

# Chapter 4

THIRD AND FOURTH HEADS OF DOCTRINE

THE CORRUPTION

OF MAN,

HIS CONVERSION

TO GOD,

AND THE MANNER

IN WHICH IT OCCURS

**A**t the Synod of Dort our forefathers deliberated and discussed five key chapters of our catholic undoubted Christian faith. As we move through these chapters we discover how one doctrine of salvation is closely connected to and intertwined with the other. What we confess regarding election and reprobation affects what we say about the depravity of mankind and his conversion to God.

In the third and fourth chapters of the Canons of Dort we find the root of the Arminian error and heresy. Man in sinful pride thinks he is not all that evil. The Arminians admitted there was a connection between the fall and disobedience of Adam and Eve and the rest of humanity but they did not believe original sin condemns the whole human race. They argued that even though we lost something the essential qualities of goodness, holiness, and righteousness are still attainable through man's ability and free will. With the gentle nudge of the gospel these qualities, which may lie hidden in man's being, will be brought to light since through the fall into sin the will of man was not corrupted but hindered. Once the hindrance is removed a choice can be made for or against God. These points were forcefully refuted by the fathers at Dort.

### *Two chapters combined*

In chapter III/IV two of the five points of the Remonstrants are refuted under one heading. The doctrines of total depravity and invincible grace are combined because the members of the Synod of Dort saw a strong link between the two doctrines. Acceptance or denial of total depravity changes one's view on the need for and manner of regeneration. The Biblical doctrine of (original) sin is the foundation upon which the doctrine of grace and regeneration is built.

### *Irresistible Grace?*

Sometimes the fourth head of doctrine is called "irresistible grace". That term is misleading. Men can and do resist the grace of God. Several places in Scripture depict resistance and opposition to the working of the Holy Spirit. In Acts 7:51 Stephen says to the Jews,

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*"You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you". Any act of unbelief or disobedience is resistance against the working of the Holy Spirit. Yet God's power is greater than our resistance. His regenerating work breaks our obstinance. The Lord will achieve His purpose. Therefore we may be wiser to speak of invincible or insuperable grace.<sup>1</sup>*

### ***Division***

The seventeen articles of this chapter can be divided into three sections:

- Article 1-5 -- the total corruption of man
- Article 6-12 -- the miracle of conversion
- Article 13-17 -- the manner of conversion

When we examine the depth and extent of the fall into sin we start from the premise that God has made peace with us through the blood of Jesus Christ. Through faith we belong to Jesus Christ in body and soul both in life and death.

### **ARTICLE 1: THE EFFECT OF THE FALL**

In the beginning man was created in the image of God. He was adorned in his mind with true and wholesome knowledge of his Creator and of all spiritual things; his will and heart were upright, all his affections pure, and therefore man was completely holy. But rebelling against God through the instigation of the devil and through his own free will, he deprived himself of these excellent gifts, and instead brought upon himself blindness, horrible darkness, futility, and perverseness of judgment in his mind; wickedness, rebelliousness, and stubbornness in his will and heart; and impurity in all his affections.

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### ***Man: created in the image of God***

To understand the depth of man's fall we have to realize the height from which he has fallen. In conflict with the theory of evolution, which portrays the first human beings as primitive and rather backward, we believe our first parents were endowed with wisdom, knowledge and insight. The human race has not progressed but digressed from the way it was in Paradise.

In the beginning God created man in His image (Genesis 1:27). You can say of a son that he is the spitting image of his father but this is not what the phrase "created in the image of God" means. The word "image" describes the role the LORD gave to mankind in creation. Adam and Eve were created in the image of God in order that they should "...have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth" (Genesis 1:26). They were to rule the earth as God's representatives. The glory of the Lord was to be visible in the way they ruled.

The LORD distinguished human beings from all the other creatures of the world by giving them a cosmic calling. It is noteworthy that nowhere in Scripture does it say that all of created reality is the image of God. The term is only used for mankind.<sup>2</sup>

Crowned with honour and glory mankind was made a little less than God. He was given dominion over the works of the Lord's hands (Psalm 8). Human beings were given the capacity to develop the potentials of the earth to the glory of God. The Lord did not create robots but people who were capable of serving Him freely, making responsible choices.

Adam and Eve were created in true righteousness and holiness so that they might rightly know their Creator. The Canons of Dort state beautifully, "He was adorned in his mind with true and wholesome knowledge of His Creator and of all spiritual things; his will and

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heart were upright, all his affections pure, and therefore man was completely holy". Being in the image of God and functioning as His representatives Adam and Eve were able to do, will, and think the right things.

During His earthly ministry Jesus once said, "*He who has seen me has seen the Father*" (John 14). In a certain way Adam could have also said this in Paradise since one could see in him the glory of God. Commenting on God's creation of man the reformer John Calvin proclaimed in a sermon, "We see of man that he is refined from the top of his head to the soles of his feet, that he is a balanced work of art (seen according to the order of nature), and that one could not know how to find fault even with the tip of his finger".<sup>3</sup>

The Arminians did not agree with what is confessed in Lord's Day 3 of the Heidelberg Catechism which states, "God created man good and in His image, that is, in true righteousness and holiness". They believed man was created neither good or evil but neutral. He was given the power to be and do good. They argued "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, and therefore cannot have been separated from his will when he fell" (Chapter III/IV, Rejection of Errors, Article 2).

What Scripture teaches in Genesis 1:26,27,31, Ephesians 4:23,24, and Colossians 3:9,10 flatly opposes these views. Adam and Eve were given a high position. They received all the gifts and talents necessary to serve the Lord.

Having been created in the image and likeness of God, Adam had an office and task to fulfil. His mind was adorned with true and wholesome knowledge so that he could be a *prophet*; confessing the glory and greatness of God's name. His will and heart were upright so that he could rule over God's creation as *king*. All Adam's

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affections were pure and he was completely holy so that he was able to serve as *priest*.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Man is no longer the image of God***

Through rebellion and disobedience mankind is no longer God's representative. The remains of the image of God are no longer stamped upon him. As the following articles will demonstrate, the Lord has to make an entirely new beginning with us. Only through the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit can we be renewed after the image of Jesus Christ. Our darkened hearts and minds need a complete overhaul. A person's life must be in Christ for him to be changed from a rebel to a representative; to be restored to his original office. The Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 12 puts it this way, "I am a member of Christ by faith and thus share in His anointing, so that I may as prophet confess His Name, as priest present myself a living sacrifice of thankfulness to Him, and as king fight with a free and good conscience against sin and the devil in this life, and hereafter reign with Him eternally over all creatures".

## **ARTICLE 2: THE SPREAD OF CORRUPTION**

Since after the fall man became corrupt, he as a corrupt father brought forth corrupt children. Thus the corruption has spread from Adam to all his descendants, with the exception of Christ alone, not by imitation, as the Pelagians of old maintained, but by the propagation of a perverted nature, according to the righteous judgment of God.

By the instigation of the devil and through their own wilful disobedience Adam and Eve transgressed the law of God. They lost the glorious position given to them and became totally corrupt. "*Their thinking became futile and their senseless minds were darkened*" (Romans 1:21).

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### ***Our sin in Adam***

In Adam's corruption, we all are corrupt; in Adam's guilt we all are guilty before the Lord. "Since after the fall man became corrupt, he as a corrupt father brought forth corrupt children".

Perhaps you are wondering, "What do I have to do with Adam's sin? Am I not responsible for my own actions? Should I be held accountable and responsible for what Adam and Eve did? Besides, they fell into sin at least six thousand years ago!"

We need to keep in mind that Adam and Eve sinned as our first parents. Ironically their sin was a representative act so that Adam and Eve produced children in their image (Genesis 5:1-3). Because of our sin in Adam, we by nature are children of wrath, dead in sins and trespasses and of a corrupt mind (Ephesians 2:1-3).

