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Canons of Dordt 400th anniversary issue

Prayer of Balthasar Lydius, at the opening session of the synod

Balthasar Lydius

Whence the Canons of Dordt?

Prof. Russell Dykstra

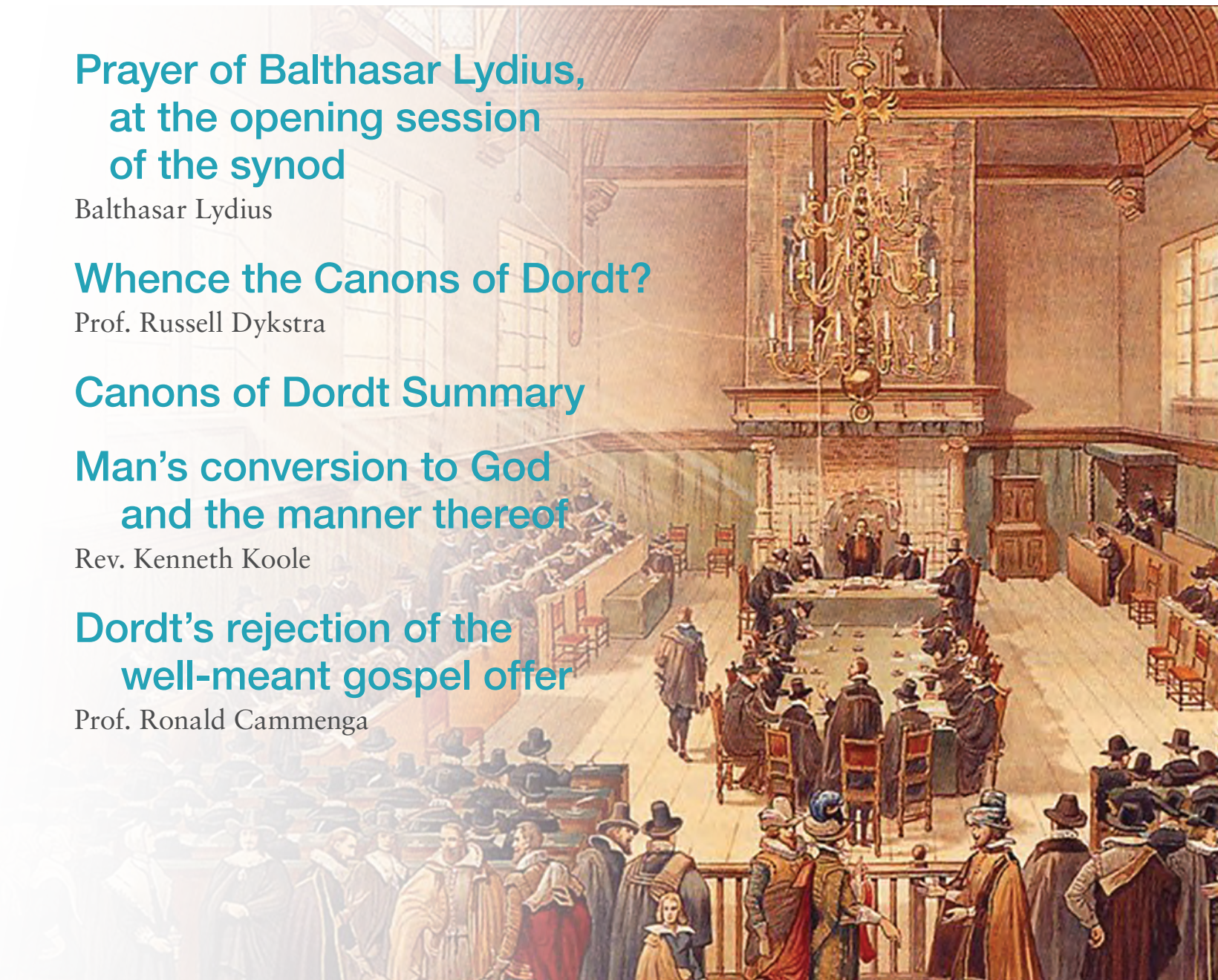
Canons of Dordt Summary

Man's conversion to God and the manner thereof

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Dordt's rejection of the well-meant gospel offer

Prof. Ronald Cammenga



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Meditation

Translated and edited by Prof. Douglas Kuiper and Dr. H. David Schuringa

Prayer of Balthasar Lydius, at the opening session of the synod

Balthasar Lydius was a Reformed minister in Dordrecht from 1602-1629, and was delegated by the Synod of South Holland to attend the great synod.¹ As the local pastor, two honors fell to him on November 13, 1618: that of preaching a Dutch sermon in the morning before the Synod opened, and that of opening the first session of the Synod with prayer. He prayed in Latin. A partial English translation of the prayer has been available for centuries,² but it is based on the memory of some in the audience. The new translation that follows is based on the Dutch translation of the prayer in the Acts of the Synod of Dordt.³

The prayer is ornate. It breathes the language of Scripture. Its long sentences include many subordinate phrases and clauses. As is the Dutch custom, in these long sentences the subject is near the beginning and the verb at the end. This translation divides the long sentences into shorter ones so that the English reader today can better understand the prayer.

Prayer at the opening session of the synod⁴

Almighty, eternal God, Fountain of all wisdom, goodness and mercy, compassionate Father in Christ! We pray that Thou wilt open our lips so that our mouth may declare Thy praise.

We are unworthy of all Thy mercies which Thou hast bountifully bestowed upon the work and workmanship of Thy hands. Not only hast Thou created us according to Thy image, but also, when we through sin had become by nature the children of wrath, Thou didst recreate us according to Thy image. Since we already are indebted to Thee because Thou hast created us, how much more do we owe because Thou hast also freely redeemed us?

It is great and marvelous that man was made in Thy image. How much greater it is that He who thought it not robbery to be equal with God made Himself of no reputa-

tion, took upon Him the form of a servant, and was made in our likeness, who of God was made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption!

Also with these benefits Thou wast not satisfied. We were a people dwelling in the darkness and shadow of death, without hope of salvation, cast off in the unworthiness of our souls, for whom an unknown treasure would be of no use. But Thou hast enlightened us by the revelation of the Sun of righteousness and truth! Without this, we would have perished everlastingly in these errors, not knowing what way we must walk.

The enemy of mankind sowed tares among the wheat while men slept. This darkness gradually gained the upper hand. Yet through the light of the Reformation Thou hast delivered us from a greater darkness than that of Egypt. In these places Thou hast planted Thy vine, whose shadow has covered the mountains and whose branches are the cedars of God.

The enemy of the human race, that great red dragon, begrudged us this blessed state. He spewed water from his mouth like a torrent to sweep us away as with a flood. He raised high the stakes, provoking horrible wars against Thy turtledove. Thy enemies were out to devour Thy congregation in these provinces. But Thou hast delivered our soul from the snare of the fowler, so that even men in the Netherlands of shield and spear were left speechless. Thou hast ordained new weapons and hast become a wall of fire round about the cities. Thou Thyself hast taken possession of the gates of the enemy, that her gates be lifted up, that the King of glory might enter in.

Going forth with our forces, Thou didst instruct the hands of the Illustrious Prince of Orange to do battle.⁵ Taking him by the hand, Thou hast broken the bars of the gates of the enemy and hast granted peace to our lands. Thou hast made us fat with the finest of the wheat and crowned us with Thy lovingkindness. Thy footsteps dripped with fatness. The chief of Thy temporal benefits toward us is this, that when the affairs were the weightiest and the storms were the highest, Thou, our Exalted Lord, hast given the rulers a pliable heart

1 Fred van Lieburg, "The Participants at the Synod of Dordt," in *Acta et Documenta Synodi Nationalis Dordrechtanae*, Vol. 1: *Acta of the Synod of Dordt*, ed. Donald Sinnema, Christian Moser, and Herman J. Selderhuis (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), XCII.

2 Gerard Brandt, *The History of the Reformation in and About the Low Countries* (London: T. Wood, 1722), 3:8.

3 *Acta of Handelingen der Nationale Synod te Dordrecht*, (Kampen: J. H. Bos, n.d.), 2-4.

4 This translation omits one section of the prayer. The complete prayer with footnoted Scripture references will be published in the *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, and later put online at www.dordt400.org.

5 Lydius refers to Prince Maurice who, in July 1617, openly sided with the Counter-Remonstrant cause against Oldenbarnevelt. Oldenbarnevelt was virtually the Prime Minister of the Netherlands (although that was not his official title) and had favored the Arminians.

to direct Thy people (over which Thou hast appointed them) with wisdom, and especially to judge between good and evil. Thou hast inspired them with sound counsel. Thou hast wonderfully blessed and made them as anointed children of honor, who would stand with the governor of the whole land.

For these benefits, Thou hast expected lovely grapes from Thy vine, but, behold, it has brought forth wild grapes!⁶ Thou hast exalted Thy people, and they have despised Thee! Therefore, Thou hast not withheld from us what we deserved. Thou art become as a visitor in the land, as a stranger who remains therein only overnight; as a man of valor who is defeated, and as a strong man who cannot help. Thou hast confounded our lips! The end of the foreign war has almost become the beginning of the internal one.⁷ In peacetime the bitterness of Thy Bride has become exceedingly bitter.

Thou hast laid the ax to the tree root, in order to cut down the unfruitful fig tree. Thy inheritance has become like a wounded lion and has roared against Thee. Many shepherds have destroyed Thy vineyard, trodden Thy portion under foot, and made Thy pleasant portion a wilderness, desolate and empty. Nowhere have the comings and goings been peaceful, but exceedingly troubled by rumors of war. This, because we did not heed Thy warnings, O Lord! One people would rise up against the other, one city against another, for Thou hast afflicted them with every misery.

But in Thy wrath Thou hast been mindful of Thy mercies. Thou hast inclined the hearts of the rulers of our fatherland, consuming them with zeal for Thy house so that they have earnestly sought that which serves the peace of Jerusalem.

To this end have they summoned this National Synod in order to inquire at the mouth of the Lord regarding the quarrels that have been stirred up, and in order that Thy law would be a light to disperse the fog of errors. Nevertheless, as everything depends on Thy blessing, O Lord, we pray that Thou wilt preside at this National Synod with Thy Holy Spirit, with the Spirit of truth and of peace. We pray this according to Thy promise, "Where two or three are gathered in my Name, there I will be in the midst of them."

The Holy Scripture must be interpreted by that same Spirit by which it was inspired, and cannot be understood except by pure minds. Therefore, we pray that

Thou wilt first cleanse our intentions, then illumine us so that we may indeed understand Thy holy Word and handle it diligently. Grant, O God, that through the Scripture we may mislead no one nor be misled, but that in it we may seek and find the truth. Having discovered the truth, may we defend it with steadfast faith.

Sanctify us in Thy truth. Grant that we might exalt Thee with one mouth. Permit no divisions among us, but rather grant that we be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. Let us not be desirous of vain glory, provoking one another, envying one another. Rather, let us endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Cause us always to remember that to an extent strife is much better for us who are united with God, than peace which separates us from God. Cause us to remember that truth and peace are two friends and twin sisters, so that peace shall not come to us if we do not cherish truth, her sister.

Grant that we, having set aside perverse errors, might consider the matters laid before us, not with sharp subtleties, but by weighing the certainty of the matters themselves, washing away the bitter stain of slander at the river of true reasoning.

Grant those who are wandering to be brought back to the right path. Give them to be not obstinate. Cause them to remember that ignorance, when recognized, is the highest wisdom; that the truth can be that which seems unbelievable to man, and the lie that which seems plausible; and that the greatest victory is to triumph over error exposed.

Since Thou hast commanded us to pray for kings and princes, and for all who are placed in authority, we pray, among others, for those governments whose theological professors are present in this solemn ecclesiastical assembly, as well as for those who are yet expected; and for his royal majesty of Great Britain, James I, who is a courageous and conscientious protector of the true faith. [*Lydius prays for other dignitaries as well, including the Prince of Orange and Dutch authorities.*] Grant that each and every one of them might serve Thee with reverence and rejoice with trembling. Confirm their scepter and secure their throne in ever-increasing measure, that they might remain faithful, nurturing fathers of Thy church in these regions.

Bless also the citizens of this city. Grant that they seek above all the kingdom of God and His righteousness. According to Thy lovingkindness, provide them that of which they stand in need. Finally, grant that we all together in this assembly may be dedicated to produce what is pleasing to Thee, to the honor of Thy holy name, the preservation of the truth, and divine blessing for the church and the republic. Amen.

6 Following his review of the Reformation and victory following the brutal wars with Spain, Lydius now transitions to the Remonstrant controversy at hand.

7 In 1609, the Netherlands and Spain had declared a truce in the Eighty Year war, which truce lasted 12 years. During this truce, the Arminian controversy was at its height, and the country came close to civil war.

