

# The Pearl of Christian Comfort

Petrus Dathenus

Translated by Arie W. Blok  
Introduced by Joel R. Beeke



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*The Pearl of Christian Comfort*

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*"Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace  
with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."*

— Romans 5:1

*"For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness  
to everyone who believes."*

— Romans 10:4

*"Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden,  
and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you,  
and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart:  
and ye shall find rest unto your souls."*

— Matthew 11:28-29



## *Introduction*

Petrus Dathenus deserves more than an obscure footnote on the pages of history. He was certainly the greatest among the early leaders of the Protestant Reformation in the Low Countries, and may justly be called the “John Knox” of The Netherlands.

Dathenus was born in 1531 or 1532 in Cassel, a town in Flanders, now part of Belgium. At an early age, he entered a Carmelite monastery near Ypres. There he studied medicine and the healing arts, knowledge which he would put to good use in later years. More importantly, among the Carmelites Dathenus met many who were in sympathy with the Reformation. When three monks who had embraced the Reformation were burned to death openly nearby, their heroic martyrdom and open confession of the Reformed faith moved many deeply. Dathenus had much opportunity to discuss these matters and the great evangelical truths of the Reformation. It pleased God to use these means to convert him to the Reformed faith as Dathenus came to know and experience that justification is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

By mid-century, Roman Catholic authorities became aware that the monasteries housed a growing number of sympathizers with the Protestant cause. A systematic search of the monasteries was launched as part of the Inquisition. Those cloisters found to be harboring Protestant sympathizers were dismantled, and many monks were burned alive in an effort to quench the Reformation movement.

At eighteen years of age, Dathenus fled the monastery, becoming a fugitive for the faith. To avoid death at the

hands of the Church of Rome, he went to London where many refugees from the Lowlands resided. The young God-fearing king, Edward VI, supported the Reformation cause in England. Dathenus obtained work as a printer and attended the church of the refugees, learning much from the renowned Polish Reformer, John à Lasco (1499-1560), who was at that time superintendent of this congregation. By the early 1550s the congregation had more than four thousand members; services were conducted in both French and Dutch.

Under the leadership of à Lasco and another Reformer, Jan Utenhove (1520-1565), work began on an order of worship, a Reformed liturgy, and a metrical version of the Psalms for the large London refugee congregation. Another leader, Martinus Micronius (1522-1559), began work on a church order, entitled *Christian Ordinances*. As Dathenus began to assist these men he soon felt called to the ministry himself. Before long, both the leadership and the congregation were persuaded of Dathenus's abilities and in confirmation of his own sense of calling encouraged him to study theology full-time. He spent the years 1551 through 1553 in quiet, productive study, which would serve him well in the stormy trials of the years that followed. During this time he also married a former nun, Benedicta, with whom he had one child, Christiana.

In 1553 Edward VI died; Mary Tudor, called "bloody Mary" because of her violent persecution of Protestants in England, ascended the throne. The London church was scattered. The unfinished work of liturgy and church order went with a number of the Dutch refugees, including à Lasco, to Frankfurt, Germany, which rapidly became home to hundreds of Reformed refugees. Under à Lasco's guidance, the Frankfurt congregation extended a ministe-

rial call to Dathenus, which he accepted. At the age of twenty-four, he was ordained into the ministry by Micronius in Frankfurt in September of 1555.

Again, peace did not last long. Alarmed by the growing Reformed presence, the Lutheran clergy of Frankfurt decided to require the Dutch Calvinist refugees to have their children baptized in the Lutheran church. Dathenus traveled to Geneva to speak with Calvin about this problem. Calvin advised Dathenus to submit to this requirement, but to affirm simultaneously Reformed convictions of the Lord's Supper. This solution worked only temporarily. By 1561 a radical Lutheran pastor, Joachim Westphal, goaded the Lutheran clergy and people to act against the Reformed congregation. On April 23, 1561 the Frankfurt government forbade the Reformed refugee congregation to worship any longer in their city, notwithstanding the plea of Frederick III, also known as Frederick "the Pious," who played such an important role in the composition of the Heidelberg Catechism.

Many of the Frankfurt refugees returned to England, where Elizabeth, who favored a more neutral stance on religious matters, had succeeded the staunchly Romish Mary. Others went back to the Lowlands and many were ultimately burned at the stake during the Inquisition. Sixty families, including Dathenus's, went to Frankenthal, a city located in the part of Germany known as the Palatinate, governed by Frederick III.

