

## Lesson 19 PASSED FROM DEATH TO LIFE

### Canons of Dort: Third and Fourth Heads of Doctrine

#### 19.1 A Two-Fold Approach

The third and fourth heads are taken together, since in the Remonstrance of 1610 the two sections (three and four) really dealt with the same topic. Further, the two matters confessed, though distinct, are also directly complementary. The Articles 1-5 form the third head of doctrine, and maintain the teaching concerning the total depravity of man. All lie under the curse of God's wrath (I,1). Articles 6-17 constitute the fourth point of doctrine, that is, the insuperability of God's work of grace.

##### 1. The Depth of the Fall

One must distinguish between created human capacities and the state of these capacities at any given time. With the fall, the capacities themselves were still present in man, but their state was one of total ruin. Man did not simply become ill or partially maimed in his mind or will; rather, he became totally corrupt in mind, will and affections, Genesis 6:5, Ephesians 2:1-5. Sin and its power permeates the entire human nature, and it is carried on through the generations, Psalm 51:9, Romans 5:12. It represents a most destructive, all pervasive and relentless power in human life.

##### 2. The Dawn of Redemption

Christ Jesus was the only human person in the world who was not conceived and born in sin, Hebrews 7:26. He was born in perfect holiness, a holiness not received from His earthly mother, but from the

Holy Spirit. His person is not grounded in the human nature, body and soul, but in God Himself, being God the Son, the second Person of the Trinity. As the Person of the Son, He took on the human nature. This act of willing obedience represents the dawn of our redemption.

### 3. The Powerlessness of Nature and the Law

The Remonstrants placed considerable importance on natural light, the light of reason, and the usefulness of the law as a moral code helping man to improve himself. The Reformed rejected this view of nature and law. The light of nature existed in the hearts of all men, but was much more of a forceful testimony against him than an aid to grace, Romans 1:18-32. Similarly, the law proclaimed God's curse, and was powerless in itself to save. Although the law was good in itself, the sin of man made this a powerless instrument for salvation, Romans 7:7f.

### 4. The Glorious Means

This chapter also brings up the recurring theme of the preaching of the good news through the servants chosen and sent by God. Law and gospel must be preached, and they must be preached in fullness. The Canons very closely connect the work of the Holy Spirit to the preached Word.

There is no dissimulation in the gospel message. While God's hidden will is not known, His revealed will must be proclaimed and obeyed, and He accomplishes His purpose through His Word, Acts 16:7. Through the proclamation of His revealed will, God realizes His eternal purpose for all men.

### 5. The Two-Fold Effect

Just as the theme of the preaching of the gospel returns, so the theme of its effect is widened and deepened in the context of man's most inner being. That the preaching has a two-fold effect cannot in any way be attributed to the preaching itself. It occurs without respect of persons, and is the same message for all. While it takes into consideration various needs and states of men, its message remains the same: repent and believe the gospel, 2 Corinthians 5:20,21. Thus, a failure to believe the gospel is not to be attributed to God, but is solely man's responsibility, Jeremiah 6:16. There is no defect in the message by which anything lacking can be found in it, 1 Corinthians 1:23, 24.

### 6. Regeneration Described

It was not the intention of the authors of the Canons to define regeneration. Rather in opposition to the sentiments of the Remonstrants, the full working of regeneration is described. The Remonstrants limited the effects of the fall, and correspondingly saw regeneration as an evolution in man representing a gradual turn for the better. This seriously limits the work of God in salvation and renewal.

Regeneration is not the planting of a new soul, but the insertion of new qualities and attributes in the soul. It represents a total transformation of the created capacities in man, a new creation, Ephesians 2:10, 2 Corinthians 5:17. It is in every way a glorious and supernatural work, occurring wholly outside of us, and yet not against our will. Rather, the will with all its attributes is completely transformed and renewed, along with the mind and heart of man, his whole being.

## 7. Faith as the First Fruit

The first fruit of regeneration is a true and living faith, Philippians 1:29. Scripture suggests a distinction between faith as a capacity and as a deed. For example, Peter was and remained a disciple, but all his deeds did not show the marks of a disciple. As a renewed capacity infused by the Spirit into the soul, faith is always present in the heart of the reborn man. As a deed, it is present in degrees, sometimes more, other times less. Believers are still often weak in faith, Hebrews 12:1, 2. It is the duty of believers to quicken the new shoot of faith in their hearts through a diligent use of the appointed means of grace.

