

# Chapter Two

## **CHRIST'S DEATH AND MAN'S REDEMPTION THROUGH IT**

Chapter 1 of the Canons of Dort had drawn out what the Scriptures reveal about divine election—that glorious though difficult matter of God choosing before creation whom he would redeem from Satan's bondage. Chapter 2, now, focuses on the subject of the death of Christ and our resulting redemption.

Why this topic, you might wonder. And how is this topic connected to the subject of election? To get a handle on that, we need to understand what the people in the pew in the Netherlands years ago were hearing from their Arminian preachers on the subject of why Christ died on the cross.

### **The Arminian Position on the Death of Christ**

The Arminians agreed that the fall into sin provoked God's righteous wrath toward sinners. The huge question that followed is obviously: how can one escape that wrath? The Arminians gave this answer (and now I'm quoting from Article 2 of the Arminian articles printed on page 29):

2. that in agreement with this Jesus Christ the Saviour of the world died for all men and for every man, so that he merited reconciliation and forgiveness of sins for all through the death of the cross; yet so that no one actually enjoys this forgiveness except the believer—also according to the word of the gospel of John 3:16, "*God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*" And in the first epistle of John 2:2; "*He is the propitiation for our sins; and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.*"

At first read, that may sound innocent enough. But check again: "*Jesus Christ . . . died for all men and for every man . . . ; yet so that no one actually enjoys this forgiveness except the believer.*" Hmmm. So there is a disconnect between those for whom Christ died (everyone) and those who

benefit from his work (the believers). That raises the question: why would the Arminians preach that those for whom Christ died form a bigger group than those who benefit from his death? It turns out that that's because the Arminians had a different understanding of why Jesus died.

By their understanding, then, why did Jesus die? Their thought was that God insisted on strict obedience to his law. God had ordained, they said, that if anyone wished to receive eternal life and enjoy his everlasting favour, they had to satisfy every requirement of the law perfectly. Exact obedience was the road to life.

After the fall into sin, the Arminians added, the Lord soon enough realized that demanding perfect obedience was asking too much for fallen people; if God kept insisting on such obedience, no one would be saved. Here was a “no-win” for people (none would be saved) as well as a “no-win” for God (his heaven would be empty)—all because God had set the threshold too high for fallen people. What, then, was God to do?

The Arminian answer was that God determined to send his only Son to earth to fix the problem. God's Son would become flesh *not* to pay for people's sins, but would come instead to obey God's law perfectly for people. Recall: in Paradise Adam and Eve could obey the law perfectly, but after the fall into sin the human race was no longer able to provide that perfect obedience God required. Christ's perfect obedience, now, would allow God to say that his demand for people to obey his law was satisfied. With God's stipulated obedience met, God could now set up conditions more favourable for fallen man to meet. That is why the Arminians said in their Article 2 that “Jesus Christ the Saviour of the world died for all men and for every man.” For he came to set every person free from the impossible demand of obeying God's law perfectly as ground for salvation.

The good news, the Arminians continued, is that on the cross of Calvary Jesus Christ was successful in obeying God's law perfectly—and so God was now free to replace the old demand of perfect obedience with easier, more user-friendly

### *Rejection of Errors, 2.5*

**Error:** All men have been accepted into the state of reconciliation and into the grace of the covenant, so that no one is liable to condemnation on account of original sin, and no one shall be condemned because of it, but all are free from the guilt of original sin.

**Refutation:** This opinion is in conflict with Scripture, which teaches that we were *by nature children of wrath* (Eph 2:3).

conditions people had to meet to receive salvation. That's why the Arminians could add in their article that Christ "*merited reconciliation and forgiveness of sins for all through the death of the cross.*" No one is bound any longer to the old requirement of strict obedience; instead, ever since Christ's death everyone has access to "*reconciliation and forgiveness of sins.*" No longer need people be burdened by the need to satisfy for the guilt of original sin (see sidebar, Error 5).

But the fact that Christ "*merited reconciliation and forgiveness of sins*" does not mean that everyone automatically benefits from Christ's work. God could have set *no* new conditions and simply saved everyone; Christ, they said, obtained for God the right to do that. As it is, God chose a new condition anyone wanting salvation had to satisfy, and that new condition was *faith*. Anyone who *believes* in God no longer needs to face God's righteous judgment on his sins, but instead this person receives eternal life. And believing the gospel is, according to the Arminians, definitely within the reach of fallen people. We are, after all, not dead in sin but (only) injured from the fall (as we'll see in more detail in Chapter 3/4)—and injured people are quite able to believe.

In the Rejection of Errors following Chapter 2, the fathers summarized this teaching of the Arminians. Error 2 (see sidebar) had Christ come into the world "*that he*

### *Rejection of Errors, 2.2*

**Error:** It was not the purpose of Christ's death that he should confirm the new covenant of grace by his blood, but only that he should acquire for the Father the mere right to establish once more with man such a covenant as he might please, whether of grace or of works.