In Frankenthal Dathenus enjoyed productive and peaceful years (1562-1566) under Frederick III. He spent himself for the cause of the gospel and for the church of Christ. Soon after his arrival in the Palatinate he was called to serve as court pastor, which position he accepted in conjunction with pastoring the congregation of exiles.

Among other duties, he was moderator of several foreign congregations. He engaged in debate with Lutheran clergy on the ubiquity of Christ's body and became involved in political missions.

Dathenus's pen was also active in his Frankenthal ministry. He translated the Heidelberg Catechism into Dutch in 1563, the same year it was published in the Palatinate. On his recommendation, the Dutch churches adopted the Catechism as a creedal standard. He also published the Catechism together with his version of the metrical Psalms, which became known as the "Dathenus Psalms." Although he used the tunes and followed the text of the Genevan Psalter, the result was distinctly his own work. Hastily completed, Dathenus's version contained numerous imperfections. Nevertheless it became the Psalter of the Dutch Reformed Church and remained in use until the publication of the version of 1773. Dathenus's Psalter took hold of the hearts of the Dutch people, who recalled the days of persecution when the Psalms were sung at open-air meetings. They are used even today among Reformed Christians in certain parts of the Netherlands, and have been used by others who settled in North America.

Dathenus's third great contribution from the Frankenthal years was his role as father of the liturgy of the Reformed Churches. Drawing on a number of important Reformed sources, he compiled and edited the largest part of the liturgy as we know it today, in particular, the forms for the administration of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. He translated portions of the Palatinate liturgy used at Heidelberg, which in turn was based on Calvin's Genevan liturgy, modifying it in various places. He also used the work done at London by à Lasco and Utenhove. Dathenus's liturgy was first published in 1566 amid scenes



of persecution, and in 1568 was adopted by the Convent of Wezel and prescribed for use in the churches. The traditional English version of these forms is a translation of Dathenus's liturgy in the classic formulation adopted by the Synod of Dort.

To Dathenus also we must attribute the order of service followed in conservative Reformed churches. So it is, whether we think of the Heidelberg Catechism, the use of the Psalter, or the liturgy and order of worship, the Reformed community of churches even today continues to enjoy the fruit of Dathenus's many labors at Frankenthal. May the Lord grant to us a heartfelt willingness to treasure this heritage of Word-centered, God-glorifying belief and worship for which our forebears labored, suffered, and died.

During his years in Germany, Dathenus's heart was still in the Lowlands and with his suffering Dutch brothers and sisters who were often put to death for espousing the Reformed faith. When in 1566 a compromise between the rulers of the Lowlands was ratified and afforded some hope of reprieve from persecution, he felt led to return to the Netherlands. It was not easy for him to leave Frankenthal where his work as pastor, court preacher, and liturgist had been richly blessed. The last twenty-two years of his life would be far less peaceable than his Frankenthal years.

Back in the Netherlands, Dathenus became a zealous, popular field preacher, condemning Rome and Spain vehemently and eloquently. He literally carried his pulpit on his back and preached wherever possible, sometimes to crowds that numbered from ten to fifteen thousand. Those were days when people were willing to walk many miles to hear the Word of God. He also held positions of leadership in the Dutch churches. In May 1566 he was elected president of the Synod of Antwerp; in 1568, he was elected president of

the Convent of Wezel, held by the refugee churches in that German city. He was a delegate to the Synod of Emden in 1571 and president of the First National Synod of Dordrecht in 1578. Both these Dutch synods dealt with preparing a church order, a process to which Dathenus lent an important hand by adapting Micronius's work accomplished in London to the Netherlands situation. This process was not completed, however, until 1619 when the Church Order of Dort was formally ratified.

Meanwhile, Dathenus led a rather checkered life. His preaching soon brought him into difficulties, even with William of Orange, the leader in the fight against Spain. The prince wanted to grant Roman Catholics freedom of worship, but Dathenus strenuously opposed such a policy. When Dathenus began to incorporate strong political statements into his messages, emphasizing in particular that any concession made to Spain would eventually destroy the Reformed faith, William strongly opposed him. Consequently, after 1567 we find Dathenus back in the Palatinate for some years, where he pastored a congregation of Dutch, French, and Walloon exiles, and served as court preacher for John Casimir. In 1578 we meet him back in his homeland as a pastor in Ghent. He again began to travel, preaching extensively, also on political issues of the day. Due to his political involvement, William of Orange had him imprisoned for eight months and then sent him into exile.