Corruption has spread from Adam to all his descendants with the exception of Christ alone. Scripture teaches that one man's trespass led to condemnation for all men. By one man's disobedience many were made sinners (Romans 5:18,19). We do not *become* sinners when we commit sin but we commit sins because we *are* sinners by nature (Genesis 6:5; 8:21; Job 14:4; Psalm 14:3; Jeremiah 17:9; Romans 3:9,10). Our inclination is to do exactly the same as a wicked and godless society. Therefore we should be careful when we speak about the sins of others recognizing that "there but for the grace of God, go I".

### ***Sin is not through imitation alone***

The Canons of Dort mention the viewpoint of the Pelagians who taught that our sin in Adam is strictly through imitation. Although it is true that people mimic the bad habits and sins of others, our sin in Adam is not simply through imitation. The apostle Paul writes, "*Sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned*" (Romans 5:12). Notice Paul does not say, "All people die because all people commit

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sin" but "*all men sinned*" in Adam. Original sin is not only a human failure that makes us feel insecure and inadequate but it is the power that enslaves us. We are born in prison, so to speak.

### ***Our union with Adam***

What kind of union exists between Adam and his posterity? The union is both biological (hereditary) and representative. The natural head Adam is also the representative head of mankind.<sup>5</sup> All mankind was in the body (loins) of Adam so that when he fell all humanity fell with him in the first transgression. Just as Levi was in the loins of Abraham when Melchizedek met him (Hebrews 7:10) so we were in the loins of Adam in Paradise. Adam is the root and spring of human nature. From a rotten root come rotten branches and from a polluted spring comes polluted water.

### ***The Arminian view of original sin***

The Arminians spoke of original sin but did not believe sin could be inherited. Sin is a deed. They argued "it is improper to say that original sin as such is sufficient to condemn the whole human race or to deserve temporal and eternal punishment" (Chapter III/IV, Rejection of Errors, Article 1). Only the power of sin which leads to death is passed on to all men.<sup>6</sup> In contrast we confess that all children are conceived and born in sin and by nature children of wrath.

## **ARTICLE 3: MAN'S TOTAL INABILITY**

Therefore all men are conceived in sin and are born as children of wrath, incapable of any saving good, inclined to evil, dead in sins, and slaves of sin. And without the grace of the regenerating Holy Spirit they neither will nor can return to God, reform their depraved nature, or prepare themselves for its reformation.

Arminians of both the past and present believe "the unregenerate man is not really or totally dead in sins, or deprived of all powers unto



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spiritual good. He can yet hunger and thirst after righteousness and life, and offer the sacrifice of a contrite and broken spirit which is pleasing to God". In their refutation of this teaching the Reformed Churches replied,

These things militate against the express testimony of Scripture: *You were dead through your trespasses and sins*, Eph. 2:1,5. And *every imagination of the thoughts of man's heart is only evil continually*, Gen. 6:5 and 8:21. Moreover, only the regenerate and those who are called blessed hunger and thirst after deliverance from misery and afterlife, and offer to God the sacrifice of a broken spirit, Ps.51:19 and Mt. 5:6 (Chapter III/IV, Rejection of Errors, Article 4).

Sin has affected every part of our human body. Our mind and will are not free from sin. The root of sin goes to the root of life so that we are conceived and born in sin. Total depravity is so extensive that there is nothing to commend us to God legally or to move us to God personally. Mankind is guilty and polluted by sin. Just as a drop of poison will contaminate an entire cup of water so our nature, will and being are totally corrupted by the poison of sin. Since we are totally depraved we find the appalling appealing.

### ***What is sin?***

Sin, as defined by Scripture, is transgression (crossing the boundary of God's law), iniquity (turning aside from the right way), rebellion (refusal to submit to rightful authority), apostasy (forsaking the Lord), lawlessness and unfaithfulness.

### ***How sin is viewed today***

This article stresses that we are conceived in sin, dead in sins, and slaves of sin. For some such terminology is shocking. Sin is either considered to be an outdated concept or it has been completely redefined. "While the Bible clearly states that *'all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God'* (Romans 3:23) our psychological

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society has substituted the word *sin* with *sickness*, so that all are sick and come short of their highest potential."<sup>7</sup> Some will even blame what is called addictions on those Christians who teach the doctrines of original sin and total depravity.<sup>8</sup>

### ***The immensity of sin and of God's love***

The sin of man is so great that God the Father could not spare His Son but gave Him up for us all. The only solution to total depravity is total renewal. "Without the grace of the regenerating Holy Spirit they neither will nor can return to God, reform their depraved nature, or prepare themselves for its reformation."

## **ARTICLE 4: THE INADEQUACY OF THE LIGHT OF NATURE**

To be sure, there is left in man after the fall, some light of nature, whereby he retains some notions about God, about natural things, and about the difference between what is honourable and shameful, and shows some regard for virtue and outward order. But so far is he from arriving at the saving knowledge of God and true conversion through this light of nature that he does not even use it properly in natural and civil matters. Rather, whatever this light may be, man wholly pollutes it in various ways and suppresses it by his wickedness. In doing so, he renders himself without excuse before God.

### ***The meaning of 'total' depravity***

Although man became totally depraved and corrupt he did not cease being human. He still has a will and the faculty to reason. "The adjective 'total' does not mean that each sinner is as totally or completely corrupt in his actions and thoughts as it is possible for him to be. Instead, the word 'total' is used to indicate that the whole of man's being has been affected by sin. The corruption extends to every part of man, his body and soul; sin has affected all (the totality) of man's faculties -- his mind, his will, etc."<sup>9</sup> Sin has

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corrupted the whole person including thoughts, words and actions (Genesis 6:5; 8:21; Jeremiah 17:9; Mark 7:21-23; 1 Corinthians 2:14; Titus 1:15).

The Lord is long-suffering and patient and restrains wickedness keeping it from reaching full expression. Otherwise it would be unbearable for the church to live in the world.

### ***There is some light of nature left in man after the fall***

The fall into sin does not take away from our being human and make us into animals. That is why this article states, "To be sure, there is left in man after the fall, some light of nature, whereby he retains some notions about God, about natural things, and about the difference between what is honourable and shameful, and shows some regard for virtue and outward order". One cannot say fallen humanity is incapable of performing any commendable achievement.

Unbelievers have the power to obtain, retain and apply insight and knowledge. Romans 2:14 talks about Gentiles who do not have the law but nevertheless do what the law requires.

We may know unbelievers who are truthful, honest and dependable. These morally pleasing traits underscore man's original state. He was created good and in the image of God. Our nature has been totally corrupted by sin but has not disappeared or been destroyed by it.<sup>10</sup>

A Christian and unbeliever may do exactly the same work. Nevertheless the reason, motivation and foundation controlling the actions of a believer are vastly different from that of an unbeliever. A Christian lives and acts for the glory of the Lord.

### ***The light of nature does not provide an avenue for salvation***

Nevertheless, saving knowledge or conversion are not gained through a proper use of the light of nature. This is where Reformed theology parts ways with Arminianism. The Arminians taught that man's will

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and nature were not totally affected by sin. There is in every human soul a "light of nature" or "common grace" whereby a person is given the ability to choose for good and come to saving grace. "In spiritual death the spiritual gifts are not separate from the will of man, since the will as such has never been corrupted but only hampered by the darkness of the mind and the unruliness of the passions... The will is of itself able to will and to choose, or else not to will and not to choose, all manner of good which may be presented to it" (Chapter III/IV, Rejection of Errors, Article 3).

The Reformed Churches confess that no one should pin their hopes on any human accomplishments. There is nothing in us that will help our cause or set us right with the LORD. There is nothing in any department of our being that will move us toward God. Whatever man received from God is used against Him. The representatives have become rebels. Through the fall into sin human nature has become so vile, corrupt and perverse that there is nothing but small traces or vestiges left of the excellent gifts God granted to man in creation (Belgic Confession Article 14).

