

Chapter 2

FIRST HEAD OF DOCTRINE

UNCONDITIONAL

ELECTION

UNCONDITIONAL ELECTION

Having studied the background to the Canons of Dort we now turn our attention to the contents of each chapter and article. The first chapter speaks about election and reprobation.

Election is the fountainhead out of which all the redemptive blessings of God flow forth. The Arminians considered the Reformed doctrine of election (as taught in the Belgic Confession) to be a most horrible teaching. They suggested that the Reformed doctrine of predestination and election, by its very character and tendency, turns the heart of men away from godliness and religion. They surmised that the Reformed doctrine of election is "an opiate for the flesh administered by the devil, and a stronghold of Satan, where he lies in wait for all, wounds multitudes, and mortally pierces many with the darts both of despair and false security" (Conclusion of the Canons of Dort). Nevertheless, unconditional election "...was preached by the prophets, by Christ Himself, and by the apostles..." (Chapter I Article 14).

Attacks on the doctrine of election should not surprise or shock us. Some will accuse the Lord and attack Him, asking why He did not order human affairs better so that both the fall into sin and election were unnecessary. Yet we may not measure God's omniscience by our human sense. We are not on equal ground with the Almighty. Moreover, "the inscrutable judgment of God is greater than man can penetrate".¹

Acceptance of the doctrine of election, as summarized in the Canons of Dort, comes through the illumination of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit must work in our hearts and open our eyes to acknowledge the work of the Lord. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 2:11,12,14, "*For what person knows a man's thoughts except the spirit of the man which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is from God, that we might understand the gifts bestowed on us by God... The unspiritual man does not receive the*

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gifts of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned". Some teachings of Scripture are difficult to understand. The ignorant and unstable will twist them to their own destruction (2 Peter 3:16).

All of Scripture (the whole counsel of God) must be preached and taught in the churches. We should not avoid speaking about the doctrine of election just because it is difficult for us to understand. It must "be taught in the Church of God, for which it was particularly intended, in its proper time and place, provided it be done with a spirit of discretion, in a reverent and holy manner, without inquisitively prying into the ways of the Most High..." (Chapter I Article 14).

Certain limits are prescribed for the preaching and teaching of God's election. Everything we believe must find its roots and foundation in the Bible. Holy Scripture sets the boundaries and defines what can and cannot be said. *"The secret things belong to the LORD our God; but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law"* (Deuteronomy 29:29). Therefore the doctrine of unconditional election is to be proclaimed in simple obedience to our Lord's command and in accordance with His revealed will.

Such an important subject cannot be covered adequately to confirm those who believe it, to convince those who doubt it and to destroy the errors that surround it unless there is a willingness to submit oneself wholly and fully to the Word of God. Yet the Lord in His goodness takes us beyond the boundary of time and gives us a glimpse of what took place before the foundation of the world. He parts the curtains and lets us peek in.²

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ARTICLE 1: ALL MANKIND CONDEMNABLE BEFORE GOD

Since all men have sinned in Adam, lie under the curse, and deserve eternal death, God would have done no one an injustice if it had been His will to leave the whole human race in sin and under the curse, and to condemn it on account of its sin, according to these words of the apostle: *that . . . the whole world may be held accountable to God. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; and, the wages of sin is death.*

Already in the first article our confession goes to the heart and crux of the dispute between the Reformed Churches and the Arminians. It does not begin with God's sovereign decree of election but with the fallen state of humanity. In other words, the point of departure is not what took place in eternity but what happened within human history.

A proper study of election and reprobation demands acceptance of what the Bible teaches about the total corruption and guilt of all people before God. We start from the principle that we are one with the rest of mankind. The Canons of Dort makes a radical confession: all people have sinned in Adam (original sin) and deserve to be placed under God's curse and receive eternal death.

Original sin

Original sin refers to the result of the first sin committed by Adam and Eve. "Original sin is both the consequence of Adam's sin and the punishment for Adam's sin".³

All human beings have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. The Lord has the right to condemn us. By nature we do not deserve anything but condemnation.

Sin and disobedience bear serious consequences. Through sin death has come upon all people (Romans 5:12). The whole world is held accountable to God (Romans 3:19) since all have sinned in Adam.

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Therefore God would have done an injustice to no one if He had left the whole human race in sin and under the curse.

We are accountable

The first sin is often referred to as "the fall into sin". In no way should this expression detract from our responsibility or accountability. Although the devil was the instigator, mankind was disobedient. No one can shift the blame or hide behind such statements as "the devil made me do it". We did not "slip" into sin. Nor were we tripped so that we fell against our will. Our first parents dove headlong into the pool of sin. The entire offspring of Adam plunged into perdition and ruin with them (Belgic Confession Article 16).

Right from the start the Canons of Dort emphasize that God cannot be charged with injustice in election and reprobation. No person deserves anything but death.

ARTICLE 2: THE SENDING OF THE SON OF GOD

But in this the love of God was made manifest, that He sent His only-begotten Son into the world, so that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.

Death has passed to and infected the lives of all human beings because of sin. Nevertheless, along with the proclamation of His righteous judgement God also demonstrates His love in the sending of His Son. The Lord does not delight in sin or in the downfall of humanity; as if He finds enjoyment in watching us wriggle and squirm as He dangles us above the fire of hell. He calls people out of the terrible state in which they have plunged themselves (Ezekiel 18:32 and John 3:16). The work of Christ comes to light immediately after the fall (Genesis 3:15). To deliver us out of our misery God gave us what was most precious to Him: He gave us His Son.⁴

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The initiative of election based on God's love

The basis of our eternal election is the love of the Father. He is committed to us and therefore He takes the initiative in working our salvation. "...Our gracious God in His marvellous wisdom and goodness set out to seek man when he trembling fled from Him" (Belgic Confession, Article 17). Christ was chosen and elected by God the Father to be our Saviour. In the fullness of time the Father sent forth His Son to be our Redeemer and Mediator. The Lord visited His people with salvation and redemption (Luke 1:68). "...*God shows His love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us*" (Romans 5:8).

At certain times in church history this truth was not given proper attention. For example, a movement in the eighteenth century worshipped Jesus for giving salvation without giving due attention to the work of the Father and the Holy Spirit. They believed God the Father was angry throughout the entire Old Testament and stayed angry until Jesus rushed in to "save the day".

We have to be careful that we do not fall into this trap ourselves. Christian bookstores carry literature that puts all the emphasis on Jesus without acknowledging that it was the Father who sent His Son. Prayers are often addressed to Jesus alone whereas Christ Himself taught us to address the Father. The Bible is more than a story about Jesus and His love. It teaches us that we are safe in the arms of Jesus because the Father sought us out in His love and mercy.

Jesus Christ is sent into the world as the second Adam. He brings those who fall short of the glory of God to His Father through the shedding of His blood. He takes on the form of a servant and dies on a cross so that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life (John 3:16).