Dathenus returned to Frankenthal as pastor, but nearly died from an epidemic disease. He was later dismissed by the congregation as he was no longer able to perform the work entrusted to him. Sadly, this dismissal, together with his rejection by William of Orange, deeply embittered him. He too was a man subject to like passions as we are (Jas. 5:17). He became a wanderer and took up the practice

of medicine. According to his own testimony, he did not despise the Christian ministry but was forced into another occupation by his need to support himself and his wife. Wandering through Germany, he joined a revolutionary and heretical sect for a short time, which resulted in his being barred from the Dutch churches as well. Happily, the Dutch churches sent a delegation to lovingly convince him of his error. Upon their arrival, how grateful they must have been to hear from Dathenus's own mouth a confession of his sin and a declaration that he had parted from the sect prior to their arrival! Nevertheless, due to the infirmities of age and a life spent fleeing persecution, Dathenus was not able to return to the church or land that he loved. On March 17, 1588 he passed away in Germany, far from home and from his friends and church, but not far from the God whom he loved and served, and who washed away all his sins in the precious blood of Christ.

Somehow amid his many activities and trials, Dathenus also found time to write scores of letters. He wrote to many of the more renowned Reformers, but many of his letters have not been recovered. Calvin was one of his favorite correspondents. Another was Lady Elizabeth de Grave, to whom he wrote extensively in 1584 about soul-matters. These letters, written in the form of a dialogue, were collected and published forty years later, in 1624. They were entitled *De Paarl der Christelijke Vertrouwing* (*The Pearl of Christian Comfort*) and are here presented in English for the first time, having been translated by Dr. Arie W. Blok with assistance from Bartel Elshout. Two editions of this work were used for the present translation, one published in Sneek, the Netherlands, in 1884, the other in Holland, Michigan in 1910. Both are based on a 1624 edition published in the Hague by Anthony Janz.

A dialogue between two or more persons was a fairly common literary genre among the Dutch for religious material that was intended to be instructive. The “pearl” Dathenus refers to is assurance of salvation and its accompanying peace of conscience before God. He refers to this as a “pearl,” since in the folklore of his day, pearls were to be esteemed far above diamonds.

*The Pearl of Christian Comfort* is written as a dialogue between “Dathenus” and “Elizabeth.” “Elizabeth” represents Lady Elizabeth de Grave. This work is a presentation of the Biblical doctrine of justification by faith and contains numerous echoes of the Heidelberg Catechism. Written to be of help and comfort to those in spiritual distress, it is characterized by an evangelical-experimental tone which would become typical of the early period of the Dutch Second Reformation (*Nadere Reformatie*).

One helpful feature of this book is its great number of supporting Scripture references. The translator has included these references, except in rare cases in which they did not seem to apply. He has added Scripture references in a few cases where a reference to a cited text was lacking, corrected references where the printer made an error, and adjusted references in cases where the Dutch verse numbers differ from those in the English version (which applies especially to the Psalms). Long sentences and paragraphs have been shortened to make comprehension easier for the reader, but great care has been taken to leave the author’s message intact.

We trust that these spiritual dialogues, written more than four centuries ago, may bring spiritual encouragement to many in ways Petrus Dathenus would never have imagined.

*The Author's Dedicatory Epistle  
to the Honorable, Virtuous  
Elizabeth De Grave*

My dearly beloved sister, grace and mercy to you by Jesus Christ our Lord:

Noble and virtuous lady, my very beloved sister, and good friend, Holy Scripture, all church histories and daily experiences give abundant testimony that the children of God are subjected to many crosses and assaults in this world. Yet no external cross can be compared to the internal strife to which believers are constantly subjected when awakened to a sense of sin — when we taste the wrath of God through the curse of the law, and the prospect of an open hell robs us of all hope of grace and salvation, distancing us from the power of the Holy Spirit who enables us to pray and cry out to God. It is very difficult to explain such strife to those who have never experienced it. It is very difficult to persuade people in their strife and to move them to faith. Yet those who have experienced this and, in the deep hell of their forsakenness, have for a time been discouraged and half-despairing, but afterwards, by God's grace and the work of the Holy Spirit, have felt and tasted the certainty of their salvation in Christ, can speak of this in a vivid way. The Lord be praised that I also have tasted and borne my portion, and as I understand, you have also not been entirely free from this cross.

