AOSIS

The Trinity in the Canons of Dordt?

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In this article the question regarding to the Trinity in the Canons of Dordt is specifically asked in the light of a broader structure of the Reformed orthodox doctrine of God in the early modern period (1500–1700). The first part of the article attempts to shed light on the Trinity in Reformed orthodoxy and, in this light, the second part will highlight an understanding of the inherent doctrine of the Trinity in the Canons of Dordt.

Introduction

The article asks about the doctrine of the Trinity in the Canons of Dordt (1618–1619). The Canons of course, did not in the first place, address the question of the Trinity. It address questions under the caption of predestination.

In his essay on the doctrine of predestination in Reformed orthodoxy, Rouwendal (2013:558)[1] argues that predestination, like any doctrine in the Reformed theological system, was 'no freestanding component'. It was related to other doctrines and this relation was such that, removing the doctrine of predestination from the system, 'threatened the ability to maintain other doctrines'. To remove or change any one of the doctrines that were in this system, in fact could be a threat to upholding the biblical doctrine of predestination. He argues that predestination had its roots in the doctrine of God. In fact, 'his eternity, will, knowledge, unchangeableness, and so forth were the soil on which the doctrine of predestination grew'.[2]

The question about the Trinity in the Canons of Dordt therefore requires an in-depth understanding of the doctrine of God in the Reformed orthodoxy of the early modern period (1500–1700). Muller (2016), however, recently argued that the theologies that arose in Reformed circles during the two centuries between the 16th century and the beginning of the 18th were diverse and variegated with differences arising out of:

> local issues and controversies, church-political concerns in various states and principalities, varied receptions of the older theological and philosophical traditions, (and) differing appropriations and rejections of the newer philosophical approaches of the era. (p. 167)

He makes it clear that Reformed orthodoxy or the development thereof was anything but monolithic.

This is also the case when it comes to the doctrine of the Trinity in the early modern period. Beck (2016b:196) argue that the renewed interest and research with regard to the doctrine of God in the early modern period have unveiled 'a considerable diversity of detail that underlie the apparent uniformity resulting from the common use of the scholastic method'. Although the Reformed orthodox systems were meant to fit within confessional borders that in themselves, showed some variety of different regions and times, they did not form a monolithic bloc.

The question regarding the Trinity in the Canons of Dordt, can naturally be answered in numerous ways. It is possible to ask how the first or second generation Reformers or the medieval period[3] in which their doctrines developed, generally understood the Trinity and how the Reformed orthodox doctrine, as found in Dordt, corresponds or differs from these doctrines.[4]

1.Please note that all the quotes in each respective paragraph belong to the author mentioned at the beginning of that paragraph unless indicated otherwise.

2.Compare in this regard also the essays on Christ and predestination by Van Asselt (2013; 2016).

3.Vos (2013:125), for whom early modern Reformed theology is mainly scholastic, argues that medieval studies are crucial for post-Reformation studies, as Protestant Scholasticism 'is simply a part of the whole of Western Scholasticism'. For a perspective on the sources, methods and forms of different perspectives within early modern theology, compare Leinsle (2016).

4.In his essay on Calvin and the Canons of Dordt, for example, Sinnema (2011c) argued that, although the Canons were most certainly influenced by John Calvin, it is almost impossible to be sure what the Synod took from him.

It is also possible to ask how the Reformed confessions, more particularly the Belgic Confession (1561) and the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) understood the Trinity. The Synod of Dordt were in agreement with these confessions. In fact, they did not want to deviate from them.[5]

In terms of the *Belgic Confession*, Beck (2016a), for example argued that the first article of the Confession where God is described as 'eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, unchangeable, infinite, almighty; completely wise, just, good, the overflowing source of all good', should not be understood as:

> an attempt at an abstract conceptualization of the divine Being, but as a statement in the context of divine attributes as they have been included through the centuries in the doctrine of God. (p. 26)

For Beck (2016a:29), the same is true of the articles of the Belgic Confession on the Trinity where God is inter alia described as the 'one God, who is one single essence, in whom there are three persons, really, truly, and eternally distinct according to their incommunicable properties – namely, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit'. The Father is described as 'the cause, origin, and source of all things, visible as well as invisible', the Son as 'the Word, the Wisdom, and the image of the Father' and the Holy Spirit as 'the eternal power and might, proceeding from the Father and the Son'. According to the Belgic Confession (Art. 8), 'this distinction does not divide God into three'. Rather, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit 'each has his own subsistence distinguished by characteristics', in such a manner that the three is only one God. Despite their distinctions, they are 'neither divided nor fused or mixed together'. In fact, 'all are equal from eternity, in one and the same essence'. There is neither a first nor a last; 'all three are one in truth and power, in goodness and mercy'.[6]

In terms of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, Te Velde (2015:127), for example argued that, while the Catechism 'limits itself to basic statements of the points of Christian doctrine, without the detailed questions and concepts of scholarly theology', the co-author Zacharias Ursinus, who was thoroughly trained in the scholastic philosophy and theology of his

time, considered at a deeper and more detailed level the implications of the brief statements. What is interesting is his argument that Ursinus in his detailed explications 'establishes a deeper connection between the immanent and the economical Trinity', on the one hand, and on the other, that:

> the divine properties or attributes do not belong to an abstract, philosophical and un-biblical conception of God, but that these attributes explicate the nature and character of the true, Triune God.