### ***Mankind is left without excuse***

Human endeavour and accomplishments give evidence of the glorious way God created man but they do not make him the image of God. The light of nature does not lead man to the right path but leaves him without excuse. It's impossible for us to represent God or begin to be His image unless we are regenerated by the Holy Spirit.<sup>11</sup>

## **ARTICLE 5: THE INADEQUACY OF THE LAW**

What holds for the light of nature also applies to the Ten Commandments, given by God through Moses particularly to the Jews. For though it reveals the greatness of sin, and more and more convicts man of his guilt, yet it neither points out a remedy nor gives him power to rise out of this misery. Rather, weakened by the flesh, it leaves the transgressor

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under the curse. Man cannot, therefore, through the law obtain saving grace.

### ***The confusing position of the Arminians***

If the so-called "light of nature" cannot bring us to salvation what about the law? The Arminians were not prepared to give a straightforward answer to this question. They gave the impression their position was in line with the doctrines contained in the Reformed Confession. Because they used the same terminology as found in the Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechism, it was difficult to decipher where the Arminians were wrong. The same thing happens today. What do people mean when they use such terms as Reformed, Christian, regeneration, church, grace, salvation? Are we on the same wave length and do we believe the same doctrines?

Like those who opposed them the Arminians claimed a person must be justified by faith alone. But faith for them was not so much a gift given by God's sovereign will as it was man's response to God's invitation. The Arminians also confessed salvation can only be achieved through grace. This grace, however, is not given by God to whom He wills and when He wills but is dispensed indiscriminately to every human being. Therefore they spoke of common or prevenient grace -- a grace that is given beforehand to all mankind.<sup>12</sup>

### ***The sense and purpose of the law***

Saving grace cannot be obtained through the law. What then is the function of the law? Why did God give us the Ten Commandments? Both positive and negative elements need to be considered.

### ***What the law does***

The Ten Commandments are the Lord's revelation delivered to us by Him. The law is not a negative document. Think of the beautiful description of the law in Psalm 19 and 119. The law of the LORD is perfect, revives the soul, makes the simple wise, rejoices the heart, etc. Our Lord Jesus came not to abolish the law but to fulfil it

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(Matthew 5:17-20). Christ did not come to undo or dissolve any of the existing Scriptures. Instead He came to realize the full measure and intent of the law and the prophets. The word "fulfil", as used by Christ in Matthew 5, comes from a root meaning "to make full, to fill to the top". The Lord Jesus came to show the full measure of the law. Therefore the Ten Commandments do not belong to a bygone era.

Furthermore the law functions as the source of our knowledge of sin and misery. It convicts us of sin and shows us how we have fallen short of the glory of God. Without a strict preaching of the law our consciousness of sin diminishes and disappears in no time flat. In the Old Dispensation the law functioned as a teacher leading and guiding people to Christ (Galatians 3:21-24). It continues to serve as our mirror. Every day we need to take a good hard look at our lives in this mirror (James 1:22f).

### ***What the law does not do***

The law does not point out a remedy but emphasizes our guilt before God and how we deserve to be cursed. It does not give us the incentive or the strength to do what is right before God but directs us to our sin, guilt and corruption. The Ten Commandments give the diagnosis but do not provide the cure. Since we are dead in sin and trespasses regeneration and rebirth is necessary.

## **ARTICLE 6: THE NEED FOR THE GOSPEL**

What, therefore, neither the light of nature nor the law can do, God performs by the power of the Holy Spirit through the Word or ministry of reconciliation, which is the gospel of the Messiah, by which it has pleased God to save men who believe, both under the old and under the new dispensation.

Article 6 answers the question: "How then can a sinner who is totally corrupt, incapable of doing any good, dead in sin and misery be

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saved from the wrath of God and restored to grace?" The answer: "What, therefore, neither the light of nature nor the law can do, God performs by the power of the Holy Spirit..."

Since we are dead in sin we cannot repent, believe the gospel, or prepare ourselves for salvation (Job 14:4, Jeremiah 13:23). The Spirit has to work a radical change in us. He applies to us the benefits of Christ's redemptive work. Jesus foretold what the Spirit would do in John 16:14,15, "*He will glorify me, for He will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that He will take what is mine and declare it to you*". The Spirit binds us to Christ so that through faith we receive acquittal and forgiveness of sins.

He who is led by the Spirit will live in Christ. "Although Christ is in heaven and we are on earth, yet we are flesh of His flesh and bone of His bones, and we forever live and are governed by one Spirit, as the members of our body are by one soul" (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 28, Q. & A. 76).

### ***The Holy Spirit and the Word of God***

He who is confronted with the message of the Word of God encounters the power of the Holy Spirit. The New Testament refers to the Old Testament Scriptures and attributes it to the Holy Spirit. After Jesus ascended to heaven, Peter stood up among the brethren who were gathered in Jerusalem and said, "*Brethren, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David, concerning Judas who was guide to those who arrested Jesus*" (Acts 1:16). The letter to the Hebrews quotes Psalm 95 mentioning the Holy Spirit as the primary author (Hebrews 3:7).

### ***God uses the ministry of reconciliation to save men***

The Lord works faith in us through the Word or the ministry of reconciliation. This is the means "by which it has pleased God to save men who believe, both under the old and the new dispensation".

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In His sovereign good pleasure the Lord has made His Word and more specifically the preaching of His Word the standard by which we should live (Romans 10:17; 1 Peter 1:25).

Through the preaching of the Word the Holy Spirit works faith in our hearts. Faith is not just believing certain doctrines but it is acting in obedience to the Word of God in all we do.

Appreciation for the significance of the ministry of reconciliation should be our highest concern. Too many people have written off preaching as an outdated form for communicating God's Word. Some figure there are more exciting ways of getting people to know about salvation in Jesus Christ. A church service with lots of variety and entertainment has more appeal than one which focuses on preaching. Drama, dance, comedy, and whatever entertains are now the prominent expressions of worship.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, we have to be on guard that we do not undermine the work of the Lord by demanding sermons which make us feel good about ourselves and give us the "warm fuzzies".

As we prepare ourselves for worship every Lord's Day, we are to remember the purpose of preaching. We do not listen to sermons just to have our needs met but to praise God for the glory of His redemptive work in Jesus Christ.

Ministers are called to preach the Word in truth (2 Timothy 4:2) realizing "*All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work*" (2 Timothy 3:16). The flock of the Good Shepherd is gathered together to be fed with the solid food of the Word of God and not with the junk food of human opinion. The power of preaching is in expositing and explaining the meaning of the Word of the Lord. The whole counsel of God must be proclaimed. "Moral lectures and motivational talks are no substitute for God's Word"<sup>14</sup>



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### ***Unity of how God works in Old and New Testament***

Even though there is a difference between the Old and New Testament the same gospel of the Messiah was preached and believed by the saints living in both dispensations. "*For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus...*" (1 Timothy 2:5). The saints of the Old Testament were not saved through the works of the law but through faith in the coming Messiah. This faith was worked in the hearts of God's children through the Holy Spirit. Recognizing the Spirit must change his heart David prays, "*Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence, and take not thy Holy Spirit from me*" (Psalm 51:10).

The gospel (good news) of the Messiah was first revealed in Paradise by God Himself (Genesis 3:15). Later He had it proclaimed by the patriarchs (Genesis 49:10) and prophets (Isaiah 7:14; 9:6) and foreshadowed by the sacrifices and other ceremonies of the law (Hebrews 10:1-10). In the fullness of time He had it fulfilled through the coming of His only Son (Galatians 4:4). (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 6 Q.& A. 19).