**Refutation:** This militates against Scripture, which teaches that Christ has become the Surety and Mediator of a better, that is, a new covenant, and that a will takes effect only at death.

### *Rejection of Errors, 2.3*

**Error:** By his satisfaction Christ did not really merit for anyone either salvation itself or faith by which this satisfaction of Christ to salvation is effectually made one's own. He acquired for the Father only the authority or the perfect will to deal again with man, and to prescribe new conditions as he might desire. It depends, however, on the free will of man to fulfil these conditions. Therefore it was possible that either no one or all men would fulfil them.

**Refutation:** Those who teach this error think contemptuously of the death of Christ, do not at all acknowledge its most important fruit or benefit, and bring back out of hell the Pelagian error.

*should acquire for the Father the mere right to establish once more with man such a covenant as he might please.”*

Again, according to Error 3, Christ “*acquired for the Father only the authority or the perfect will to deal again with man, and to prescribe new conditions as he might desire*” (see sidebar). Error 4 added that this new set of conditions “*consists in the fact that God has revoked the demand of perfect obedience of the law and regards faith as such and the obedience of faith, though imperfect, as the perfect obedience of the law.*”

It’s this error, by the way, that lies behind the popular teaching that the God of the New Testament shows considerably more mercy than the God of the Old Testament. Perhaps that’s a surprising root!

We need to realize what the Arminians have done. They placed Christ’s death, as it were, some distance away from the sinners in the pew. Instead of the preacher proclaiming to the congregation that Jesus Christ atones for my sins of today and yesterday, the Arminian preacher would tell his flock that you’re forgiven for today’s sins and yesterday’s if you *keep believing* that God gave his Son centuries ago so that today you need do no more than believe. Christ’s *past* work gives space for you today to satisfy God’s *new* demands—believe—and if you do that your sins will be forgiven.

But for the sensitive folk in the pew, this message did not give comfort. After all, it’s precisely when we fail in our struggles against sin that we’re so apt to conclude that our faith is obviously not strong enough. . . . So one is left with the need to tank up on more (or better) faith. Yet tanking up (repeatedly) is so exhausting and so frustrating because we’re never

### *Rejection of Errors, 2.4*

**Error:** The new covenant of grace which God the Father, through the mediation of the death of Christ, made with man, does not consist herein that we are justified before God and saved by faith, inasmuch as it accepts the merit of Christ. It consists in the fact that God has revoked the demand of perfect obedience of the law and regards faith as such and the obedience of faith, though imperfect, as the perfect obedience of the law. He graciously deems it worthy of the reward of eternal life.

**Refutation:** This doctrine contradicts Scripture: *They are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood* (Rom 3:24, 25). Those who teach this error proclaim, as did the ungodly Socinus, a new and strange justification of man before God, against the consensus of the whole church.

sure that our faith is strong enough or good enough to meet God's demand for faith. In the face of this frustration in the pew the fathers at the Synod of Dort sought to draw out Scripture's explanation about why Christ died. Their insistence was that Christ's work on Calvary directly touches the Christian's daily struggles and daily failures in this sense that Christ took on himself the judgment that my failures earn—and so there is no condemnation left for me. That's comforting!

To follow the fruits of the fathers' study of Scripture on the topic of why Christ died, we turn now to the articles of Chapter 2.

## ARTICLE 1

### **The Punishment Which God's Justice Requires**

*God is not only supremely merciful but also supremely just. And as he himself has revealed in his Word, his justice requires that our sins, committed against his infinite majesty, should be punished not only in this age but also in the age to come, both in body and soul. We cannot escape these punishments unless satisfaction is made to the justice of God.*

In the broader community where I live, a man was senselessly shot to death and his remains incinerated for no other reason than that he was in somebody's road. After some clever detective work, the murderer was apprehended, eventually brought to trial and appropriately sentenced according to the stipulations of the law. As a community we were all relieved that the full weight of the law came down on the murderer. Justice had to be done.

Are we to expect something different from God? Would ours be a healthy universe if the Creator declined to execute justice, and chose only to show mercy on wrongdoers? We might certainly prefer God's mercy over his justice, and might even prefer to block out (or deny) God's justice, but the fact of the matter is that if the Lord ignored justice and celebrated only mercy to wrongdoers, we would not feel safe with him at all. Justice in daily life is ultimately rooted in his identity as a God of justice. Indeed, to appreciate the marvel of his mercy in our lives, we need to have a healthy understanding of his justice. It is to Paradise that we need to turn to grasp what his justice is about.

