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*For in the time of trouble he shall hide me in his pavilion:
in the secret of his tabernacle shall he hide me;
he shall set me up upon a rock.
—Psalm 27:5*

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And Moses gathered all the congregation of the children of Israel together, and said unto them, These are the words which the LORD hath commanded, that ye should do them. Six days shall work be done, but on the seventh day there shall be to you an holy day, a sabbath of rest to the LORD: whosoever doeth work therein shall be put to death. Ye shall kindle no fire throughout your habitations upon the sabbath day.

—Exodus 35:1–3

The Sabbath Preface to the Tabernacle

It was finally time to begin building the tabernacle. The children of Israel had been encamped at Mount Sinai for a little over three months. Over the course of several ascents up the mountain, Moses had received from God the pattern according to which he was to build the tabernacle, its furniture, the priests' garments, and all the associated hardware and vessels. Having descended from Sinai for the seventh and final time, Moses would now set the people to their task of building the tabernacle. It was a holy and joyful moment when Moses gathered all the congregation of the children of Israel together.

What would we expect to be the first thing that Moses would say to God's people with this tremendous building project ahead of them? Perhaps: "Time to work!" Perhaps: "Get busy!" Perhaps: "Hurry up!" But Moses said nothing of the sort. Rather, Moses said this: "Sabbath!" Moses said this: "Rest!" Yes, there would be labor. "Six days shall work be done" (Ex. 35:2). But the whole purpose of this grand tabernacle that they would build was rest. Therefore, "On the seventh day there shall be to you an holy day, a sabbath of rest to the LORD" (v. 2). The sabbath was the preface to the tabernacle. How wonderful! For just as one enters a book through its preface, so Israel entered the tabernacle through the sabbath.

Why was the sabbath the preface to the tabernacle? First, by it God taught his people that the meaning of the tabernacle was covenant fellowship between the mighty God and his lowly people.

One could hardly imagine a lowlier people than Israel. Former slaves and current murmurers encamped in the wilderness! And there is no one mightier than God. He is the LORD, Jehovah, the I AM THAT I AM. He is the God who turned the Nile to blood, slew the strength of Egypt, and parted the Red Sea. But this mighty God was pleased to abide with the lowly children of Israel in the midst of the wilderness. He pitched his tent in their midst and dwelled with them. What a gracious covenant!

And the sabbath testified of God's covenant of grace. For prominent in the sabbath preface was the number seven. "On the seventh day there shall be to you an holy day, a sabbath of rest" (Ex. 35:2). Everything was done by sevens in the wilderness. There were seven pieces of furniture in the tabernacle. There were seven bowls on the golden candlestick. There were seven garments for the high priest. There were seven consecration ceremonies to ordain the priests. There were seven annual feasts. There were seven days of unleavened bread. There were seven weeks from the days of unleavened bread until the feast of weeks. Moses had ascended Mount Sinai seven times. And now the sabbath preface called attention to the seventh day as the day of rest. Seven is God's covenant number. The sabbath preface to the tabernacle reminded the people that the gracious God of the covenant was pleased to dwell with them.

Second, by the sabbath preface to the tabernacle, God taught his people that their labor in the tabernacle's construction was not the labor of slaves in the house of bondage but the labor of

those who lived under God's favor. The last time that Israel had worked on a building project as a nation was in Egypt, the house of bondage, building the treasure cities of Pharaoh (Ex. 1:11). But Israel had been redeemed from her bondage and baptized unto Moses in the Red Sea (I Cor. 10:1–2). Her labor in the wilderness could never again be the labor of slaves under the law of bondage. Her labor could only ever be the grateful labor of those who already had rest with God. Rest was the preface to her labor! Her labor was not *unto* her rest but was *because of* her rest in God.

And that rest in God was for all God's people—not only the men, who would lay down their hammers and tongs and saws and chisels on the sabbath, but also the women, who would kindle no cooking fire in their habitations on the sabbath. All the children of Israel had “a sabbath of rest to the LORD” (Ex. 35:2).

And would you hear the gospel of the sabbath preface to the tabernacle? It is this: Jesus Christ is our sabbath rest. Only Jesus Christ is our rest!