### **ARTICLE 7: WHY THE GOSPEL IS SENT TO SOME AND NOT TO OTHERS**

Under the old dispensation God revealed this mystery of His will to few. Under the new dispensation, however, He took the distinction between the peoples away and revealed it to a larger number. The cause of this very distribution of the gospel is not to be ascribed to the worthiness of one people above another, nor to the better use of the light of nature, but to the sovereign good pleasure and undeserved love of God. Therefore we to whom so great a grace is granted, beyond and contrary to all we deserve, ought to acknowledge it with a humble and grateful heart. But as regards to others whom this grace is not given, we ought with the apostle to adore the

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severity and righteousness of the judgments of God but by no means inquisitively to pry into them.

Throughout the generations and dispensations the Lord calls His people to repentance through the preaching of the gospel. In both the Old and New Covenant the sovereign grace of God in the only Mediator was preached and proclaimed for the salvation of the believer and the condemnation of unbelievers. Article 7 explains the difference between the Old and New Dispensation.

### ***Where the Gospel goes in the Old Testament***

In the Old Testament God revealed the mystery<sup>15</sup> of His will to few. God chose one nation to be His special people (Psalm 147), allowing the other nations to walk in their own ways (Acts 14:16).

The Lord God did not select Israel because they were more worthy than other nations. Nor did they make a better use of "the light of nature". The conduct of the covenant people was often shameful and a far cry from what it should have been. Israel was a stiff-necked people whom God threatened to wipe out. Being the chosen nation was simply a matter of God's sovereign good pleasure.

Yet the scope of the Lord's work is not limited to Israel. Already in the Old Testament the prophets spoke of the day when the nations of the earth would find salvation in God. The prophets "always set forth the fact that after the flaming judgments of the Messiah upon Israel itself, and upon the nations, a new and glorious Israel will become the gathering point to which the peoples of the earth shall assemble."<sup>16</sup> Isaiah prophesies, "*It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it, and many peoples shall come, and say: 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that He may teach us His ways and that we may walk*

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*in His paths.' For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem" (2:2,3).*

### ***Where the Gospel goes in the New Testament***

The call of the gospel has an ecumenical (world-wide) and catholic character in the New Testament. Christ takes away the dividing wall which separated Israel from the other nations of the earth. "*For He is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in His flesh the law of commandments and ordinances, that He might create in Himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end*" (Ephesians 2:14-16 see also Acts 10:34-36 and Colossians 3:11).

The calling of the Gentiles fulfilled the promise the Lord made to Abraham (Genesis 17:1-8). Nevertheless, it caused considerable consternation among the Jews who had joined the Christian Church after Pentecost (Acts 15). God was cutting away the unbelieving Jews and selecting Gentiles of the nations to replace them. On this subject Calvin remarks,

... by this public calling the Gentiles not only were made equal to the Jews, but it was also manifest that they were, so to speak, taking the place of dead Jews. Besides this, all those strangers whom God had previously received into the body of the church had never been made equal to the Jews. Paul with good reason, therefore, proclaims this a great "mystery hidden for all ages and generations" [Col. 1:26; cf. Eph. 3:9], and says that it is wonderful even to the angels [cf. I Peter 1:12].<sup>17</sup>

The grace of God granted to us is beyond what we deserve. Therefore, with thankful and humble hearts we ought to honour the character of the Lord's plan and the severity of His punishment on

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unbelievers. He works where, when and with whom He wills. Without inquisitively prying into the deeper things of God we ought to "*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).

### ***God's calling to salvation is not general***

Like many modern day Christians the Arminians taught God's calling to salvation is general and concerns all people. They believed "corrupt and natural man can so well use... the gifts still left in him after the fall, that he can gradually gain by their good use a greater, that is, the evangelical or saving grace, and salvation itself" (Chapter III/IV, Rejection of Errors, Article 5). As Reformed believers we confess that whatever knowledge we gain from natural things is sufficient to leave us without excuse but insufficient to save a soul. The Lord has to work in our hearts through the energy and power of the Holy Spirit. God calls certain individuals to be His people. Romans 1:6 refers to members of the church as those who are called.

## **ARTICLE 8: THE EARNEST CALL BY THE GOSPEL**

But as many as are called by the gospel are earnestly called, for God earnestly and most sincerely reveals in His Word what is pleasing to Him, namely, that those who are called should come to Him. He also earnestly promises rest for their souls and eternal life to all who come to Him and believe.

### ***The charge of the Arminians***

If the preaching of the Word works faith in the hearts of some but hardens the hearts of others is the call of the gospel seriously meant? What sense does it have to call people to repentance and conversion when God has determined beforehand who will believe? Isn't it somewhat cruel to say to the reprobate "Repent and believe" when they cannot do it anyway? Isn't that like telling a blind man to see or

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a crippled man to walk? It was for this reason that the Arminians, and later on Methodists and Evangelicals such as John Wesley and Billy Graham taught the call of the gospel can only be taken seriously if the decision to be saved is left up to man. Any person who is willing to trust Jesus as his personal Saviour can be born again.<sup>18</sup> The Lord Jesus will work in our hearts if we allow Him to. A man like Billy Graham starts from the premise that the love of God is for all people. Whether you believe and accept God's love is your choice.

### ***The answer of the Synod***

Contrary to this way of reasoning the Canons of Dort stress that God is serious when He calls us to come to Him. The Lord has no pleasure in the death of any one but that the sinner should turn from his way and live (Ezekiel 18:23, 30-32). God is not joking when he promises eternal life to all who believe in Him (John 3:15,16,36; 6:35; 8:12 etc.).

He earnestly promises rest and eternal life. Our unbelief cannot revoke or take away from the call of the gospel. "Calling is not to be defined in terms of responses which the called yield to this act of God's grace...The application of redemption begins with an act of God's grace that derives nothing of its character from any activity of ours".<sup>19</sup>

### ***Preaching not only works faith***

The preaching of the gospel has a two-fold effect and result. Some of those who are called do not repent. Within a congregation there are individuals who do not respond to the promises of the gospel so that they are excluded by the elders from the Christian congregation, and by God Himself from the kingdom of Christ (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 31).

Preaching not only leads to the saving but also to the hardening of souls. It condemns the reprobate. Through the preaching God's decree

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of election is realized. Thus everyone must be confronted with the command of the gospel: "Repent and believe". Whether they are elect or not is none of our business.

Christ will be a stumbling stone and a rock of offense to many (Romans 9:33; 1 Peter 2:8). This is why the apostle Paul wrote in his first letter to the Corinthians; "*The unspiritual man does not receive the 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*" (2:14).

It is not to be blamed on the gospel that some do not heed its earnest call. The gospel of salvation in Christ is the power of God to all who believe (Romans 1:16; 1 Corinthians 15:1; 2 Corinthians 5:20). Through it the glory of Christ Jesus is made manifest.

### ***Certainty derived from what God earnestly promises***

Since the call of the gospel is seriously meant, those who are called by the Lord can always plead on His promises. This applies to all members of the covenant and church of Christ.

God has called us and our children to His covenant. For that reason our children have a place in His covenant. God's call precedes all faith, all conversion, all regeneration in adults and infants. As many as are called by the gospel are seriously called by God. When He says that the promise of the covenant is to the believers and their children, then we do not have any uncertainty about the call of our children. They are children of the covenant, children of God. Therefore, we baptize our children; not because something is present in them (regeneration, faith, conversion), but because something was expressed about them: the promise of remission of sins and eternal life.<sup>20</sup>

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### **ARTICLE 9: WHY SOME WHO ARE CALLED DO NOT COME**

It is not the fault of the gospel, nor of the Christ offered by the gospel, nor of God, who calls through the gospel and who even confers various gifts upon them, that many who are called through the ministry of the gospel do not come and are not converted. The fault lies in themselves. Some of them do not care and do not accept the word of life. Others do indeed receive it, but they do not accept it into their hearts, and therefore, after the joy of a temporary faith has vanished, they turn away. Still others choke the seed of the word by the thorns of the cares and the pleasures of this world, and bring forth no fruit. This our Saviour teaches in the parable of the seed, Mt 13.