In fact, the attributes 'arise from the Trinitarian economy of salvation'. It is for this reason, he argues, that the Heidelberg Catechism does not contain a separate doctrine of God as it is 'included and implied by the doctrine of the Trinity it teaches'.[7]

It will, however, also be possible to ask about the doctrine of the Trinity in the theology of Arminius,[8] and as a second question, his followers to which the Synod of Dordt reacted. In fact, in his essay on the Trinity in the mentioned period, Lehner (2011) argues that the Trinitarian thought of Jacob Arminius has often been neglected.[9]

In this article, however, the question regarding the Trinity in the Canons of Dordt will specifically be asked in light of *a* broader structure of the Reformed orthodox doctrine of God in the early modern period. Despite the fact that the Synod (led by Bogerman)[10] advised that 'the orthodox doctrine of the Reformed churches should be set forth, as much as possible, in the very clearest words suitable to the capacity and edification of the common people and be supported by very solid reasons and arguments', and in spite of the fact that 'the order and style of these canons (were) to be directed to the instruction of the churches', in other words, that the Canons were '*not* (to) be scholastic or academic',[11] it was coloured by the scholasticism that characterised the delegates' own theologies. In fact, Dordt

....

(footnote 4 continues...)

For a perspective on his thoughts on the doctrine of the Trinity, compare Baars (2005). His thoughts have inter alia been picked up by Smit (2009:36–50) in his essay on the Trinity in the Reformed tradition. He asks if the doctrine of the Trinity have any special significance for the early figures in the Reformed tradition and for their successors, if it is possible to distinguish specific Reformed perspectives regarding the doctrine of the Trinity. He answers by referring to at least five motifs that appear regularly in Reformed thought; in Calvin and again, albeit in diverse and complex ways, in well-known 20th century theologians. These motifs include the following: a 'Biblical grammar'; the motif of a 'living God'; a 'Trinitarian spread'; the motifs of a 'pastoral purpose'; and a 'practical pattern'.

For a perspective on Calvin's thoughts on the Dordt related theme of predestination, compare Muller (2008:17–38). In terms of the question of this article, it is important to ask regarding the relation between Calvin's doctrine of the Trinity and predestination.

5.Rohls (1998:22) states that the Synod of Dordt 'confirmed the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism as confessional writings of the church of the Netherlands'. In line with Rohls, Van Lieburg (2011) argued that:

> despite the great significance of the Dordt synod as the delimiter and guardian of Reformed truth, the fact remains that decisions concerning the doctrine of predestination had already been made earlier in Dutch reformed history. (p. 1)

6.In terms of this article, the question of the relation between the doctrine of the Trinity and of predestination will have to be asked.

7.Again, in terms of this article, is the question of the relation between the doctrine of the Trinity and predestination.

8.Compare in this regard Bangs (1998), Brian (2015), Den Boer (2010; 2011), Muller (2002), Olsen (2009), Stanglin (2009), Van Leeuwen (2009) and Van Leeuwen, Stanglin and Tolsma (2009).

9.Prior to the important research of Muller (1991) and Dekker (1993), Den Boer (2010) argues:

> Arminius' theology was almost exclusively approached from the five most controversial points as expressed in the Remonstrance (1610), the disputes that followed it, and finally the decisions made at the Synod of Dordt. (p. 35)

Where Stanglin and McCall (2012:81) remarks that 'even a cursory reading of Arminius's work on the Trinity shows that he was deeply committed to classical Trinitarian orthodoxy', Lehner (2011:248) reiterates that the Remonstrants 'gave up the Trinity as a fundamental article of faith'. The question is thus not only how Arminius' doctrine of the Trinity relates to predestination. These relations are also to be studied in the Remonstrants' theology leading up to Dordt.

10.Bogerman quoted in Sinnema (2011b:318).

11.Sinnema (1986) argues that:

> although the scholastic approach was well established by the early seventeenth century, it was nevertheless common for Reformed theology to make a distinction between the scholastic treatment of theology, done especially in the schools, and a popular treatment of theology, done in preaching and in teaching the uneducated. (p. 497)

He highlights that the popular character of the Canons does not mean 'that no scholastic thinking was involved in the formation of the Canons'. He argues, rather, that 'behind the popularly written Canons lay, in the minds of the drafters, a somewhat scholastic understanding of their order'.

cannot be understood without at least an analysis of the underlying scholastic structure.[12]

The first part of this article will therefore attempt to shed light on the Trinity in the early modern period of Reformed orthodoxy. The aim of this part of the article is *not* to give a detailed description of what the Reformed doctrine of the Trinity is as if there is *a* doctrine of God in this period. This part rather asks about the broader structure of the doctrine of the triune God in this period's Reformed orthodoxy. In this light, the second part will highlight an understanding of the inherent doctrine of the Trinity in the Canons of Dordt. The fact that the doctrine of the Trinity is merely inherent in what is now being confessed as one of the three *formulieren van eenigheit* is of importance, as the Canons is inter alia not to be loosened, firstly, from the questions it wanted to answer;[13] and secondly, from the way it wanted to answer these questions.

The Trinity in Reformed orthodoxy

Beck (2016b:197–204) has argued that it is true of most, if not all, Reformed orthodox theologians 'that the triune God is envisaged from the very beginning'. Throughout the *locus de Deo*, he argues, they had the Trinitarian God in mind. In fact, 'the Reformed orthodox considered the doctrine of the Trinity to be a fundamental article of faith, the use of which was essential for all Christians'.