Genesis 2 tells us that God placed the first man he created in the garden of Eden. His place in the garden came complete with a covenant of



love that the Lord established between himself and the creature man. The fact that God put the human race (initially just Adam, and then also Eve) in a garden of plenty illustrated the promise of God within this covenant; he promised to *be God* to the creature man so that Adam would lack nothing. Within that covenant God also placed obligations upon the human race, including first of all the command to “*work [the garden] and keep it*” (Gen. 2:15), and then also the narrower instruction not to touch the fruit of one particular tree. As Scripture puts it, “*You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die*” (Gen. 2:16, 17). Notice the penalty of death God pronounced upon transgression of his command. Obedience within God’s covenant ensured *life*; disobedience warranted *death* (see Figure 2.1). Within the covenant God made with him, then, Adam was responsible to make choices that would greatly affect his future.

Adam ate—and in him the entire human race disobeyed God’s command of life and brought upon ourselves eternal death. That’s material we’ve covered already as we read Article 1 of the First Head of Doctrine in these Canons. As a result, all humanity ended up on Satan’s side and became dead in sin (recall Figure 1.1).

How, now, should God respond? Given the threat God had included in his covenant with mankind—if you eat you die—this rebellion was not something God could simply overlook. It’s appealing to think that the Almighty Creator would bear with our folly, and give us a second chance. But God’s identity as *God* means that that simply could not be. If God backed away from his promise of death, he would not be a God of his word, truthful and trustworthy. Later in Scripture he says plainly concerning himself, “*If we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself*” (2 Tim. 2:13). In

Paradise he spoke a word, and as the days passed he kept that word—because he is God. So man had to die, because God had said so. That’s his righteous justice.

What, though, is death? We generally understand that a person dies when his heart stops beating. When God, though, spoke of death he meant not simply (or even first of all) physical death, but he meant in first place *spiritual* death. The human race is bound to the Creator, and dependent on the Creator, because God in the beginning “*breathed into his nostrils the breath of life*” so that “*the man became a living creature*” (Gen. 2:7). With his rebellion man separated himself from the God of life so that his spirit died even while his heart still beat. His spiritual death guaranteed his physical death: “*You are dust, and to dust you shall return*” (Gen. 3:19). That took some years, but physical death was the inevitable consequence of the spiritual death that resulted immediately from his disobedience to God’s command. In the time between immediate spiritual death and eventual physical death, the human race suffers much. As God put it, “*Cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground*” (Gen. 3:17–19).

It is with this material that the fathers began their second chapter. Mankind, we confess in Article 1, fell into sin, and God’s justice required that the human race either had to pay or perish. God’s justice was simply not negotiable. That’s why the concluding words of Article 1 read as they do: “*We cannot escape these punishments unless satisfaction is made to the justice of God.*”

We for our part perceive justice to be something awful, terrible, and dark. And so it is; Scripture says that “*it is a fearful thing to fall into the*

### *Lord’s Day 4.10, 11*

#### **Will God allow such disobedience and apostasy to go unpunished?**

Certainly not.

He is terribly displeased with our original as well as actual sins.

Therefore he will punish them by a just judgment both now and eternally, as he has declared: Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law (Gal 3:10).

#### **But is God not also merciful?**

God is indeed merciful, but he is also just.

His justice requires that sin committed against the most high majesty of God also be punished with the most severe, that is, with everlasting punishment of body and soul.

*hands of the living God*" (Heb. 10:31). Yet if God did not keep his word in the beginning, and if the Lord would let all rebellion go unpunished, there would be no ground left in human society for the punishment of evildoers. That would make life distinctly more dangerous, and unfair.

As it is, God's justice also speaks of comfort and gives hope to those repentant of sin, for God decreed that redemption would come by justice (Isa. 1:27). How that works is the topic of the next articles.

## ARTICLE 2

### The Satisfaction Made by Christ

*We ourselves, however, cannot make this satisfaction and cannot free ourselves from God's wrath. God, therefore, in his infinite mercy has given his only-begotten Son as our Surety. For us or in our place he was made sin and a curse on the cross so that he might make satisfaction on our behalf.*

God's justice, we had confessed in Article 1, requires that we either pay for our sins or perish on account of them. Article 2 goes on to say that we cannot make this payment. "*We ourselves, however, cannot make this satisfaction and cannot free ourselves from God's wrath.*" This article does not elaborate on why we cannot make this payment; that's a topic the Canons will come to later. For now I take the liberty to mention that the people of the pew were familiar with Lord's Day 5 of the Heidelberg Catechism (see sidebar), where the matter is addressed.

#### *Lord's Day 5.12-14*

**Since, according to God's righteous judgment we deserve temporal and eternal punishment, how can we escape this punishment and be again received into favour?**

God demands that his justice be satisfied.

Therefore we must make full payment, either by ourselves or through another.

**Can we by ourselves make this payment?**

Certainly not.

On the contrary, we daily increase our debt.

**Can any mere creature pay for us?**

No.

In the first place, God will not punish another creature for the sin which man has committed.

Furthermore, no mere creature can sustain the burden of God's eternal wrath against sin and deliver others from it.