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ARTICLE 3: THE PREACHING OF THE GOSPEL

So that men may be brought to faith, God mercifully sends heralds of this most joyful message to whom He will and when He wills. By their ministry men are called to repentance and to faith in Christ crucified. For *how are they to believe in Him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher? And how can men preach unless they are sent?*

God the Father also takes the initiative in making sure the message of salvation reaches us. He sends out men to proclaim the gospel. The Lord does not leave the whole human race wallowing in sin and misery. We are called to repentance and faith through the preaching of the gospel. No human being has the power within him or herself to come to faith.

God brings us to faith

Notice how Article 3 says we are *brought* to faith. Sometimes people will attribute the working of faith to the efforts of an individual. They will say, "He brought me to know the Lord Jesus". However, if the Holy Spirit does not work in us, the most powerful words will not rouse us. Man does not have the ability in and of himself to come to faith. In John 6:44 Christ says, "*No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him;*" The Father and the Spirit must pull us along, like a tugboat will pull a ship, and bring us to Christ.⁵

God brings people to faith and the knowledge of salvation through the preaching. He sends faithful preachers who proclaim the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. People hear the gospel, come to faith and so serve the living God. Peter writes to the churches of Asia Minor, "*You have been born anew, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God...That word is the good news which was preached to you*" (1 Peter 1:23,25).

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Who receives the message?

The Lord is free to let His Word work where He wants it. The message will come to those who are supposed to hear it. He determines, by His sovereign good pleasure, where the gospel will be preached and to whom it will be preached. The apostle Paul wanted to work in Asia Minor but the Holy Spirit would not permit him to do so. According to the divine counsel and plan, the message of the gospel had to go to Europe first (Acts 16:6-10).

Not every person in the world will hear the message of the gospel. In Matthew 24:14 Christ did not promise that the gospel would be heard by every single individual but He said, "*And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations; and then the end will come*".

Yet every person must hear the preaching of Christ to be saved. God's ways are revealed and uncovered through the administration of reconciliation. People cannot come to saving knowledge simply by observing the beauty of creation. They must be brought to faith. The Holy Spirit plants the seeds of the gospel into our hearts, waters them and makes them grow and bear fruit.

The authority of preachers

Christ's ambassadors are called to proclaim the gospel of salvation in His name and with His authority. Thus the first question ministers and missionaries answer at their ordination is: "Do you feel in your heart that God Himself, through His congregation, has called you to this holy ministry?" Their word is the Word of Jesus Christ. Preachers herald the message given to them by the King.

Not all ministers or missionaries have the authority to say "Thus says the Lord". Only when there is a ministry faithful to Christ can you expect to hear Him through the voice of man. Every preacher must bring the Word of God (the full counsel of God) and avoid expounding human wisdom, feeding people's ideas, or tickling the

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ears of the hearers. The personal anecdotes or experiences of the minister do not help the congregation grow in the Lord. It is through faithful preaching that we learn Christ.

As members of the church we are privileged to hear the message of the gospel. The Bible tells us about the sacrifice Christ made to deliver us from the bondage of sin. Through the preaching of the gospel He brings us to an obedient response of faith.

ARTICLE 4: A TWOFOLD OUTCOME

The wrath of God remains upon those who do not believe this gospel. But those who receive it and embrace Jesus the Saviour with a true and living faith are delivered by Him from the wrath of God and from destruction, and are given eternal life.

The message of Scripture does not have to be *made* alive or exciting to be effective. God's Word is living and active and cuts two ways; resulting in either repentance from sin or hardening in sin. *"For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and return not thither but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it"* (Isaiah 55:10,11).

When the message of salvation does not receive a response from the hearers, the wrath of God remains on the person(s) involved. In fact the punishment will be intensified (see further Hebrews 10:26-31; 12:25-29). The same gospel is *"to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life"* (2 Corinthians 2:16). John writes about the twofold reaction to the coming of Christ in his account of the gospel. *"The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world...He came to His own home, and His own*

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people received Him not. But to all who received Him, who believed in His name, He gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:9,11-13). The fruit of the Lord's election is a true and living faith. By faith we embrace the person, the work and the words of Jesus Christ.

The two aspects of faith

A true and living faith has two aspects. First, it is a sure knowledge whereby we accept as true all that God has revealed in His Word (Lord's Day 7). In other words, to embrace Christ we must accept as true what Scripture reveals concerning the days of creation. We must accept what the Bible says about the serpent in Paradise, about Balaam's donkey who opened its mouth to rebuke him, about Jonah who was in the belly of a great fish for three days. A true and living faith accepts as truth the events of redemptive history: the virgin birth of Christ, His resurrection and ascension. We accept what it says about the role of men and women in the church. Through the Word we have union with Christ. If the Bible is a closed book in our life we cannot really say that we have a true and living faith.

Secondly, true faith is also a firm confidence that what God promises is not only for others but is for us personally. Through a true and living faith we gain the assurance that the children of God will be saved; we are confident that we too belong to those whom Christ bought with His precious blood. Our certainty is based on the promise of God: those who receive the gospel and "...embrace Jesus the Saviour with a true and living faith are delivered by Him from the wrath of God and from destruction, and are given eternal life". Jesus said to the Jews who sought to kill him, "*Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears my word and believes Him who sent me, has eternal life; he does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life*" (John 5:24). We can embrace Christ because He bore for us the heavy wrath of God under which we should have perished eternally.

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ARTICLE 5: THE CAUSE OF UNBELIEF, THE SOURCE OF FAITH

The cause or guilt for this unbelief, as well as for all other sins, is by no means in God, but rather in man. Faith in Jesus Christ and salvation through Him, however, is the free gift of God, as it is written: *By grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God. Similarly, It has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should . . . believe in Him.*

We may not blame God for unbelief. *"Therefore, hear me, you men of understanding, far be it from God that He should do wickedness, and from the Almighty that He should do wrong"* (Job 34:10). Mankind fell into sin by his own wilful disobedience. Thus the cause of unbelief does not lie with the Creator but with the creature.

Those who do not repent, remain in their sins, are guilty and deserve punishment. What Christ said to the unrepentant Jews applies to all unbelievers to the close of the age: *"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not"* (Matthew 23:37).

Unbelievers are held accountable for refusing to come to Christ. Scripture expresses this as they could not believe (John 12:39) and they would not believe (John 5:40). Upset about the attitude of His apostate children, the Lord says to Isaiah, *"And now, go, write it before them on a tablet, and inscribe it in a book, that it may be for the time to come as a witness for ever. For they are a rebellious people, lying sons, sons who will not hear the instruction of the LORD"* (Isaiah 30:8,9).

But how then does it happen that some are brought to faith and salvation in Jesus Christ? The Arminians claimed that people have

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the power within themselves to believe and come to faith. "Election to faith depends on the condition that man should use the light of nature properly, and that he be pious, humble, meek, and fit for eternal life" (Chapter I, Rejection of Errors, Article 4). We believe salvation cannot be attributed to a person's contribution. Faith is a free gift of God's grace granted to us by the good pleasure of the Lord (Ephesians 2:1-10). Our faith has its roots in God's election. He makes sure we will believe and can believe (Philippians 1:29).