Muller, in *The Triunity of God* (2003d),[14] argues that the Reformed orthodox developed their teaching on the Trinity in conscious dialogue with the patristic and medieval tradition. For him, the history of the doctrine of the Trinity from the 16th to the 18th centuries is, from one perspective, 'little more than the history of the defence of traditional orthodox formulations against a variety of resurgent … heresies'. However, a rather different picture emerges if the question is asked regarding the Trinity in terms of:

the extent and manner in which the theologians of the Reformation and Reformed orthodoxy received and used the materials of the tradition, the ways in which they dealt with the problems of anti-Trinitarian heresies[15] and the patterns of stress and strain on both language and exegesis caused by the philosophical and critical changes that took place in the course of these centuries. (p. 59)

Muller (2003d) argues that the Reformed orthodox theologians with regard to the doctrine of the Trinity grounded the formulae and the traditional language more completely and explicitly on the biblical traditions than had been done for centuries.[16] According to him, dogmatic concepts were eminently biblical in their meaning and intention despite the non-biblical origins of the oft used language. Although these theologians were wary of philosophical speculation, even to the point of finding many of the arguments of the fathers and the scholastics unacceptable, it is for him, fairly clear that the orthodox reception of the scholastic method, inter alia provided a:

methodological and philosophical context within which traditional Trinitarian language well served the needs of orthodoxy in the face of continuing pressure from the anti-Trinitarian arguments and other critics of dogmas. (p. 61).[17]

In his essay on the doctrine of God in Reformed orthodoxy, Rehnman (2013:356) answers the question of why the Reformed orthodox' doctrine of God is divided into the existence of God, the nature and attributes of God, and the persons in God by arguing that 'a discourse about God supposes an (more or less clear) account of how words can be used meaningfully about God'.[18] According to him, it is central to Reformed orthodoxy 'that humans cannot know what God is or can only know what God is not'. Although knowing God is impossible, it is possible to talk about God. He therefore argues that the Reformed orthodox doctrine of God is 'structured in response to this difficulty of talking meaningfully about God'. For him, three ways – causality, negation and eminence – structures the doctrine, highlighting his argument that the doctrine is divided on the basis of an account of how language is used about God.

12.Beck (2016a:35) argues that if the Canons of Dordt is analysed in its historical context by taking into account the scholastic background of the delegates and their debates, it becomes clear that, on the one hand, 'the Reformed confessions do not belong to the genre of scholastic writing and are not primarily meant to be used in the academic setting', and on the other, that the scholastic background of these theologians enabled them to place their confessional writings in the broader catholic tradition of the Christian church and to include patristic and medieval theological insights'. Beck would therefore argue that despite the diversity inherent in both orthodox and scholastic thinking, 'there is no conflict but harmony' between them. For him:

studying these confessions against the background of the more scholastic writings of their authors may even help to fully see the theological nuances in their articles on doctrines such as divine predestination. (p. 35; compare also Van Asselt 2007).

13.The 'several drafts of the Canons, amendment suggestions on some of the drafts by the various delegations at the Synod, and a variety of drafting committee documents' are, of course, also to be reflected on if the question regarding the Trinity in the Canons of Dordt is to be answered sufficiently. This is clear in Sinnema (2011a:291, 307), who argues that the collection of informal working documents on the formation of the Canons are significant as they 'make it possible to trace the development of thought that went into the drafting of the specific articles of the Canons', thus contributing to a more differentiated conceptualisation of the 'nuances of thought and why an article is formulated the way it is'. As these documents have never been gathered into a collection, and as they have not been precisely identified and only a few have ever been transcribed from the original Latin, this article will restrict its focus to the Canons of Dordt.

For an attempt to put the Synod in its proper historical context by an exploration of newsprints, propaganda, allegorical representations, satires and emblems related to the Synod of Dordt, compare Spaans (2011).

14.Muller's *Post-Reformation Reformed dogmatics* consists out of four volumes. The first volume deals with the *Prolegomena to theology* (2003a), volume two with *Holy Scripture* (2003b) as the cognitive foundation of theology, and volume three with *Divine essence and attributes* (2003c).

15.Muller (2003d:59) argues that the doctrine of the Trinity was formulated in the context of large scale assault on the Trinity. This is also the argument of Lehner who argues that the 16th century not only saw a diversification of Christianity in its characteristic confessionalisms, but an anti-Trinitarian movement. Lehner (2011:240, [*author's italics*]) interestingly ads the explosion of mystical theology, 'with its numerous approaches to the mystery of the *triune* God'.

16.Compare Trueman (2016) who argues that, during these centuries:

a series of intellectual developments and theological challenges continued to press the Reformed toward greater refinement, both of their doctrine of scripture and understanding of exegesis, while also calling into question whether a commitment to traditional theological formulations regarding the unity of scripture and possibility of connecting traditional doctrine to scripture, was possible. (p. 180)

17.Muller (2003d) adds the Reformed orthodox' reception of the early orthodox critical appropriation of philosophical views of the older dogmatic tradition. Krop (2011:50, [*author's italics*]) argues 'for the absence of *direct* links between the philosophical views adopted by the delegates and the conclusions reached in the theological issues debated at Dordt'. This is the case despite the fact that 'a significant number of the delegates at the Synod were professional philosophers'.

18.Rehnman (2013) argues that the doctrinal progression from God's existence (part 1) over God's nature and attributes (part 2) to persons in God (part 3) should be obvious:

for, that there is something has to be settled before what this something is like can be considered; and what something is like has to be settled before the manner this something can be considered. (p. 386)

The first part on the existence of God provides the basis for talking about God. Rehnman (2013:357) argues that human discourse about God cannot proceed 'from some innate concept or idea of God that causes us to know that God is'. Reformed orthodoxy therefore typically argues that 'all knowledge of God is from effects to cause'. It is possible to speak about God 'from things in the world known as effects of their first cause'. The basis of the doctrine of God therefore is the minimal affirmation that God is the first cause of everything.