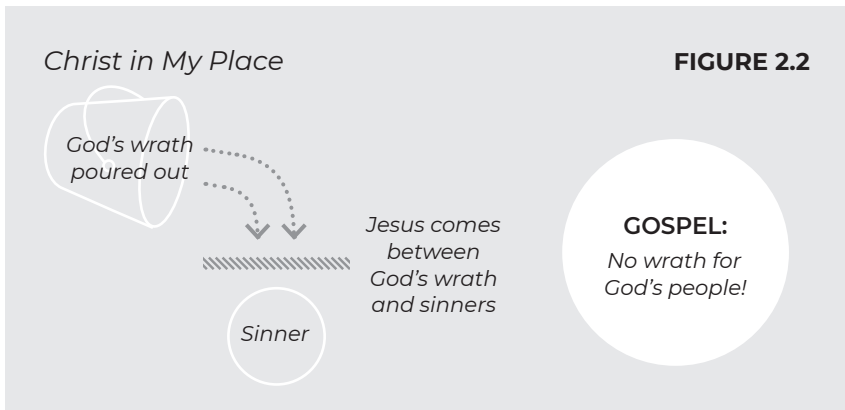


God, however, did not leave the human race stuck with this impossible debt and its inevitable eternal penalty. Instead, the Lord sent his only Son into our fallen world with the specific intent that he pay the total debt for us.

We'll come momentarily to a discussion of how Jesus did that. We need first to pause to marvel at this grace of God. Think it through: in response to the bond of love God established with us in Paradise, we chose against God and sided with the rebel Satan—surely God's righteous judgment must now fall upon us! But lo, *we do not perish* under the load of God's eternal judgment! He recognizes our bankruptcy, realizes our helplessness and hopelessness, and in boundless grace sends his Son to rescue us—and do so through a sacrifice of death in our place. That is *mercy* in purest form—and the glorious surprise of the Bible! This God of justice is delightfully merciful!

## The Glorious Gospel of Substitution

How did Jesus pay the debt we were to pay? The Lord would have us know that God's infinite and eternal wrath is invariably deadly. In a graphic picture the Holy Spirit draws out what that looks like: God's "*wrath is poured out like fire, and the rocks are broken into pieces by him*" (Nah. 1:6). In the eye of my mind I picture an endlessly large bucket of red hot lava being steadily poured out. Such is its heat that the rocks upon which the lava falls shatter upon impact. If that fire should fall on me, surely I'm toast—and worse. Then to recall that "*if anyone's name is not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire*" (Rev. 20:15)—and I picture the fiery liquid of the lake endlessly raining upon us. . . . The picture is horrifying in its agony. . . .



The delightful gospel of Scripture is that as God justly pours out his infinite wrath upon me, he slides Christ Jesus between the container of fire and me (see Figure 2.2)—so that Christ forms, as it were, a concrete floor protecting me from the fires of God’s wrath. On the cross of Calvary Christ took upon himself the full content of that container so that there is nothing left in that container that God might today pour out on me. Instead of wrath, there is for me today only grace, endless grace. That’s glorious indeed! Christ came into our fallen world to bear God’s wrath in our place!

This glorious gospel is what theologians call *substitutionary atonement*. It was graphically and delightfully taught in the tabernacle of the Old Testament. The people of Israel, sinners as they were, ought to have perished when they appeared in the presence of God in the tabernacle. But God commanded them to take along a lamb with them to the tabernacle, confess their sins over the head of the animal (with a gesture that symbolized the transfer of their sins to the animal), and then kill the now sin-laden animal. The Israelite, though guilty of sinning, was now free to return home under the blessing of holy and Almighty God (see Lev. 1–4). As the priests explained the ceremony, they had to describe the righteous judgment of God on you the sinner so that you knew you ought to die, and then describe that you could be freed from that righteous penalty because the animal died *for you*, died *in your place*, was your substitute. The instruction in the law of Moses was gospel! John the Baptist proclaimed that Jesus was “*the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world*” (John 1:29)—and so the fulfillment of this Old Testament law. Paul repeated the same message with this description of Jesus’ work: “*For our sake (God) made (Jesus Christ) to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*” (2 Cor. 5:21). Elsewhere he put it like this: “*For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. . . . God shows his love toward us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from wrath of God*” (Rom. 5:6, 8–9). Essential in each of these sentences is the message of that little preposition “*for*.” Christ died *for* me, died *in my place*, died *instead* of me. I deserved hell, but Christ received hell in my place, experienced God’s wrath for me. That’s what Christ’s work is all about; he’s my substitute!

We recognize that this is a distinctly different message than Arminian preachers had proclaimed. They had preached that Christ died in order to satisfy God’s first set of conditions so that God would have the opportunity to start anew with mankind—and then satisfying the second set of conditions is up to us. But the fathers understood that that was not at all what the Bible

taught. So in Article 2 they put the Bible's teaching in their own words like this: *"For us or in our place he was made sin and a curse on the cross so that he might make satisfaction on our behalf."*

## Surety

In the process of drawing out how Christ made satisfaction for our sins, the fathers described God's only Son as "*our Surety*." A surety (or guarantor) is the person who underwrites a debt for another person, so that a bank can claim payment from him in the event the person who made the loan defaults on that loan.