Editor's notes

Four hundred years ago, theologians—pastors and professors—from Reformed churches all over Europe were wending their way to the town of Dordrecht, in the province of Utrecht, in the Lowlands. They were coming by invitation of the Reformed churches and the States General, the governing political body of the provinces. These men came knowing that they were facing a difficult task, namely, confronting a dangerous heresy with many heads and much deception. Did they know that they were leaving behind their families and their labors for six months? Probably not. But they were willing to pay the cost, to sacrifice and be sacrificed for the sake of the truth. By God's grace they united mind and heart and will to expose and condemn the serious errors that were tearing apart the Reformed churches in the Lowlands. And then, with amazing unity among them, they set forth

the Reformed doctrine of salvation in such a way that it was both theologically precise and heartwarming pastoral. God used these men to accomplish a monumental task, and the Reformed church world benefits yet today more than it is possible to express.

In thankful recognition of God's gift, the *Standard Bearer* commemorates the 400th anniversary of the Synod of Dordrecht. Two special commemorative issues will be printed, D.V. The current issue is the first, focusing on the Canons as such. The second issue is planned for the April 1 issue. It will focus on the other work of the great Synod.

Let us rejoice in God's faithfulness. And let us do so by being instructed in the doctrines and recommitting ourselves to these glorious truths.

Prof. Russell Dykstra



Canons of Dordt—history

Prof. Russell Dykstra, professor of Church History and New Testament in the Protestant Reformed Seminary

Whence the Canons of Dordt?

The Canons of Dordt is an amazing document with an amazing history to match. Drawn up by the Synod of Dordrecht in 1618-19, it sets forth the Reformed doctrine of salvation, explaining further the teaching of the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession. Our purpose is to explore some of this history and its significance. What occasioned the Synod of Dordrecht? And how did God accomplish His purposes in the meeting of this great Synod?

The setting of the Synod was, first of all, Dordrecht, a city in the province of South Holland, in the Lowlands.¹ The Lowlands was an area known for struggle and bloodshed for the sake of the Reformation. In 1517 Martin Luther posted his 95 theses for debate, sparking the Reformation. The Reformation soon spread to the Lowlands, and conflict was almost immediate. In fact, the first known martyrs of the Reformation were two monks from the Lowlands. The Spanish/Catholic oppression of the Reformation in the Lowlands was unequalled in all of Europe in the sixteenth century. Thousands were tor-

tured and put to death, including the writer of the Belgic Confession of Faith, Guido de Brès.

Into that world in 1559, Jacob Arminius was born—two years before the Belgic Confession was published. Arminius was born in the town of Oudewater in the province of Utrecht. His father died about the same time, and a local priest assisted the family. Arminius received a good education, including instruction in various centers of learning in other countries. During one of his educational forays, the Spanish troops that destroyed Oudewater also killed his mother and siblings.

Arminius received his theological training in the new University of Leiden and subsequently in Geneva, where John Calvin's successor Theodore Beza maintained the Reformed traditions. With Beza's commendation, Arminius returned to the Lowlands and was ordained a Minister of the Word in Amsterdam in 1588.

About two years later he was asked to respond to controversial writings on predestination. Although Arminius agreed, he never published his answer, and it is generally thought that his own views on predestination began to crystallize, views contrary to what he had been taught.

Arminius' aberrant views soon began to surface. He began a series on Paul's Epistle to the Romans. His ser-

¹ I will refer to this area as "the Lowlands," rather than the Netherlands because the country of the Netherlands was not yet formed at this time.

mons on Romans 7 led a fellow pastor, Petrus Plancius, to protest them for teaching Pelagianism. Arminius taught that the man described in Romans 7, who willed to do good, was *unregenerate*. When Arminius preached on Romans 9, Plancius again objected, for Arminius taught that God elects those who believe. In all this, Arminius escaped censure, though his own consistory examined him more than once. Eventually Arminius would be appointed to the position of professor of theology in Leiden, after promising to teach in harmony with the confessions. However, he did not keep his promise but continued to teach seminarians these errors.²

In these teachings, however, Arminius was hardly alone. Many pastors in the Lowlands churches disagreed with the doctrine of predestination taught by Calvin and Beza. However, the Reformed churches were not able to remove these men, often due to the church polity that was in force. Local magistrates controlled the church buildings and paid the salary of the ministers. There were times when a consistory or a classis condemned a minister and banned him from the pulpit, but the magistrates continued to support him and refused to pay the salary of another minister.

In fact, these false doctrines were spreading quickly in the Reformed churches in the Lowlands. To understand the widespread acceptance of Arminius' teachings one must know that the Reformed churches in the Lowlands were far from united in doctrine. Yes, there were many sincere believers and preachers who loved the Reformed faith taught by Calvin. Yes, the Confession of Faith written by de Brès was widely accepted in the churches, and many classes and provincial synods had not only adopted but even required subscription to the Confession. Yes, the Heidelberg Catechism was much beloved, having been translated into Dutch and used for teaching and preaching in many churches.

However, from the start of the Reformation in the Lowlands many who joined the Reformed churches did not do so out of heartfelt conviction. When a local municipality decided in favor of the Reformation, the local church then began holding Protestant services. The townspeople could either continue to worship there, or travel to another town to worship in a Roman Catholic church. Many continued their membership in the town church. And this was even easier when the minister in that church was the former Roman Catholic priest

who converted to Protestantism. Some of these priests genuinely confessed the Reformed faith, and some did not. Those who did not, continued to maintain Romish doctrine and, on the matter of salvation, these doctrines were Pelagian at bottom.

In all these years of reformation, the Reformed churches could not become purely Reformed. Persecution made it very difficult to hold ecclesiastical assemblies. And government regulations made it almost impossible to call a national synod—only three had been held to this point.

The upshot was that the doctrines espoused by Arminius were held by a multitude of members and preachers. And in this period, with the support of the local magistrates, as well as some powerful men in national government, the Arminians became bold. Increasingly they called for a national synod to revise the confessions. Sibrandus Lubbertus, professor of theology in Franeker warned that Arminius and his friends were creating doubt and controversy over the very fundamentals of the faith, including original sin, free will, predestination, faith, justification, sanctification, regeneration, and more.³ When Arminius died in 1609, the movement was in no way diminished, and theologians met in the Hague to draw up a “remonstrating” document with five heads of doctrine. They became known as the Remonstrants.

Things went from bad to worse. Reformed preachers were being put out of office by their consistories or local magistrates. In places the Reformed members formed *doleerende kerken*—grieving churches—because they could not in good conscience worship under Arminian preaching.

In short, everything hung in the balance. The days were very dark for the Reformed faith. Many sincere believers and pastors must have been very afraid for the future of the Reformed faith in the Lowlands, for the very existence of the Reformed churches there, and for their own children and grandchildren.

In that darkest of hours, God changed everything, demonstrating that “the king’s heart is in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water; he turneth it whithersoever he will” (Prov. 21:1). First, after decades of fighting, a truce was signed between the Dutch and the Spanish in 1609, allowing the government and churches of the Lowlands to focus on internal troubles, including Arminianism.

Second, England, which had significant influence in the provinces of the Lowlands, began to exert pressure on the

2 A student of Arminius reports how his professor turned them from the writing of Calvin, Beza, Zanchi, and other Reformed writers, and toward heretics and Roman Catholic writers. See Richard A. Muller, *God, Creation, and Providence: Arminius' Theology in Context*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991), 27-28.

3 Nicolas Fornerod, “‘The Canons of the Synod had Shot the Head off the Advocate’s Head’: A Reappraisal of the Genevan Delegation at the Synod of Dordt,” *Revisiting the Synod of Dordt (1618-1619)*, ed. Aza Goudriaan and Fred Van Lieburg, (Leiden/ Boston: Brill, 2011), 188.

government. In God's grace and providence, the head of the Church of England at that time was George Carleton, Archbishop of Canterbury. Carleton was a Calvinist who had already dealt with similar errors in England. He saw problems in the Lowlands and influenced King James I to send letters opposing the appointment of the notorious heretic Conrad Vorstius to replace Arminius in Leiden in 1612. James also urged the States General to call a national synod to deal with the division in the Reformed churches due to the Remonstrants.

Third, God moved Prince Mauritz of the house of Orange to cast his lot with the Counter-Remonstrants. Mauritz used his large army (free from fighting against the Spanish) to disarm the local militia that supported the magistrates, and in some cases he replaced the magistrates who were opposed to him and had favored the Remonstrants.

Finally, in 1618, God moved the States General to authorize the Reformed churches to convoke a national synod and invite foreign delegates; they even pledged to finance the entire synod.

This was an astounding turn of events! Not to be overlooked is also this: the changes at the local level of government meant that nearly all the delegates sent to the synod in 1618 were not Remonstrants, but Reformed, something that could not have happened just two years earlier.

Looking back at this, one might wonder why God determined *this* course of events. Why allow the theology of the Arminians to grow until it seemed to dominate the churches, and only then sovereignly bring in a national synod—an *international* synod—that thoroughly and decisively rejected Arminianism?

God's ways are higher than our ways, and His thoughts than our thoughts, so I cannot give all His purposes. And yet at least one is evident. That one has to do with God's plan for maintaining His truth and developing right doctrine. Throughout the new dispensation, God used errors in doctrine to develop His truth. Errors brought into the church force the church to search the Scriptures. In and through her search, and guided by the Spirit of truth, the church rejects the lie. That sharpens the truth as it stands in relief over against error. But there is more to God's plan. In this process, His truth is set forth more clearly and explicitly, sometimes in confessional form. There is *development* in doctrine.

Thus, it was the plan of God that these errors in the doctrine of salvation should be set forth in the Reformed churches in the Lowlands. These were not entirely new errors. Various forms had risen in the church in the past—the Judaizers condemned by the council in Jerusalem (Acts 15); the errors of Pelagius refuted by

Augustine (early 400s), followed by the Semi-Pelagians. Neither of those had truly been extinguished and they rose up in the Middle Ages in the full-blown work-righteousness defended by Rome. And now Arminianism. This was the culmination, the well-developed fruit of the false teaching of merit and free will, of resistible grace and conditional election, and of the denial of reprobation. God determined that the enemies of sovereign, particular, efficacious, saving grace should fully develop their heresies in the Lowlands.

And develop them they would—logically, so that all the parts of their theology would hang together. The many implications would be set forth, the “supporting” texts given their Arminian interpretation.

Once and for all, the church would be able to face the question: What does the Word of God teach on the doctrine of salvation? Is salvation truly *all* of God? Is there a part that depends on man? Does man merit something? Does he contribute to his salvation?

According to God's eternal counsel, after the errors were fully developed and laid out for all to see, a gathering of theologians representing the Reformed church world of that day came together to reject Arminianism, which brought “again out of hell the Pelagian error (II, B, 3), and then set forth the Reformed faith on the doctrine of salvation. Refuting the errors of the Arminians, in five heads of doctrine they demonstrated clearly from Scripture 1) that fallen man is totally depraved and therefore contributes nothing to his salvation; 2) that Christ's death is effectual because it is substitutionary and a true satisfaction of God's justice, a complete atonement; 3) that God's grace is always and only particular and saving; 4) that the saints cannot be lost, preserved as they are by God's sovereign grace; and 5) that all of this is grounded in sovereign, unconditional, unchanging, eternal election.

That is the Canons of Dordt.

What a marvelous gift of God the Canons are to His church! The Canons define what is Reformed. None can legitimately claim to be Reformed who deny the doctrines so clearly set forth in the Canons.

God's truth was and is on display there, over against the heresies of the past. God's glory was and is on display there. With this certain knowledge we can worship this God in truth, not wondering, as Luther put it to Erasmus, “how much [of my salvation] I ought to ascribe unto myself, and how much unto God.”⁴

Salvation is all of God.

⁴ Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, transl. Henry Cole, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976), 36.