The doctrine on the existence of God is about 'what humans strictly can know of God, namely the positive statement that God is' (Rehnman 2013:368). This requires both biblical exegesis and philosophical reflection. The brief treatment of the existence of God is not aimed, however, at 'establishing the existence of God', as would have been done in philosophy, but rather 'to remind the reader that a cause of everything has been established'.

For Rehnman (2013), Reformed orthodoxy therefore generally maintains a causal argument, demonstrating the existence of God 'from effect to cause', thus commonly defending the *a posteriore* and not the *a priore* argument for the existence of God, demonstrating *that* God is, and not why or what God is. This doctrinal part does not claim knowledge of what God is, but simply 'that the word "God" can only be used correctly for whatever is the cause of the being of everything else'. In other words:

> if God were not the cause of everything that exists, then God would not be what we use the term 'God' for; namely, that which could not be otherwise than it is. (p. 370)

The second part of the Reformed orthodox doctrine of God has to do with the divine nature and attributes. Every cause 'exerts itself in bringing about effects and communicates some likeness or similitude of itself to its effect(s)' (Rehnman 2013:359). This is the case as it is generally held 'that every effect is what it is because of what its cause is'. The Reformed orthodox, however, distinguishes between a univocal cause, 'that can be grasped by the same concept', and an equivocal cause, 'when the definitions of what a cause is and what an effect is are not the same'. It is the Reformed orthodox understanding of God as an equivocal cause that comes to expression in the widespread Reformed orthodox division of divine attributes into 'communicable and incommunicable ones'. This distinction therefore subdivides the second part of the Reformed orthodox doctrine of God into two parts.

The first subdivision of the second part concerns the incommunicable attributes, 'saying God is *not* so and so'. Rather than leading to positive affirmations straightaway the bases provided by part one leads to negative affirmations concerning God, namely 'that God does not exist with the composite, variable, temporal, and finite features of the creation' (Rehnman 2013:359). For him, the seemingly positive predications are thus really negative predications or denials.

The second subdivision of the Reformed orthodox doctrine of God concerns the communicable attributes, 'saying God *is* so and so' (Rehnman 2013:360). It is possible for people to talk about God in such terms of likeness because of what they know about God's effects or works, for 'every cause communicates some likeness, resemblance, similitude, or analogy of itself to its effect(s)'. The basis for the possibility of saying something about God 'is the principle that effects are like or similar to their causes'. In God causing them to exist, 'God communicates some likeness of himself' to what he caused to exist. This causal likeness thus is 'the ground for analogical predication'.

For Rehnman (2013:371), this part thus concerns 'both God as wholly other than what everything else is, and God as somewhat similar to what everything else is'. It begins with 'a denial of every limitation to God (*incommunicable*)' and continues with an affirmation of 'some similarities to God (*communicable*)'.

In terms of the incommunicable attributes, 'simplicity' is mentioned first. With simplicity is meant that 'nothing is in God that is not God himself' (Rehnman 2013:377–379). Second is 'infinity' by which is meant 'utter boundlessness, without every limit and boundary, not restrained by any boundaries'. This infinity is related to 'space' in the sense of 'immense or immeasurable space', and to 'time' in the sense of 'eternity or ceaselessness' (pp. 379–381). He thirdly mentions 'immutability' or changelessness which means that 'God brings about change but is not changing'. In fact, it is denied that God changes at all or to even have the possibility to change, whether in terms of existence or will (p. 381).[19]

According to Rehnman (2013:384), the incommunicable attributes make the communicable attributes *just* communicable, that is, 'predictable analogically and not univocally'. In terms of the principle communicable attributes he mentions, in the first place, 'life'. With this attribute is meant that God is conceived 'as directing, enjoining, and executing created things'. Inwardly, this life is connected to 'intellect and will', and outwardly, to 'power'.[20]

The third part of the Reformed orthodox doctrine of God has to do with the persons in God. The doctrine of the Trinity aims at coherence in the statement that the three Persons in the Godhead are one person 'by means of technical terms and analogical reasoning' (Rehnman 2013:391).

For Rehnman (2013:386, [*author's italics*]), everything that can be truly said of God, can be truly said of the Father, of the

19. In his chapter on the first order of divine attributes, Te Velde (2013:139) lists ten attributes – 'simplicity, independence, aseity, spirituality, infinity, eternity, omnipresence, incomprehensibility, immutability, and perfection' – which he then lists under the headings of the mentioned simplicity, infinity and immutability.

20. Te Velde (2013:139), in his chapter on the second order of divine attributes, refers to knowledge which 'directs the actor towards the possible options of action', the will which 'decides which of the possible actions should be performed', and power which 'is responsible for the actual execution of the preceding decision of the will'. Although he refers to 'knowledge' and not to 'intellect' when referring to the second order divine attributes, as is the case with Rehnman (2013:175), Te Velde (2013:139) argues that the Reformed orthodox normally start with drawing a larger picture of God's cognitive capacities, including 'wisdom, skill, understanding, prudence, and indeed, knowledge'.

Son, and of the Holy Spirit; yet, 'everything that can be truly said of each, cannot be truly said of all'. For the Reformed orthodox theologians, 'what God is like needs to be set out *before* God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit can be explained'. It is in this manner, he argues, that the parts of the Reformed doctrine of God make up one whole. For him, to proceed in the opposite direction would mean that 'there are three Gods of one divine kind'.