We find the concept also in the Bible. Job prayed to God to "*put me in a surety with Thee*" (Job 17:3, KJV). David likewise prayed to the Lord, "*Be surety for Your servant for good; do not let the proud oppress me*" (Ps. 119:122, NKJV). Concerning his brother Benjamin, Judah promised his father Jacob that "*I myself will be surety for him; from my hand you shall require him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, then let me bear the blame forever*" (Gen. 43:9, NKJV). With that promise Judah foreshadowed the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Through his being the fulfillment of the lambs sacrificed in the Old Testament, Christ became "*the guarantor* [*surety*," NKJV] *of a better covenant*" (Heb. 7:22). This is the glorious gospel of Jesus-condemned-in-my-place!

## ARTICLE 3

### The Infinite Value of Christ's Death

*This death of the Son of God is the only and most perfect sacrifice and satisfaction for sins, of infinite value and worth, abundantly sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world.*

As we drew out in the opening pages of this chapter, the Arminians had said that Christ died so that God had space to specify a new set of conditions that fallen people must satisfy in order to be saved. But Article 2 made clear that that wasn't biblical. Rather, as the fathers insist in the present article: "*This death of the Son of God is the only and most perfect sacrifice and satisfaction for sins.*" Notice that the fathers went a step further than saying that Christ's death was simply to satisfy God's wrath, that is, pay for man's sin. No, the fathers added, Christ's death was in fact the *only possible* way to atone for sins. No other effort or sacrifice will ever set sinners right with God. That would include (contrary to the Arminian teaching)

that even my faith would never be able to reconcile me to God.

It should be noted that according to Arminian thinking God did not have to require the death of his Son to save anybody (see sidebar, Error 7). God was, they said, free to save any person he wished, regardless of sins or sacrifice, simply because he is God. Besides, according to their thinking, sin wasn't as bad as the Reformed made it out to be. This latter topic will be the focus of our attention in Chapter 3/4.

Meanwhile, we need to note that Holy Scripture clearly teaches that Jesus' death constitutes the only possible means for a sinner to be reconciled to God. Recall, for example, Jesus' words, "*I am the way, and the truth, and the life.*

*No one comes to the Father except through me*" (John 14:6). That's absolute. There is not a Buddhist in the world, no matter how pious he may be in his religion, able to come to the Father unless he embrace Christ as his Saviour—and then he is a Buddhist no longer. There is not a religious Christian in the world either who can successfully present to God his own sacrifice, including per chance his faith, as a means to gain God's approval. Peter spoke in equally absolute language when he addressed the Sanhedrin concerning the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross, saying, "*And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved*" (Acts 4:12). Any who would escape from God's righteous wrath can do so only through the sacrifice offered on the cross in his place. The church, of course, had caught this confession already in Lord's Day 11 of the Heidelberg Catechism (see sidebar).

Four hundred years ago the Arminians hated such absolute language, and many in today's world find this language equally repulsive. We're told it's far too arrogant and judgmental; we ought to be more tolerant and

### *Rejection of Errors, 2.7*

**Error:** Christ could not die, did not need to die, and did not die for those whom God loved in the highest degree and elected to eternal life, since these do not need the death of Christ.

**Refutation:** This doctrine contradicts the apostle, who declares: *The Son of God loved me and gave himself for me* (Gal 2:20). Likewise: *Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died* (Rom 8:33, 34), namely, for them. And the Saviour assures us: *I lay down my life for the sheep* (Jn 10:15). And: *This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends* (Jn 15:12, 13).

*Lord's Day 11***Why is the Son of God called Jesus, that is, Saviour?**

Because he saves us from all our sins, and because salvation is not to be sought or found in anyone else.

**Do those who seek their salvation or well-being in saints, in themselves, or anywhere else, also believe in the only Saviour Jesus?**

No.

Though they boast of him in words, they in fact deny the only Saviour Jesus.

For one of two things must be true: either Jesus is not a complete Saviour, or those who by true faith accept this Saviour must find in him all that is necessary for their salvation.

open-minded of others' beliefs. Who, after all, gives us the right to say that the Jesus we confess is the only way to God?

My abiding sinful nature would prefer that these more open-minded people were correct. But the simple fact is that the Lord God speaks differently. At the end of the day one either accepts what God says, or one doesn't. And if one wants to disagree with God, well, your opponent is the Almighty Creator against whom we rebelled, and that Creator is also the Judge. It is foolish to be offside with this God. He says that neither Buddhism, my ancestry, my race, my church attendance, nor even my faith in Jesus Christ can settle my debt with God; Christ alone can do this.