Canons of Dordt Summary

Head 1: Of divine predestination

- Article 1** Because of universal sin, universal damnation would be just
Article 2 But God's love sent His Son for salvation
Article 3 God sends preachers to bring men to believe
Article 4 Wrath comes upon unbelievers; life to believers
Article 5 The blame for unbelief rests on man; the credit for faith to God
Article 6 The source of faith is God, according to His election of some
Article 7 A definition of election; the fruits of election
Article 8 Election is *one*: a decree to grace, glory, salvation, and the way of salvation
Article 9 Election is unconditional (see Article 10)
Article 10 Election is sovereign: its explanation is God alone
Article 11 Election is unchangeable and certain
Article 12 How one is assured of his election
Article 13 Assurance of election has positive effects; not presumption or carelessness
Article 14 The truth of election must be preached
Article 15 The doctrine of reprobation, which helps emphasize the grace of election
Article 16 Three kinds of people who may be alarmed at reprobation
Article 17 What about the election of believers' children dying in infancy?
Article 18 Scripture's answer to those who object to the doctrine of predestination

Head II: The death of Christ and the redemption of men thereby

- Article 1** God's justice requires punishment of sinners
Article 2 Man cannot make the payment; God did, in His Son
Article 3 The death of Christ is of infinite value
Article 4 This infinite value has a twofold reason: who Christ was, and what God did
Article 5 The promise of this gospel with the command to repent and believe must be preached promiscuously
Article 6 The blame for unbelief is not in the gospel preached, but in the unbeliever
Article 7 The credit for faith is not in the believer, but in God's grace
Article 8 God's saving purpose in Christ's death: the salvation of the elect alone
Article 9 This saving purpose always has been and always will be accomplished

Heads III/IV: Of the corruption of man, his conversion to God, and the manner thereof

- Article 1** Created good by God, man brought upon himself his depravity by the fall
Article 2 Depraved men bring forth similarly depraved children (Christ excepted)
Article 3 Depravity described: unable to do good; inclined to all evil; dead in sin, bondage

- Article 4** The light of nature cannot save fallen and depraved man
Article 5 The law cannot save fallen and depraved man
Article 6 Only God saves: by His Holy Spirit through the gospel
Article 7 This gospel has been revealed to some alone, according to God's sovereignty
Article 8 The call in the gospel is a serious call
Article 9 The blame for unbelief is not in the gospel or in Christ; but in the unbeliever
Article 10 The credit for faith is not in man's free will exercised, but in God alone
Article 11 Conversion illuminates man's *mind*, softens his *heart*, and quickens his *will*
Article 12 Conversion is effected without man's aid; it miraculously makes man willing and active
Article 13 The way God effects conversion is incomprehensible, but known experientially
Article 14 Faith is God's gift, worked by Him; it is not offered for man's acceptance or rejection
Article 15 Recipients of faith, therefore, can only be grateful; certainly not proud...
Article 16 Grace does not take away man's will, but quickens it, giving Christians a "free will"
Article 17 God works grace through the *means* of gospel preaching

Head V: Of the perseverance of the saints

- Article 1** Sin no longer reigns in believers; but it does remain in them
Article 2 Thus, both original and actual sin bring believers to humility, to Christ, etc.
Article 3 Sinful men cannot preserve themselves; but God preserves His own.
Article 4 Therefore, believers must "watch and pray" or fall...
Article 5 By sin, a believer may lose a sense of God's favor; upon returning in repentance...
Article 6 But the God of election does not allow His fallen children to perish
Article 7 God preserves their life and renews them in repentance, resulting in...
Article 8 The explanation of preservation is not in man, but in God alone
Article 9 Assurance of this preservation comes according to the measure of faith
Article 10 Assurance is inseparable from faith in God's Word, the Spirit's testimony, and godly desires
Article 11 Assurance of preservation does not mean believers are always free from doubts
Article 12 Assurance of preservation brings carefulness: good fruits, not bad
Article 13 Renewed assurance (after backsliding) brings more carefulness, not carelessness
Article 14 God works preservation and its assurance through the Word
Article 15 Reaction: The wicked respond evilly to this truth; believers cherish and defend it



Canons of Dordt, Head I

Prof. Douglas Kuiper, newly appointed professor of Church History and New Testament in the Protestant Reformed Seminary

Of divine predestination

The first head of doctrine in the Canons of Dordt sets forth the Reformed teaching regarding divine predestination, and exposes some errors regarding that doctrine. I will explain the Arminian error that our Reformed fathers rejected, summarize the positive teaching of the first head, and evaluate the Reformed response. Unless otherwise noted, every article of the Canons to which I refer is found in Head I.

The Arminian error: Reprobation

Simon Episcopius, the Arminians' spokesman at the Synod of Dordt, said: "We do not so much scruple at the doctrine of *Election*; but it is in that of *Reprobation* that the difficulty lies."¹ For this reason the Arminians wanted the Synod to focus on reprobation, and not address the doctrine of election.

To be clear, the Arminians did not deny that some would go to hell. Rather, they denied that God had in eternity *appointed specific individuals* to hell. According to them, God determined that all people who put themselves in a certain category would go to hell—those who, after hearing the gospel and being given a fair opportunity to believe, would choose unbelief and disobedience. Because infants who died in infancy are not given this "fair opportunity," the Arminians denied that any such children, whether born to believers or unbelievers, went to hell.

Our Reformed fathers were not convinced that the Arminian error was limited to reprobation. For one thing, the logical relation of reprobation to election gave them pause: if God decreed to reprobate a *category* of people but not *specific individuals*, would the same not be true of His decree of election? And if He punishes some solely because of their unbelief and disobedience, what role do faith and obedience play in God's election to salvation?

In addition, our Reformed fathers knew what the Arminians had written in "The Remonstrance," a doc-

ument that they presented at a conference in The Hague in 1610:

God, by an eternal and unchangeable decree in His Son, Christ Jesus, before laying the foundation of the world, determined, out of the human race fallen in sin, to save those in Christ, on account of Christ, and through Christ, who through the grace of the Holy Spirit, would believe on His same Son, and who would persevere in that very faith and obedience of faith, through the same grace without ceasing to the end; but on the other hand, to leave the obstinate and unbelieving under sin and wrath, and condemn them as alienated from Christ.²

On the basis of this, our Reformed fathers concluded that the Arminian error also pertained to election.

The Arminian error: Conditional election

At the root of the Arminian error was their view that election is conditional, that is, that God chooses to save those who believe and obey, *because* they have believed and obeyed. The quotation from "The Remonstrance" indicates this: God chose to save those who "would believe...and who would persevere in that very faith and obedience...to the end." The Arminians quickly added that faith and obedience and perseverance are of grace, but they redefined grace as "a gentle advising" (III/IV, B, 7)³ that is common to all men (III/IV, 10; B, 5) rather than as God's almighty and irresistible work in the elect.

Viewing election as conditional, the Arminians denied that God elected particular individuals to salvation. Rather, He chose a certain category of men—those who believe, obey, and persevere to the end in faith and obedience (B, 1, 3).

What of the person who believes for awhile, even experiences for a time the benefits of believers, but then

1 Gerard Brandt, *The History of the Reformation and Other Ecclesiastical Transactions In and About the Low Countries*, (London: T. Wood, 1722), 3:102.

2 "The Remonstrants (1610)," in *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation*, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), 4:42.

3 "B" here and throughout the issue refers to the "Rejection of Errors" part of the Canons in each head.

falls away? The Arminians taught that there were various kinds of election—a general and indefinite, regarding those who believe for a time but do not persevere to the end, and a particular and definite, regarding those who ultimately go to heaven (B, 2, 5). Because of these various kinds of election, some elect perish (B, 6), so that no one can be assured in this life that he is chosen to heavenly glory (B, 7).

These statements in the Rejection of Errors are not just words that the Reformers put into the mouths of the Arminians; they are borrowed from “The Opinions of the Remonstrants,” a document that the Arminians wrote at and submitted to the Synod of Dordt.⁴

Head one: The Reformed response

The first part of Head I sets forth positively the teaching of Scripture regarding election (7-14) and reprobation (15), and gives pastoral implications (13-14, 16-18).

Article 7 is a beautiful confessional statement regarding God’s electing grace. The article emphasizes 1) that God appointed a specific number of people to everlasting life (“He...hath...chosen...a certain number of persons to redemption in Christ”); 2) that the necessity of His having chosen them in Christ was that He knew they would be sinners; 3) that the elect know they are elect even before death, because in this life God gives them all the blessings of salvation; and 4) that election is “of mere grace, according to the sovereign good pleasure of His own will.”

Articles 9 and 10 elaborate on the unconditional character of this election. Article 9 emphasizes that man’s faith and holiness are not the *reason* for election, but the *fruit and effect* of election. Article 10 explains “the sole cause of this gracious election” as being “the good pleasure of God.”

Because election is God’s sovereign work, He has but one decree of election, not several (8); this one decree is unchangeable (11); and God assures His elect that they are elect, though in various degrees and different measures (12).

Article 15 sets forth the doctrine of reprobation, namely, that God eternally determined to leave others in the misery of sin, not giving them faith and conversion, but letting their sin work out their own ruin. The reprobate are a specific number, the number of all those who are not elect. By appointing them to everlasting condemnation God manifests His justice.

Appreciating this response

Reformed believers love and appreciate this first head for several reasons.

First, it is explicitly biblical. In the eighteen positive articles, our fathers quoted sixteen Scripture *passages* (not just *verses*), and referred to five more. The nine articles in the Rejection of Errors section include references to twenty-three Scripture passages. The point cannot be overemphasized: our forefathers responded to false teaching with Scripture.

Second, the teaching of the Canons connects the doctrine of election to the gospel of salvation in Christ. Election has *everything to do* with the gospel: we are elected *in Christ!* Those who are elected are sinners, *in need of salvation!* God’s decree of election includes the decree *to bestow on us all the blessings of salvation!* Election is itself “*the fountain of every saving good*” (9; italics mine).

The first head underscores this connection in its first six articles. Why did our fathers not begin with the doctrine of election immediately in Article 1? Because they would put election clearly in the context of the gospel of grace. Articles 1-6 set forth the fundamentals of the gospel: all men have sinned in Adam and deserve God’s curse (1). God manifested His love in Jesus Christ (2) and through the preaching of the gospel calls many to believe in Christ and repent (3). Those who will not believe experience God’s wrath, and those who do believe are given eternal life (4). Unbelievers are responsible for their own unbelief, while faith, by contrast, is God’s gift (5). And God’s decree is the deepest explanation for the faith of some and unbelief of others (6).

Why is this connection of election to the gospel worth pointing out? One reason is to remind us that any expression of the doctrine of election that does *not* relate election to the gospel is not proper. I refer, for example, to those who claim to be elect, but who do not confess specific sins, who do not express their need for the death of Christ and His continuing grace, and who disregard His law. These treat election as something that has nothing to do with the gospel of salvation for sinners.

Another reason is to remind us to follow this pattern when explaining the Reformed faith to one who does not understand it. In explaining the Reformed faith, we should not begin by referring to the doctrine of election. Rather, we should begin by explaining the gospel: man’s sin, God’s curse, man’s need for Christ, and God’s provision of Christ. When the person understands the gospel, he is ready to hear and understand the doctrine of election.

Third, Reformed believers appreciate the warm, pastoral approach of the entire Canons, and particularly

⁴ This document is found in Homer C. Hoeksema, *The Voice of Our Fathers: An Exposition of the Canons of Dordrecht* (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, c1980, 2nd ed., 2013), 103-109.

the first head. It relates election to the *believer*. Why was *I* elected? Because God wanted to choose me (10). How do *I* know that *I*, being elected, will go to heaven? Because election is unchanging (11). How can *I* know that *I* am elect? By observing in myself the fruits of election, “such as a true faith in Christ, filial fear, a godly sorrow for sin, a hungering and thirsting after righteousness,” etc. (12). What response does this doctrine of election produce in *me*? Daily I humble myself before Him, adore His mercy toward me, examine myself and hate and flee from sin, and strive more and more to obey His law. Emphatically, the doctrine of election does *not* lead me to ignore God’s law (13). What of *my* child who dies in infancy? Even though the child has not come to conscious faith in Christ, the fact that God continues His covenant in the line of generations means that I have no reason to doubt the election and salvation of my dead child (17).

Even the doctrine of reprobation is set forth pastorally. Perhaps I am not confident that my sins are forgiven; might *I* be reprobate? The law requires perfection of me, and I know that I fall short; am *I* reprobate? I do

not always focus on God, and desire to serve Him as I ought; did God reprobate *me*? Article 16 says that they only must be terrified who cast off all regard for God and Christ, who love sin and this world, and continue in an unconverted state. However, those who see the enormity of their sin and realize how far short they fall need not be terrified at reprobation, but must continue to use the means of grace.

Finally, we love this first head because it sets forth the glory of our God before whom all must bow. Are we prone to murmur at God’s free grace? Or, does the severity of His justice in reprobation cause us to question His goodness? Article 18 reminds us that we are but men, who must not reply so against God (Rom. 9:20); that it is lawful for God to do what He will with His own (Matt. 20:15), and that our response must be that of the apostle Paul: “O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!... For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen!” (Rom. 11:33-36).

Believer, say “Amen!”