The next two articles deal with the reaction to the preaching of the gospel. Through the ministry of reconciliation Christ calls, "*Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest*" (Matthew 11:28). Yet some of those who are called do not come. Jesus laments, "*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)

Why is it that some who are called do not come? The fault does not lie in the gospel since the message of the Word of God is clear and straightforward. There are things stated in Scripture which might rub people the wrong way. They may stumble over and be offended by what is said. But that applies to believers too. Yet the preaching of the gospel may not cater to the wishes and desires of the hearers. The message of the Bible is not according to the flesh; it goes against the grain of every individual.

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### ***Negative reaction to the gospel***

The gospel does not always have positive results. The twelve apostles asked Jesus why He taught in parables and His answer was: "*To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables; so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand; lest they should turn again, and be forgiven*" (Mark 4:11,12). Christ's preaching drove many away. They were turned on by what He did -- His signs and wonders fascinated them but they were turned off by what He said. At one point in His ministry Jesus delivered a tough sermon. The people did not like it. John 6:66 tells us, "*After this many of His disciples drew back and no longer went about with Him*".

The reason some do not heed the call of the gospel lies in unbelievers themselves. Either their hearts are closed to the gospel or divided between serving God and their own interests. The Canons of Dort make reference to Matthew 13 and the parable of the sower to highlight various reactions to the call of the gospel. Some hear the gospel and immediately reject it. Their hearts are closed. Others accept it temporarily but it has shallow roots and no strength to grow. Yet others do not bear fruit but are choked by the cares and pleasures of this world. In each case the same seed was sown and the same power was at work but the soil was different. God must prepare our hearts to receive His Word. All the "seed" would be lost if He did not prepare the field for planting. That there are even some who heed the call of the gospel and come to faith is an amazing gift of God's love and grace.

### **ARTICLE 10: WHY OTHERS WHO ARE CALLED DO COME**

Others who are called by the ministry of the gospel do come and are converted. This is not to be ascribed to man. He does not distinguish himself by his free will above others who are furnished with equal or sufficient grace for faith or



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conversion (as the proud heresy of Pelagius maintains). It is to be ascribed to God. He has chosen His own in Christ from eternity and calls them effectually within time. He gives them faith and repentance; He delivers them from the power of darkness and transfers them to the kingdom of His Son. All this He does that they may declare the wonderful deeds of Him who called them out of darkness into His marvellous light, and may boast not of themselves but of the Lord, according to the testimony of the apostles in various places.

Some of those who are called come. They believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, repent of their sins and bear fruit. Nevertheless, all faithfulness, obedience and love for God cannot be ascribed to the proper exercising of one's "free will". The Lord God who calls also works it in our hearts to respond to what He declares and promises (1 Peter 2:9-10; Ephesians 1:11-12; 2:7-10; 1 Corinthians 1:30-31; 2 Corinthians 10:17,18). God must receive all the credit and the praise. The Canons of Dort neatly outline the order of the Lord's works:

- From eternity He has chosen His own in Christ. Their names are written in the book of life. He drafted the blueprint of the house He would build with living stones. He will make sure none of the stones are missing.
- Within time He calls them effectually. Just as Jesus called Lazarus and commanded him to come forth from the grave, He calls us to come forth from the grave of our sins. His invitation and calling is a sovereign and authoritative command giving them faith and repentance, delivering them from the power of darkness, transferring them to the kingdom of His Son.

The bottom line is the praise and glory of God. The grace of God leaves no room for human boasting.

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### **ARTICLE 11: HOW GOD BRINGS ABOUT CONVERSION**

God carries out His good pleasure in the elect and works in them true conversion in the following manner. He takes care that the gospel is preached to them, and powerfully enlightens their minds by the Holy Spirit, so that they may rightly understand and discern the things of the Spirit of God. By the efficacious working of the same regenerating Spirit He also penetrates into the innermost recesses of man. He opens the closed and softens the hard heart, circumcises that which was uncircumcised, and instils new qualities into the will. He makes the will, which was dead, alive; which was bad, good; which was unwilling, willing; and which was stubborn, obedient. He moves and strengthens it so that, like a good tree, it may be able to produce the fruit of good works.

The Canons of Dort now dig deeper showing how God goes about His work. The Lord changes the hearts of the elect so that they turn away from sin and towards Him. This change is called conversion. Our old nature is crucified and our new nature is brought to life. Based on the doctrines of the Old and New Testament, Article 11 describes how God brings about conversion.

Conversion and regeneration are a miracle of God. The Holy Spirit opens closed eyes and hearts. The apostle Paul was sent to the Gentiles, *"to open their eyes, that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me"* (Acts 26:18). Thus the Lord opened the heart of Lydia to give heed to what was said by Paul (Acts 16:14). Conversion is a circumcision of the heart. Moses exhorts the people of Israel, *"Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn"* (Deuteronomy 10:16).

What the LORD demands He will perform. *"And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so*

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*that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live" (Deuteronomy 30:6).*

The call to conversion comes to God's covenant people. Christ died for them and the Spirit is poured out on them. The entire people of God are to repent and live for God. Therefore we may not only be concerned about our own personal salvation but for the salvation and conversion of the entire church. It is not a light matter when apostasy gets a foot-hold in a congregation.

The exhortation to repent is extended to us as individuals who are part of the covenant people. The famous conversation Christ had with Nicodemus, as recorded in John 3, demonstrates this. Jesus says in John 3:7, "*You must be born anew*". Many have taken that to be a call of Christ to Nicodemus that he should break with the orthodoxy of the Pharisees and have a personal relation with Jesus. However, it is overlooked that the pronoun "you" is plural. The whole people must repent and begin living like children who are born of God. Nevertheless, no one will be regenerated unless the cross is erected. Thus Jesus continues, "*As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up*". Jesus Christ, crucified and resurrected, causes us to be born anew. This is why faithful churches can be addressed as "born anew". Writing to several congregations, Peter says, "*You have been born anew ... through the living and abiding Word of God*" (1 Peter 1:23). The people of God have been born anew and must continue being born anew. Every individual who hears the gospel of Christ's redemption is called to join the assembly where the Holy Spirit works renewal and conversion.

Conversion and regeneration are not merely matters of conduct but involve doctrine, church order and liturgy. The Pharisees needed to be born again since they changed the doctrine of salvation by grace alone through Christ alone, adding works as a condition for salvation. True repentance is totally and radically choosing to live according to

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the Word of God. Everything has to be done in accordance with the will of God.

### **ARTICLE 12: REGENERATION IS THE WORK OF GOD ALONE**

This conversion is the regeneration, the new creation, the raising from the dead, the making alive, so highly spoken of in the Scriptures, which God works in us without us. But this regeneration is by no means brought about only by outward teaching, by moral persuasion, or by such a mode of operation that, after God has done His part, it remains in the power of man to be regenerated or not regenerated, converted or not converted. It is, however, clearly a supernatural, most powerful, and at the same time most delightful, marvellous, mysterious, and inexpressible work. According to Scripture, inspired by the Author of this work, regeneration is not inferior in power to creation or the raising of the dead. Hence all those in whose hearts God works in this amazing way are certainly, unfailingly, and effectually regenerated and do actually believe. And then the will so renewed is not only acted upon and moved by God but, acted upon by God, the will itself also acts. Therefore man himself is rightly said to believe and repent through the grace he has received.

Article 12 uses several terms to describe the one work of conversion. Conversion is referred to as: regeneration, new creation, resurrection from the dead, making alive. To that list we can add: repentance, rebirth, the dying of the old nature and the coming to life of the new nature. Each of these have their own nuance but they all underscore there must be a powerful change in our life from the inside out. This change God works in us without us. Notice our Reformed Confession does not make a distinction between regeneration and conversion but regards them as synonymous.