The children of Israel could not bring themselves into God's rest. Their sabbath preface came with the threat of death. “Whosoever doeth work therein shall be put to death” (Ex. 35:2). Nor can we bring ourselves into God's rest. In ways large and small we fail to keep God's day as “a sabbath of rest to the LORD” (v. 2). But Jesus Christ has taken upon himself our curse—with all its tumult, all its bondage, all its death—and has satisfied the justice of God. And our Lord has perfectly obeyed the law of the sabbath. He sings of his perfect sabbath-keeping in the “Psalm or Song for the sabbath day” (Ps. 92, heading). “For thou, LORD, hast made me glad through thy work: I will triumph in the works of thy hands” (v. 4). Through our savior there is no labor remaining for God's people to enter into God's rest. There is only rest, which the child of God has by faith. And because he is our rest, Jesus Christ is our entrance into God's covenant fellowship.

What a blessed gospel for weary sinners. Jesus, the sabbath preface to the tabernacle!

—AL

CANONS OF DORDT

Historical Background of the Canons (5)

The work of the Synod of Dordt began on November 13, 1618. The main item on synod's agenda was the Arminian controversy. Synod's task was to evaluate the Remonstrant doctrine in the light of the word of God and render a judgment concerning it. Synod already had in its possession the Five Articles of Remonstrance (1610). But in order that the Remonstrants might have an opportunity to explain and defend their doctrine to the synod, one of synod's first acts was to summon the main Remonstrant representatives to appear before synod. Synod also required that the Arminian party submit in writing all its objections to the existing Reformed confessions. The summoning note that synod adopted for each Remonstrant representative read as follows:

To the reverend and most learned, N. The national synod of the Dutch Reformed Churches, lawfully assembled in the city of Dordrecht in the name of the Lord and by the authority and mandate of the illustrious and powerful representatives of the States General of the Dutch Republic to examine and remove the controversies that have arisen in said churches, knowing that it is the will of said illustrious lords that, above all, the Five Articles of Remonstrance should be examined and judged, since these controversies have arisen mainly from them; synod has judged it fair and necessary, from the number of the Remonstrants, in addition to those who are present at this synod, to

call and summon [here follow the names of several Remonstrant ministers, including the prominent Simon Episcopius], as the most experienced in this cause, to this synod, that they may freely propose, explain, and defend said articles as much as they are able and shall judge necessary. At the same time, they should also present to this synod in writing all their considerations, if any, on the doctrine contained in the [Belgic] Confession and [Heidelberg] Catechism of these churches, and the reasons for those considerations, so that said synod, having heard and examined all, may be able to render a mature judgment about each one in the fear of the Lord. Therefore, said synod, with the authority and consent of the illustrious and most noble representatives, summons you, N.N., by these letters, to appear before synod for the aforesaid purpose, together with the others, within fourteen days after the receipt of these present letters, without any evasion or exception, lest any fault of negligence or obstinacy be found in you, or your cause be lacking.¹

The Remonstrant representatives were summoned, but they would not arrive at synod until December 6. Therefore, while it waited, synod turned its attention to other matters that needed to be decided by the churches in common. The last national synod—the Synod of ’s-Gravenhage (1586)—had been held thirty-two years earlier. Since that time, several issues that could not be resolved locally had begun to fester in the churches. Now, finally, the churches had an opportunity to resolve these issues.

The first and most important matter that needed addressing was a sound Dutch translation of the Bible. The Dutch churches had tried to produce a good translation in the past, but they had gotten nowhere. Synod’s minutes succinctly capture the sorry state of the Dutch Bible at the time.

After solemn and holy prayers were offered by the president, it was decided to translate the Bible from the original languages into the Dutch language because the Dutch churches have hitherto lacked an accurate translation and instead use a very defective Belgian version, which is merely a poor rendering of a German version. Furthermore, although the Dutch churches successively appointed the most noble Philip Marnix, lord of Saint-Algonda, and then the most illustrious Arnold Cornelii and Werner Helmich to prepare a new version from the original sources, the work was scarcely begun, and they are long since dead.²

But in God’s special care for his church and his people in the Netherlands, he had brought foreign delegates from Great Britain to the Synod of Dordt. God had given these English-speaking delegates from Great Britain an excellent English Bible only a few years earlier, in 1611—the King James Version (KJV), or Authorized Version (AV). The delegates from Great Britain wrote out for the Synod of Dordt the rules and methods that had been followed in producing the KJV. Within a short time, the Dutch delegates to synod were thoroughly convinced that the Dutch churches needed their own faithful Dutch version of the Bible. The decision was made to authorize the project.