Canons of Dordt, Head II

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Limited (effectual) atonement

Introduction

The second of the doctrines in the Canons of Dordt that teach and defend the gospel of salvation by grace alone is the truth of the death of Jesus Christ as effectual atonement of God’s elect people, and of the elect *only*. Atonement is the reconciliation of sinful humans to God by the satisfying of the justice of God. This satisfaction is the payment to God of the suffering of the punishment of sin that God’s justice demands and the rendering to God of the obedience to His law that His justice requires. The lifelong obedience climaxing in the obedience to the will of God that brought the Savior to the cross and the lifelong suffering of Jesus Christ climaxing in His death by crucifixion were His atonement of the chosen people of God.

This atonement was limited with regard to those humans for whom Jesus obeyed and suffered.

In the popular mnemonic (memorizing device), “TULIP,” this truth is remembered by the third letter, “L,” for “*limited* atonement.” The Reformed doctrine of the atonement of the death of Christ is that Christ died in the stead of, and on behalf of, a *limited* number of humans. What limited the number is God’s decree of predestination. By the eternal will of God of election, Christ died only for some, the elect. He did not die for all humans. He did not die for those whom God did not choose unto salvation, that is, for the reprobate.

The doctrinal enemies of limited atonement proclaim that Christ died for an unlimited number of persons, indeed, for all humans without exception. In 1610, the Arminians, or Remonstrants, stated their doctrine of the atonement in these words:

Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world, died for all men and for every man, so that he has obtained for them

all, by his death on the cross, redemption and the forgiveness of sins; yet that no one actually enjoys this forgiveness of sins except the believer... (Philip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3 [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007], 3.546).

This doctrine of the cross is that of “universal atonement.” Since according to the Arminians the death of Christ failed to atone for, and save, many who perish everlastingly, also these enemies of limited atonement limit the atonement. In their doctrine, what limits the atonement is the will of sinners, who refuse to believe on Christ. Necessarily implied is that the reason why the cross atoned for some is that these sinners distinguish themselves by choosing to allow it to do so, by their own allegedly free will. The explanation of the atonement of the cross, which is salvation, is the will of the sinner. The Reformed faith, confessed in the Canons of Dordt, explains the limitation by the will of God in election. This origin of the cross and its atonement ascribes the glory of the cross to the gracious God, rather than to the sinner himself.

Defense of “limited”

It is common and popular today on the part of those who profess allegiance to the truth that the term defends to express strong dissatisfaction with describing the atonement as “limited.” Other terms are preferred, for example, “definite” and “particular.” Reasons are given, some of which admittedly commend themselves to the Reformed Christian. One wonders, nevertheless, whether aversion to “limited” is not, in reality, dislike of the strong message of the term, “limited,” that the cross was not for everyone and that the salvation of the cross is determined by the counsel of election. “Limited” is offensive to theologians who like, in one way or another, to extend the grace of God more widely than election and who are determined as much as possible to avoid the offense of the denial of universal, common grace.

Whatever the reasons for opposing the term “limited” in the Reformed confession of the atonement, the atonement of the cross of Christ was limited. That which limited the saving nature and power of the cross was the gracious, electing will of God in the decree of predestination. This is the language and teaching of the Canons of Dordt in the fundamental article explaining the death of Christ, Article 8:

This was the sovereign counsel and most gracious will and purpose of God the Father, that the quickening and saving efficacy of the most precious death of his Son should extend to all the elect...that is, it was the will of God, that Christ by the blood of the cross...should

effectually redeem...all those, and those only, who were from eternity chosen to salvation and given to him by the Father... (Schaff, *Creeds*, 3.587).

“Those only,” in the creed, is limitation of the atonement. What limits the atonement is not the will of sinners, but the “sovereign counsel and most gracious will...of God.”

In its historical reality in the past, the cross was not universal, but limited. In the gospel today, the cross is not universal, but limited.

An essential aspect of the death of Christ’s being limited is that it was *effectual*. It accomplished something, then and there, when and where Christ suffered and died. Canons II, 8 teaches, as official, authoritative confession of Reformed Christianity, that the death of Christ did “effectually redeem” humans, namely, all those whom God elected. The death of Christ did not merely make redemption possible for humans, but it effectually redeemed all those for whom Christ died. It bought the elect out of the state of guilt, condemnation, and damnation by the price of the death of the Son of God. By payment of the price of His suffering and death, thus fully satisfying the justice of God, the crucified Jesus bought the elect as His own.

According to the Canons, the cross of Christ did something. Indeed, it did several things, all of which make up salvation. It “confirmed the new covenant.” It “effectually redeemed.” It “purchased” faith and “all the other saving gifts of the Holy Spirit.” It assured the purging from all sin of every one for whom Christ died. It made certain that Christ “should at last bring them [all those for whom He died] free from every spot and blemish to the enjoyment of glory in His own presence forever.” The death of Christ did not make salvation possible. It saved. It did this because by His death the Son of God “was made sin and became a curse” for the elect (Canons II, 2, in Schaff, *Creeds*, 3. 586; the biblical basis for the confession is II Corinthians 5:21 and Galatians 3:13).

The cross accomplished all this inasmuch as it was the atonement for a limited number of persons.

The doctrine of universal atonement denies all this. According to it, the death of Christ accomplished *nothing*.

The heresy of universal atonement

The opposing doctrine, which the Arminian heresy teaches, is that Christ died “without a certain and definite decree to save any” (Canons II, B, 1, in Schaff, *Creeds*, 3:563). The Arminian heresy teaches that Christ died for all humans with a death that merely

made possible atonement for sin, on condition that humans will believe in Christ, by their own supposedly free will. In this theology, the cross was not atonement. It accomplished nothing in reality. In the words of the Canons, this doctrine judges “too contemptuously of the death of Christ” (Canons II, B, 3, in Schaff, *Creeds*, 3.563). It is contemptuous of the death of Jesus!

At the Synod of Dordt, Reformed churches in all the world condemned the Arminian doctrine of the death of Christ as heretical. Today, Calvinistic theologians urge that Reformed churches judge the Arminian doctrine less severely, indeed, as a legitimate, even acceptable, form of the Christian religion. In the recent book, *Perspectives on the Extent of the Atonement: 3 Views*, Andrew D. Naselli denies that the Arminian doctrine of universal, ineffectual atonement is heresy. He contends that the doctrine of limited atonement is not essential to the Christian faith.¹

And Carl R. Trueman, while himself giving a good defense of what he prefers to call “definite atonement,” grants to a proponent of universal atonement that the Arminian doctrine is not Pelagianism, or even semi-Pelagianism.² Trueman denies that the issue of the atonement is “preclusive of Christian fellowship” between Reformed believers and Arminians.³ Evidently, Dordt’s banishment of the Arminians from the Reformed churches in the Netherlands was a mistake, indeed, sin against the oneness of the church. In the end, therefore, the controversy over the doctrines of grace as confessed in the Canons was “much ado about nothing.” Then, virtually conceding the controversy over the atonement to Arminianism, Trueman declares that “I do not think we should rush to criticize an evangelist who tells an audience of unbelievers, ‘Christ died for your sins....’”⁴ His qualifications in no wise mitigate the gravity of the declaration.

Dordt condemned universal, ineffectual atonement as heresy: a subtle bringing “again out of hell the Pelagian error” (Canons II, B, 3, in Schaff, *Creeds*, 3.563). and an instilling into the people “the destructive poison of the Pelagian errors” (Canons, II, B, 6, in Schaff, *Creeds*, 3.564).

Dordt was right. Universal atonement, which denies the efficacy of the cross as determined by God’s electing will, makes the death of Christ dependent for its saving efficacy upon the will of the sinner. It is a form—an

especially wicked form, in view of the centrality and preciousness of the death of the Savior—of the false doctrine that the salvation of the cross depends upon the will of the sinner, contrary to Romans 9:16: “[Salvation] is not of him that willeth...”; of the false doctrine that the cross of the Son of God was an impotent failure; and of the false doctrine that the cross depends for whatever benefit it may offer upon the will of the sinner.

Contemporary forms of universal atonement

The heresy of universal atonement has been craftily introduced into Reformed and Presbyterian churches in our day by the false doctrine of the “well-meant offer” of the gospel. This is the teaching that the proclamation of the gospel is an offer to all sinners on the part of God, motivated by the love of God for all and with the sincere desire on God’s part to save them all. Since the saving call of the gospel is founded on the cross of Christ, the inescapable implication of the “well-meant offer” is that Christ died for all, to make salvation possible for all, dependent on the sinner’s acceptance of God’s offer.

In the 1960s, the Christian Reformed theologian, Harold Dekker, openly and boldly argued this case for universal atonement on the basis of the “well-meant offer.”⁵ There was neither discipline of Dekker for public criticism of the second head of doctrine of the Canons of Dordt, nor refutation of his argument basing universal atonement on the Christian Reformed Church’s doctrine of the well-meant offer.

Of late, there has been a spate of books, some of them highly regarded by the evangelical community, by professing Calvinists arguing (rightly) that the doctrine of the well-meant offer of the gospel implies and demands the doctrine of universal atonement.⁶ Even those disposed to defend, to some (meager) extent, the truth of limited atonement cannot escape the conclusion that if God lovingly offers salvation to all humans in the sincere desire to save them all, Christ must have died for all without exception.

Noticeable has been the failure of Reformed theologians to come to the defense of limited atonement, much less to re-examine the popular theory of the well-meant offer.

5 See “The Well-Meant Offer of the Gospel,” in my *Hyper-Calvinism & the Call of the Gospel* (Grand Rapids: RFPA, rev. ed. 1994), 29-65.

6 See *The Extent of the Atonement: A Historical and Critical Review*, by David L. Allen (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2016) and *He Died for Me: Limited Atonement & the Universal Gospel*, by Jeffrey D. Johnson (Conway, AR: Free Grace Press, 2017).

1 Ed. Andrew David Naselli and Mark A. Snoeberger (Nashville, Tennessee: B&H, 2015), 213-227.

2 *Perspectives on the Extent*, 127.

3 *Perspectives on the Extent*, 127.

4 *Perspectives on the Extent*, 60.

The result is that Reformed churches in fact renounce their own creed, the Canons of Dordt; deny the cross of Christ; and make themselves responsible for bringing

again “out of hell the Pelagian error” (Canons II, B, 3, in Schaff, *Creeds*, 3.563).



Canons of Dordt, Head III

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Fallen man's total depravity

The title of the third and fourth heads of doctrine in the Canons of Dordt is “Of the Corruption of Man, His Conversion to God, and the Manner Thereof.” In the familiar acronym used to summarize the five main doctrines treated in the Canons, “TULIP,” the third and fourth heads explain the “T,” total depravity, and the “I,” irresistible grace. This article will cover the first part of these heads, treating the subject of fallen man's total depravity (Arts. 1-5; rejection of errors, Arts. 1-5).

Before explaining the content of this opening section of Heads III/IV, a question worth asking and answering is: Why are Heads III and IV combined into one section in the Canons of Dordt? The doctrines of unconditional election, limited atonement, and the preservation of the saints are each treated in a distinct chapter in the Canons. Total depravity and irresistible grace are combined into one section. Why?

I offer a twofold answer.

First, there is a close theological relationship between the doctrines of the corruption of man and the conversion of man by God's irresistible grace, which naturally brings these two doctrines together into one section. The nature of man as totally depraved is the necessary background to understanding the nature of God's work in conversion. God converts totally depraved sinners, which conversion, on account of man's complete corruption, must necessarily occur by God's effectual grace.

Second, and more significantly, the two doctrines are treated together in order more clearly to expose the Arminian error concerning the subjects treated in this section. Quoted below in full is the third head of “The Remonstrance” (the Arminian statement of 1610):

That man has not saving grace of himself, nor of the energy of his free will, inasmuch as he, in the state of apostasy and sin, can of and by himself neither think, will, nor do anything that is truly good (such as saving

Faith eminently is); but that it is needful that he be born again of God in Christ, through his Holy Spirit, and renewed in understanding, inclination, or will, and all his powers, in order that he may rightly understand, think, will, and effect what is truly good, according to the Word of Christ, John xv.5 ‘Without me ye can do nothing.’¹

As it stands alone, the Arminian article on man's depravity is Reformed and biblical, a faithful explanation of the corruption of fallen man. Consider now the Remonstrants' fourth head on the grace of God, which reads toward the end of the article: “But as respects the mode of the operation of this grace, it is not irresistible.” In no uncertain terms, Arminian soteriology teaches man's ability to resist God's grace. Upon whom, then, does salvation depend? Not God, but man. And if that is true, man is no longer totally depraved. The Arminian error concerning the depravity of man only becomes plain when viewed directly next to and in light of the Arminians' view of God's grace. Thus, the synod combined its treatment of man's corruption and man's conversion in order more sharply to reveal the Arminian error.

I call your attention now to several main elements of the Canon's teaching on man's corruption over against the errors of the Remonstrants.