The Reformed orthodox doctrine of the persons in God commonly begins with and persists 'in reaffirmations of the incomprehensibility and mystery of God' (Rehnman 2013:389). Although the words *Father*, *Son* and *Holy Spirit* can be used correctly of God, argues Rehnman, it is not always possible to know 'what the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are'.[21] In fact, 'we cannot understand how we are using these words in the context of God, namely, that God is (immutable) infinite simplicity and Father, Son, and Holy Spirit'. It is because of this incomprehensibility, he argues, 'that the Reformed orthodox doctrine of the Trinity is brief in comparison to the doctrine of God as a whole'.

The Reformed orthodox doctrine of the Trinity is thus about the analogical predication of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. For him (Rehnman 2013:393), the communicability and incommunicability are therefore also central in this third and final part. The divine essence can be communicated to divine persons – 'the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit share being God or the divine essence is common to the divine persons'. But, 'the manner in which the Father is God, the manner in which the Son is God, and the manner in which the Holy Spirit is God', can essentially not be communicated.

Rehnman (2013:393) acknowledges that, although Reformed orthodoxy does not generally abstract 'the meaning and use of talk about God' from the doctrine of God, as he did, this abstraction does allow further understanding of the structure of the doctrine.[22]

How then does the inherent Trinity in the Canons of Dordt relate to this structure of the Reformed orthodox doctrine of God?

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21. This is also the argument of Wisse and Meijer (2013). They argue from a Reformed scholastic perspective that the Holy Spirit, for example, was not always explicitly mentioned. This, however, is not due to a *Geistvergessenheit*. It rather is:

> prompted by God's actions as the actions of all divine persons together, although these actions can sometimes be attributed to the Father, Son, or Spirit in a specific way. This is not because it belongs to one of them in an exclusive manner, but because Scripture speaks about it in this way. (pp. 515–518)

In fact, they argue that:

> all appropriations to the distinct divine persons of the Trinity are limited by the fact that in every work of the Trinity *ad extra*, all three divine persons always play a role. An act of the Trinity is never an act of only one person. This implies also that the work of a specific person of the Trinity can never be made completely functionally transparent, because it will never be just one divine person who acts in a specific way within the Trinity. As a consequence of this, the relationship between the one divine essence and the three divine persons can never be completely elucidated.

22. Van Asselt and Rouwendal (2011:1) argue that the term *scholasticism* is to be associated 'not so much with content but with method, an academic form of argumentation and disputation'. Compare in this regard also Muller (2003e:25–46) on scholasticism and Reformed orthodoxy, and Goudriaan (2006) on the relation between philosophy and Reformed orthodoxy, focussing particularly on Gisbertius Voetius who was present at the Synod of Dordt, and Petrus van Mastrict and Antinius Driessen.

The Trinity in Dordt?

The Canons of Dordt does not start with the *predestining* God, as is suggested by its caption, but with all people who 'have sinned' (*peccaverint*) (Art. 1). In fact, no one was 'better or more deserving' (*nee meliorum, nec digniorum*) (Art. 7, Rejection V, IX). They were all 'equally lost' (*æqualiter perditorum*), all in 'common misery' (*communi miseria*) and this was their 'own fault' (*sua culpa*) (Art. 6, 7). It was God's right to 'condemn them' (*damnare*). Indeed, God would have done no one an 'injustice' (*injuriam*) if it had been his will to leave the entire human race in sin (Art. 1).

However, before the foundation of the world, in line with the 'free good pleasure of his will' (*secundum liberrimum voluntatis suæ beneplacitum*) (Art. 7, 10), with his 'single good pleasure, purpose, and plan' (*unicum … beneplacitum, propositum, et consilium*) (Art. 8), 'his entirely free, most just, irreproachable, and unchangeable good pleasure' (*ex liberrimo, justissimo, irreprehensibili, et immutabili beneplacito*) (Art. 15), 'out of mere grace' (*ex mera gratia*), 'in order to demonstrate his mercy' (*ad demonstrationem suæ misericordiæ*) and 'glorious grace' (*gloriosæ suæ gratiæ*), God, 'most wise, unchangeable, all-knowing, and almighty' (*sapientissimus, immutabilis, omniscius, et omnipotens*) (Art. 11), in his 'eternal decree' (*æterno … decreto*) 'predestined' (*prædestinavit*) a definite number of people to be 'chosen' (*electio*) (Art. 7).

It is not various elections, but 'one and the same election for all' (*Hæc electio non est multiplex, sed una et eadem*) (Art. 8, Rejection II), an election that 'can neither be suspended nor altered, revoked, or annulled' (*nec interrumpi, nec mutari, revocari, aut abrumpi*) (Art. 11, Rejection II).

He did this in Jesus Christ whom he also 'appointed from eternity' (*etiam ab æterno*) for salvation (Art. 7). In fact, God revealed his 'care' (*charitas*) for the chosen by (sending) his 'only-begotten' (*unigenitum*) Son into the world (Art. 2). It was Christ that was to be 'the mediator (*Mediatorem*), the head of all those chosen (*omnium electorum caput*), and the foundation of their salvation' (*salutisque fundamentum constituit*) (Art. 7). God, in fact, decided to give the chosen ones to Christ, to 'call and draw' them effectively into Christ's fellowship (*vocare … trahere*) (Art. 3, 7).

He did this to bestow upon them true 'faith' (*fide*), 'justification' (*justificare*), 'sanctification' (*sanctificare*) through his 'word and Spirit' (*verbum et Spiritum*) (Art. 3, 7, Rejection I, [*author's italics*]). These 'fruits and effects' (*fructus et effectus*) 'flow forth' (*profluunt*) from election (Art. 9) and they are secured or assured of this election not by an 'inquisitive searching into the hidden deep things of God' (*non quidem arcana et … Dei curiose scrutando*) (Art. 12, Rejection V), but by the 'infallible fruits' (*fructus … infallibiles*), inter alia by the 'adoration of the fathomless depth of God's mercies' (*abyssum misericordiarum ejus adorandi*) (Art. 13, Rejection VII) pointed to in his word through the Spirit.