**Perfect**

Article 3 says more than that Christ's work on the cross forms the "*only*" sacrifice and satisfaction for sins. The fathers also confessed that Christ's sacrifice is the "*most perfect sacrifice and satisfaction for sins.*" They learned that from passages of Scripture as this: "*He entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption*" (Heb. 9:12). Christ's work doesn't need completion, nor does it require repetition. Rather, his work on the cross 2,000 years ago was complete, and was completed most perfectly. "*And every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God*" (Heb. 10:11, 12). He sat down because there was nothing left to do, neither by himself nor by us. His work was done, perfectly.

That means in turn that Christ's death was of such "*infinite value and worth*" that it was "*abundantly sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world.*" His work was not just good enough to save only the Jews or just a limited

number of persons (even if it be in the billions), but it was sufficient to save everybody, “*the whole world*.” Every sinner deserves to have God’s wrath poured out on him still. But Christ has so completely satisfied the justice of God and borne his wrath that all the world’s sinners would go free if they all received what Christ obtained. So adequate is Christ’s work! That’s the implication of such passages of Scripture as the following:

- Said Jesus concerning himself, “*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life*” (John 3:16).
- The apostle John repeated his Master’s thought: “*He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world*” (1 John 2:2).
- Paul echoes the thought: “*And he died for all*” (2 Cor. 5:15).

No, these texts do not say that every person will be saved, as we’ll see when we come to Article 8. But they do all underline the fact that Christ’s sacrifice was so complete that it was sufficient to wash away the sins of every sinner on earth.

This confession contains immense comfort for the believer. No matter how bad my sins are, none is so serious that Christ can’t wash it away. So the Lord could say to Israel: “*Come now, and let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool*” (Isa. 1:18). Yes, here is delightful comfort for people burdened by their many and diverse sins. God did not send Christ so that he could start another program for us to follow to achieve our salvation; God sent his Son so that Christ would die in my place for all my very real sins—no matter how horrendous—and the glorious result is that I am fully reconciled to God my Father through his gracious work. That’s a far more reassuring and comforting gospel than what the Arminian preachers were providing!

## ARTICLE 4

### Why His Death Has Infinite Value

*This death is of such great value and worth because the person who submitted to it is not only a true and perfectly holy man, but also the only-begotten Son of God, of the same eternal and infinite essence with the Father and the Holy Spirit, for these qualifications*

*were necessary for our Saviour. Further, this death is of such great value and worth because it was accompanied by a sense of the wrath and curse of God which we by our sins had deserved.*

Article 3 had echoed the teaching of Scripture concerning the value of Christ's death. Article 4 now gives two reasons *why* Christ's death has infinite value. The first reason concerns the person of Christ; the second concerns the wrath of God on account of sin.

## The Person of Christ

Over the span of many years, countless persons have been crucified. Typically, the Romans crucified only runaway slaves and those in engaged in rebellion against the state; this manner of death was considered too inhumane for any other category of people. In fact, so vile was crucifixion that decent folk did not talk about it. That raises the pressing question: if Jesus was numbered with such social transgressors as runaway slaves and terrorists, what was there about his death on the cross that made him Saviour of the world? Indeed, how could *this* death appease the righteous wrath of the sovereign Creator?

Jesus Christ was as fully human as any of us. He was, after all, born as we are born, grew up as we grow up, was a man with the same habits and urges as we have, and so on. The people of his day saw him simply as "*Jesus of Nazareth*" (John 1:45), "*the carpenter's son*" whose brothers were "*James and Joseph and Simon and Judas*" (Matt. 13:55). Jesus was truly "*like his brothers in every respect*" (Heb. 2:17), as human as any other.

### *Lord's Day 6.16–18*

#### **Why must he be a true and righteous man?**

He must be a true man because the justice of God requires that the same human nature which has sinned should pay for sin.

He must be a righteous man because one who himself is a sinner cannot pay for others.

#### **Why must he at the same time be true God?**

He must be true God so that by the power of his divine nature he might bear in his human nature the burden of God's wrath, and might obtain for us and restore to us righteousness and life.

#### **But who is that Mediator who at the same time is true God and a true and righteous man?**

*Our Lord Jesus Christ, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption (1 Cor 1:30).*

Yet there was a profound difference in him. Before his conception the angel told Mary that “*the power of the Most High will overshadow you*” so that the child she would bear would be “*holy—the Son of God*” (Luke 1:35). John puts the matter like this: “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . All things were made through him,*” and then goes on to write that “*the Word became flesh and dwelt among us*” (John 1:1, 3, 14). His point is that the Jesus who walked the roads of Galilee and Judea, who by every appearance was a man like any other Israelite walking those roads, was in fact God! That explains why Jesus could preach God’s word with such authority, and could undergird that preaching with astounding miracles. John followed Jesus around the villages and towns of Israel for three years and eventually wrote concerning him, “*He is the true God*” (1 John 5:20). Ever since Paul’s encounter with the ascended Jesus on the road to Damascus, Paul boldly proclaimed “*Christ who is God over all, blessed forever*” (Rom. 9:5) and described him as “*our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ*” (Titus 2:13). In the course of his thirty-three years on this earth, this Jesus “*committed no sin*” (1 Peter 2:22). Yes, “*in every respect*” he was “*tempted as we are,*” but despite the temptations he remained “*without sin*” (Heb. 4:15). That’s because “*in him there is no sin*” (1 John 3:5)—the blessed result of his being God himself in our midst. The just penalty of God on sin, then, did not apply to him.