In the first place, the Canons teach the *origin* of man's corruption. Most significantly, Heads III/IV, Article 1 makes clear that the source of the depravity of man is not found in God: “Man was originally formed after the image of God.” The Reformed faith, while maintaining the absolute sovereignty of God, cannot be charged with making God the source of man's corrup-

¹ Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983) 3:546-47.

tion, for in His own image God created man. In harmony with the Heidelberg Catechism (Q&A 6) and the Belgic Confession (Art. 14), the Canons identify the image of God in Adam as his true knowledge, righteousness, and holiness. The source of man's corruption, rather, is found wholly in man himself: "...revolting from God by the instigation of the devil and abusing the freedom of his own will, he forfeited these excellent gifts (Art. 1)."

In this connection, the Canons reject the error of those who teach "that the spiritual gifts, or the good qualities and virtues, such as goodness, holiness, righteousness, could not belong to the will of man when he was first created" (Canons III/IV, B, 2). At all cost the Arminians must protect their precious doctrine of free will. By maintaining that original goodness did not extend to the will of man as created by God, the Arminians were able to insist that there was no change in the will of man after the fall of Adam into sin. Regarding his will, man could not lose in the Fall what his will never had. Thus, according to Arminian theology, both before and after the fall of Adam, man's will remains neutral and free, able to choose or not to choose that which is good or evil. Over against this error, the Canons teach that the original goodness with which God created man "undoubtedly belong[ed] to the will," which in turn was utterly lost by man's Fall.

In the second place, the Canons explain the *nature* of man's depravity as a result of Adam's sin. Losing the image of God with which he was created, man took on the opposite, that of the image of the devil (John 8:44). The description at the end of Article 1 of man's depravity leaves the reader no doubt what the Reformed fathers taught concerning man's corruption: man "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." Later, Article 3 says that men are by nature "children of wrath, incapable of any saving good." The result of the Fall is not that man is now morally neutral or merely spiritually sick. Rather, man is spiritually dead (Eph. 2:1).

Noteworthy in the Canon's description of man's corruption is what it says concerning the will of man: fallen man is "wicked, rebellious, and obdurate in heart and will." The whole Arminian system of doctrine depends upon the freedom of the will. Therefore, the Canons in both its positive explanation and in its rejection of errors (errors 3 and 4) teach the biblical truth of the bondage of the will. Man's will after the Fall is not free, possessing the ability to choose spiritually that which is good. Instead, fallen man's will is bound, a slave to sin

and evil, incapable of choosing any good and only able to choose what is contrary to the precepts of God. The Canons, generally with respect to the whole of fallen man and specifically with respect to the will of fallen man, teach his *total* depravity.

In the third place, in addition to teaching the *source* and *nature* of man's corruption, the Canons at the beginning of Heads III/IV in Article 2 teach the *effect* of Adam's fall upon the whole human race. This is the Reformed doctrine of original sin. In this connection I call the reader's attention to one unfortunate omission in our English translation of the original Latin of the Canons of Dordt. While faithfully explaining that the corruption of man's nature is passed down to Adam's posterity ("A corrupt stock produced a corrupt offspring"), the article as we read it in English fails to speak about the guilt of Adam's sin. The Reformed doctrine of original sin is twofold: original pollution and original guilt. As our first father, Adam passed down his pollution to all his posterity. In addition, Adam was the representative head of the human race, so that the guilt of his sin is imputed to all men, which guilt makes all men liable to the just wrath and punishment of God (Rom. 5 and I Cor. 15). It is this second part of the doctrine of original sin that the English translation of Article 2 does not address. In the original, however, the end of Article 2 reads: "...by the just judgment of God." The just judgment of God is His punishment of those who stand before Him as guilty. What this phrase makes clear is that God justly punished the whole human race with the original pollution that is propagated to all men. How could the just judgment of God come upon the whole human race for the sin of Adam? Scripture's teaching in Romans 5 and I Corinthians 15 is clear: All men are guilty in Adam, the legal head of the whole human race.

Last, a brief word is in order concerning the oft-misunderstood phrase in Article 4 of Heads III/IV that there remain "in man since the fall the glimmerings of natural light." Space does not permit a thorough exposition of the phrase and the article in which it is found. The following is but a brief explanation.

The Canons explain the content of the "glimmerings of natural light." First, by them man "retains some knowledge of God," which is not a saving knowledge but one that leaves man without excuse. Second, by these glimmerings man possesses a knowledge of "natural things," that is, he is able to study the world created by God, not to glorify God thereby but as a totally depraved sinner. Third, by this "light" man has a knowledge of "the difference between good and evil, and discovers some regard for virtue, good order in society, and for maintaining an orderly external deportment."

Though possessing a conscience, knowing the difference between right and wrong, and living outwardly a law-abiding life, the sinner does not do so out of true faith from the heart to the glory of God, but for some sinful, selfish, man-centered purpose, only deepening his guilt and rendering him all the more inexcusable before God.

The qualifying statements to each of the three points above arise out of the Canons' own explanation in the second half of the same article on the "glimmerings of natural light" (as well as the Rejection of Errors, Art. 5). The article further states what the "glimmerings of natural light" cannot do for man and what man, in fact, does with them. On the one hand, the glimmerings cannot "bring him to a saving knowledge of God and to true conversion." On the other hand, man "is incapable of using it [natural light] aright even in things natural and civil," and with regard to the natural light man renders it "wholly polluted, and holds it in unrighteousness, by doing which he becomes inexcusable before God." This is unmistakably clear: the Canons' teaching concerning the "glimmerings of natural light" in fallen man does not compromise the biblical truth of fallen man's total depravity, but is in harmony with it and even strengthens it.

I end with a brief note of application. I express it by two words: humility and thanks! May the teaching of the Word of God expressed in this section of the Canons of Dordt humble you, dear reader. May it lead you all the more to a personal knowledge of your own sin and guilt by nature. May it humble you in such a way that you are led daily, with a believing heart, to Jesus Christ. And may it fill you with thanks for the gospel that the Canons go on to expound, that of an irresistible, powerful, particular, grace of God in Jesus Christ, by which you are delivered in full from this guilt and sin and brought into and preserved in everlasting life with our covenant God.



Canons of Dordt, Head IV

Rev. Kenneth Koole, minister emeritus in the Protestant Reformed Churches

Man's conversion to God and the manner thereof

In Head IV of the Canons, the head that sets forth the truth of "irresistible grace," are to be found some of the most exquisite phrases not only in the Canons but in all the great Reformed confessions.

When describing how the Holy Spirit deals with those whom He intends to save, the Canons declare that the Spirit's regenerating grace does not do violence to our wills, "...but spiritually quickens, heals, corrects, and at the same time sweetly and powerfully bends it; that where carnal rebellion and resistance formerly prevailed, a ready and sincere spiritual obedience begins to reign..." (III/IV, 16).

And again, in describing how God accomplishes His good pleasure in the elect, He "...by the efficacy of the same regenerating Spirit pervades the inmost recesses of the man; He opens the closed and softens the hardened heart, and circumcises that which was uncircumcised, infuses new qualities into the will..." (III/IV, 11).

The language of poetry and wonder. This is only proper in light of the fact that what the Canons is describing is essentially a second creation wonder, the beginning of a new creation in God's chief creature,

man—the beginning of restoring what will one day be the full restoration of the image of God.

And when a creative work takes place, the "morning stars [sing] together; and all the sons of God [shout] for joy" (Job 38:7). Contemplation of God's creative works always move sons of God to wonder and praise.

Head IV explains (gives the biblical explanation for) how it can be that fallen and spiritually dead men, men who moreover are living in rebellion, can live again.

And not only that, but only *some* live again, not all. Why? What is it that makes men to differ in the end? Some alive and rebellious no longer; others rebellious against the will of the true God and despising His Son until the day of their deaths.

Head IV speaks of salvation in terms of 'conversion,' which is a conscious turning from sin, a renouncing it, unto the ways of God in faith and repentance. The gospel call, "Turn ye, turn ye," goes out to all. Some turn, confessing Christ as Lord and Savior, while others do not.

What accounts for this difference?

Over this question arose the great controversy in the Netherlands between the Reformed Calvinists and their

Arminian counterparts (who also claimed to be Reformed).

The issue of contention revolved about the freedom of man's will. As other articles in this issue make plain, it is not that the Arminians flat-out denied predestination altogether or man's extensive depravity. They paid a lip service to salvation all by God's grace. But in the end the decisive factor that determines for every man or woman whether they are to be saved or not is whether or not they so *willed* salvation, whether one gave one's consent to God or not, without which permission granted by man's free will the sovereign God's will to save cannot be accomplished or prevail.

In Arminianism, it is a man exercising his alleged 'free will' to accept what God offers in the interest of their salvation that explains why some differ spiritually from others in this life, and are converted and saved.

When it comes to salvation all of grace the Arminians are slippery in their explanation. In their fourth point they declare that if any sinner is saved it can only be ascribed to God's marvelous grace (first prevenient!, then saving). However, "with respect to the mode of the operation of this grace, it is not irresistible [!]...."

In other words, when it comes to what God desires to accomplish in a man by His grace, that grace is resistible. Whether or not the Spirit will enter a man's heart to renew it hinges on the decisive choice of a man's will. Acts 7:51 is cited as proof.

In Acts 7:51 Stephen declared to the Jews, "Ye do always resist the Holy Ghost."

So, resistible grace.

Such is shoddy exegesis. As the verse following makes plain, Stephen is not referring to the Jews resisting some *grace* of the Spirit by which He desired to save them one and all, but he is referring to their resisting the *words* of the prophets, calling the nation to repent and denounce their idolatrous ways.

Stephen's pointed point was, "In resisting the gospel, you as a miserable stiff-necked nation are guilty not just of resisting the words of *men*, but of the Holy Ghost Himself! Because who else was it who spoke through the prophets but the Holy Ghost?!"

Such was the enormity of the nation's sin before God.

But of God desiring to save the whole Jewish nation and of a grace powerless to save though the Spirit yearned to do so the passage speaks not a word.

Nor does any other.

What then is the explanation for the fact that in the human race there are two kinds of people—the converted and saved in contrast to the lost and unbelieving? What is it that makes one to differ, to be numbered with the redeemed and renewed?

The Canons give answer, an answer that magnifies the Holy Spirit and that humbles man.

What makes one to differ from another is the wonder of regeneration. As Christ declared to Nicodemus, "Except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of heaven" (John 3:3).

The Canons speak glowingly of this regeneration, describing it as "...highly celebrated in Scripture and denominated a new creation: a resurrection from the dead, a making alive, which God works in us without our aid; ...a supernatural work, most powerful, and at the same time most delightful, astonishing, mysterious, and ineffable..." (III/IV, 12).

When it comes to salvation, every theologian and believer is confronted by the great question, why is one (myself) born again and another not?

The Arminian answer is that some, having heard the gospel, find in themselves (ourselves) the wisdom to make the spiritual choice to believe, granting the Spirit permission to enter their hearts so that they might be born again. And thus one distinguishes himself from the foolishness of the rest.

The Canons' answer stands in stark contrast.

"But that others who are called by the gospel obey the call and are converted is not to be ascribed to the proper exercise of free will [better is, "as though man through a free will..."], whereby one distinguishes himself above others equally furnished with grace sufficient for faith and conversion...; but it must be wholly ascribed to God, who as He has chosen His own from eternity in Christ, so He confers upon them faith and repentance..., and translates them into the kingdom of His own Son..." (III/IV, 10).

So, election (God's sovereign determination) is the decisive reason and, in accordance with the Creator's will, the Holy Spirit with irresistible power enters a man's heart, breathing newness of life. Accordingly, one is born again, having no more say in this second birth than he had in his own physical birth.

It is out of this sovereignly bestowed and worked newness of life that faith and repentance are called into expression by the gospel summons.

In the Arminian scheme of things, first comes the gospel call (as an invitation), then comes faith as a man decides to believe what he has heard, and then follows regeneration (being born again). This implies, of course, that a man is able, by his free will, to display the spiritual virtue of faith before he is spiritually alive. A contradiction in terms. It can only mean that in reality no one is really spiritually dead—nearly so, perhaps, sick unto death, but not completely so.

In the Reformed and biblical scheme of things, being born again by the grace of the Holy Spirit comes first,

and faith and all other spiritual activities follow. Before one can believe, the will of a man must be set free from bondage to sin and death.

This the Holy Spirit accomplishes in whomsoever He wills. Whom the Spirit yearns to save, earnestly desires to save, He saves. He is not frustrated as Spirit, unable to penetrate a man's heart where He is not first welcomed and accepted. If such were the case, who would be converted and saved?

Put that question to the apostle Paul and the answer would come back with a vigor. "By grace I was saved, through faith; and that not of myself, it was the gift of God!" (cf. Eph. 2:8)

In other words, not grace *offered*, and one deciding by faith to take advantage of this wonderful 'well-meant offer,' but grace *worked*, and the fruit of that grace is the faith that results.