Beyond human reason

If we try to figure out logically what is taught in this article we will get stuck. The Arminians reasoned: if the cause of unbelief lies in man, then the cause of faith also lies in man. Thereby they tuned in on the wrong frequency. We are not on the same wave length with God. His work cannot be measured by human standards.

As members of the church of Christ we should not pretend to have all the answers and we should not expect an answer to all our questions. Instead, we need to listen obediently to what God says in His Holy Word. The Bible teaches us that God is one hundred percent sovereign and we are one hundred percent responsible. No human being will be able to understand this. Scripture is not like a problem in mathematics which can be figured out.

ARTICLE 6: GOD'S ETERNAL DECREE

That God in time confers the gift of faith on some, and not on others, proceeds from His eternal decree. For He knows all His works from eternity, and He *accomplishes all things according to the counsel of His will*. According to this decree He graciously softens the hearts of the elect, no matter how hard they may be, and inclines them to believe; those not elected, however, He leaves in their own wickedness and hardness by a just judgment. And here especially is disclosed to us the profound, merciful, and at the same time just distinction between men equally worthy of condemnation, or

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that decree of election and reprobation which has been revealed in God's Word. Although perverse, impure, and unstable men twist this decree to their own destruction, it provides unspeakable comfort for holy and God-fearing souls.

Our confession directs us away from the things that are on earth (the visible) to the work of God in heaven (the invisible). The eternal decree of the Lord is being executed and therefore some believe what is proclaimed in the gospel and others do not.

The general use of the term "election"

To grasp the meaning of the term "election" we should look at its general use in the New Testament. The word "election" means to call out, to pick out, to choose. For example, Jesus Christ elected His twelve apostles. *"And when it was day, He called His disciples, and chose from them twelve, whom He named apostles"* (Luke 6:13). Out of the multitude of disciples who followed Him, Jesus sovereignly selected the twelve apostles. In the book of Acts seven deacons were picked out of the congregation. By selecting some to serve as deacons others were by-passed. From the general use of the word "election" we can already draw a couple of conclusions. First, the act of choosing and electing is the prerogative and privilege of the selector. Secondly, the chooser is active and the chosen one is passive.

Election of the covenant people

Not every reference to choosing or electing in Scripture has to do with God's eternal election. The Lord also chooses a certain number of people to live with Him in a covenant relationship. He promises them forgiveness of sins and life eternal. At the border of Canaan, Moses says to the people of Israel, *"For you are a people holy to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession, out of all the peoples that are on the face of the earth"* (Deuteronomy 7:6). Peter writes to several New Testament churches the following, *"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare*

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the wonderful deeds of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvellous light" (1 Peter 2:9).

This shows us that we may not by-pass the communal aspect of covenant and election. In his helpful book on covenant and election J. Van Genderen remarks,

In the discussion of the covenant and election, as well as the address, contents, and realization of the covenant promise, one generally thinks in terms of the individual person. Yet the personal and individual element is not the only factor. One could even say on biblical grounds, that it is not the primary consideration.⁶

The question, "Do I belong to the elect?" is an individualistic question and for that reason unfruitful. It cannot be answered apart from Christ or His congregation. The doctrine of election binds believers to the fellowship of the church.⁷

Does this mean that every member of the covenant and church will be part of those elected to eternal life? No. Even though the covenant proceeds from God's counsel of election the two are not identical. The covenant is "that relation of God with sinners in which He binds Himself to them in order to be their God and by which He binds them to Himself in order that they might be His people".⁸

The elect share in the blessings of the covenant but not all covenant children receive eternal life. The Lord works election through the covenant. For this reason Jesus said, "*For many are called, but few are chosen*" (Matthew 22:14). We must speak about the covenant before we start talking about election.

Throughout redemptive history it was the Lord who set His heart in love for His people. Therefore, Abraham was called by the Lord from Ur of the Chaldeans, Jacob was chosen to be the bearer of the

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messianic promises, the people of Israel were selected as God's chosen nation, and the apostle Paul was stopped dead in his tracks while on the road to Damascus.

The hearts of the elect are moved to faith. The Lord bends the will of those who are His so that they perform His will. If the Lord had not sovereignly decreed election the preaching of the gospel would always be rejected.

Election revealed for our comfort

God's eternal decree of election is the heart of the church and serves us with a continual reminder that all human glory and self-conceit are impossible.⁹ It has not been revealed to frighten us or to cause us to doubt but to provide us with unspeakable comfort and consolation.

Our comfort is in the Lord. He is our strength, our bulwark and fortress. He pulls us out of a world of evil and grants us His protection and refuge. Believers obtain comfort because their election is sure. The elect cannot be led astray and will not perish (Chapter I, Rejection of Errors, Article 6) because God is their rock and stronghold. The elect may fall (and do fall) but our Father in heaven is faithful. He will not let go of the work of His hands. Perverse, impure and unstable people distort this doctrine to ridicule it or to use it as an excuse to live an unholy life (thinking it makes no difference anyway) but it causes the people of God to live in humble gratitude.

ARTICLE 7: ELECTION DEFINED

Election is the unchangeable purpose of God whereby, before the foundation of the world, out of the whole human race, which had fallen by its own fault out of its original integrity into sin and perdition, He has, according to the sovereign good pleasure of His will, out of mere grace, chosen in Christ to salvation a definite number of specific persons, neither better nor more worthy than others, but involved together with them in a common misery. He has also from eternity

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appointed Christ to be the Mediator and Head of all the elect and the foundation of salvation and thus He decreed to give to Christ those who were to be saved, and effectually to call and draw them into His communion through His Word and Spirit. He decreed to give them true faith in Him, to justify them, to sanctify them, and, after having powerfully kept them in the fellowship of His Son, finally to glorify them, for the demonstration of His mercy and the praise of the riches of His glorious grace. As it is written: *God chose us in Christ, before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. He destined us in love to be His sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of His will, to the praise of His glorious grace which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. And elsewhere, Those whom He predestined He also called; and those whom He called He also justified; and those whom He justified He also glorified.*

The definition of eternal election as described in this article is best understood by using a question-answer format:

- What is election? "Election is the unchangeable purpose of God".
- When did it take place? "Before the foundation of the world".
- Who are elected? "Out of the whole human race... a definite number of persons, neither better nor more worthy than others".
- How is election made effective? "According to the sovereign good pleasure of His will" "out of mere grace" "chosen in Christ".

Predestination

The definition of election brings us to the topic of predestination. Before the Lord created the heavens and the earth He determined His plan for this world. Just as a house is constructed according to a

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predetermined blueprint so the Lord created this world and everything in it according to His plan.

John Calvin defined predestination in the following manner:

We call predestination God's eternal decree, by which He compacted with Himself what He willed to become of each man. For all are not created in equal condition; rather, eternal life is foreordained for some, eternal damnation for others. Therefore, as any man has been created to one or the other of these ends, we speak of him as predestined to life or to death.¹⁰

God made His choice and selection before He poured the foundations of His creation.

