

From Dort to Desire
Patterns Observed for Shaping Christian Devotion
In Expression of a Reformed Theology of Desire

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“The Reformation...was more a song or a symphony than a system, more lyric than lecture...” Professor Peter Matheson has observed.¹ What did the Reformation do to do address matters of the heart, not only of the mind? And what does the legacy of the Reformation give for the betterment of man’s desire? This paper will first give a broad theology of desire in the Reformed way of thinking, especially from Dort onward; then, give attention to how in the period following the Synod of Dort the sermons, prayer books, liturgies, diaries, hymns and confessions were useful for the cultivation of Christian devotion in the vein of classic Protestantism.

It would be an over-statement to say that the Reformation was an appeal only to the heart, even as it would be an over-statement to say that the Reformation was an appeal only to the mind. The Reformation has richly endowed classic Protestantism the grounding of a cohesive system of creedal and catholic doctrines. This was and still is an academic enterprise. For example, we hear of Luther’s *95 Theses* or Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* or the *Canons of Dort* we think first of systematic delineation or argumentation of various truths. To learn the creeds, confessions or a catechism invites a person, whether a child or college professor, into the work of the mind.

The Reformation has not only richly endowed classic Protestantism with a cohesive system of creedal and catholic doctrines, *lex credendi*, the pattern of belief. We have in the Reformation heritage also much literature for Christian devotion, *lex orandi*, the pattern of prayer. In this 400th anniversary year of the Synod of Dort we are reminded of an example in its canons of how the Reformed tradition has regarded the importance of bringing together both the study of Christian doctrine and the experiential life of the Christian. The one need not exclude or crowd out the other.

In his “Prefatory Address to King France I” Calvin said about the *Institutes* that “My purpose was solely to transmit certain rudiments by which those who are touched with any zeal for religion might be shaped to true godliness. And I undertook this labor especially for our French countrymen, very many of whom I knew to be hungering and thirsting for Christ; but I saw very few who had been duly imbued with even a slight knowledge of him.”² Notice how the French reformer binds together as a unified endeavor the “rudiments” and the “zeal” of the Christian faith. He sees no tension or

¹ Peter Matheson. *The Imaginative World of the Reformation*. 26.

² John Calvin. John McNeill, ed. Ford Battles, trans. *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Loc 1531.

conflict between “hungering and thirsting for Christ” and laboring to have a greater “knowledge of him” – the head and heart, the intellect and desire like two hands serving the same master. Notice also his expression “might be shaped.” The Latin word Calvin used for this is *formarentur*, a passive subjunctive of *formare*, to form, to shape, to fashion which is a concept related to the Greek word, *morphe*. Calvin’s *magnum opus* is offered by him so that Christian’s life “might be shaped” as life lived in union with Christ. Calvin’s way and the Reformed way to be re-shaped toward Christian devotion is bringing intellect and desire together. This way and its devotional patterns focus on “the human end not as intellectual on the ocular model, but as possessive on a tactile model.”³ What has been handed down to us is as vital as what we can see for ourselves. The Christian life is not just theoretical. It is theoretical, ie., contemplative or theological and the Christian life is practical. We will consider in a few moments how this is so.

Over the last several centuries there have been a variety of ways that Protestants have answered the question of how to bring the ways of the heart in accord with the work of the mind. The answers and methods stand as a mountain when we consider the question going back to the early church. The Synod of Dort is a good sample for us to observe ways to “shape” Christian devotion, especially from the perspective of a Reformed theology of desire. When then can we learn about Christian devotion from the *Canons of Dort* and its influence in the years following?

This paper is only survey and thus I leave aside extended preliminary analysis of the *Canons* except to give attention to the *Canons’* way of emphasizing man’s desire in conversion and his active desire in a subsequent life of service to God. The following list of quotes from the *Canons* shows the primary interest its authors had not only for academic or theological matters on the question of man’s free will and God’s sovereign work. This list of quotes shows the primary interest they had for man’s desire to be shaped for Christian devotion. Just a note about the word “piety” – It is a word that has had a negative side to its history, but also the word has a positive connotation when not used in a context of legalism or mysticism. It can simply be another way of referring to a heart for God. Throughout the 5 heads or 5 main points in the *Canons* we find many words and phrases which express the vitality of an active desire for God. These are highlighted below in bold. The numbering indicates the main point and the article therein.