Not that Paul as unconverted Saul did not at first resist the Spirit's word through the apostles, "Confess yourself to be a damnable sinner, Saul of Tarsus, you young Pharisee, one standing in need of grace found only in the name of this Jesus." He resisted that call with fierce vigor, with all his will-power.

And then something happened to him—not only a voice from heaven, but an irresistible word within: "Let there be life and light!" (a "spiritual quickening," and a will "sweetly and powerfully" bent from rebellion to obedience, a will set free, III/IV, 16). The Spirit had secretly "pervade[d] the inmost recess" of another elect child's heart (cf. Art. 11).

Saul could not resist the Christ's saving will: "[H]e is a chosen vessel unto me" (Acts 9:15). As reportedly was said later by a proud, defeated Caesar, "Galilean, thou hast conquered!"

The Galilean, by His Spirit, always does.

As the Canons put it: "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..." (III/IV, 14).

The praise, the glory, the credit goes to almighty God.

But note, the Canons also make plain that part of that glory is how God accomplishes this, namely, without doing violence to our being "creatures endowed with understanding and will" (III/IV, 16).

Violating our creaturehood was exactly the Arminians' charge against the Reformed.

Such was a calumny.

Rather, God works in such a way that His regeneration "does not...take away our will and its properties...neither does violence thereto," but rather renews the

heart so that "...a ready and sincere spiritual obedience begins to reign, in which the true and spiritual restoration and freedom of our will consist" (III/IV, 16).

The freedom of our wills restored. Something that Article 12 labels as "mysterious, and ineffable." Ineffable. A word difficult to understand? How appropriate. Because so it is difficult to understand the mystery of God sovereignly transforming us by His irresistible grace, in such a way that He does not do violence to our being rational, moral, choosing creatures. Not completely explainable, but nonetheless true!

God works in such a way that when the gospel is declared, we ourselves "...do actually believe. Whereupon the will thus renewed is not only actuated and influenced by God, but in consequence of this influence becomes itself active. Wherefore also, man is himself rightly said to believe and repent by virtue of that grace received" (III/IV, 12).

What the Canons mean is that man is rightly said to believe and repent in response to the gospel call, "Who-soever will, let him take of the water of life freely" (Rev. 22:17).

And the graced sinner freely, joyfully obeys.

Calvinistic truth does not contradict Scripture and its "whosoever wills."

But, for this ability to hear, ponder, turn, and to believe, all the praise and the glory goes to God and not to self.

The Reformed, Calvinistic, apostolic truth of irresistible grace is humbling. And not only before God, but also before our fellow man.

We as believing Protestant Reformed Calvinists, still holding so strongly to the old paths and truths, are different from many others—in some cases, strikingly so.

What shall we then conclude? We are superior? Away with all others?!

Let the Canons remind us, "And as to others, who have not yet been called, it is our duty to pray for them to God, who calls the things that are not as if they were. But we are in no wise to conduct ourselves towards them with haughtiness, as if we have made ourselves to differ" (III/IV, 15).

Haughtiness towards others! That makes one an Arminian, though one calls oneself a Calvinist. As if we made ourselves to differ! Rather, the true Calvinist prays for those who have not yet been led into life and all the truth as oneself (as did a certain converted Saul of Tarsus for his countrymen). Such is the evidence of Christ's Spirit in us, nothing less.

In the end, to our God of gospel truth and saving power be all the glory.

As the Canons put it, “He therefore who becomes the subject of this grace [that works conversion and faith]

owes eternal gratitude to God, and gives Him thanks forever” (III/IV, 15).



Canons of Dordt, Head V

Rev. Martyn McGeown, missionary-pastor of the Covenant Protestant Reformed Church in Northern Ireland, stationed in Limerick, Republic of Ireland

The doctrine of certain perseverance: The church’s “inestimable treasure”

Conditional versus unconditional perseverance (or preservation)

Conditionality is the key to Arminianism, where salvation depends on the activity of the sinner: God chooses you *if* He foresees you will believe (conditional election); Christ redeems you by the cross *if* you accept it (conditional atonement); the Spirit saves you *if* you do not resist Him (resistible grace); and God will keep you in the state of salvation *if* you cooperate with His grace (conditional perseverance). Of course, conditional salvation requires that the sinner be partially depraved, so that he retains some power of free will (partial depravity).

If you wanted to write a doctrinal statement on the perseverance of the saints, perhaps you would begin with a statement on God’s power or faithfulness. Wisely, the Synod of Dordt did not begin there. Instead, the synod presented the truth of the perseverance of the saints in the context of the believing sinner’s struggles with sin. *Against what* does the saint persevere; or *in what context* does God preserve the saint? The answer is that God preserves the saint in a state of grace in the midst of a fierce, unrelenting battle against sin. In this way, God’s saving, preserving grace is magnified; and in this way, the preserved and persevering saint experiences and is thankful for God’s preserving grace.

The Reformed-Christian life

Since the doctrine is called “the perseverance of the saints,” Dordt first identified what a saint is. God does not preserve us in our sin so that we live without repentance, faith, or good works. God delivers us, says Article 1, “from the dominion and slavery of sin in this life.” Nevertheless, continues the article, “not altogether from the body of sin, and from the infirmities of the flesh.”

The imperfect saint—delivered in principle from sin, but retaining the sinful flesh or old man—is the object of God’s preserving grace. Therefore, we can expect two things: first, we can expect to be holy and even to make progress in holiness; but, second, we also expect *not* to become perfectly holy in this life. We can expect to persevere and to be preserved, but we expect to do so only through many struggles along the way. We can expect, and even be guaranteed and assured, to attain to heavenly glory, but we expect to arrive in heaven only after having fought against our spiritual foes by the power of God’s grace.

Thus we see the wisdom of the Synod of Dordt: the synod sets forth a realistic (biblical) view of the Christian life. The synod does not promise an easy path to heaven in which we sail to the harbor of glory on a luxury yacht in the midst of a tranquil sea. Although God promises to keep us from final shipwreck, we ought to expect “many dangers, toils, and snares” before grace leads us home. Or to put it another way, God brings us through many dangers, toils, and snares *in order to* lead us home, for many passages of the Bible teach us that God prepares us for glory *through* suffering and temptation.

Daily infirmities versus lamentable falls

While God always “confirms and preserves true believers in a state of grace” (V, 4), there are times, warns the Canons, when believers “sinfully deviate from the guidance of divine grace.” What follows is a sobering account of the effect of negligence in the Christian life, which ought to silence anyone who suggests that the Synod of Dordt was soft on sin. In Article 4 synod lays the blame for the believer’s fall at the feet of the careless Christian: *he* sinfully deviates from the guidance of divine grace; *he* is seduced by the lusts of the flesh; *he* complies with such sinful lusts; *he* neglects to watch and

pray; and therefore *he* is drawn into great and heinous sins, and *he* falls into them.

The negligent, careless, even presumptuous saint is at fault when he sins. God is not to blame for our sins, or even for our lamentable falls; we are. Never does the Synod of Dordt allow us to hide behind the sovereignty of God as an excuse for our sins. The synod rightly ascribes the glory for our salvation to God, but imputes the guilt of our sins to us.

Every believer who has fallen into sin knows that the Canons accurately portray the progress of sin. A careful study of the life of David, Peter, Samson and others demonstrates the veracity of the synod's presentation here.

Equally sobering is Article 6, in which the synod describes in excruciating detail the miserable effects of such lamentable falls: they offend God; they incur guilt; they grieve the Spirit; they interrupt faith; they wound the conscience and cause the believer to lose the sense of God's favor. (I summarize—look up the article and take note of the adjectives and adverbs.) As one Puritan said, "If you want to sin with David, you must also repent with David." Triflers with sin will experience the heavy, chastising hand of God crushing their bones (Ps. 32:3-4). It may well be that the sword (or some other unpleasantness) shall never depart from their house. Like Jacob they might limp the rest of their earthly pilgrimage.

These lamentable falls, however, are not the same as "daily sins of infirmity" and "spots" (V, 2). Lamentable falls are not a daily occurrence in the life of the child of God—a pattern of living in sin without repentance is the mark of an unbeliever. Nevertheless, the Christian does not take his infirmities and spots lightly: "[they] furnish [the Christian] with constant matter for humiliation before God and for flying for refuge to Christ crucified...."

How far can we fall?

True believers can fall into sin—they struggle daily with infirmities and they can even experience lamentable falls resulting in life-altering blows with the Father's rod—but they cannot forfeit salvation altogether. God chastises His erring children, God even inflicts heavy blows upon His rebellious children, but God never damns His children to hell. Instead of allowing them to run wild as unruly, incorrigible, spoiled children, He "certainly and effectually renews them to repentance, to a sincere and godly sorrow for their sins, that they may seek and obtain remission in the blood of the Mediator" (V, 7). According to the Canons, there is no salvation for the backslidden saint without repentance from sin, which repentance has good works of gratitude *as its fruit*. David repented and lived a new and godly life, humbling himself when he faced the painful

consequences of his sin. Peter repented, weeping bitterly for his denial of Christ and devoted his life to preaching Christ. Samson, blinded and bound in fetters by the Philistines in Gaza's prison, repented and laid down his life for God's glory.

Against this the Remonstrants argued that true believers "*can* fall from justifying faith" and "indeed often *do* fall from this and are lost forever" (V, B, 3). They insisted that true believers "*can* sin the sin unto death or against the Holy Spirit" (V, B, 4). The Arminians believed that a true believer could sin his way into hell, while the Synod of Dordt taught that such an outcome was impossible.

The power of perseverance

The theologians at the Synod of Dordt labored under no illusions, however. They did not believe that we persevere *in our own strength*. They did not attribute the final perseverance of the struggling saint to some power that he possesses, even with the assistance of divine grace. "It is not in consequence of their own merits or strength," say the Canons. Left to our own strength, warned the synod, final apostasy and perishing in backsliding "is not only possible, but would undoubtedly happen" (V, 8). The power of perseverance, therefore, is found in God alone: the counsel, promise, call, and purpose of God; the merit, intercession, and preservation of Christ; and the sealing of the Spirit make the perishing of the elect absolutely impossible. What an unshakable foundation for our faith! What an invincible fortress for our confidence! If the triune God ceases to be God, then and only then is the loss of our salvation possible!

The Arminians disagreed. God provides the believer with grace, if only he is willing to make use of it. Therefore, "it even then ever depends on the pleasure of the will whether [the believer] will persevere or not" (V, B, 2). Indignantly, the fathers at Dordt exclaimed: "[this] makes [men] robbers of God's honor" by attributing to man what rightly belongs to divine grace.

We are weak—we cannot stand a moment!—but God powerfully preserves us in a state of grace. Christ never suffers anyone to pluck us out of His Father's hand. Even in our foolish wanderings, He restores our soul so that we never perish. He finds the prodigal in the pigsty, He wrenches from his wretched soul the confession, "I have sinned against heaven," and He brings him home to the Father's embrace. That's grace—irresistible, preserving grace!

The assurance of perseverance

"Of this preservation...and perseverance" we "may

and do obtain assurance” (V, 9). It is one thing to understand and believe the doctrine of salvation as it pertains to others; it is quite another to believe that you are saved. It is one thing to believe that you are saved today; it is quite another to believe that you will continue in that state of salvation and be saved on the Last Day. The Arminians believed that present assurance is possible (we can know that we are currently in a state of grace), but certainty of final salvation is impossible and unnecessary. “Without special revelation,” said the Arminians, “we can have no certainty of future perseverance” (V, B, 5), which opinion the Canons labeled the comfort-removing “doubts of the papist.” Moreover, the Arminians claimed that the assurance of final perseverance is harmful to piety and that “it is praiseworthy to doubt” (V, B, 6).

Assurance, both of eternal, unconditional election (Head I) and final perseverance (Head V), is of the essence of faith. “This assurance...springs from faith in God’s promises” (V, 10). The stronger our faith, the stronger is our assurance; the more we struggle with doubts, which the synod calls “carnal doubts” (V, 11) or doubts of the flesh, the weaker our faith and assurance shall be. In addition, assured faith brings forth good works: notice that good works are the *fruit* of faith,

not the *cause* of assurance: “and lastly, from a serious and holy desire to preserve a good conscience and to perform good works” (V, 10). Never does the Synod of Dordt encourage a morbid introspection as the method to obtain assurance. We are assured through faith by looking to Christ, who is the object of our faith. The effects of this assurance are not, contrary to the Arminian slander, carelessness and a lack of piety. On the contrary, he who is assured of final perseverance produces good works (V, 12).