A definite number of persons

According to His sovereign good pleasure the Lord has chosen a definite number of persons to salvation. The number of God's elect is fixed and cannot be decreased or increased. Those chosen by God are not better or more worthy to be saved than others but are just as guilty as those rejected by Him. They are involved in a common misery. Ephesians 2:3 says, "*and so we were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind*".

Election in Christ

To speak sensibly and scripturally about election one must point exclusively to Christ. He is the mirror of election. To check the condition of your hair (whether it's combed or messy) you look in the mirror. If you want to find out about your election you have to go to Christ.¹¹ Moreover Christ's work in history may not be separated from God's election in eternity. The grace and love of God in Christ and the eternal sovereign decree of election are interrelated and intertwined. For not only did God decree *that* election would be accomplished but He also ordained *how* it would be accomplished.

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Therefore the Father appointed Christ to be the Mediator and Head of the elect.

The Father's choosing and selection is anchored in, rests upon and is surrounded by Christ. Our election is in Christ and can never be separated from Him (Ephesians 1:3-5; 1 Peter 1:20). Since this is true it is possible for us to respond to the gospel of the kingdom. Thus we can work with the gospel so that fruits of election manifest themselves.¹² Those whom the Father calls are given to Christ, united by Christ and preserved in Christ.

Election and God's sovereignty

The Lord acts according to the sovereign good pleasure of His will. He is all-powerful and supreme and does not have to give account for His actions to anyone but Himself. God is sovereign and therefore everything is willed or permitted by Him. The Lord has the final say in all matters. Every creature is accountable to Him. In language that can be understood by a little child, our Lord Jesus Christ points us to the author and the source of our election: "*And if the Lord had not shortened the days, no human being would be saved; but for the sake of the elect, whom He chose, He shortened the days*" (Mark 13:20).

ARTICLE 8: ONE DECREE OF ELECTION

There are not various decrees of this election, but there is one and the same decree concerning all those that are to be saved under both the Old and the New Testament. For Scripture declares that the good pleasure, purpose, and counsel of the will of God is one. According to this purpose He has chosen us from eternity both to grace and to glory, both to salvation and to the way of salvation, which He prepared for us that we should walk in it.

God's work of predestination and election is one. The Arminians taught there are various kinds of divine election to eternal life. One is general and indefinite and the other is particular and definite. The

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former does not specify who is part of God's chosen people while the second does. They claimed there is an election to faith and another to salvation. You could be elected to grace without receiving the glory.¹³ Whether you will be elected depends on where you stand at the end of your life. The Synod of Dort rejected these views as "an invention of the human mind without any basis in the Scriptures" (Chapter I, Rejection of Errors, Article 2). God's elect will receive both grace and glory.

The same decree for Old and New Testament

Moreover, there is one decree for those elected in both the Old and New Testament. The Holy Spirit needed to work faith in the hearts of the Old Testament believers as much as He needs to do that today. Believers in the Old Dispensation were saved by the same means as believers are delivered from sin today. Speaking to the elders and apostles in Jerusalem about the relation between Jews and Gentiles, Peter says, "*But we believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will*" (Acts 15:11). Our Lord Jesus Christ gathers His church to everlasting life from the beginning to the end of the world.

The certainty of faith rests on one decree

The certainty of our faith rests on what the Bible teaches regarding one decree of election. God gave Himself to us in love. What He began to do He completes perfectly (Psalm 138). This process of election is visible where Christ is doing His work, namely, in the midst of His congregation whom He bought with His precious blood. All that happens in the church is evidence of God's election.

The apostle Paul writes about this in Ephesians 1. As he begins to write this letter he pictures in his mind the life of the church at Ephesus in the light of all God's redemptive acts and in view of God's eternal counsel and plan. Paul reviews the life of the congregation -- their sanctification, renewal, forgiveness, etc. -- and puts it in the framework of God's election. All that goes on in the

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church, and in the life of individual believers, are not loosely connected happenings but part of a pattern by which the Lord is fulfilling His decree of election. The apostle is filled with excitement, having discovered the connection between God's present work and His foreordained counsel and plan. He erupts into an exuberant song of praise: "*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world...*" (Ephesians 1:3,4).¹⁴

The way to salvation

The one decree of election also implies that the Lord has chosen us from eternity both to salvation and to the way of salvation, which He prepared for us, that we should walk in it. Therefore it is "impossible that those grafted into Christ by true faith should not bring forth fruits of thankfulness" (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 24). God determines who will be chosen and how they should live with Him and one another.

ARTICLE 9: ELECTION NOT BASED ON FORESEEN FAITH ARTICLE 10: ELECTION BASED ON GOD'S GOOD PLEASURE

This election is not based on foreseen faith, the obedience of faith, holiness, or any other good quality of disposition, as a cause or condition in man required for being chosen, but men are chosen to faith, the obedience of faith, holiness, and so on. Election, therefore, is the fountain of every saving good, from which flow faith, holiness, and other saving gifts, and finally eternal life itself, as its fruits and effects. This the apostle teaches when he says, *He chose us* (not because we were, but) *that we should be holy and blameless before Him.*

The cause of this gracious election is solely the good pleasure of God. This good pleasure does not consist in this, that out of all possible conditions God chose certain qualities or

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actions of men as a condition for salvation, but in this, that out of the common mass of sinners He adopted certain persons to be His own possession. For it is written, *Though they (the children) were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad*, and so on, *she (namely, Rebecca), was told, 'The elder will serve the younger.'* As it is written, *'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.'* And, *as many as were ordained to eternal life believed.*

The basis of election

What is the basis of our election? Does a person have enough goodness in him so that, with the assistance of the Holy Spirit, he will choose for Jesus? Arminians of the past and present suggest man chooses God, and then God chooses man. He elected us because He knew we would believe.

Our confession refutes this position in Article 9 and 10. Election is not based upon a foreseen condition that some people meet and others do not. Faith is not the foundation of our eternal salvation. "God never bases His choice on what man thinks, says, does, or is".¹⁵ Election is not the fruit of faith but faith is the fruit of election.

The order of salvation

According to God's eternal decree the order in which salvation unfolds is always election, calling, justification, glorification. This is what we find in Romans 8:29,30, *"For those whom He foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, in order that He might be the first-born among many brethren. And those whom He predestined He also called; and those whom He called He also justified; and those whom He justified He also glorified"*.

Again the Canons of Dort emphasize that election is not a work of man but of God. The Lord chose Jacob before he was born and before he could do anything good or bad. Since election is God's work it can be called "the fountain of every saving good, from which

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flow faith, holiness, and other saving gifts, and finally eternal life itself".

The origin of election in God alone

The origin of our election lies in God Himself and in no one else. He elects on the basis of His own good pleasure. His counsel will stand and He will accomplish all His purpose (Isaiah 46:10). Man cannot *earn* salvation. The Lord does not accept us on the grounds of all the things we do for Him. We are made children of God through adoption. This doctrine is clearly taught in Acts 13:48 where we are told: "*And when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of God; and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed*". Notice that this passage says "*as many as were ordained to eternal life believed*". Not one more or less!