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### ***A new creation***

What God works in us is no small matter but involves a total change of direction. It is as astonishing as the creation. We are made a new creation. The apostle Paul remarks in 2 Corinthians 5:17, "*Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come*". God says, "*Let there be light*" (effectual calling) and there is light (regeneration). "*For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ*" (2 Corinthians 4:6).

When the LORD created the world He spoke and it was brought into existence. What man could not create in a billion years God brought into being by the Word of His mouth. By the same Word He breathes new life into a dead sinner. He calls us out of darkness to bask in the light of the gospel.

### ***Raised from the dead***

Conversion is as powerful as a resurrection from the dead. Our sins were nailed to the cross with Christ and we are raised to a new life in Him as well. Paul wrote to the Galatians, "*I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me*" (Galatians 2:20). Through the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ makes us alive. He revives us by changing our heart of stone into a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26). Therefore we can pray to God at the baptism of infants, "...look upon this child of Thine and incorporate him (her) by Thy Holy Spirit into Thy Son Jesus Christ, so that he (she) may be buried with Him by baptism into death and raised with Him to walk in newness of life".<sup>21</sup> What we ask, God promises to work in us. Each day we are being raised to a new life. Through the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit we speak of God's ways and seek His praise.

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### ***The foundation of our conversion***

The foundation of our conversion is in Christ. Based on the promises of the gospel believers and their children can say that they are raised to a new life; they are born again. The consequences of our union with Christ must be seen in fruits of faith during the course of our life. Believers must flee from sin and live according to the will of God. Though our outer nature is wasting away our inner nature is being renewed every day. Raised by the power of Christ our mouths, ears, eyes -- all the members of our body -- are not to be used as weapons of unrighteousness but as instruments displaying the mercy and love of God at work in us. Those who have been born anew are being renewed each day through the Holy Spirit.

### ***Regeneration not by outward teaching alone***

The Lord works faith through the Holy Spirit who uses the preaching of the gospel as the means whereby Christ's treasures and gifts are applied to the children of God. Yet the power to regenerate does not lie in preaching and teaching. The Spirit works with the Word. Ministers, missionaries and evangelists cannot work faith in the hearts of people.

God must single-handedly change us. Thus the apostle Paul turned from being an enemy of the gospel to being a witness for Christ. "No more than there was any possibility or necessity of cooperation on the part of Adam when God created him, no more is there any room to speak of cooperation on the part of man when God creates him anew. No more than there was any possibility of the proper exercise of free will on the part of the dead Lazarus when Christ raised him, nor more is there any possibility of ascribing the spiritual resurrection of the dead sinner to such a proper exercise of the free will".<sup>22</sup>

### ***The responsibility of the Christian***

All this does not take away from our Christian responsibility. God does not believe and repent on our behalf. By virtue of the grace

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given to us we must turn away from sin and to the Lord. Our heavenly Father will give what He demands. He works in us what He requires of us. Our will is renewed, acted upon and moved by God so that the will itself also acts.

### **ARTICLE 13: REGENERATION IS INCOMPREHENSIBLE**

In this life believers cannot fully understand the way in which God does this work. Meanwhile, however, it is enough for them to know and experience that by this grace of God they believe with the heart and love their Saviour.

The authors of the Canons of Dort underline that they have not given an exhaustive exposition on God's work of regeneration. In fact, as human beings, we are limited in what we can say and know about God. God's work in us cannot be analyzed or explained but can only be described in so far as God has made this work known to us.

#### ***Knowing God***

Knowing God is to have intimate communion with Him. We get to know the LORD by listening to Him speak, by communicating with Him and by discovering His works. Our downfall is certain when we do not know God; when other matters fascinate us and occupy more of our time. The main reason for which we exist is to know God. As we grow in the knowledge of the Lord we learn how He has known us before we ever came to know Him.<sup>23</sup>

Yet there are things in the works of God which go beyond our knowledge and comprehension. The manner in which God works regeneration and conversion cannot be fully understood in this life. "We may say many things about this work of God; but we can never fully comprehend it, grasp it in its very essence, so that we can exactly define it...If we could comprehend God's works, we could fathom God Himself."<sup>24</sup>

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It is striking that the Canons of Dort define and compare regeneration and conversion with works of God that are equally incomprehensible (creation, resurrection from the dead). Our inability to comprehend does not make us restless or uneasy. Believing the work of God gives us a peace which passes all understanding and fills our hearts with joy and thankfulness. We confess with the psalmist "*For God alone my soul waits in silence; from Him comes my salvation. He only is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be greatly moved*" (Psalm 62:1,2).

### **ARTICLE 14: HOW FAITH IS A GIFT OF GOD**

Faith is therefore a gift of God, not because it is merely offered by God to the free will of man, but because it is actually conferred on man, instilled and infused into him. Nor is it a gift in the sense that God confers only the power to believe and then awaits from man's free will the consent to believe or the act of believing. It is, however, a gift in the sense that He who works both to will and to work, and indeed all things in all, brings about in man both the will to believe and the act of believing.

#### ***The Arminian view of grace and faith***

What Scripture teaches regarding regeneration and conversion led the Reformed Churches to the confession that faith is a gift of God "in the sense that He who works both to will and to work, and indeed all things in all, brings about in man both the will to believe and the act of believing". The Arminians disagreed. They believed that God brings man to conversion after man, through his free will, has decided to allow the Lord to work in his heart. They suggested that "the grace whereby we are converted to God is only a gentle advising". This idea is still prevalent in modern evangelical preaching. Preachers urge, invite, and plead with their listeners to accept Jesus as their personal Saviour.



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Moreover the Arminians argued, "In regenerating man God does not use the powers of His omnipotence so as to forcefully and unfailingly bend man's will to faith and conversion. Even if all the works of grace have been accomplished which God employs to convert man and even if God intends his regeneration and wills to regenerate him, man may yet so resist God and the Holy Spirit, and indeed often does so resist, that he entirely prevents his regeneration. It therefore remains in man's power to be regenerated or not" (Chapter III/IV, Rejection of Errors, Article 8). In this way the superiority and effective power of God's grace and of the working of the Holy Spirit is denied or at best challenged.

### ***What Scripture teaches***

The Synod of Dort refuted the false teaching and heresy of the Arminians by referring to passages of the Bible such as:

Philippians 2:13, "*for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure*".

Romans 9:16, "*So it depends not upon man's will or exertion, but upon God's mercy*".

Ezekiel 36:26, "*A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh*".

## **ARTICLE 15: THE PROPER ATTITUDE WITH RESPECT TO GOD'S UNDESERVED GRACE**

This grace God owes to no one. For what could He owe to man? Who has given Him first that he might be repaid? What could God owe to one who has nothing of his own but sin and falsehood? He, therefore, who receives this grace owes and renders eternal thanks to God alone. He who does not receive this grace, however, either does not care at all for these spiritual things and is pleased with what he has, or in false security vainly boasts that he has what he does not have. Further, about those who outwardly profess their faith and

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amend their lives we are to judge and speak in the most favourable way, according to the example of the apostles, for the inner recesses of the heart are unknown to us. As for those who have not yet been called, we should pray for them to God, who calls into existence the things that do not exist. But we must by no means act haughtily, as if we had distinguished ourselves from them.

Grace is a gift given to whom God is pleased to grant it. He owes it to no one (otherwise grace would not be grace any longer). Regeneration and conversion are unmerited and undeserved. The Almighty, Sovereign, King of kings has a right to work with us in the manner in which He pleases. He will have mercy upon whom He will have mercy and compassion upon whom He will have compassion since it is His right to act with us as He pleases (Romans 9:14-24). We have nothing that we did not receive. We cannot bring ourselves to God or "decide for Christ". All that we can offer is sin and falsehood.

