i.e. above, *infra*, i.e. below and *lapsus*, i.e. fall. By these terms is expressed, that predestination is before the decree of creation and the decree of the fall. The order in the decree is, therefore, as follows: 1. God's determination to glorify himself. 2. Predestination, i.e. the decree to glorify himself in vessels of honor and vessels of dishonour. 3. Creation, i.e. the decree to create all things good. 4. The decree of the fall.

Infra-lapsarianism presents the order as follows: 1. God's determination to glorify himself. 2. The decree of creation. 3. the decree of permitting the fall. 4. The decree of predestination.

Although the Canons proceed from the Infra-lapsarian viewpoint, the Supra-lapsarian view was never condemned and always acknowledged to be Reformed.

Better it is to proceed from the question, what in God's decree is purpose or end, and what it means unto that purpose or end. Then we have the following order in God's decrees: 1. God determined to glorify himself. 2. He predestined the church in Christ. 3. He predestined the reprobate to serve the realization of the church, as chaff must

serve the wheat. 4. He ordained all things in heaven and on earth to serve the realization of election and reprobation.

16. Article 2 speaks of the manifestation of the love of God in the sending of his Son into the world, for the salvation of them that believe. Notice, that the Canons approach the doctrine of election from the viewpoint of the salvation of believers. The following is the line it follows: a. Man is fallen. b. God will save them that believe in his Son. c. He calls to faith by the gospel, d. He gives the faith to whom he wills. e. He wills to give faith to the elect only.

17. There is no Scriptural ground for the position of some, that even in the heathen world, outside of the sphere of the preaching of the gospel, there is salvation. We may surely believe, that God will send his gospel wherever there are his people. The apostles were sometimes forbidden to preach the gospel in a certain place while in other places they must labor for some time, because God had much people in the place.

18. The gospel is preached to whom God wills. For it is God that prepares the field for the preaching of the gospel; it is God that prepares his church to preach the gospel; it is God, too, that in due time prepares men and calls them to preach the gospel. After all, it is Christ that gathers his church.

19. The gospel is not preached to all men. In fact, there are comparatively but a few that ever hear the gospel. Ultimately it must be preached to all nations, but it need not be preached to every individual. The reason undoubtedly is, that the gospel must be preached only in those places and at that time, where and when God has his elect in such places. Nevertheless, the gospel is not to be preached only to the elect, even if this were possible. The reason is, that God wills that also some reprobates shall hear the gospel, that sin may become fully manifest as sin.

20. The distinction between those that believe and have eternal life; and those that do not believe and are hardened. A distinction that must ultimately lead to the conflict of Christ and Antichrist.

21. The significance of the preaching of the gospel for the reprobate unbeliever is: a. That it reveals the perverseness of his sinful nature. b. That it hardens him in sin. c. That it aggravates his guilt. d. That it makes his condemnation heavier.

22. Children are not saved through the preaching of the gospel, if they die before the age of discretion. Regeneration in the narrower sense is immediate.

23. There is a difference between receiving the gospel of Christ and embracing him. Receiving him rather looks at the matter from the viewpoint of that act of Christ whereby he imparts himself to us and he prepares a place for himself in our hearts. Embracing or accepting him rather looks at it from the viewpoint of the activity of saving-faith, whereby we appropriate him as our personal Redeemer.

24. Unbelief is sin. Of all sin, also of the sin of unbelief man is the author. He will not come to Christ, because he is wholly depraved. For the same reason, faith is solely the gift of God. No man would believe unless God would work the power of faith in him.

25. This is solely to be attributed to God's sovereign election and reprobation. No other considerations enter in. It is on this point that Reformed people radically differ from all others. Only when this is maintained can absolute predestination be accepted as the truth.