1.12 “The elect in due time, though in various degrees and in different measures, attain the assurance of this their eternal and unchangeable election, not by inquisitively prying into the secret and deep things of God, but by observing in themselves with a **spiritual joy and holy pleasure** the infallible fruits of election pointed out in the Word of God - such as, a true faith in Christ, **filial fear**, a **godly sorrow** for sin, a **hungering and thirsting** after righteousness, etc.”

1.13 “...for **adoring** the depth of His mercies, for cleansing themselves, and rendering grateful returns of **ardent love** to Him, who first manifested so great love towards them..”

³ Majorie Boyle. *Senses of Touch: Human Dignity and Deformity from Michelangelo to Calvin*. 221.

1.16 “Those who do not yet experience a lively faith in Christ, an assured confidence of soul, peace of conscience, an **earnest endeavor** after **filial obedience**, and glorying in God through Christ, efficaciously wrought in them, and do nevertheless persist in the use of the means which God hath appointed for working these graces in us, ought not to be alarmed at the mention of reprobation, nor to rank themselves among the reprobate, but diligently to persevere in the use of means, and with **ardent desires** devoutly and humbly to wait for a season of richer grace.”

1.18 “...with **holy adoration** of these mysteries, we exclaim in the words of the apostle:”

1.RE.7 “...**rejoice** with the apostle and **praise** this favor of God”

2.8 “...at last bring them free from every spot and blemish to the **enjoyment** of glory in His own presence forever.”

2.9 “...a church composed of believers, the foundation of which is laid in the blood of Christ, which may **steadfastly love** and faithfully serve Him as their Savior, who as a bridegroom for his bride, laid down His life for them upon the cross, and which may **celebrate** His praises here and through all eternity.”

3-4.1 “...all his **affections** pure; and the whole man was holy; but revolting from God by the instigation of the devil, and abusing the freedom of his own will, he forfeited these excellent gifts; and on the contrary entailed on himself blindness of mind, horrible darkness, vanity and perverseness of judgment, became wicked, rebellious, and **obdurate in heart** and will, and impure in his **affections**.”

3-4.7 “Hence they, to whom so great and so gracious a blessing is communicated above their desert, or rather notwithstanding their demerits, are bound to acknowledge it with **humble and grateful hearts**, and with the apostle to **adore**...”

3-4.9 “others, though they receive it, suffer it not to make a lasting impression on their **heart**; therefore, their joy, arising only from a temporary faith...”

3-4.10 “that they may show forth the **praises** of Him who has called them out of darkness into His marvelous light, and may **glory** not in themselves but in the Lord”

3-4.11 “by the efficacy of the same regenerating Spirit He pervades the **inmost recesses** of man; He opens the closed and softens the hardened **heart**”

3-4:13 “to know and experience that by this grace of God they are enabled to **believe with the heart** and to **love** their Savior.”

3-4.15 “He, therefore, who becomes the subject of this grace owes eternal gratitude to God, and **gives Him thanks** forever.”

3-4.RE.3 referring to Remonstrants belief in “the irregularity of the **affection**” the Canons of Dort names this notion “an innovation”

3-4.RE.4 “Moreover, to **hunger and thirst** after deliverance from misery and after life, and to offer unto God the sacrifice of a **broken spirit**, is peculiar to the regenerate and those that are called blessed.”

3-4.RE.6 “God infuses new qualities of faith, of obedience, and of the consciousness of His **love into our hearts**”

3-4.RE.8 “that God fulfills every **desire** of goodness”

5.2 “to mortify the flesh more and more by the spirit of prayer and by holy exercises of **piety**”

5.7 “by His Word and Spirit He certainly and effectually renews them to repentance, to a sincere and **godly sorrow** for their sins... through faith adore His mercies”

5.10 “a **serious and holy desire** to preserve a good conscience and to perform good works.”

5.12 “source of humility, **filial reverence**, true **piety**, patience in every tribulation, fervent prayers, constancy in suffering and in confessing the truth, and of solid **rejoicing** in God”

5.13 “Neither does renewed confidence of persevering produce licentiousness or a disregard of **piety** in those who are recovered from backsliding”

5.13 “God’s ‘gracious countenance from them (to behold which is to the godly **dearer than life...**)’”

A first principle we can glean from this emphasis is how vital desire is not only to life, but also life with God. He has given us the capacity for want, this instrument of forward motion in the soul at a level of complexity and deep involvement that desire for anything, even wrong desire, is a hint of the ultimate desire for God. It follows from this that authors of the Canons are also aware of the mistake we humans can make of making the desiring itself into the object of our desire. To do so is to take the wrong side of piety by using the ultimate object of man’s desire, God, as merely a means to gain something else. What is spirituality? What is a corrected piety? What is Christian devotion? Here is a simple and clear answer: “What is Reformed spirituality? Simply put, it is stewardship of God’s gracious gift of a full and complete relationship with him, according to

Scripture.”⁴ The prophet Isaiah stated it this way: “In the path of your judgments, O LORD, we wait for you; your name and remembrance are the desire of our soul” (Isaiah 26:8).

