

## 12. WOULD IT NOT MAKE THINGS EASIER FOR EVANGELISM TO BE A BIT ARMINIAN INSTEAD OF STRICTLY ADHERING TO THE CANONS OF DORT?

This final “dilemma” that we want to discuss and then to reject, needs first some clarification. In the Canons of Dort the Reformed churches confess God’s predestination: “that some receive the gift of faith from God, and others do not receive it, proceeds from God’s eternal decree . . . According to which decree He graciously softens the heart of the elect . . . while He leaves the non-elect in His just judgment to their own wickedness.” “Election is the unchangeable purpose of God whereby, before the foundation of the world . . . He has chosen from the whole human race a certain number of persons to redemption” (I, 6, 7).

The capitals T.U.L.I.P. are often used to help us remember that we confess man’s *Total* Depravity; his *Unconditional* Election; *Limited* Atonement, *Irresistible*, or rather *Invincible* Grace, and *Perseverance*, or rather *Preservation* of the Saints.

When you look at these big terms, you may get the impression that nothing is left for man to do; it is all God’s work. If one does not receive the gift of faith one will not but also *cannot* believe. When one is not elected, a thousand sermons will not make any impression, will not bear any fruit except more hardening of the heart. Christ did not die for all; He only died for His own, for those whom the Father has given to Him. And once a believer, always a believer: “perseverance of the saints” as a result of God’s “preservation of the saints.”

If that all is true, one may say, why then bother about evangelism? And, if one wants to be consistent, why bother about Mission! God will fulfil His purpose anyway.

If we would go on like that we would fall under the condemnation of the Conclusion of the Canons, where it is said that such and similar reasonings “the Reformed Churches not only do not acknowledge, but even detest with their whole soul.” Obviously we were on the wrong track, by saying, “If that all is true . . .”

Yet, Arminianism seems so much more attractive especially with regard to evangelism, because it teaches that Christ died for all mankind. Thus we must go out to all nations, and confront all persons with the glorious truth, “Christ has died for you! Believe it, and you will be saved.” Much evangelism of our day is carried out in that vein. We need not mention names. But this is the Arminian message in most of those large revival meetings, “Christ has died for all of you and for everyone in particular; the only thing you have to do — and do it now! — is to accept the message and you are saved, right here and now.”

Would our message not have more appeal and impact if we could

preach the same way? Then we could “forget” about predestination, and that man cannot believe unless it is given to him. Then it is up to man, and we should get out and tell as many as we can reach that Christ has also died for them; they just have to accept it.

In other words, does a strict adherence to the doctrine of election not rob us of a zeal to win others; because, if we are honest, we should also tell them that Christ has *not* died for all men, and that they can *not* believe by their own decision and choice? This “problem” of “Evangelism and Predestination” has been repeatedly discussed in Reformed circles in the past; a proof that here we have something that needs clarification.

First of all, a bit more light on the obvious fact of wrong deductions from the doctrine of predestination might help. When you mention the name of John Calvin, for many people that’s just another word for that “horrible decree” of predestination. One should, however, know that in Calvin’s thought predestination did not have the central place. In the first edition of his *Institutes* he mentions it as an after-thought. God’s sovereignty — that was his central thought.

When one reads the Scriptures, one discovers very soon that the same Spirit Who inspired Ephesians 1:3-14, and Romans 9-11, also inspired the uncoun­ted calls to believe in Jesus Christ! “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved!” It is obvious that God’s sovereignty, which reveals itself also in His eternal purpose, does not take away from man his responsibility. One may never play off the one against the other.

No Reformed person in his sound mind, would — while wholeheartedly agreeing with the Canons of Dort, say, “Well, because God elects and rejects, I need not teach my children to pray nor give them a Christian upbringing, let alone build Christian schools, because — if they are elected, they will come there (i.e., in Father’s House) anyway, whatever I do or not do, yea whatever my children do or not do. God’s plan cannot be changed . . . .”

Such a conclusion from this doctrine would mean the end of all preaching and teaching, and that would bring us in open conflict with the whole Word of God. “Preach in season and out of season.” After having stated that “every one who calls upon the Name of the Lord will be saved,” Paul continues, Romans 10:14ff., “But how are men to call upon Him in Whom they have not believed? And 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?” It is as clear as that. If we do not go out and preach the Gospel to others, they cannot believe, because “faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ,” verse 17.