The church’s defense of this “inestimable treasure”

The truth of “the perseverance of the saints, and the certainty thereof,” say the Canons, is something that “the spouse of Christ [has] always most tenderly loved and constantly defended...as an inestimable treasure” (V, 15). The spouse of Christ (the church) loves her Savior. What can be more precious to her than the promise of eternal life, a life with her Beloved that shall never end, a life with her Beloved that can never be taken from her, a life with her Beloved that she shall enjoy forever? Let Satan rage; let the world mock; let the hypocrite abuse; and let the heretic oppose this truth. Dordt defended it, we shall defend it, and God will cause us to defend it forever to His glory and our comfort.



Canons of Dordt, Conclusion

Prof. Barrett Gritters, professor of Practical Theology in the Protestant Reformed Seminary

The important Conclusion

After long deliberation, the Great Synod officially adopted both the Canons themselves and a *Conclusion*. Although the *Conclusion* is not a part of our Reformed creed, it is very helpful to understand what the fathers said in it, and why. The *Conclusion* is instructive, not only for students interested in history. It has important application for Reformed believers today. We can learn from it.

But who has read it?

To spur on the reader to read the *Conclusion* itself, I present my own somewhat loose paraphrase of it. I trust even teenagers will understand my paraphrase, who might not make it past the first few sentences of it in the back of the Psalter. My paraphrase may even provoke some to disagree with its wording, which will not disturb me: it will have served my purpose to lure

you to read the *Conclusion* itself. Consider it a commentary. I trust it is faithful [cf. p. 70].

In this *Conclusion* the fathers make clear that they were at war. They were not even “playing hardball,” for this was no game. This was battle, real war. The matter of truth was the most serious business one could engage in, for the honor and name of God were at stake. Unlike scholars today who refrain from sharp words in their writings, omit any judgmental language, and leave the impression that differences of opinion and even misrepresentation are just part of the game, the fathers at Dordt were in dead earnest about the contended doctrines. They would not allow the Remonstrants to get away with their campaign of slander, even if it

An abbreviated paraphrase of Dordt's Conclusion

These five chapters are the clear, simple, and honorable declaration of the truth. They are written to set forth truth over against the errors that have recently been troubling the churches. Included after each chapter is a rejection of the errors. The doctrine all comes from Scripture; and it agrees with our confessions (the Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechism).

By reading these five chapters, you will see clearly that our opponents are violating truth, fairness, and charity when they vilify our Reformed doctrine. This is what they say, and we get these expressions from their own writings:

The Reformed doctrine of predestination leads Christians astray from godliness and faith. It is a mind-numbing drug from Satan that wounds some and kills others, either with despair or presumption. It makes God the author of sin—portrays Him to be an unfair and tyrannical hypocrite. It is no different from other false doctrines that are fatalistic and immoral (of the Stoics, Manicheans, Libertines, and Muslims). It makes men feel safe in their sin—nothing can change their election, no matter how wickedly they live. And on the other hand, if a reprobate would do all good works, it would make no difference for his salvation. The Reformed doctrine teaches that predestination is arbitrary, has nothing to do with sin, and that God created the worlds simply so that He could damn most men to hell. It teaches that reprobation is the cause of unbelief and evil in the very same way that election is the cause of faith and good works. This teaching even has innocent babes ripped from their mothers' breasts

and thrown into hell; nothing can save them—not the prayers of the church, not even their baptism.

With all our soul we detest these and other charges they make. They are false.

Therefore:

We call pious Christians: *judge our doctrine, not from the multitude of slanders; not from quotes of our preachers either taken out of context or simply misquoted; not even from the personal opinions of some good men. Judge our doctrine from our official creeds, adopted unanimously at this synod.*

We warn you who slander: *Consider God's terrible judgment that awaits you who bear false witness against our confession, you who distress weak consciences, you who labor to make us look evil who are actually faithful.*

We exhort the brothers (especially the ministers): *In your speaking and writing, both in seminary and the pulpits, 1) direct your teaching to God's glory, to holy living, and to comfort for the afflicted; 2) regulate your language—even your thoughts—by the Scripture itself, always in context, using the creeds as guides; 3) and refrain from any language that goes beyond Scripture and that would give our enemies just cause to attack us or make us repulsive in the eyes of others.*

We pray to God: *May Thy Son, Jesus Christ, Who sits at Thy right hand and gives gifts to men.... 1) may He sanctify us in the truth; 2) may He bring those who are in error to the truth; 3) may He shut the mouths of those who slander; 4) and may He give wisdom to preachers so that all their sermons glorify Thee and edify those who hear. AMEN*

meant repeating the calumnies they had spread abroad. A spade must be called a spade. The 'spade' himself is addressed. The Reformed fathers addressed the slanderers directly in this conclusion, not talking *about* them, but *to* them. "Consider the judgments of God that await you who bear false witness against us, who distress the weak members, who blacken our good name. The judgments of God are coming!" Would that such boldness be maintained, or restored, in Reformed churches today.

As in 1619, so today, the believer who might not read everything in a controversy must not be allowed to be ignorant. Ignorance exposes the believer to the temptation to leave a true church for another (less pure, or even false) because he does not understand the errors of the church he thinks to join, or because he believes the slanders spoken about his present church. Today, as in 1619, church leaders must inform their members of both

the errors in other churches and also the slanders told about the Reformed faith, or their Reformed denomination. The *Standard Bearer's* purpose includes this at its heart. Preaching and writing, to be faithful preaching and writing, will both explain truth and expose error.

In this *Conclusion*, therefore, the Reformed fathers explicitly address those who are observing the battle from the sidelines, as it were. They speak to them *first*. The fathers beseech¹ *as many as piously call upon the name of our Savior*. Good instruction and exhortation are given here to the pious, common member: "Do not judge the Reformed faith from slanderers. There will be such. Do not give too much weight even to the private expressions of some men whom you respect. Some of these are misquoted by our enemies. Other good men

¹ "Conjure"—the word used in our *Psalter*—is to appeal to someone solemnly, to charge them earnestly.

may use expressions that you rightly judge to be improper. Instead, judge your church's doctrine by reading the official expression of it in the confessions." What good directives for the churches today when issues are contended and debated. Read! Read carefully! And when you hear expressions and opinions from various men, adopt (or reject!) these opinions not based on who the man is, but based on the official decisions rendered by the ecclesiastical assemblies.

Then the fathers exhorted the preachers and teachers in the churches. Also this exhortation was appropriate. For, fact of the matter is that, although official decisions are written and ought to be read, what the people would hear most was the preachers and professors. The pious members would listen to their sermons and read their articles. Thus, these leaders are solemnly exhorted to preach and teach with care. In the seminary and the churches, they must conduct themselves piously and religiously in handling the doctrine.

One can imagine the danger. There are many ways to violate this "order" of the synod, but elders in the churches must listen for violations. One may be tempted to soft-pedal error. Another to ignore the controversy. Yet another to speak in a way that unnecessarily offends. But the synod itself showed how preaching and writing ought to be done when it laid out three essentials: 1) Aim at the glory of God; that is, aim not at your glory; God forbid that the people talk about *you* when your sermons are finished or article read, but rather bow in humble adoration before the good and gracious God. 2) Aim at holiness of life; that is, aim not at mere intellectual growth, important as that is, but also and especially at godliness and sanctification of heart, mind, life. 3) And aim at comforting afflicted souls; that is, you may be tempted to aim at the strong, the bold, the big people; instead, aim at the *kleine luiden*, the distressed souls, the doubting spirits. Distress the comfortable and comfort the distressed, so to speak.

There is another danger the fathers addressed. At the *Conclusion's* end, the fathers gave the good counsel to preachers carefully to regulate the language they used (even their thoughts, or "sentiments") *by Scripture itself*. Preachers, not only young ones, must be cautioned against inventing novel language to explain truth. At the same time that they must be encouraged not to use all the old clichés, they are also warned, especially with regard to the controverted doctrines, not to use phrases that "exceed the limits necessary to be observed in ascertaining the genuine sense of Scripture." The Latin is difficult here, and could be translated: "phrases that exceed the prescribed limits of the genuine sense of Holy Scriptures." But the fathers' point is clear: It is possible to "go overboard" in the kind of language one uses. When that happens, we are warned here, we give *just* cause for the enemies to assail our faith, even vilify the doctrines which are the very name of God.

The *Conclusion* ends with a prayer, unsurprising in some respects, happily surprising in others. Read it again, and notice first how God's Son is addressed: The Son of God who gives gifts to men. Dordt recognized that what truth they possessed and defended was not found *by* them, but given *to* them. "What do we have that we have not received?"²

Then they asked this Father of Jesus Christ 1) to sanctify them in the truth; 2) to convert those who erred; 3) to shut the mouths of the slanderers; and 4) to give the spirit of wisdom and discretion to preachers so that, on the pulpit, God may be glorified and the people edified.

Shall we follow this exemplary prayer, thinking carefully about the meaning of each petition, praying them perhaps even this Sunday evening before the minister ascends the pulpit in our church?

2 Cf. I Corinthians 4:7. At Dordt, the fathers adopted this Dutch translation, "En wat hebt gij, dat gij niet hebt ontvangen?"



Canons of Dordt, special topic

Prof. Ronald Cammenga, professor of Dogmatics and Old Testament in the Protestant Reformed Seminary

Dordt's rejection of the well-meant gospel offer

The Synod of Dordt condemned heresy and upheld the truth of the gospel. The heresy that it condemned

was not only an error that concerned the *content* of the gospel. But it was also a heresy that concerned

the *preaching* of the gospel. In a unique way the error of Arminianism concerned not only the message of the gospel, but also the way in which the gospel was proclaimed. It concerned both *what* was preached and *how* it was preached. For the Synod of Dordt condemned the Arminian perversion of the gospel as an offer of faith and salvation.

Sadly, this is the generally accepted view of the preaching of the gospel in the church today, also in Reformed and Presbyterian churches. The well-meant offer of the gospel is widely defended in churches whose very confession condemns such a view of the gospel.

The “offer” of the gospel

More than once, the Canons speak of the “offer of the gospel.” The article that is often quoted is Canons III/IV, 9: “It is not the fault of the gospel, nor of Christ *offered therein*, nor of God, who calls men by the gospel and confers upon them various gifts, that those who are called by the ministry of the Word refuse to come and be converted.” The article refers to the *preaching* of the gospel. This is evident from the reference to the fact that God “calls men by the gospel” and the mention of the “ministry of the Word.” In such preaching of the gospel, so says the article, Christ is “offered” to those to whom the preaching comes.

There is also reference to the offer of the gospel in Canons II, B, 6. Here the fathers of Dordt are repudiating a certain error of the Arminians. The error is that “while some obtain the pardon of sin and eternal life and others do not, this difference depends on their own free will, which joins itself to the *grace that is offered without exception....*” This article refers to the Arminian conception of the preaching of the gospel. According to the Arminians, in the preaching of the gospel grace is offered to all who hear the gospel.

Yet another reference to the offer of the gospel is found in Canons III/IV, 14. Once again, the Canons are describing the Arminian view of the preaching as an offer. Article 14 begins: “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....” This is emphatically the Arminian conception of the preaching. In the preaching, God offers faith to men. This faith may be accepted or rejected by them.

In two instances, therefore, the Canons of Dordt refer to the Arminian view of the offer of the gospel. In one instance, Canons III/IV, 9, the Canons is referring to the true preaching of the gospel, in which preaching Christ is “offered” to those who hear.

There are those who explain “offered” in Canons III/IV, 9 by referring to the literal meaning of the Latin

word *offero*. Most Latin dictionaries define *offero* as “present, bring before, exhibit.” That Christ is “offered” in the preaching of the gospel, therefore, simply means that He is presented, exhibited, and set before the people in all the glory of His person and work.¹

Whether or not there is agreement on the exact meaning of *offero* in Canons III, IV, 9, one thing ought to be abundantly clear. That is that the Reformed understanding of the offer of the gospel is radically different from that of the Arminians. The Reformed reject and condemn the Arminian conception of the offer. Dordt’s rejection of Arminianism includes the rejection of the Arminian view of the preaching of the gospel.

Basically, it is the Arminian view of the offer of the gospel that has been resurrected in Reformed and Presbyterian churches today. There is no essential difference between the view of the well-meant gospel offer widely accepted today, and the Arminian view of the gospel offer condemned by Dordt. It is an offer based upon a love of God—in some sense—for all men and a desire of God to save all men. It is an offer grounded in a death of Jesus Christ that is of benefit for all men—wider in its scope than only the elect. The only difference is that the contemporary proponents of the well-meant gospel offer—some, at least—will not openly appeal to free will as that which makes the offer effectual for those who “accept” the offer.