Through these gracious and 'free gift(s) of God' (*gratuitum Dei donum*) (Art. 5, Rejection III), those whom he has chosen with a true and living faith will be delivered from 'God's anger' (*ira Dei*); they will receive eternal life (Art. 2, 4). The fact that it is given to some and not to others is due to God's decree. The 'cause or blame' (*caussa seu culpa*) for sin and unbelieve, however, is not to be found in God, but in the people themselves. In fact, God is sin's 'fearful, irreproachable, just judge and avenger' (*tremendum, irreprehensibilem ... justum judicem ... vindicem*). The unchosen by his just judgement, he 'leaves' (*relinquit*) (Art. 6, 15). In fact, precisely as a 'display of his justice' (*ad declarationem justitiæ suæ*) (Art. 15, Rejection VIII), God's anger 'remains on those' (*super eos manet*) who do not believe (Art. 4). This election is thus not based on 'a prerequisite cause or condition' (*caussa seu conditione*) in the person to be chosen (Art. 9, Rejection II, IV), but in God who is 'the cause' (*Caussa*) (Art. 10).

For the chosen, who cannot be cast off or their number reduced (Art. 11), this gracious and just 'election and reprobation' (*electionis et reprobationis*) thus is or offers 'comfort beyond words' (*ineffabile præstat solatium*) (Art. 6, Rejection VI). *This* is the 'unchangeable purpose of God' (*immutabile Dei propositum*) (Art. 7, Rejection VI) and it should be taught to God's people today. It should, however, be done with a 'spirit of discretion, in a godly and holy manner, at the appropriate time and place, without inquisitive searching into the ways of the Most High' (*cum spiritu discretionis, religiose et sancte, suo loco et tempore, missa omni curiosa viarum altissimi scrutatione*). In fact, it should be done 'for the glory of God's most holy name, and for the lively comfort of God's people' (*ad sanctissimi nominis divini gloriam, et vividum populi ipsius solatium*) (Art. 14, 16, 17). This is then what Dordt does in the following main points.

Where the focus was in the first main point on God's predestination or election, the second main point focuses on this election in Christ, *on his death and human redemption through it*. In a way, it is an explanation of what God did *in Christ*.

In line with the first main point, it starts with sin. God is not only 'supremely merciful' (*summe misericors*), but also 'supremely just' (*summe justus*) (Art. 1). This justice cannot be avoided and therefore all are to be punished for the sins committed against his 'infinite majesty' (*infinitam majestatem*) (Art. 1, Rejection V).

To avoid this justice, 'satisfaction' (*satisfacere*) is thus to be offered to God's justice. Because people are not able to give this to God (Rejection V), God himself 'in his boundless mercy' (*immensa misericordia*) gave them such a satisfaction in Jesus Christ. In fact, as a 'sponsor' (*Sponsorem*), a new 'covenant' (*novum fœdus*) or a new 'covenant of grace' (*novum gratiæ fœdus*), his only-begotten Son was made to be sin 'in their place, on the cross' (*in cruce pro nobis*) (Art. 2, Rejection II). This death is the 'only and entirely complete'

(*est unica et perfectissima*) satisfaction; it is 'more than sufficient' (*abunde sufficiens*) for atonement of all (Art. 3, Rejection VII). This is the case not only because Jesus Christ is 'true and perfectly holy' (*verus et perfecte sanctus*), but also because he is the Son of God, 'of the same eternal and infinite essence with the Father and the Holy Spirit' (*ejusdem aeternæ et infinitæ cum Patre et Spiritu S. essentiæ*) (Art. 4).

The fact that many, despite his death being announced and declared without differentiation or discrimination to all nations and people (Art. 5), do not believe is not because what Christ did was 'deficient or insufficient' (*defectu, vel insufficientia*) (Art. 6). It was sufficient, but only 'effective' (*efficacia*) for the chosen ones (Rejection VI).

The fact that many thus do believe, as it has been highlighted in the first main point, is 'solely from God's grace' (*sola Dei gratia*) given to them in Christ 'from eternity' (*ab æterno*) (Art. 7, Rejection IV). Dordt thus, again, links what Christ has done to the 'very gracious will and intention' (*gratiosissima voluntas atque intentio*) of God the Father in line with the structure of God as described above. It was the Father that gave the chosen to him to 'effectively' (*efficaciter*) save (Art. 8, Rejection III). In fact, it is God's 'fixed and definite plan' (*certo ac definito consilio*) (Rejection I), emanating from his 'eternal love for his chosen ones', (*æterno erga electos amore*) that has been 'carried out' (*impletum*) (Art. 9, Rejection VII).

The third and fourth main doctrine on *human corruption, conversion to God and the way it occurs* again starts with sin, with 'blindness, terrible darkness, futility, distortion of judgement in their minds, perversity, defiance, hardness in their hearts and wills, impurity in all their emotions' (*cœcitatem, horribiles tenebras, vanitatem, ac perversitatem judicii in mente, malitiam, rebellionem, ac duritiem in voluntate et corde, impuritatem denique in omnibus affectibus contraxit*); in short, with total corruption (Art. 1, 2, Rejection IV). This corruption of people spread and therefore all are 'inclined to evil, dead in their sins, and slaves to sin' (*propensi ad malum, in peccatis mortui, et peccati servi*) (Art. 3, Rejection I).