The man, then, who was “*numbered with the transgressors*” (Isa. 53:12) so as to be crucified was not simply a man like there are twelve in a dozen; the man on that cross on Calvary was none less than the beloved Son of God himself! Precisely that glorious identity made Jesus able to bear the load of God’s infinite wrath. Anyone less than true God would have perished as the fires of God’s righteous anger on sin were poured onto him. As the fathers put it in Article 4: “*This death is of such great value and worth because the person who submitted to it is not only a true and perfectly holy man, but also the only Son of God, of the same eternal and infinite essence with the Father and the Holy Spirit, for these qualifications were necessary for our Saviour.*”

## The Wrath of God on Account of Sin

Scripture gives a second reason why the death of the Son of God on Calvary had such infinite value. Ever since the fall in the beginning, countless people have died—each in turn because of God’s righteous penalty on sin. Yet none of these billions died under the same weight of God’s wrath as Jesus did. So intensely did the wrath of God fall upon Jesus



that he earnestly prayed to the Father to “*remove this cup from me*” (Luke 22:42). Such was his agony in the face of the coming judgment that “*his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground*” (Luke 22:44). On the cross itself darkness settled on the land at high noon as the God of light turned his holy face away from his Son-become-sin and handed him over to the darkest powers of hell (Matt. 27:45). As Jesus suffered the horrid rejection of the very God whose presence he had enjoyed from all eternity, he cried out in his agony, “*My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?*” (Matt. 27:46). One would think he would collapse under the sheer burden of that eternal anger.

But he didn't! Though the wrath of God was so enormous, Jesus, true God that he was, was not crushed by that wrath or scalded by the infinite heat of God's deadly fire. After the three hours of darkness had passed, Jesus cried out triumphantly, “*Father, into your hands I commit my spirit*” (Luke 23:46) and “*It is finished!*” (John 19:30). So the apostle could write, “*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us*” (Gal. 3:13) and, “[*God*] *made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*” (2 Cor. 5:21). As the article puts it so well, “*Further, this death is of such great value and worth because it was accompanied by a sense of the wrath and curse of God which we by our sins had deserved.*”

## ARTICLE 5

### **The Universal Proclamation of the Gospel**

*The promise of the gospel is that whoever believes in Christ crucified shall not perish but have eternal life. This promise ought to be announced and proclaimed universally and without discrimination to all peoples and to all men, to whom God in his good pleasure sends the gospel, together with the command to repent and believe.*

God's delightful work in Jesus Christ requires a response from mankind; we, after all, were created to be responsible (see Gen. 1:26–28). What, now, is the correct way to respond to God's gift of Jesus Christ? The Lord answers that question in numerous places in Scripture, the best-known passage perhaps being John 3:16: “*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*” The opening line of the present article obviously alludes to that passage of Scripture.

The pressing question now is: what actually is this “believing”? What is it we’re to do if we are to receive eternal life?

## Believing

The English language uses two unrelated words to translate various forms of the Greek word *pisteuein*. When the Greek term appears as a verb, we use the English word “believe”; when it appears as a noun, we use the word “faith”. I mention this to show that the terms *believing* and *faith* actually describe the same thing. Believing is having faith; the person who has faith believes.

Believing, or faith, is not a thing, like a pretty vase, that I can put on the shelf to admire and then ignore. Believing, or faith, is an action, like breathing or running or holding. We know what those actions look like, and we know too how to act them out in a game of charades. But what does believing look like? How would you enact the biblical term “*by faith*”?

Suppose your neighbour in his generosity presents you with a box of chocolates. The box has your name written on it, and he holds it out to you. What are you to do? Now that he’s holding it out to you, should you cut his lawn so as to earn the box? Obviously not. What you need to do is take your hands out of your pockets, and *receive* his box of chocolates. And when you receive that box you’re not meant to drop it, but draw the box to yourself, even take off the plastic, open it, and enjoy a chocolate (and perhaps share some chocolates with your friends).

The same is true in relation to God’s work in Jesus Christ. The Lord God in boundless generosity has given his Son to take on himself the eternal judgment our sins deserve, and Christ has successfully absorbed that judgment. God now gives this completed work of redemption to sinners as a free gift on his part so that we need to add nothing to earn it. We, however, do need to respond to what he gives; as with the chocolates we need to take our spiritual hands out of our pockets and *accept* this salvation. That *accepting* is believing; you receive God’s free gift “*by faith*.” As John Calvin put it, faith is the hand of the soul.