In the long time in which I have served and walked, I have counseled and reassured many people who were honest, pious, and of good conscience, who because of the sinfulness of their nature and temperament had almost perished in despair (for Satan labors to this end and goes about day and night as a roaring lion). Therefore, it has often been my intention to improve on the little tract *The Consolation of the Sick*,<sup>1</sup> by writing something shorter and more Biblical in content for broader instruction of troubled consciences. I wish to help those who lack an adequate understanding of the difference between the law and the gospel, i.e., those who feel themselves unable to accept the doctrine of justification of grace by faith. However, because of my frequent journeyings and other occasions which overtook me, I have long been unable to carry out my intention, to say nothing of all the problems of the churches which keep me more than busy. I have not had the time for thorough meditation to be able to make a competent and orderly composition.

However, being moved by the dialogue we had with each other, it caused me to work out this dialogue in the manner of a friendly conversation, insofar as my situation permitted, until a time when God the Lord will give me the rest and opportunity to describe and explain these teachings in a broader, plainer, and more thorough way for the comfort of all poor sinners.

In order that you might be helped in the meantime, may you be able to study this comforting dialogue to the peace of your conscience. I have written this to you as a sure evidence and glorious remembrance of our godly

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<sup>1</sup> Since the days of Dathenus, Dutch Psalmbooks have included this *Consolation of the Sick* (*Ziekentroost*), written by Cornelius van Hille.

friendship and unity which we have in Christ through the hand of the Holy Spirit. I present this in the hope that God may use this small labor to your comfort and that of many others in a wonderful way until the Lord will provide you with something better.

I request of you that you will receive this in thankfulness, read it and be comforted by it. Remember me in your prayers, and according to my slender ability, I will heartily do the same for you in order that we, together with all of God's elect, may walk in true faith which works by love, persevering steadfastly until the end and afterwards may live forever in blessed glory.

With all my heart, I commend all of you to the protection of our omnipotent God.

Your sincere brother and friend,  
PETRUS DATHENUS

Date of posthaste to Ghent, June 26, 1585





*A Christian dialogue from God's Word for the instruction and consolation of all troubled hearts who are not properly able to distinguish between the law and the gospel — that is, between Moses and Christ — who are troubled in heart by the burden of their sins and fear of damnation.*

The dialoguing persons are  
DATHENUS AND ELIZABETH

DATHENUS: God greet you, Elizabeth, my dear sister. Where are you coming from that you are so sorrowful? One would almost become depressed just by looking at you.

ELIZABETH: I come from a worship service where I heard God's Word preached.

DATHENUS: But how can that be? David says that the law of the LORD, which is perfect, rejoices the heart (Ps. 19:8). What have you heard that has done the opposite and made you so troubled and depressed?

ELIZABETH: Yes, it is true; in that same psalm where we read that God's Word is sweeter than honey and the honeycomb, we also read that in keeping God's Word there is great reward. But I find in myself that I am very far from keeping God's law. In spite of the knowledge which the Lord has given me, I am making the gulf of sin deeper, in that I daily make my sin-debt greater and bring myself deeper under God's curse and wrath. For it is written, "Cursed be he that confirmeth not all the words of this law to do them" (Deut. 27:26). To this our minister added that the servant who knew his Lord's will but did not do it would be beaten with double stripes (Luke 12:24). This has effectively admonished me and I find myself one of

these servants. Therefore, do not I have good reason to be sad and to mourn?

DATHENUS: Everyone must acknowledge their shortcomings (Rom. 7:23) and have regret in their hearts, but they also must be mindful not to be overwhelmed with excessive sorrow (2 Cor. 2:7) — the kind that works death.

It seems to me that your sorrow is such a sorrow, and arises out of a great misunderstanding, which is that you do not distinguish between the law and the gospel because you do not rightly know the Lord Jesus. Therefore you are still far from a childlike fear. But perfect love drives out fear, for fear brings anguish, and one who fears in this way is not perfect in love. So please, dear Elizabeth, learn to understand God's Word better, so that you do not regard Jesus as another Moses. By this I mean, that you will not treat our Advocate and Savior as an accuser and condemner, which is the greatest dishonor with which people can dishonor Jesus.

ELIZABETH: I feel and bewail my ignorance and inadequacy enough, and I have found, as you say, that God's love in me is very incomplete. Yet I plead with you, dear brother, if you love my salvation, please be willing to take the time to instruct and comfort me, for I sincerely hunger and thirst after righteousness.

DATHENUS: This I owe to you and I am willing to do, but let us sit here along the bank of this watercourse under the green trees, where we are away from the noise of the crowd. Let us sit where the little birds laud and praise their Maker with happy songs. They will encourage us to delight in God and thank Him for all His benefits.