Another first principle is evident in how the authors of the *Canons* understood the central and controlling importance of God’s desire to man’s desire. They express this fact in the *Canons* by repeated mention of God’s “pleasure” or God’s “good pleasure.” This emphasis on God’s “pleasure” is indicative of what the Reformation contributed to a theology of desire. Again the words are highlighted in bold.

1.3 “at what time He **pleaseth**”

1.7 “out of mere grace, according to the **sovereign good pleasure** of His own will” and “according to the **good pleasure** of His will”

1.8 “Scripture declares the **good pleasure**, purpose and counsel of the divine will to be one”

1.10 “The **good pleasure** of God is the sole cause of this gracious election” and “He was **pleased**”

1.15 “His sovereign, most just, irreprehensible and unchangeable **good pleasure**”

1.17 “it **pleaseth** God”

1.RE.3 “the **pleasure** of God and the merits of Christ”

2.2 “He hath been **pleased** in His infinite mercy to give His only begotten Son”

2.5 “out of His **good pleasure**”

2.RE.1 “the **pleasure** of the LORD shall prosper in his hand” (Is. 53:10)”

3-4.6 “it hath **pleased** God to save such as believe, as well under the Old, as under the New Testament.”

3-4.7 “results wholly from the **sovereign good pleasure** and unmerited love of God”

3-4.11 “God accomplishes His **good pleasure**”

3-4.14 “Faith is therefore to be considered as the gift of God, not on account of its being offered by God to man, to be accepted or rejected at **his pleasure**; but because it is in reality conferred, breathed, and infused into him; or even because God bestows the power or ability to believe...”

⁴ John Cooper. *Calvin Theological Journal*. Spring 2002, p 3-4. see also <https://www.ccel.org/node/13458>

3-4.17 “His **good pleasure**”

3-4.RE.4 ““Then shalt Thou be **pleased**...””

3-4.RE.8 ““all the **good pleasure** of His goodness, and the work of faith with power’ (2 Thess. 1:11)”

3-4.RE.9 ““For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of His **good pleasure**’ (Phil. 2:13)”

5.14 “And as it hath **pleased** God, by the preaching of the gospel...”

The Synod by admitting to the primary position of God’s pleasure continued in the teaching of the reformers. This was not merely a theological concept, not only a theoretical principle. The fact of God’s “good pleasure” as the center and control for man’s desire was meant for the practical life. This meant taking practical steps to live God’s pleasure outwardly. It meant handing down and working out a “possessive” model of Christian devotion in accord with the “good pleasure” of God. What practical steps did the authors of the Canons take and those leaders who came later? It wasn’t TULIP.

A simple and practical step was the Synod ordering and financing a new translation of the Bible. “Of further lasting importance was the decision on a new Bible translation, which was published in 1637 as the *Statenvertaling*, a translation that not only shaped Reformed spirituality for centuries, but also had a large impact on the development of the Dutch language.”⁵ This translation as much as possible was based on the original languages of Scripture. It also had the profound affect of advancing the native language. Luther’s Bible and Tyndale’s Bible has similar affects. “The Word of God must be heard in the worship services, prayers sent up to the throne of grace; not according to men’s desires, but according to the Word and as occasion may require.”⁶

One example of how this translation was intended as a means to draw its readers into seeking God’s desire as the center and control of their desire was the explanation of God’s name. How better to be inclined to please God than to first know his name. The marginal note in Genesis explained that title HEERE is for God’s actual name IEHOVAH (or Yahweh as it is typically pronounced now).

“Na de voleyndinge van het werck der scheppinge/ wort hier aldereerst Gode de naem van IEHOVAH gegeven/ beteeckenende de selfstandigen/ selfwesenden/ van hem selven zijnde van eeuwicheyt tot eeuwicheyt/ ende den oorspronck ofte oorsake van het wesen aller dinge; daerom oock dese naem de ware Godt alleen toecomt. Onthoudt dit eens voor al; waer ghy voortae het woort HEERE met groote letteren geschreven vindt/ dat aldaer in 't Hebr. het woort IEHOVAH, oft korter/ IAH staet.”