Therefore it is not true that Reformed faith by its nature takes away the zeal for “saving souls.” Arminianism, if it is consistent (it often is better than its doctrine), is a hopeless business. For it gives to man a part, a deci-

sive share in his own redemption, while man is by nature so perverse that he is unable to do any good by himself (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 3). Arminianism puts the work of redemption in human hands. For that reason it can never give the "living comfort" that the Canons speak about. Just the same as with the Romanists. According to the latter a believer, however hard he has tried all his life, can never be completely sure of his salvation for the simple reason that at the end of the road he may commit a mortal sin and die before absolution; then he is lost forever. That's their theory, anyway.

Predestination, however, grants us that living comfort. Because my salvation is God's work from beginning to end (see Ephesians 2:8-10), He will also "finish perfectly what He for me has undertaken" (Psalm 138:4, *Book of Praise*).

We would not dare to say that no one will ever be saved by what we call Arminian preaching. As well as there are people who have grown up under a Reformed pulpit and yet perish everlastingly, as well as there are people who have heard the Gospel of forgiveness of sins within an Arminian frame, and have embraced it with their whole heart. The remarkable thing with a man like *John Wesley*, a great preacher but considered an Arminian, is that in his prayers, many of which have been preserved, he is 100% Calvinistic in that he ascribes his own redemption wholly and exclusively to God's work of mercy.

One may say that every true believer ultimately, if not from the start, "becomes a Calvinist" in that he will praise God for his redemption here in this life, and forever in life everlasting, boasting, not in himself, nor thanking himself for the good decision to have believed, but boasting in the Lord.

Thus, predestination is not a hindrance in evangelism, if only put, or rather left, in its proper place. One does not start with it. Paul did not start with it. In Antioch in Pisidia he delivered a moving sermon. After a review of the Old Testament and the preaching of Christ as the promised Messiah, he continued, "We bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this He has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus . . . . Let it be known to you therefore, brethren, that through this Man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by Him every one that believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the Law of Moses . . ." (Acts 13:32, 33, 38, 39).

Then most of the Jews became jealous, when they saw how many gentiles hung upon Paul's lips. A week later they tried to stir up a riot, but "when the gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified God . . . (verse 48). Then, as a note in the margin, Luke adds, "and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed." This remark came at the turning point, where the Church passed from the Jews to the gentiles, in order to make clear that such was God's purpose. Nothing went wrong; all went

according to God's plan. "And the disciples were filled with joy," verse 52.

The Canons themselves do not start with predestination. They start with man's fall; then, "for God so loved the world." The next article, "God mercifully sends messengers of these most joyful tidings to whom He will and at what time He pleases" (Romans 10 is quoted). The next step, "The wrath of God abides on those who believe not this Gospel — but such as believe it and embrace it, are delivered . . ." "The cause and guilt of unbelief as well as of all other sins is in man," of course . . . . But "faith is the free gift of God," what else? Only *then* the Canons start to speak about the "background," the "why?" of the fact that not all believe, and thus proceed to speak about God's eternal purpose. *That* is the proper way and the proper place.

If there were no election, no one would ever be saved! And thus, the doctrine of predestination is not and therefore should not in any way ever be felt as a hindrance to evangelism. On the contrary! As much as for ourselves this glorious truth is a "living comfort," so it is a "living comfort" for missionaries to go to heathen lands and start the "impossible" task of winning people for Christ. "Impossible" indeed! But the missionary may comfort himself that it pleases God to save sinners by the preaching of the Gospel, and that as many as were ordained in that heathen land, will believe. Thus everyone who evangelizes by word and deed, may comfort himself that God's Church will become complete. That his work is not in vain. His conviction of God's election takes nothing away from the urgent appeal to believe in Jesus Christ. It only supports him in his witnessing for the Lord. He may trust that the full harvest will be brought in; that none will be lost, that the number will become complete.

The fact that God's complete work of salvation also includes that "He has chosen us in Christ before the foundation of the world" gives us a lively hope. All causes and undertakings in the world will fail in the end. Only one cause will be completed, the cause of Jesus Christ and His Church!

In this cause we may stand, also in evangelism.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For more on this we recommend B.D. KUIPER, *God-centered Evangelism*, Banner of Truth Trust, London, 1966.