It was decided by unanimous vote that a more accurate translation of the Holy Bible from the original sources into the Dutch language would not only be useful for our Dutch churches but also absolutely necessary for them because of the infinite errors with which the old version is full; and therefore, as has been decided and done in previous national synods, efforts should be made to establish this work of a new version as soon as possible, in the most convenient and competent manner.³

¹ Donald Sinnema, Christian Moser, and Herman J. Selderhuis, eds., *Acta et Documenta Synodi Nationalis Dordrechtanae (1618–1619)*, vol. 1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 15. All translations from the Latin are mine.

² *Acta*, 16.

³ *Acta*, 17.

Synod spent several days discussing and debating necessary details concerning the translation project. For example, would the Dutch Bible include the apocryphal books? Some of the delegates argued strongly that they should not be included because they were not inspired and because they contained doctrinal errors. Synod finally decided to include the apocryphal books because that had been the practice in previous Bible versions but to indicate by a different typeset and by a preface that the apocryphal books were not the word of God but the word of man.

For another example, synod debated how to translate the second-person singular pronouns. Should the translators use the common Dutch word *Du* (you) or the exalted *Gij* (thou)? Without making it an issue of principle, synod decided that the Dutch Bible should follow the exalted manner of Dutch speaking and use *Gij*. This was also the customary way for the churches and the people to speak in their prayers. Thus, like the KJV, the Dutch Bible would be a “thee/thou” Bible and not a “you/your” Bible.

For another example, synod debated how to translate the Hebrew name YHWH. Should the translators use the word *Jehovah* (transliterating the letters of YHWH, as could be done in both English and Dutch) or *Heere* (Lord)? Again without making it an issue of principle, synod decided to use *Heere* as the word that most Dutchmen were familiar with but to use capital letters to indicate that it was the name Jehovah. Thus, like the KJV’s *LORD* for Jehovah, the Dutch Bible used *HEERE* for Jehovah.

Its plan for a Dutch translation laid out, synod appointed the translators. Synod optimistically suggested that the project could be finished in four short years but did not set a hard deadline. Though the project would take much longer than anticipated—nearly twenty years—God was with his church in the Netherlands and gave her the Dutch *Statenvertaling* Bible in 1637.

A second issue that needed addressing in the Dutch churches by the Synod of Dordt was the matter of Catechism preaching. The previous national synod of ’s-Gravenhage in 1586 had mandated

that the ministers in the Netherlands must preach the Heidelberg Catechism every Sunday afternoon. God’s people at that time—as in every age—needed constant instruction in the whole counsel of God. By explaining the Catechism over the course of a year, the ministers would instruct themselves and the people in all the major doctrines of the scriptures. The mandate of Synod ’s-Gravenhage is the basis of article 68 of our Church Order today: “The ministers shall on Sunday explain briefly the sum of Christian doctrine comprehended in the Heidelberg Catechism, so that as much as possible the explanation shall be annually completed, according to the division of the Catechism itself for that purpose.”

However, by the time the Synod of Dordt met in 1618, Catechism preaching was widely neglected in the Netherlands. Many churches in the cities were in the habit of holding only one service, on Sunday morning, after which the people went to their work or to their games in the afternoon. In the small villages, two churches often shared one pastor, who would preach once in the morning in one village and once in the afternoon in another village. Some churches that did hold a second service to explain the Catechism found the attendance to be so poor that they gave up. There were also many churches that did hold Catechism services and insisted on following the instruction of Synod ’s-Gravenhage. Many churches were compelled to lodge complaints with the Synod of Dordt about the neglect of Catechism preaching in the denomination.

In response, the Synod of Dordt reiterated the rule of Synod ’s-Gravenhage that the Catechism be explained each Lord’s day. Where attendance was poor, the minister was to preach the Catechism anyway; even if he preached only to his own family, he was to hold Catechism services, which it was hoped would have the effect of drawing others in the congregation as well. Where Sunday work and games drew the people away, the magistrates were to outlaw work and games in their cities. Where two villages shared one minister, each was to get its own so that one minister could preach two sermons to one church on the Lord’s day. If it was impossible for each village to get its own minister, then the

minister was to preach the Catechism every other Lord's day for each village. The church visitors were to take careful note whether each church preached the Catechism. If any did not, the ministers were to face the heaviest ecclesiastical discipline, up to and including deposition from office and excommunication from the church. How important was the preaching of the Catechism for the Synod of

Dordt! How important was—and is—the sum of Christian doctrine for the sheep of Christ!

A third issue that needed addressing in the Dutch churches was the catechetical instruction of the children and youth. About this next time, Lord willing.

(To be continued)

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