Other passages which confirm that election is based on God's sovereign choice are: Romans 11:5-6; Ephesians 1:5,9; 2:4-10 and 1 John 4:10.

But does election based on the good pleasure of God not suggest, as some have charged, that the Lord makes His selection in an arbitrary and whimsical manner? Are we part of a universal and cosmic lottery? Do the elect belong to the circle of "lucky" winners?

Answering these questions R.C. Sproul writes,

To be arbitrary is to do something for no reason. Now, it is clear that there is no reason found *in us* for God to choose us. But that is not the same as saying God has no reason in himself. God doesn't do anything without a reason. He is not capricious or whimsical. God is as sober as he is sovereign. A lottery is intentionally left up to chance. God does not operate by chance. He knew whom he would select.¹⁶

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Moreover Scripture itself declares, "*But who are you, a man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, 'Why have you made me thus?' Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for beauty and another for menial use?*" (Romans 9:20,21)

Through God's sovereign choice He "manifested Himself to be as He is: merciful and just. Merciful, in rescuing and saving from this perdition those whom in His eternal and unchangeable counsel He has elected in Jesus Christ our Lord by His pure goodness, without any consideration of their works. Just, in leaving the others in the fall and perdition into which they have plunged themselves" (Belgic Confession, Article 16).

ARTICLE 11: ELECTION UNCHANGEABLE

As God Himself is most wise, unchangeable, all-knowing and almighty, so His election can neither be undone and redone, nor changed, revoked, or annulled; neither can the elect be cast away, nor their number be diminished.

The Lord's decree of election does not change with time since He is unchangeable, perfectly wise, all-knowing, and almighty. The elect will not be led astray (Matthew 24:22-24). Christ said "*...and this is the will of Him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that He has given me, but raise it up at the last day*" (John 6:39). Those whom God predestined He also glorified (Romans 8:30). Election cannot be undone or redone. We may change our opinion and revise our decisions as we gain a better or deeper understanding of a matter, but God does not change since His ways and His knowledge are perfect. He knows what is best and takes the best course to achieve His goal.

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God's Repentance

But what, then, does it mean that God repented of what He was planning to do? This expression does not mean that the LORD changes but He has a different attitude toward the person(s) involved. God's repentance can be compared to the sun. The sun, which does not change, can be life-giving (causing a plant to sprout and grow) but can also bring on death (causing a plant to shrivel up).

We learn several things about God's repentance from 1 Samuel 15. In verses 28 and 29 we read, "*And Samuel said to him, 'The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this day, and has given it to a neighbour of yours, who is better than you. And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or repent; for he is not a man, that he should repent'*". The chapter concludes "*And the Lord repented that He had made Saul king over Israel'*". We may be puzzled and confused by what we find in this chapter. Does the Lord repent or doesn't He? According to our way of reasoning the one must exclude the other. No choice needs to be made, however, if we simply read both statements in their context. Two different matters are being discussed. God's repentance as mentioned in 1 Samuel 15:35 refers to the Lord's position and attitude toward Saul. Saul has rejected his covenant God and has not listened to Him. Therefore the Lord will not stay with Saul. Gradually God's rejection will take effect. However, when Samuel says in verse 29, "*The Glory* (or better translated 'the Reliable One') *of Israel will not lie or repent'*" it is in the context of the words which the Lord has spoken. God said the kingdom would be torn away from Saul. He has rejected Saul as king and that word will not change. The Lord is unchangeable in the fulfilment of His counsel and plan. He does not say the one thing and do the other. What He says stands.

God's repentance is different from ours. "I repent that I have made Saul king" should not be interpreted to mean, "Saul has been such a disappointment. I'm really sorry that I picked him". The Lord knew beforehand that this was going to happen. The change comes in the

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way the Lord will treat Saul. Our covenant Lord is not left unmoved by the actions of His people.¹⁷

ARTICLE 12: THE ASSURANCE OF ELECTION

The elect in due time, though in various stages and in different measure, are made certain of this their eternal and unchangeable election to salvation. They attain this assurance, however, not by inquisitively prying into the hidden and deep things of God, but by observing in themselves, with spiritual joy and holy delight, the unfailing fruits of election pointed out in the Word of God – such as a true faith in Christ, a childlike fear of God, a godly sorrow for their sins, and a hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Election is a sovereign, unchangeable act of God. But how do we know that we are elected? Is not the confession of sovereign and unconditional election a threat rather than a comfort to the certainty of faith? The Remonstrants answered, "Yes it is. You cannot know until the day of your death whether you belong to the final number because election depends on your faith". In contrast, the Reformed Churches have always taught "the elect in due time, though in various stages and in different measure, are made certain of this their eternal and unchangeable election to salvation."

God does not give us a list with the names of His elect written on it. Nevertheless, with the disciples of Jesus Christ, we may rejoice that our names are written in heaven (Luke 10:20; see also Chapter I, Rejection of Errors, Article 7). The Lord does not give us a special inner revelation whereby we are told that we are His chosen. The assurance of our election is granted to us in Christ and by noting what He is doing in our lives.¹⁸

Article 12 emphatically warns against inquisitively prying into the secret and deep ways of God. We know that we belong to the elect because of what the Lord has granted to us. Some people would

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prefer receiving a direct indication that they belong to God's elect but Scripture is clear: assurance does not come through some special revelation or inner voice. That does not put a damper on personal assurance. Instead there would be a damper "if one first had to discover signs or fruits of election in one's life before one were warranted to appropriate the promised salvation".¹⁹

Calling and Election

It is our duty to seek assurance of our election. Thus the apostle Peter writes, "*Therefore, brethren, be the more zealous to confirm your call and election, for if you do this you will never fall*" (2 Peter 1:10). Note well, Peter does not appeal to his readers to confirm their election and call but their call and election. Why does he place calling before election? He starts where God's election is visible.

When we talk about the assurance of election our starting point is God's calling in the covenant. The Lord's eternal decree is made manifest and is revealed in our calling. If we do not start with the position we receive in God's covenant and church we will get caught in an endless cycle of questions and doubts. The assurance of election comes "from the very constant promises of God" (Chapter V, Rejection of Errors, Article 5).

How assurance of election is received

The elect receive assurance by "observing in themselves, with spiritual joy and holy delight, the unfailing fruits of election pointed out in the Word of God -- such as a true faith in Christ, a childlike fear of God, a godly sorrow for their sins, and a hunger and thirst for righteousness". Each of these fruits deserves individual attention.

True faith

True faith in Christ is having the confidence and trust that the perfect work of Christ accomplished for His people is applied to me personally through the Holy Spirit. This faith can be sorely tested but

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cannot be taken away from the elect. Faith in God's revealed will opens our eyes to see God's work in our lives.

Childlike fear

Having a childlike fear of God does not mean we are afraid of Him but we stand in awe of His holy majesty. We revere and adore Him.