⁵ Donald Sinnema, Christian Moser and Herman J. Selderhuis, eds. *Acta et Documenta Synodi Nationalis Dordrechtanae (1618–1619)*, vol 1. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015. p xvi.

⁶ Abraham Van de Velde. *The Wonders of the Most High (A 125 Year History of the United Netherlands 1550 - 1675)*. See chapter 36.

The note reminded the readers that whenever they read the title HEERE they should think of the personal Name of God which speaks of his eternal and self-existing being. Like the influence of Luther's translation and of the King James Bible this Dutch translation came to have a wide influence on expressions in politics, education and in the public square not only in churches. This is a good example of how the Synod of Dort did more than settle an argument of doctrine. It handed down to the people it served a tangible instrument, God's Word in their tongue, that they might learn who God is and increase in desire to serve him. Knowing God's name is a big step in knowing who you are. "Let me know Thee, O Lord, who knowest me: let me know Thee, as I am known," Augustine said.⁷

The order and work of a new Dutch translation was also accompanied by discussion and prescribing a liturgy. This at times turned into a contentious endeavor. Shall we sing Psalms only? Shall we use new written songs? Should the churches be allowed an organ? Should they not? We can be put off by the tensions in those questions argued before and after Dort that we may turn away altogether from the idea of liturgy or psalm singing or reciting of creeds, etc. Yet, consider the beauty of the fact that these matters were being debated in the first place. It was not always so. An earlier synod also called the "The Synod of Dort (1574) is sometimes called the 'liturgical synod,' because more than any other synod it dealt with liturgical matters."⁸ The Reformation had given the worship of God back to the people. Naturally they had the follow up question which comes on the heels of being given such freedom of participation in worship – How can we guard this worship of God from become *our* worship? That the Reformation afforded its worshipers the chance to ask this question in the first place is a unique grace in itself.

In contrast to the tensions of Reformed liturgy in that era was the generous desire for the Synod of Dort to represent not solely the views of the Dutch, but of as many other Reformed leaders and theologians across Europe as could join in. In a recent book on the *Canons of Dort* we are reminded of another practical step from the Synod that is as much one of attitude as of action. Daniel Hyde notes in the historical introduction of *Grace Worth Fighting For* that the main points of the *Canons* were written to reflect "the history of Western catholicity on the doctrine at hand."⁹ Uniformity of church practices is difficult to achieve given that so many practices of churches are culturally informed. However, even when it is necessary to state doctrinal distinctions a "catholic spirit" is also necessary in how these distinctions are stated. That the delegates at the Synod came from many regions, not just the Netherlands, is a reminder that the Christian devotion we pursue is not owned by us, but is the mutual creed and desire of all God's people. The "Three Forms of Unity" as they are now called is a body of doctrine and devotional instruction respected and used by many Reformed churches or denominations which do not have a direct Dutch heritage. That spirit of singlemindedness on essential doctrine, that catholicity around the Church's teaching, has a preventative and healing affect on the devotional life of God's people.

The period called the *Nadere Reformatie* (the Further Reformation) resembled in many way English Puritanism and German Pietism. There were cultural and theological

⁷ Augustine. *The Confessions*. book 10.

⁸ D. A. Carson, ed. *Worship: Adoration and Action*. Klaas Runia, 'The Reformed Liturgy in the Dutch Tradition.' 97.

⁹ Daniel Hyde. *Grace Worth Fighting For*. Davenant Press. 36.

differences, no doubt, but the motivations for the shift from Reformed orthodoxy or Lutheran orthodoxy to piety were quite similar. It was a transitional period after much writing and teaching in a scholastic mode into writing and teaching with more emphasis on practical matters. It is surprising how many Dutch theological works or how much devotional literature from the Reformation era has only been translated in recent decades. Many works from this era have been unknown till recently. There are still many in Latin which need to be translated. One set of books translated in the 2000s has been assembled in a collection called the “Classics of Reformed Spirituality.” Richard J. Mouw said of this collection: “I am so pleased that these Dutch classics are now available to a wide audience. The writings of the Dutch Further Reformation—almost completely inaccessible until now to the English-speaking world—are a gold mine of spiritual wisdom.” The collection holds together the work of eight Dutch authors whose desire was to present Christian truths to the common man to encourage Christian devotion.