The Canons’ conception of the preaching of the gospel

Consistently, the Canons refer to the preaching of the gospel in a way that cannot be squared with the idea of an offer. Canons III/IV, 9 speaks of the gospel in a way that opposes the well-meant offer, which reduces the preaching to a weak, ineffectual invitation. Three times the article refers to the authoritative call of God in the preaching: “of God, who *calls* men by the gospel;” “those who are *called* by the ministry of the Word;” and “some of whom when *called* ... reject the Word of life.” The preaching of the gospel issues God’s call to all who hear.

Not only in this article, but throughout the Canons,

1 Some dispute this. They insist that more is implied in the word *offero*. Among them is R. Scott Clark. The interested reader can consult his contribution entitled “Janus, the Well-Meant Offer of the Gospel, and Westminster Theology,” in *The Pattern of Sound Doctrine: Systematic Theology at the Westminster Seminaries (Essays in Honor of Robert B. Strimple)*, ed. David VanDrunen (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2004), 149-179. In part, because of his faulty understanding of the distinction between archetypal and ectypal knowledge of God, Clark is critical of the PRCA for the meaning its theologians have generally given to *offero* in Canon III/IV, 9.

the preaching of the gospel is consistently referred to as the “call of the gospel.” The preaching of the gospel is the authoritative call of God to repentance and faith. As the call of God, it comes with divine authority and dignity. They to whom the call comes are summoned to obey the call. The call comes to them as the command to repent and to believe.

Canons III/IV, 8 says that “[a]s many as are called by the gospel are unfeignedly called.” Obviously, they are “unfeignedly called” *by God*. The article goes on to point out that it is the will of God “that those who are *called* should come to Him.” Article 10 of the same head of doctrine says: “But that others who are *called* by the gospel, obey the *call*...” Take note of that. Those who come under the preaching of the gospel are called by the gospel in such a way that those who respond positively to the call “obey the gospel.” The preaching of the gospel comes as a call to men to obey. That is quite different from a powerless, unauthoritative offer. The implication, of course, is that those who do not respond positively to the gospel, disobey the gospel and God who calls men through the gospel. This is the very worst disobedience!

The authoritative nature of the preaching of the gospel, in distinction from an unauthoritative offer, comes out also in Canons II, 5. In this article the contents of the gospel are referred to as “the promise of the gospel.” That, too, is significant. An offer is not a promise. An offer is always contingent and conditional. For the enjoyment of that which is offered depends on the acceptance of the offer by the one to whom it is made. In the nature of the case, an offer is quite different from a promise. If the gospel is a promise, it cannot be an offer. Canons II, 5 says that the preaching of the gospel is the proclamation of the “promise of the gospel.” But more than that, the article goes on to say: “This promise, together with the command to repent and believe, ought to be declared and published to all nations....”

Canons II, 6 also refers to the “call of the gospel.” The article speaks of those “who are called by the gospel,” but who reject that call. They show disdain and contempt for the call, and refuse to give heed when they are called. They “do not repent, nor believe in Christ, but perish in unbelief.” This unbelief is not due to “any defect or insufficiency” in the sacrifice of Christ, “but is wholly to be imputed to themselves.” Guilt—great guilt—accrues to those who reject the authoritative call of God in the gospel. There is no guilt associated with declining an offer. In the nature of the case, an offer may be accepted or rejected. The gospel is not and cannot be merely an offer, inasmuch as they who reject the gospel are guilty before God.

Loathing of free will

One of the most compelling reasons for Dordt’s rejection of the Arminian teaching concerning the offer of the gospel was that it necessarily implied free will. The fathers of Dordt steadfastly maintained that to accept the teaching of the Arminians concerning the offer of the gospel also involved embrace of the teaching of the free will of the sinner.

As a matter of record, the Arminians denied the teaching of free will. In “The Remonstrance” (1610), the Arminians stated in their third point “[t]hat man does not have saving grace of himself nor by the power of his own free will....” In the “Opinions of the Remonstrants,” they stated: “The will in the fallen state, before calling, does not have the power and the freedom to will any saving good. And therefore we deny that the freedom to will saving good as well as evil is present to the will in every state.”

Despite the Arminians’ disavowal of free will, the Synod of Dordt correctly attributed the teaching of free will to the Arminians. The frequent repudiation and condemnation of the teaching of free will that is found throughout the Canons is Dordt’s rejection of free will *as taught by the Arminians*. A few examples from Canons III/IV will suffice. “But that others who are called by the gospel obey the call and are converted is not to be ascribed to the *proper exercise of free will* [as the Arminians teach], whereby one distinguishes himself above others....” (III/IV, 10). God does not “bestow the power or ability to believe, and then expects that man *should by the exercise of his own free will* consent to the terms of salvation and actually believe in Christ....” (III/IV, 14). And, apart from the grace of God working in us “man could have no hope of recovering from his fall *by his own free will*....” (III/IV, 16).

What was true of the Arminians at the time of the Synod of Dordt is true today of the proponents of the well-meant gospel offer. Although they disavow free will, they are nevertheless compelled to teach free will. That ought to be plain. If God loves all men alike, and desires equally their salvation, and if the death of Jesus Christ was in some sense for all men, the only possibility for distinction among men has to be in man himself and in the exercise of his free will. If, despite the love of God for them all and a death of Jesus Christ that is of benefit to them all, all are not saved, the explanation cannot be in God, but must be in man. The defenders of the well-meant offer of the gospel are of necessity cast upon the free will of the sinner as the explanation for the salvation of one and not the other.

And the reality is that in the churches that have embraced the teaching of the well-meant gospel offer, by-

and-large the people have come to hold to the teaching of free will. The difference between men is that one accepts the offer of the gospel and another does not. That is the explanation as to why one person is saved and another is not.

Warrant for preaching the gospel

But if the preaching is not a well-meant offer to all men, at least to all who hear the preaching of the gospel, what warrant does the church have to preach the gospel to all men everywhere? May and can the church take the gospel into the whole world? Does not the church forfeit the basis for missions?—always a charge leveled against those who maintain the truths of sovereign grace.

To begin with, the Canons of Dordt affirm that the “command to repent and believe ought to be declared and published to all nations, and to all persons promiscuously and without distinction, to whom God out of His good pleasure sends the gospel” (II, 5).

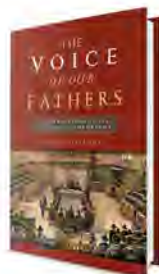
First of all, the warrant for the promiscuous proclamation of the gospel is the command of Jesus Christ in the Great Commission. Christ has commanded His church: “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15). In obedience to the command of Christ, the church brings the gospel into the whole world, to every nation, tribe, and tongue.

Secondly, the warrant is that God has His elect in all the nations. In distinction from the Old Testament, in

which God’s elect were primarily from one nation, the nation of Israel, in the New Testament God has His people throughout the world. This is “the mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints,” according to Colossians 1:26. The book of Acts and the New Testament epistles bear testimony to the truth that God has His elect people in the nations of the Gentiles.

And finally, the warrant for the promiscuous preaching of the gospel is that God has determined to use the means of the preaching of the gospel in order to work faith and to gather the elect into the church. Immediately after Paul has spoken of the mystery hid from the ages, but now revealed, the apostle adds: “Whom we preach, warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom; that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus” (Col. 1:28). Because God has determined that the preaching of the gospel is the power (that is, means) unto salvation, the faithful church and minister preach the Word promiscuously.

The preaching of the gospel is not an ineffective offer, but the very power of God unto salvation. And what a power it is! Dead sinners are raised to life. Intractable rebels are brought to bow the knee to Christ’s scepter. Avowed enemies of God are made His friends. Slaves of Satan are made servants of the living God. There is no power like the power of the gospel!



THE VOICE OF OUR FATHERS *An Exposition of the Canons of Dordrecht*

HOMER C. HOEKSEMA, author

An extensive commentary on the articles drawn up by the great Synod of Dordrecht (1618–19). The articles stated and defended the doctrines of sovereign grace and rejected the Arminian error of free will. The Canons thereby resolved a raging controversy in the Dutch Reformed Churches concerning the sovereign grace of God.
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Announcements

Resolution of sympathy

The congregation and Council of Hull PRC convey their deep and whole-hearted sympathies to the Rev. James and Margret Laning family in the death of their brother and uncle, **David Laning**. May they remember the Word spoken through Isaiah: “He will swallow up death in victory: and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces; and the rebuke of his people shall he take away from off all the earth: for the Lord hath spoken it. And it shall be said in that day, Lo this is our God” (Isaiah 25:8-9a).

Jeff Baker, Clerk of Records

Resolution of sympathy

The congregation and Council of Hull PRC express their sincere and heartfelt sympathies to Hazel Andringa, the Jeff and Rose Andringa family, the Marcus and Paige Andringa family, and the Jim and Karen Andringa family in the death of their husband, father, grandfather, great-grandfather and brother **Jack Andringa**. Our prayer is that they receive comfort from the Word: “For which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory” (II Corinthians 4:16-17).

Rev. James Laning, President
Jeff Baker, Clerk of Records

Resolution of sympathy

The congregation and Council of the Hull PRC send their earnest condolences to the Gerald and Marilyn Brummel family and the Craig and Jessica Van Briesen family in the death of their mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother **Nelvina Mulder**. May the families receive comfort from Psalm 73:25-26: “Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is none upon the earth that I desire beside thee. My flesh and heart failest; but God is the strength of my heart, and portion forever.”

Rev. James Laning, President
Jeff Baker, Clerk of Records

Resolution of sympathy

The congregation and Council of the Hull PRC express their sincere sympathies to Cora VandenTop, Duane and Nick Netten in the passing of their husband, father-in-law, and grandfather, **Minard VandenTop**. May the families remember the promise of God in I Thessalonians 4:16-17: “For the Lord himself shall descend with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so we shall ever be with the Lord.”

Rev. James Laning, President
Jeff Baker, Clerk of Records

Resolution of sympathy

The Council and congregation of the Doon PRC express their Christian sympathy to Elmer Van Den Top, Peter Van Den Top, and Ed and Alice Van Ginkel in the death of their brother and brother-in-law, **Minard Van Den Top**. “But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (I Corinthians 15:56). May therein lie the family’s comfort.

Rev. J. Engelsma, President
Perry Van Egdome, Clerk

Resolution of sympathy

The Council and congregation of the Doon PRC express their Christian sympathy to our missionary family, Rev. and Tricia Smit and their children, in the death of their father, father-in-law, and grandfather, **William Smit**. By faith we confess “He will swallow up death in victory; and the Lord GOD shall wipe away tears from off all faces” (Isaiah 25:8a).

Rev. J. Engelsma, President
Perry Van Egdome, Clerk

Resolution of sympathy

The Council and congregation of the Kalamazoo PRC express their Christian sympathy to Dave, Gwen, and Kim Pryor in the death of their step-father and grandfather, **Herbert Goodwin**. May their comfort be found in God’s Word where we read, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble” (Psalm 46:1).

Rev. Michael DeVries, President
Steve DeVries, Clerk

Wedding anniversary

“For the LORD will not forsake his people for his great name’s sake: because it hath pleased the LORD to make you his people.... Only fear the LORD, and serve him in truth with all your heart: for consider how great things he hath done for you” (I Samuel 12:22, 24).

We are truly blessed as the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchild of **David and Linda Poortings**, who will celebrate, Lord willing, their 50th wedding anniversary on November 8, 2018. We praise God for His preserving work in them and we are ever thankful for the Spirit evident in their lives as they continue to be godly examples to us. May God continue to richly bless them for His great Name’s sake!

Rod and Kimberly Griess
Craig and Tiffany Poortinga
Sam and Deborah Carson
Jordan and Chandra Kamps
19 grandchildren (1 in glory)
1 great-grandchild
Loveland, Colorado

Announcements continued

Teacher needed

The **Edmonton PR Christian School** is in need of a full-time teacher for the 2019-2020 school year. The school will be starting with grades 1-4, and the board is willing to work with the teacher on a curriculum suited to their preference. Please contact Gord Tolsma at gr.tolsma@gmail.com / 780-777-5780 or Scott Ferguson at s_r_ferguson@hotmail.com.

Teacher needed

Loveland Protestant Reformed Christian School (Loveland, CO) is seeking applicants for an additional High School teacher for the 2019-20 school year. Interested candidates may contact the Administrator, BJ Mowery at (970) 218-3420 or bmowery@lovelandprcs.org or the Education Chairman, Joe Ophoff at (970) 818-6790 or joe@scotthomeinspection.com

Reformed Witness Hour

Rev. Wilbur Bruinsma

- Nov. 4 "To a Thousand Generations"
Psalm 105:6-8
- Nov. 11 "Israel Transgresses God's Covenant"
Hosea 6:7
- Nov. 18 "Jehovah Does What Pleases Him"
Psalm 135:5, 6
- Nov. 28 "Prayer for Restored Joy"
Psalm 51:10-12

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