Godly sorrow

There is a difference between godly grief and selfish sorrow for our sins. Paul makes this distinction in his second letter to the Corinthians "*For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief produces death*" (7:10). True remorse for sin is "...to grieve with heartfelt sorrow that we have offended God by our sin, and more and more to hate it and flee from it" (Lord's Day 33). True sorrow for sin regulates how we ask for forgiveness as well. Asking for forgiveness is different from apologizing. A person who apologizes says, "I'm sorry for doing wrong" but a person who asks for forgiveness confesses, "I have sinned against God. I have offended Him."

A hungering and thirsting after righteousness

Hungering and thirsting after righteousness is the same as seeking our life apart from ourselves in Jesus Christ. He is the one who accomplishes for us what God's law requires.

Our confession does not give an exhaustive list of fruits of election. We could mention as well the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Galatians 5:22,23).

All the fruits of election have their roots in Christ. He as the vine produces fruit. We gain assurance of our election by examining what He accomplishes in us.

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ARTICLE 13: THE VALUE OF THIS ASSURANCE

The awareness and assurance of this election provide the children of God with greater reason for daily humbling themselves before God, for adoring the depth of His mercies, for cleansing themselves, and for fervently loving Him in turn who first so greatly loved them. It is therefore not at all true that this doctrine of election and the reflection on it makes them lax in observing the commands of God or falsely secure. In the just judgment of God, this usually happens to those who rashly presume to have the grace of election, or idly and boldly chatter about it, but refuse to walk in the ways of the elect.

What is the purpose of having this assurance? Assurance of election does not make us *haughty* but *humble*. If someone boasts, his election is questionable. Pride and boasting are not fruits of faith. Instead of boasting we are to worship God because of the depths of His riches and marvel at His immeasurable mercy and grace.

The assurance of election has value for all the members of Christ's church. During our teens or at other times in our life we can be tossed up and down in a sea of doubt. Yet then, too, we may believe that God wants to be God to us and for us. We can count on receiving the contents of God's promises, namely, the forgiveness of sins and the daily renewal of life because the Lord is not a man that He should lie.

By the same token, true assurance rules out all complacency and carelessness. It leads us to diligence in holiness, honest self-examination, and a desire to live in communion with the Lord and His people. All our energy is directed toward confirming what God is working in us. Just as a roll of steel is tied down with a strong piece of chain and a ship is kept from drifting out of the harbour by tying it down with ropes to the dock, so our calling and election are to be tied down, tightened and confirmed by a life of sanctification.

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ARTICLE 14: HOW ELECTION IS TO BE TAUGHT

This doctrine of divine election, according to the most wise counsel of God, was preached by the prophets, by Christ Himself, and by the apostles, under the Old as well as the New Testament, and was then committed to writing in the Holy Scriptures. Therefore, also today this doctrine should be taught in the church of God, for which it was particularly intended, in its proper time and place, provided it be done with a spirit of discretion, in a reverent and holy manner, without inquisitively prying into the ways of the most High, to the glory of God's most holy Name, and for the living comfort of His people.

Election is the foundation of our life and therefore we must speak about it in the preaching of the Word. Believers in both Old and New Testament were told about God's election through the proclamation of prophets and apostles. For some examples look up: Deuteronomy 7:7; Psalm 33:11; Isaiah 46:10; Ephesians 1:1-14. The doctrine of election is a fundamental truth. There is nothing more dangerous than when a truth of God's Word is silenced or passed by.²⁰ Officebearers who sign the Form of Subscription declare by their signature that they wholeheartedly believe the doctrine of election as explained in the Three Forms of Unity and they promise to diligently teach and faithfully defend this doctrine.

Yet we must be careful how we speak about election. God gives us a glimpse of His work of election because it declares His glory and gives unspeakable comfort to the people of the Lord who live and work in a corrupt and evil world. The God of election is the Lord of the covenant who is mindful of His covenant for ever, of the word that He commanded for a thousand generations (Psalm 105:8). The doctrine of election is part of God's living Word. Therefore it may not be presented as a dry, abstract and theoretical concept. It must be taught with reverence and holiness in order to strengthen the people of the Lord. Preaching the doctrine of election should result in our

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confession: "*O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and how inscrutable His ways!*" (Romans 11:33).

ARTICLE 15: REPROBATION DESCRIBED

Holy Scripture illustrates and recommends to us this eternal and undeserved grace of our election, especially when it further declares that not all men are elect but that some have not been elected, or have been passed by in the eternal election of God. Out of His most free, most just, blameless, and unchangeable good pleasure, God has decreed to leave them in the common misery into which they have by their own fault plunged themselves, and not to give them saving faith and the grace of conversion. These, having been left in their own ways and under His just judgment, God has decreed finally to condemn and punish eternally, not only on account of their unbelief but also on account of all their other sins, in order to display His justice. This is the decree of reprobation, which by no means makes God the author of sin (the very thought is blasphemous!), but rather declares Him to be its awesome, blameless, and just judge and avenger.

Definition of Reprobation

Not all men belong to the elect. There are those who have been passed by in God's sovereign, eternal plan of election. Simply defined election is to "call out". Reprobation means "to reject". E.H. Palmer defines reprobation as "God's eternal sovereign, unconditional, immutable, wise, holy, and mysterious decree whereby, in electing some to eternal life, He passes others by, and then justly condemns them for their own sin -- all to His own glory".²¹

Reprobation explained

The Arminians repudiate this doctrine. But they are not alone. Many shudder at the thought of a certain number being condemned to eternal perdition. They suggest that we should concentrate on the

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decision we must make for the Lord rather than speak about the eternal decisions of God.

Once you deny the doctrine of reprobation you will question the other teachings of Scripture too. We have a recent example of this. During the late 1970's, Rev. Harry Boer sent a gravamen (an official objection to an official teaching of the church) to the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church. He argued there is not a shred of evidence in the entire body of Scripture for the doctrine of reprobation.²² Rev. Boer's views were only the tip of the iceberg. In a more recent book, *An Ember Still Glowing*, he questions total depravity, limited atonement, individual election, and divine sovereignty in grace and regeneration.²³

Many consider reprobation an unacceptable doctrine because this would mean the Lord destined some for hell and eternal condemnation even before mankind fell into sin. "God has predestined and created the greatest part of the world for eternal damnation by a mere arbitrary act of His will, without taking into account any sin" (Conclusion of the Canons of Dort)

The doctrine of reprobation, however, clearly presupposes the fall into sin. The condemnation of the reprobate is based on their sin and unbelief. Those passed by in God's eternal decree are not sinners because of or as a result of their being passed by.²⁴ We believe the Lord is completely just in His decision to leave a large number of people in the sin and misery into which they plunged themselves. He has every right to condemn them and to punish them with eternal death.

The Lord has decided to keep the reprobate under His wrath. He hardens their heart, that is, He gives them over to their sins and sometimes uses their evil intentions to fulfil His own redemptive purposes. During the procedure which led up to Christ's crucifixion Herod, Pontius Pilate, the Gentiles and the people of Israel conspired

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together against Jesus and had Him crucified. But they carried out what God had determined beforehand in His plan for history.