They are trapped in a total inability that distorts even 'a certain light of nature' (*lumen aliquod naturæ*) that remains in people (Art. 4, Rejection III). This inability is also highlighted in terms of the law which merely exposes 'the magnitude of sin' (*magnitudinem ... peccati*) (Art. 5). What neither the light of nature nor the law are able to do (Rejection V), God, who 'does not owe this grace to anyone' (*gratiam ... nemini debet*) (Art. 15), does *through the* 'grace of the regenerating *Holy Spirit*' (*Spiritus Sancti regenerantis gratia*) (Art. 3), through 'the power of the Holy Spirit' (*Spiritus Sancti virtute*) (Art. 6).

It is God who 'calls' (*vocantur*) the many through the good news (Art. 8, Rejection V) and it is he, not people and their 'free choice' (*liberum arbitrium*) (Art. 9, Rejection III), who

'works true conversion in them' (*veram in iis conversionem operatur*) (Art. 10, 11) through the Spirit (Rejection VI). This means that he, in a 'supernatural' manner (*supernaturalis*) (Art. 12, 13, 17, Rejection VII), 'illumines' them (*illuminat*) so that they can 'understand and discern' (*intelligant et dijudicent*). He 'infuses them with new qualities' (*novas qualitates infundit*), 'activating them' and allowing them to 'bear fruits of good deeds' (*fructus bonarum actionum proferre possit*) (Art. 11, 16, Rejection VIII). Dordt describes this as a 'most powerful and most pleasing, a marvellous, hidden, and inexpressible work' (*potentissima simul et suavissima, mirabilis, arcana, et ineffabilis operatio*) (Art. 12).

It is all 'done' by God (*efficiat*) who 'bestowed, breathed and infused' (*conferatur, inspiretur, et infundatur*) it into them (Art. 14, Rejection IX). Also what the Spirit does, is thus linked to God and the 'mystery of his will' (*voluntatis suæ mysterium Deus*) which he made manifest due to his 'free and good pleasure and undeserved love' (*in liberrimo beneplacito, et gratuita dilectione*) (Art. 7, 17).

In line with the first, second, third and fourth, the fifth main point on *the perseverance of the saints* starts with sin. Those who have been called by God into fellowship with Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit are not entirely unbinded 'from the body of sin' (*corpore peccati*) (Art. 1). It is because of these 'sins of infirmity' (*infirmitatis peccata*) that they would 'perish and be dislodged' (*pereat ... excutiatur*) if left to their own (Art. 2, 4, 5, 7).

They are therefore continually urged toward what could be described as the triune God who is 'rich in mercy' (*qui dives est misericordia*) (Art. 6). He 'mercifully confirms' (*misericorditer confirmat*) them 'to the end' (*ad finem*) in the grace that he once conferred on them (Art. 3, Rejection I). God does not 'take his Holy Spirit from his own completely' (*Spiritum Sanctum ... a suis non prorsus aufert*) (Art. 6). In fact, with God it cannot possibly happen that they are taken from his own (Art. 8, Rejection III).

This is the case, as his plan cannot 'be changed' (*mutare*), his promise cannot 'fail' (*excidere*), his purpose cannot 'be revoked' (*revocari*) (Art. 8, 10, Rejection II). What God has done through Jesus Christ and his Holy Spirit cannot be 'nullified' (*irrita reddi*), 'invalidated' (*frustranea*) or 'wiped out' (*deleri*) (Art. 8, 9, Rejection IV). In fact, it is in and through Jesus Christ (Art. 8, Rejection IX) and the Holy Spirit that they have this 'assurance of the preservation' (*perseverantiæ certitudinem*) (Art. 11, 12, Rejection V, VIII).

This is their 'incentive' (*stimulus*) to godliness (Art. 12, 13, 14, Rejection VI, VII).

He does not 'let them fall down so far that they forfeit the grace of adoption' (*nec eousque eos prolabi sinit, ut gratia adoptionis*) (Art. 6). This is their comfort, their 'well founded comfort' (*solido ... solatio*), that they are 'children and heirs' (*filios et hæredes*) of the 'Father of all comfort' (*Pater omnis*

consolationis) (Art. 10); in fact, of God 'the Father, Son and Holy Spirit' (*Patri, Filio, et Spiritui Sancto*) (Art. 15).

Preliminary conclusion

The Canons of Dordt and its mere inherent doctrine of the Trinity in many ways clearly reflects the historical period it was written in.[23]

It reflects at least the structure of the Reformed orthodox doctrine of God as influenced, inter alia by a type of scholasticism as described above. It is, however, precisely in this manner – structured in many ways by causality, negation and eminence – that the Canons have been said to be lacking in terms of a doctrine of the Trinity. Despite the fact that the actions of the divine persons are God's actions and that it is not always possible to distinguish the particular actions attributed the divine persons in the structure of the Reformed orthodox doctrine of God, it is precisely this ambiguity with regards to the Tri-unity that causes this lacking with regards to the Trinity.

In *Bevrydende waarheid*, Jonker (1994:147) argues, for example that a *broader* conceptualisation of the Trinitarian understanding of predestination – that God the Father elects in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit – would have assisted the Canons in drawing predestination out of what he described as abstract structures.[24] According to him, a broader Trinitarian understanding would have allowed the eternal predestination to be conceptualised in time; *there* where people are called. For him, at least today, it is therefore important to think of predestination or election as a reality and not as an eternal decision. The decision of God is not to be thought of as an abstract plan made in the past, but rather as the *living God* himself.