### ***Thankfulness***

God does not owe us anything but we owe Him eternal thanks. Day by day we are to humbly acknowledge the grace and mercy the Lord has shown to us in Christ Jesus His Son. Those who receive the grace of God are thankful that their eyes have been opened to see the glory of God's works. They render eternal thanks to the LORD; a praise that begins now and lasts into all eternity. In covenant worship we express, "*What shall I render to the LORD for all His bounty to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD, I will pay my vows to the LORD in the presence of all His people...I will offer to thee the sacrifice of thanksgiving and call on the name of the LORD*" (Psalm 116:12,13,14,17). Rendering thanks to God is a lifestyle, an attitude of gratitude. People ought to see in our church activities, personal lives and daily work that we live each day by the grace and mercy of God.

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Thanksgiving is not a duty that began at the cross but in creation. The Lord created us so that we would praise Him in all our words and works for all His words and works. Our praise ought to be the spark that sets our entire life on fire for the Lord. The redemptive work of Christ enables us to carry out this duty.

### ***Negative reactions to the grace of God to be avoided***

Thus the grace of God may not be despised or denied by laxity or false security. Despising the grace of God leads to liberalism that suggests we are free to live the way we want because God's grace covers our sins anyway. Having been saved by grace demands fruit. The law of God is our delight and serving Him gives us joy and pleasure.

Denying the necessity of God's grace results in legalism that assumes, "Since I live a good life, say my prayers, read the Bible, follow the ten commandments, I should be okay". Legalism is like the story of the explorer who took a crew to the Arctic Ocean. They were endeavouring to move further North. They charted their location by the stars and started a very difficult march northward. After walking for hours they took their bearings from the stars and discovered, to their dismay, that they were further south than when they started. How had this happened? They were walking on an ice flow, drifting south faster than they were walking north. Similarly, we may think our piety is drawing us closer to God when in fact we are on an "ice flow" moving further away. Obedience to the law cannot save us.

### ***Judging others***

The proper attitude with respect to God's undeserved grace includes how we judge and speak about others. Sometimes people will say, "You are not allowed to judge a person. How do you know if their heart is right with the Lord?" Reference is made to Matthew 7:1,2 where Jesus says, "*Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get*". It is true, of course, we cannot and

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may not judge a person's final destination (the new earth/hell) because we do not have the ability to look into someone's heart. A person is to be judged by the way he/she lives. We are to speak favourably about those who outwardly profess their faith and live a godly life.

Note well the phrasing of Article 15. We are to judge and speak favourably about those who outwardly profess their faith and amend their lives. In this way we follow the example of the apostles.<sup>25</sup> Thus this article teaches us a proper attitude toward fellow believers in the communion of saints. Our judgments and the manner in which we speak about each other are to be characterized by love and not by harshness. Church members are often too hasty in their condemnation of one another.

The Lord obliges us to judge those who are unbelieving too. Prayers are to be offered up for such individuals. Referring to the apostate Jews, Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, "*Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved*" (Romans 10:1). Moreover, we have a task to call back members of the church who are straying and to witness to an unbelieving world.

### ***No room for haughtiness***

Christians run the danger of elevating themselves above those who stand outside Christ's saving love. Living by grace alone leaves no room for arrogance. Believers cannot be like the Pharisee who thanked God he wasn't as sinful as the publicans. We did not choose for the Lord but He sought and found us.

## **ARTICLE 16: MAN'S WILL NOT TAKEN AWAY BUT MADE ALIVE**

Man through his fall did not cease to be man, endowed with intellect and will; and sin, which has pervaded the whole human race, did not deprive man of his human nature, but

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brought upon him depravity and spiritual death. So also this divine grace of regeneration does not act upon men as if they were blocks and stones and does not take away the will and its properties, or violently coerce it, but makes the will spiritually alive, heals it, corrects it, pleasantly and at the same time powerfully bends it. As a result, where formerly the rebellion and resistance of the flesh fully dominated, now a prompt and sincere obedience of the Spirit begins to prevail, in which the true, spiritual renewal and freedom of our will consists. And if the wonderful Maker of all good did not deal with us in this way, man would have no hope of rising from his fall through this free will, by which he, when he was still standing, plunged himself into ruin.

Article 16 was developed in response to the charge that the Reformed doctrine of regeneration and conversion makes men passive and indifferent (blocks and stones). The Arminians questioned, "What is left of man's will and ability to make decisions if everything is left up to the sovereign grace of God?" Their question made a caricature of the Reformed faith suggesting that degenerate human beings were really without an intellect and will, lacked the power to think, choose, and act, just as a log or a stone is devoid of such power.<sup>26</sup>

As in Article 4 of this chapter, our attention is drawn to the fact that man remains man after the fall into sin. Humans do not become passive and neutral like a log or stone wall but they become enemies of God.<sup>27</sup> The Lord God does not deal with us as if we were a puppet on a string or a computer.

Degeneration and corruption do not leave humans without a will, intellect, or human nature. The will is totally depraved and spiritually dead. It is corrupted -- not lost. In like manner, regeneration does not take away our will or constrain it. The Lord takes into account our sense, mind, will and thinking. He wants us to act as responsible human beings.

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Therefore it is wrong to conclude from the doctrine of invincible grace that mankind must wait passively for some indication or revelation of conversion. This thinking has received sympathy in the theology and preaching of some, but the Reformed Churches deny it emphatically.

By the powerful work of the Holy Spirit the will is spiritually revitalized, healed, corrected, pleasantly and at the same time powerfully bent and reshaped. The Spirit does not break the will but bends it. Here we learn an important lesson regarding the manner of preaching and the nurturing of children. Preachers and parents run the risk of being too soft or too harsh with those whom they are to equip for service in the kingdom of God. In a pleasant and powerful manner congregation and children must be directed to the mercy, love and grace of the Lord and to the obedience the Lord requires.

### ***Freedom of the will***

It is noteworthy how the Canons of Dort speak about the freedom of the will. Of his own free will mankind plunged into ruin. His will is ensnared by sin. We do not have a free will to choose or reject the Lord. Sin enslaves our whole being so that we will always make the wrong choices. The miracle of conversion, realized by the Spirit, frees the will from the chains of sin. Thus our Christian freedom is not to live as close as we can to the culture ruled by sin, Satan and our own flesh but to live within the boundaries of the law of the Spirit. "*For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery*" (Galatians 5:1).

## **ARTICLE 17: THE USE OF MEANS**

The almighty working of God whereby He brings forth and sustains this our natural life does not exclude but requires the use of means, by which He according to His infinite wisdom and goodness has willed to exercise His power. So also the aforementioned supernatural working of God whereby He

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regenerates us, in no way excludes or cancels the use of the gospel, which the most wise God has ordained to be the seed of regeneration and the food of the soul. For this reason the apostles and the teachers who succeeded them, reverently instructed the people concerning this grace of God, to His glory and to the abasement of all pride. In the meantime, however, they did not neglect to keep them, by the holy admonitions of the gospel, under the administration of the Word, the sacraments, and discipline. So today those who give or receive instruction in the church should not dare to tempt God by separating what He in His good pleasure has willed to be closely joined together. For grace is conferred through admonitions, and the more readily we do our duty, the more this favour of God, who works in us, usually manifests itself in its lustre, and so His work best proceeds. To God alone, both for the means and for their saving fruit and efficacy, all glory is due throughout eternity. Amen.

### ***Food from God***

The Almighty and most Sovereign God, who is the Lord and Giver of life, maintains and sustains the life He gives through means. Our natural bodies need food and drink to survive. In the same manner we need spiritual food and drink so that we grow in the Spirit. We are nourished and fed with lasting food through Jesus Christ. As people of God we cannot settle for the food that only fills our stomach because we consist of body and soul. We need food for the whole person.

In John 6, our Lord Jesus identifies Himself to be the Bread of Life. He is the bread no baker can make. What He will accomplish is better for our health than any home-baked bread. Jesus Christ came to fill our hungry souls. He is the One, and the only One, who can fill us. The bread He gives is His flesh. He let His body be nailed to the cross to free us from sin and the misery sin brought into this world.