Take as an example what we read in Acts 2:23 where Peter says to the assembled Jews, *"this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men"*. Notice that the first part of the verse shows the death of Christ was according to God's decree but yet the second part of the verse demonstrates that man is totally responsible and is to be blamed for sin and unbelief. The Lord holds all people responsible for their actions. The same is taught in Acts 4:27,28, *"...for truly in this city there were gathered together against Thy holy servant Jesus, whom Thou didst anoint, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Thy hand and Thy plan had predestined to take place"*. Once again there is the juxtaposition of God's decree and man's responsibility. Those involved are not powerless objects in the hands of fate.

We may not blame God for the unbelief of mankind. He does not reject poor innocent people but evil, vile and wicked sinners. The reprobate do not come to Christ. They have no desire to come. "Not a single soul in the history of the human race has desired salvation and been withheld from it. Not a single soul has ever sincerely desired eternal life and failed to receive it."²⁵ The Lord warned the unbelieving Jews and admonished them to break with their sins but they would not listen to His voice. God rejected them as vessels of wrath made for destruction (Romans 9:22). They stumbled because they disobeyed the Word, as they were destined to do (1 Peter 2:8). To show His justice God decided to let them go their own way.

The reason why reprobation is revealed: God's greater praise

But doesn't the doctrine of reprobation conflict with God's grace and mercy? No, on the contrary, this decree has been revealed to us so that we might know God in the fullness of His virtues and attributes. God is love (1 John 4) but also wrath (Psalm 7). Our God is a

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consuming fire. As this article states, "Holy Scripture illustrates and recommends to us this eternal and undeserved grace of our election, especially when it further declares that not all men are elect but that some have not been elected, or have been passed by in the eternal election of God". A similar thought was already expressed in Article 1, "...God would have done no one an injustice if it had been His will to leave the whole human race in sin and under the curse, and to condemn it on account of its sin..."

The doctrine of reprobation should fill us with awe and greater praise for the grace He has granted to us. *"Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in His kindness; otherwise you too will be cut off"* (Romans 11:22). The Lord lets His chosen people know that He is under no obligation to elect them.

What is taught in Scripture and confessed in the Canons of Dort regarding reprobation defies all human logic. Reprobation is an unfathomable mystery. Since we honour the inspiration of Scripture we accept what we are told. The Lord rejects just as He elects. We must know about Esau, Pharaoh, Judas and others who were made for destruction so that we can give Him greater praise for His redemption in Christ.

ARTICLE 16: RESPONSES TO THE DOCTRINE OF REPROBATION

Some do not yet clearly discern in themselves a living faith in Christ, an assured confidence of heart, peace of conscience, a zeal for childlike obedience, and a glorying in God through Christ; nevertheless, they use the means through which God has promised to work these things in us. They ought not to be alarmed when reprobation is mentioned, nor to count themselves among the reprobate. Rather, they must diligently continue in the use of these means, fervently desire a time of more abundant grace, and expect it with reverence

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and humility. Others seriously desire to be converted to God, to please Him only, and to be delivered from the body of death. Yet they cannot reach that point on the way of godliness and faith which they would like. They should be even less terrified by the doctrine of reprobation, since a merciful God has promised not to quench the smoking flax nor to break the bruised reed. Still others disregard God and the Saviour Jesus Christ and have completely given themselves over to the cares of the world and the lusts of the flesh. For them this doctrine of reprobation is rightly fearsome as long as they do not seriously turn to God.

Reprobation not meant to alarm the godly

Those who are weak in the faith, yet avail themselves of the means of grace (preaching and sacraments), should not be alarmed at the mention of reprobation. For this doctrine is not meant to discourage those who do not feel the assurance of faith.

When Article 16 speaks of those "who do not yet clearly discern in themselves a living faith in Christ", it adds that believers "ought not to be alarmed when reprobation is mentioned". At the same time it points out the way the elect must walk and the way in which they can long for more abundant grace.

We are to become all the more diligent in seeking our life in the Lord and in the promises of His Word, acknowledging His mercy. For we are engraved on the palms of His hands (Isaiah 49:16). The strengthening of our faith requires diligence in using the means of grace granted to us, hearing the Word of the Lord, and acting upon it. For "*...he who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer that forgets but a doer that acts, he shall be blessed in his doing*" (James 1:25).

Reprobation must be preached

The doctrine of reprobation must be preached in the church of our Lord Jesus Christ. Ministers should not hesitate to proclaim the whole

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counsel of God concerning our redemption (Acts 20:27). They may not hide what the Lord has revealed. Although God's decree of reprobation refers to individuals, we do not know who those individuals are. For this reason we are not allowed to regard or consider a person to be part of the reprobate. The church has the task to preach the complete gospel to all people.

Furthermore, as John Calvin points out, the Lord can use the preaching to heap burning coals of fire on the heads of the reprobate "He directs His voice to them but in order that they may be made even more deaf; He kindles a light but that they may be made even more blind; He sets forth doctrine but that they may even grow more stupid; He employs a remedy but so that they may not be healed".²⁶

ARTICLE 17: CHILDREN OF BELIEVERS WHO DIE IN INFANCY

We must judge concerning the will of God from His Word, which declares that the children of believers are holy, not by nature but in virtue of the covenant of grace, in which they are included with their parents. Therefore, God-fearing parents ought not to doubt the election and salvation of their children whom God calls out of this life in their infancy.

What about children? They are conceived and born in sin and by nature they are children of wrath. Must they be considered reprobate and unregenerate until they prove to be part of God's elect? Should baptism be administered on the assumption that they are elect?²⁷ What about those children who die in infancy?

The Arminians accused the Reformed of being extremely harsh on children. They claimed "many innocent children of believers are torn from their mothers' breasts and tyrannically thrown into hell, so that neither the blood of Christ nor their baptism nor the prayers of the

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church at their baptism can be of any help to them" (Conclusion of the Canons of Dort).

This article steers us in the right direction by pointing us to the unspeakable comfort God-fearing parents receive through faith in God's covenant promises. Children too have been called out of darkness (together with their parents). They have the rich promises of the Lord, being members of His covenant and church (Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 27 Q & A 74). On the day of Pentecost Peter says to fellow covenant people, "*For to you is the promise and to your children...*"(Acts 2:39).²⁸

We do not become members of the church at our public profession of faith. Christ is Head and King of His church. Children are members of His body and subjects of His kingdom just as much as the adults. Which king turns away the children and tells them to leave his kingdom?