## 8. The Sovereign Decree

That not all who are called show the marks of faith is not to be attributed to God, but remains their own fault. Neither is it in anyone's right to boast in himself, as if he had brought faith into his own heart. Believers must always walk in humility, acknowledging the wonder of God's gifts to them, Ephesians 1:3; 2:8-10. At the same time, they should pray for those called, that they might believe, and for those not yet called, that God's call to salvation may be extended to more and more people, Matthew 9:38, Ephesians 6:19, 20.

## 9. The Depth of God's Work

Just as sin led to the total corruption of the human nature and permeates man to the innermost recesses of his being, so the work of regeneration creates a new man, and results in a radical transformation of the human heart, in its innermost depths. This is a glorious divine work, turning the heart of man to God. It is a supernatural work, but not unnatural or against nature. In fact, God always builds on what He

has created. Recreation reforms and renews creation, Colossians 3:10, Ephesians 4:24.

## 10. Creation as Image of Recreation

Nature here forms an image of recreation. Just as in nature God not only causes new growth to begin but also provides the necessary means for the plants to be nourished and strengthened, so in spiritual life God does not only plant the seed of regeneration through the means of grace but also nourishes and sustains the seed through the working of His Spirit and Word. The Word proclaimed is both the seed of regeneration and the food for the soul, 1 Peter 1: 23-25. The sacraments form an additional food of life in order to strengthen and confirm the believer in the certainty of God's promises, 1 Peter 3: 21.

## 19.2 The Remonstrants Opposed

In the third and fourth heads of doctrine, the Reformed opposed the teaching of the Remonstrants which held that all men retained a number of outward virtues which could lead to salvation. While the Remonstrants maintained that faith once gained could be lost, they held that virtues shared by all men could not be lost. They saw the key to the improvement of the human condition and the elimination of sin in the growth and development of human understanding. Corruption for them was essentially limited to the mind, not the will. And even the mind was not totally ruined. For with a right use of the light of nature, man was able to prepare himself to receive the gospel. They maintained that an adjustment of character was required to be elected, rather than a radical rebirth. For the Reformed, the **total man** was corrupted, and he needed to be renewed in all his capacities and characteristics.

The Remonstrants held that man in his essence was not totally corrupt. Despite his fall, he could turn to God and desire eternal life. He was able to desire even those things he did not know. The Remonstrants defended the ideas of self-advancement and self-improvement. Begin with yourself! was their motto. In distinction to this, the Reformed maintained that fallen man does not have the capacity in himself to make a new start. In man there can be no preparatory acts to salvation. There is also not a middle way (*via media*) between regeneration and unbelief. One is either regenerated or he is not regenerated.

The Remonstrants also depreciated the appointed means of grace. Common grace was for them a bridge to special grace. The call of God in the preaching was as general as His gifts in creation. The proclaimed message was not a special tool of the Spirit, but simply an external means used by God to redirect the minds and hearts of men to Him. So, too, there is only a relative difference between natural light and the grace of rebirth. The Reformed, on the other hand, took the means of grace strictly as a part of God's work of redemption, and saw them as a gift of God coming into the world after the fall into sin, and designed for our complete renewal.

## Exercises Lesson 19

**I. Reference Passages**

Study and Review: Job 14:4; Romans 1:18-32, 2 and 3;  
Romans 8:7, Philippians 2: 12, 13,  
Hebrews 6:4-8

**II. Review Questions**

1. How was man created? What gifts did this include?
2. What happened with these gifts with the fall into sin? Did the Remonstrants accept this?
3. What did Pelagius teach regarding the will of man?
4. What is required to lead people to salvation? Who does this?
5. What are the terms which the Canons use to describe the work of regeneration? See Article 12, Chapter III/IV.

**III. Extra Questions**

1. What did the Remonstrants say about original sin?
2. What did the Remonstrants teach with regard to the natural light still remaining in man?
3. How was man created according to the Arminians? What according to them was man's condition after the fall?

4. What was the Arminian view of the grace of God? How was this grace communicated?
5. How does God call men with the gospel? Does He desire all to be saved?
6. Who are hypocrites? What about those who have doubts about their salvation, and struggle with this daily?
7. What did Dort say about the manner of conversion? What should we say about this today?
8. Are we able to understand this glorious work of God? How does Dort summarize the attitude required here?