The importance of his comments are highlighted in the last chapter of Berkouwer's book on *Divine Election* (1960). He refers to the great misconception whereby human beings 'take their election for granted'. A misconception of election arises, he argues, when it is 'accepted as a matter of course and it is no longer seen as truly free, sovereign, and gracious' (p. 307). Election, in fact, 'cannot be more seriously misinterpreted' when, abstracted from the grace of God, it changes into a 'self-distinction' that places *us* over against *them*.

Likewise, also the *question* about the Trinity in the Canons of Dordt can therefore be greatly misinterpreted when it is loosened not only from the questions it wanted to answer in the first place, but also from the way it wanted to answer these questions.

Perhaps a manner in which the great misconception Berkouwer refers to can be avoided, is *to avert a partitioning*

23. Compare in this regard González (2010), Moser, Selderhuis and Sinnema (2014), and Wielenga (2015).

24. For an in-depth discussion of the meaning of election in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit in Dordt's *Wirkungsgeschichte*, compare Graafland's research (1987) on the doctrine of election from Calvin to Barth.

between the message of Dordt and its inherent comforting character. This, in fact, is the way Jonker (1989:13), who was one of Berkouwer's students, begins his *Uit vrye guns alleen*. Election, he writes, is *genadewoorde* [words of grace]. In fact, they articulate the undeserved grace of God.[25]

As an epigraph he therefore elicits Bavinck (2004:402) who, in his *Reformed Dogmatics*, highlighted that it is because of grace that 'even the most unworthy and degraded human being … is an object of God's eternal love'. For him, in fact, 'no one has a right to believe that he [*sic*] is lost, for everyone is sincerely and urgently called'. It is precisely because of this being called that 'there is hope even for the most wretched', and that 'we may not, cannot, and do not believe that anyone is lost and not the object of God's eternal love'. This, he writes, is true even and precisely of 'the most wretched in our eyes'.[26] He can therefore emphasise that the doctrine of election is a source of 'inexpressibly great comfort'.[27]

This inexpressibility, of course, is expressed in the Canons of Dordt and it is in light thereof – conscious of the mentioned misconception – that the inherent doctrine of the Trinity in the Canons of Dordt is to be conceptualised *today*.[28]

....

25. Jonker (1989:13) writes:

Uitverkiesing … is genadewoorde. Hulle gee uitdrukking aan die onverdiende guns, liefde en trou van God. In 'n situasie wat deur sonde, skuld en verlorenheid gestempel word, praat hulle van Gods onbegryplike goedheid. Daarom is die konteks waarin hierdie begrippe in die Bybel gebruik word, dié van lofprysing en dankbaarheid. [Election ... is words of grace. They give expression to undeserved favour, love and faith of God. In a situation characterised by sin, guilt and being lost, they express God's incomprehensible goodness. Therefore, the context in which these concepts are used in the Bible – is a context of doxology and gratitude.] (p. 13) [author's own translation]

26. Van Zyl (2004) therefore chooses to view the Canons of Dordt as a creed of complete comfort. According to him, 'all four the subdivisions of the Canons of Dordt give witness to the complete comfort of God's grace'. It does this, he says, by showing that:

an alterable election would imply an uncertain comfort, that an election based on a decision of faith would imply a conditional comfort, that if the election needs to be supplemented by the general grace it would imply an insufficient comfort and that a call to continuous responsibility would imply a short-lived comfort. (p. 127)

He writes:

Die sensitiwiteit van die leer van die uitverkiesing en die gevaar dat dit baie hard kan klink, is deur die opstellers van die DL besef. Daarom benader hulle hierdie leer doelbewus vanuit 'n pastorale perspektief waarin die troos wat dit aan gelowiges bied, beklemtoon word. Voortdurend waarsku die DL teen onnodige spekulasie wat geen pastorale nut het nie. [The drafters of the Canons of Dordt realised the sensitivity of the doctrine of election and the danger that it might sound hard. They therefore deliberately approached the doctrine from a pastoral perspective where the comfort that it provides to believers are accentuated. The Canons constantly warns against unnecessary speculation without pastoral benefit.] [authors own translation]

and reiterates:

Die uitverkiesing is juis 'n ware troos vir hulle en geen spekulatiewe leer wat hulle in onsekerheid moet dompel nie. [Election is a sure comfort for them and not a speculative doctrine that plunges them into uncertainty.] (p. 129) [author's own translation]

27. Dirkie Smit recently chose these words of Bavinck, namely that there is 'hope for even the most wretched' as the theme of his retirement lecture held in October 2017 in Stellenbosch. He also used these words as the title of the Warfield lectures which he delivered in March 2018 in Princeton. It is because of the 'problematic ways in which they (the Canons of Dordt) spoke and argued', he says, that it is necessary to rather speak of the 'deepest intention of the Synod of Dordt' (Smit 2018a). It is necessary to read also the confessional tradition against 'their own reception histories' (Smit 2018b) to be able to hear anew this comfort of which Bavinck spoke.

28. It is interesting that Welker (2006:36) also chooses to link the doctrine of the Trinity to comfort. In contrast to an ultimate lack of comfort: '*die Trinitätslehre soll vielmehr helfen, den langen Atem des Glaubens zu verstehen und zu bewahren inmitten der Erfahrungen zerstörerischer Sinnlosigkeit und 'Zweckwidrigkeit' in dieser Welt*'. [The doctrine of the Trinity will rather help to understand and sustain the long breath of faith in the midst of experiences of destructive meaninglessness and a senseless lack of purpose in this world.] [author's own translation]

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