Children of believers are sanctified in Christ (1 Corinthians 7:14) and set apart from sin for service. They have been distinguished from children of unbelievers. Thus we should not get ourselves entangled in a net of speculation regarding the election and regeneration of children who die in their infancy, but deal with this topic from the perspective of God's covenant.²⁹ On the basis of the covenant, parents may be assured of the election of those children who die in infancy.³⁰ Holy Baptism seals and confirms the promise of the Holy Spirit who "assures us by this sacrament that He will dwell in us and make us living members of Christ, imparting to us what we have in Christ, namely, the cleansing of our sins and the daily renewal of our lives, till we shall finally be presented without blemish among the assembly of God's elect in life eternal."³¹

On the day of Christ's return all children of believers who have died before birth or in their infancy will be raised from the dead and receive a glorious body. We confess in Article 37 of the Belgic

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Confession, "Then all people, men, women, and children, who ever lived, from the beginning of the world to the end, will appear in person before this great Judge... As a gracious reward, the Lord will cause them to possess such a glory as the heart of man could never conceive. Therefore we look forward to that great day with a great longing to enjoy to the full the promises of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!*"

ARTICLE 18: NOT PROTEST BUT ADORATION

To those who complain about this grace of undeserved election and the severity of righteous reprobation, we reply with this word of the apostle: *But who are you, a man, to answer back to God?* And with this word of our Saviour, *Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to Me?* We, however, with reverent adoration of these mysteries, exclaim with the apostle: *O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and how inscrutable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been His counselor? Or who has given a gift to Him that He might be repaid? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be glory for ever. Amen.*

The first chapter ends with a doxology (word of praise). All praise and thanks go to the Lord. The doctrine of election is resisted by the sinful heart of man but it teaches us to put all our trust in the Lord's mercy. At the same time all haughtiness, humanism, Arminianism and self-glorification are dismissed. Just because we do not understand all the aspects and facets of the doctrine of unconditional election, this does not give us the right to resist or oppose it. A child is unfair and unjust in challenging decisions of his parents which he may not comprehend. To challenge the decisions of our eternal, wise and perfect Father is far more hazardous and perilous. Rather than talk back to God we are to adore the depths of His riches and wisdom and knowledge (Romans 11:33).

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The apostle Paul summarizes it beautifully for us in his letter to the Thessalonians, "*But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God chose you from the beginning to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth*" (2 Thessalonians 2:13).

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Questions

1. Why is the doctrine of unconditional election challenged and questioned by so many people? (Introduction)
2. Is it sufficient to call the first sin "the fall"? (Article 1)
3. Who takes the initiative in working our salvation? Using contemporary examples, discuss how this is not always highlighted the way it should be. (Article 2)
4. How are we brought to faith? Does the Lord use people as His instruments to accomplish His purpose? (Article 3)
5. Who determines where the gospel will be preached? Will every person hear it before Christ returns? (Article 3)
6. What is a true and living faith? (Article 4)?
7. If the cause of unbelief lies in man, why can we not say that the cause of faith also lies in man? (Article 5)
8. Does every reference to God's calling, choosing and election have to do with His election from eternity? (Article 6)
9. Many find the doctrine of election both difficult and frightening. How can the doctrine of election give us comfort? (Article 6)
10. What is the relation between election and the covenant? (Article 6)
11. Define what is meant by the terms predestination and election. (Article 7)

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12. We cannot separate Christ's work in history from God's election in eternity. Explain this statement. (Article 7)
13. Where is the process of election made visible? (Article 8)
14. Election is the fruit of our faith. Discuss whether or not this is a correct statement (Article 9 & 10).
15. How is the fact that God is unchangeable to be explained in view of what Scripture teaches about His repentance? (Article 11)
16. Can you know for certain that you belong to those whom God has elected to eternal life? (Article 12)
17. Why are you not free to live the way you want? (Article 13)
18. When God decreed reprobation did He take into account the sinful actions of mankind? (Article 15)
19. Should the gospel be preached to all people if some are rejected anyway? (Article 16)
20. How can parents be sure of the election of children who die in their infancy? (Article 17)

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Notes

1. J. Calvin, *Concerning The Eternal Predestination of God* (translated with an introduction by J.K.S. Reid, published by James Clark & Co, 1982) p.58.
2. W.H. Kooienga, "The U in Tulip --Unconditional Election" in *Christian Renewal* (April 29, 1996).
3. R.C. Sproul, *Chosen by God* (Wheaton, Tyndale, 1986) p.98.
4. J. Faber et al., *To the Praise of His Glory* (Launceston, Geneva, 1971) p.14.
5. In Acts 16:19 and James 2:6 the same Greek word translated in John 6:44 as "draw" is used and translated by the English word "drag". Acts 16:19, "*But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market place before the rulers.*" James 2:6, "*But you have dishonoured the poor man. It is not the rich who oppress you, is it not they who drag you into court?*"
6. J. VanGenderen, *Covenant and Election* (Neerlandia, Inheritance, 1995) p.76.
7. *Ibid.*, p.78.
8. *Ibid.*, p.58.
9. G.C. Berkouwer, *Divine Election* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1960) p.51.
10. J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (McNeill and Battles edition, Westminster Press, 1960) Book 3, Chapter 21, Section 5.
11. J. VanAmstel, *Dort in Kort* (Goes, Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1987) p.18.

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12. J. Kamphuis, *Aantekeningen Bij J.A. Heyns Dogmatiek* (Kampen, Vandenberg, 1982) p.33.
13. J.G. Feenstra, *De Dordtse Leerregelen* (Kampen, Kok, 1950) p. 40.
14. see further on this, C. Trimp in *The Bride's Treasure*, p.48,49.
15. E. Palmer, *The Five Points of Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1972) p.26.
16. *Chosen By God*, p.157.
17. E. Koop, *De Dordtse Leerregels Dicterbij Gebracht* (Kampen, Vandenberg, 1983) p.44-45.
18. G. Kwakkel, *Uitgekozen* (Barneveld, Vuurbaak, 1990) p.39.
19. *Covenant and Election*, p. 74.
20. *De Dordtse Leerregelen*, p.59.
21. E. H. Palmer, p. 95.
22. H.Boer, *The Doctrine of Reprobation in the Christian Reformed Church* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1983) p.7.
23. For more information on this matter see: J. Bolt "A smoldering ember: Harry Boer's continuing battle with the Reformed tradition" *Calvin Theological Journal*, 26 (1991) pp.111-124.
24. F.H. Klooster, "Harry Boer's battle against reprobation" *Calvin Theological Journal* 19 (1984) p.59.
25. G. Girod, *The Deeper Faith* (Grand Rapids, Reformed Publications, 1958) p. 25.

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26. *Institutes*, III, 21.13.
27. The status of infants and children was debated in the years leading up to the Liberation of 1944 in the Netherlands. For more on this see P.K. Keizer, *Church History* (Neerlandia, Inheritance, 1990) pp. 196-203 and W.W. J. VanOene, *Inheritance Preserved* (Winnipeg, Premier, 1991) pp. 35-43.
28. Calvin makes some worthwhile comments on the position of the children in the covenant in his commentary on Genesis 17:7, Acts 2:39 and Romans 9:6.
31. C. Trimp, p.54.
32. In his book *Surprised by Suffering* (Wheaton, Tyndale, 1988) pp.186-187, R.C. Sproul states "Any time a human being dies before reaching the age of accountability (which varies according to mental capacity), we must look to special provisions of God's mercy". Such a statement does not adequately take into consideration the promises of God's grace which are granted to both believers and their children. God does not have to apply "special" grace and mercy to those who die before the age of accountability.
33. "Form for the Baptism of Infants", *Book of Praise*, p.584.