The Marks of God’s Children, Jean Taffin

The Duties of Parents, Jacobus Koelman

Spiritual Desertion, Gisbertus Voetius and Johannes Hoornbeeck

The Path of True Godliness, Willem Teellinck

Essential Truths in the Heart of a Christian, Wilhelmus Schortinghuis

A Spiritual Appeal to Christ’s Bride, Jodocus van Lodenstein

The Practice of Faith, Hope, and Love, Godefridus Udemans

In Remembrance of Him: Profiting from the Lord’s Supper, Guilelmus Saldenus and Wilhelmus à Brakel

Wilhelmus à Brakel (1635-1711) also wrote *The Christian’s Reasonable Service* which has recently been translated into English. I say recent in the sense that when a work of this caliber reaches the Anglophone audience after several hundred years it is notable in its long dormancy. The Dutch version of *The Christian’s Reasonable Service* was well received having gone through 20 editions. Richard Muller praises the work for its clear and doctrinal presentation as a “vernacular theology.” Practical works after the Synod are worthy of our present attention, but we also find more gold in the “gold mine of spiritual wisdom” in theological works to be read and studied by the common man.

Beginning with the Doctrine of God in *The Christian’s Reasonable Service* à Brakel wrote: “...the foundation of religion [Christian devotion] is the character of God. The works of His omnipotence and benevolence are indeed reasons to stimulate man to serve God; however, they are not the basis for such service. This foundation is the very

character of God. God possesses within Himself all glory and worthiness to be served, even if there were no creature.”¹⁰

We can add to our “to read list” of vernacular theologians the name of Gisbertus Voetius (1589-1676). “Like Calvin and Ames, Voetius argued that piety and knowledge are not separate; rather, each promotes the other, for they are wedded... Voetius argued that the mind must assist the heart and life, and the heart and daily living must reinforce the mind.”¹¹ The motto of Voetius’ inaugural address in 1636 was, *Scientia cum pietate conjugenda*, “science [or academics] joined with piety.”¹² Here then is another reminder that the life of Christian devotion is not merely about a properly wedded mind and heart, but these and all of life filled with the loveliness of Christ. I am reminded of the words of ‘Rabbi’ John Duncan who said, “But if you preach doctrine and experience and practice, by the blessing of God, you will have head, and heart, and hands, and feet - a perfect man in Christ Jesus.”¹³

There are many more resources and example we could cull from this era of Reformed history. We close with the mention of one that should not be overlooked. Here again is another fine work of theology and Christian devotion that has just recently become available to English readers. The first volume of Petrus Mastricht’s *Theoretical-Practical Theology* is now in print with the second volume on the doctrine of God due out soon. In the first volume, his *Prolegomena* (explanation of method and first principles), Mastricht also defines theology as finding its end in Christ. Under the heading, “The Definition of Theology” Mastricht writes, “...theology is nothing other than the doctrine of living for God through Christ.” He continues: “Second, we likewise presuppose: (1) Since God made all things for the sake of man, and man for God, so that God is the ultimate end of man and of all human actions, it is necessary that some teaching be given that directs man and all he has to the point.”¹⁴

The second volume of *Theoretical-Practical Theology* will bring to the fore the importance of classical Theism in the pursuit of Christian devotion and for preaching and teaching that is grounded in who God is rather than in who we want him to be. G.K. Chesterton in *What's Wrong with the World* warned that the youth or the contemporary generation does not entitle one to dismiss or minimize the gold in the gold mine of our forefathers. He said in his vivid manner, “The future is a refuge from the fierce competition of our forefathers.” We value the treasures of the past that we might learn what we have missed and are missing in our tendencies to tunnel in on the now and pray with the closing words of the *Canons*:

“May Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who, seated at the Father's right hand, gives gifts to men, sanctify us in the truth, bring to the truth those who err, shut the mouths of the calumniators of sound doctrine, and endue the faithful minister of His Word with the spirit of wisdom and discretion, that all their discourses may tend to the glory of God and the edification of those who hear them. Amen.”

¹⁰ Wilhelmus à Brakel. *The Christian's Reasonable Service*. 3.

¹¹ Joel Beeke. *Piety in Reformed Theology*. 11.

¹² William Knight. *Colloquia Peripatetica*. 1907. 167.

¹³ *Ibid.* 167.

¹⁴ Petrus Mastricht, Todd Rester, trans. Joel Beeke, ed. *Theoretical-Practical Theology, Volume 1: Prolegomena*. RHB. 99