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Having Christ, the Bread of Life, we can be assured of everlasting communion with God and fellow believers. Christ has conquered sin and Satan, taking away the cause of our eternal hunger and misery. Being in Christ, we will receive the hidden manna; the lasting food for eternal life.

### *Use of means ordained by God*

The Holy Spirit feeds us with Christ by the use of means. He works faith by the preaching of the Word and assures (strengthens) us by the sacraments. The only wise God has ordained the use of the gospel as the seed of regeneration and food for the soul. In the preaching and the celebration of Lord's Supper we already have an "appetizer" for the new life.

We may not neglect the use of these means because they are ordained by God. The Lord can perform a miracle and feed His people in a supernatural way. Just as He fed Israel with manna in the wilderness and five thousand people with five loaves of bread and two fish, He can regenerate a dead sinner without the use of means. Nevertheless, the Lord God has prescribed a norm for us. The Spirit works with and through the Word. *"Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth that we should be a kind of first fruits of His creatures"* (James 1:18). *"You have been born anew, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God"* (1 Peter 1:23).

For a church to be the dining room of the Holy Spirit it must bear the marks of pure preaching, the right use of the sacraments and the proper exercising of Christian discipline. Where there is no preaching, people are deprived of hearing the Word that must move them to repentance; they are denied spiritual nourishment.

This article distinguishes between instruction in the gospel and the admonitions of the gospel. The apostles and the teachers who succeeded them not only instructed members of the church



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concerning the grace of God but they also admonished them to be obedient to the LORD. Again the implications for life in the church are plain. "So today those who give or receive instruction in the church should not dare to tempt God by separating what He in His good pleasure has willed to be closely joined together".

### ***The "usefulness" of the use of means***

The instruction and admonitions of the gospel strengthen our faith, confidence and assurance. Diligence in church attendance, consistent Bible study, meditation on a personal and communal level, instruction in the doctrine of the church and reading good books and magazines allow us to live in the joy of faith. In this life we can never produce enough fruits of thankfulness. There is always room for growth in the service of the Lord. The more we take advantage of the means of grace, "and the more readily we do our duty, the more this favour of God, who works in us, usually manifests itself in its lustre, and so His work best proceeds." Through a prayerful and appreciative use of the means granted to us the Lord is honoured.

### ***Conclusion***

The means, the manner and the results of regeneration are God's work. Therefore "to God alone, both for the means and for their saving fruit and efficacy, all glory is due throughout eternity. Amen".

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### *Questions*

1. Why did the Synod of Dort combine the contents of chapters III and IV under one heading? (Introduction)
2. Why is there a problem with the term "irresistible grace"? (Introduction)
3. What does it mean that man was created in the image of God? Is unregenerate man still the image of God? What happens when a person's life is in Christ? (Article 1)
4. What is original sin? How does Adam's sin affect us? Are we not responsible for our own actions? (Article 2)
5. What is sin? How do many look at sin in today's society? (Article 3)
6. What is the "light of nature"? Why isn't it adequate for salvation? (Article 4)
7. Because the Arminians used the same terminology as found in the Reformed Confessions, it was difficult for the Reformed to pin down their position. Discuss this within our contemporary context. (Article 5)
8. What is the negative and positive function of the law in the life of a believer? (Article 5)
9. It has pleased the Lord to save men through the ministry of reconciliation. This has implications for how the worship service is structured. Discuss. (Article 6)
10. Did the Holy Spirit work faith in the hearts of Old Testament believers? (Article 6)

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11. What is the relationship between the Old and New Testament with respect to the call of the gospel? Why was Israel selected as God's chosen people? (Article 7)
12. Should the Jews still be considered the special people of God? (Article 7)
13. Believing God elects those who are His own from before the foundation of the world, can we in all sincerity call people to repentance? (Article 8)
14. Both adults and children can live in the certainty of faith because they have been called by God. Explain the significance of this statement. (Article 8)
15. What is the significance of Matthew 13 in view of what is taught in Article 9?
16. Some heed the call of the gospel. Can't any of this be ascribed to our obedience and faithfulness? (Article 10)
17. Is the call to conversion only directed to individuals? (Article 11)
18. Discuss the various words used by Scripture for regeneration and conversion. (Article 12)
19. Should ministers call their members to repent and believe? If so, how would this be different from urging them to accept Jesus into their hearts? (Article 14).
20. God does not owe us anything but we owe God eternal thanks. Discuss how we are to render such thankfulness. (Article 15)

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21. Are we permitted to judge others? (Article 15)
22. What is meant by the phrase "blocks and stones"? (Article 16)
23. What is the "free will of man"? Can the expression be used correctly? (Article 16)
24. Is regeneration ever worked separately from the instruction and admonitions of the gospel? (Article 17)

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### Notes

1. H. J. Meijerink in *The Bride's Treasure*, ed. J. Faber (Launceston, Geneva, 1979) p.95.
2. G.C. Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, reprinted 1981) p.84.
3. J. Faber, *Essays in Reformed Doctrine* (Neerlandia, Inheritance Publications, 1990) p.244.
4. J.G. Feenstra, *De Dordtse Leerregelen* (Kampen, Kok, 1950) pp. 117-18.
5. For a more detailed discussion on this matter see: John Murray's *The Imputation of Adam's Sin* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1960).
6. *The Bride's Treasure*, p.79.
7. Martin and Deidre Bobgan, *12 Steps to Destruction* (Santa Barbara, Eastgate, 1991) p.75.
8. *Ibid*, pp. 37-38.
9. David N. Steele and Curtis C. Thomas, *The Five Points of Calvinism* (Phillipsburg, Presbyterian & Reformed, 1978) p.25.
10. H.J. Meijerink, *To the Praise of His Glory*, ed. J. Faber (Launceston, Geneva Press, 1971) p.40.
11. The Canons of Dort, the Belgic Confession and the writings of John Calvin all stress that "the light of nature" "traces" or "sparks" of the original image of God leaves mankind without excuse. For a more detailed study of this subject I can refer you to an article by J.Faber, "Imago Dei in Calvin: Calvin's doctrine of man as image of God in connection with sin and restoration" in *Essays in Reformed Doctrine*, pp. 251-281.

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12. *The Brides Treasure*, pp. 79,80.
13. John F. MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel* (Wheaton, Crossway, 1993) p.35.
14. *ibid.*, p.32.
15. The Canons of Dort uses the word "mystery" in the same sense as Scripture does. The apostle Paul uses the word to describe something secret that was hidden but has been revealed (examples: Romans 11:25, 16:25; 1 Corinthians 2:7;4:1,14:2; 15:51; Ephesians 1:9; 3:3,4,9; 5:32; 6:19).
16. J.H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions* (Phillipsburg, Presbyterian & Reformed, 1960) p.21.
17. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.11.12.
18. Peter Toon, *Born Again: A Biblical and Theological Study of Regeneration* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1987) pp. 162-165 and pp. 177-182.
19. J. Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray*, Volume 2 (Edinburgh, Banner of Truth, 1977) p.162.
20. J. Douma, *Infant Baptism and Conversion* (Winnipeg, Premier, 1979) p.28. In this booklet Dr. Douma defends the doctrine of infant baptism and refutes the errors of the Reformed Baptists.
21. "Form for Baptism of Infants", *Book of Praise* (Winnipeg, Premier, reprinted 1995) p.586.
22. H.C. Hoeksema, *Voice of Our Fathers* (Grand Rapids, Reformed Free Publishing, 1980) p.521.
23. see further J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, InterVarsity, 1973) pp. 20-37.

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24. *Voice of Our Fathers*, p.527.
25. *De Dordtse Leerregelen*, p. 164
26. *The Voice of Our Fathers* p. 552
27. The terms used in the Latin for "blocks and stones" refer to the trunk of a tree or a log. J.N Bakhuizen Van Den Brink, *De Nederlandse Belijdenisgeschriften* (Amsterdam, Ton Bolland) p.258.