That’s why I said above that faith is not a *thing* that sits on a shelf, but faith is an action. That’s what James gets at when he says that “*faith apart from works*”—like “*the body apart from the spirit*”—“*is dead*” (2:26).

Does this mean that faith is my contribution to salvation? The Arminians had said so, as if God might be pictured as providing the bulk

of what I need to be saved (say, the “7” of Jesus Christ) and I providing the remainder (that’s the “3” of faith) so as to complete the “10” so that salvation is finally mine. Yet such an equation is distinctly not the teaching of Scripture. Salvation is from Christ alone, so that my contribution to my salvation is always “0.” Faith is not what I *add* to God’s gift so as to complete the salvation equation. Rather, God comes to the sinner with his “10” of salvation—it’s completely his gift—and I receive what he gives. It’s what the churches had already confessed in Lord’s Day 23 of the *Heidelberg Catechism*; see sidebar.

### *Lord’s Day 23.61*

#### **Why do you say that you are righteous by faith only?**

Not that I am acceptable to God on account of the worthiness of my faith, for only the satisfaction, righteous and holiness of Jesus Christ is my righteousness before God.

I can receive this righteousness and make it my own by faith only.

Faith, then, does not belong *in* some equation as my contribution to redemption, but it belongs *after* the equation ( $10 + 0 = 10$ ), when God graciously gives me the salvation he obtained for me through Jesus Christ. Then I gratefully receive his salvation, and that receiving is “*by faith*.”

## Mission

The fact that the death of Christ is the only way of salvation leads to a necessary consequence. If no one can be reconciled to the God against whom we sinned without the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, it follows that the gospel of Christ’s victory on the cross must be proclaimed to every person on earth. Peoples anywhere and everywhere need to hear of how Jesus Christ has atoned for sin, and must be called to repent of trusting in any creature and summoned to believe in Christ crucified for sin. Embracing God’s plan for how he would redeem people leaves the believer no option but to do one’s best to have this gospel “*announced and proclaimed universally and without discrimination to all peoples*.” We’re inclined to say this consequence is self-evident.

It turns out that there’s a particular reason for the fathers to mention this consequence at this point. The Arminians had accused the Reformed of being interested only in that part of the human race they considered were elect. For, they said, if you insist that Christ saves only the elect, there’s no need to speak of the gospel to non-elect people. Christ’s work isn’t

for them anyway, so you Reformed people have no reason to do mission work. . . . Hmm. At first read, that even makes sense. If God won't save the reprobate anyway, why bring the gospel to their attention? Isn't that futile and a waste of time?

It is true that Jesus' work saves only the elect. We earthlings, though, cannot determine who God's elect actually are. God, after all, has not given us a look into his book of life to read the names he has listed there (see Rev. 3:5; 13:8). What we do know is that God created all people with the responsibility to praise and glorify him, a responsibility that remains despite the fall into sin. So all should hear of the righteous justice of God displayed in Jesus Christ as well as of the gracious mercy he exhibited in Jesus Christ. Those whom God has elected—of whatever race or language or identity group or lifestyle they might be—will indeed respond to this preaching with faith and obedience, while those whom God has passed by will reject God's message. Especially the reaction of the latter group is on their own heads. But that doesn't mean they need not hear. God created them with ears for hearing! Since we need to work with the responsibility God gave each person, we are in fact commanded to bring God's word of salvation to all peoples everywhere. Consider the following:

- God did not send his Son into the world for the Jews only, or for the first thousand who asked him for salvation. Rather, "*God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life*" (John 3:16). So it follows that the gospel of Christ's redeeming work should be preached to all.
- Christ's emphatic command to his disciples after his resurrection from the dead was this: "*Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you*" (Matt. 28:19, 20).
- Jesus repeated this instruction just before his ascension: "*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth*" (Acts 1:8).

God for his part will ensure that through our working with commands as these, his Word of life will come to the ears of those whom he has chosen to eternal life (recall Chapter 1, Article 3). Rightly, then, did the fathers say in the present article that the gospel is to go out to "*all people and to all men . . . with the command to repent and believe.*" It's why

Reformed churches have historically been very active in mission work.

As to what this “repenting” looks like, I refer the reader to the material that shall appear later in Chapter 3/4, Articles 12, 13.

### **Jesus loves you?**

In efforts to bring the gospel of salvation to people who do not believe, the temptation is there to tell them, “Jesus loves you.” Indeed, it’s a message we hear zealous preachers trumpet in our society. It sounds attractive, and we would think it’s appealing to those we’d like to draw to the gospel. But we do well to realize that this formulation actually undermines the need to repent and believe. For the obvious response to such a message is this: if Jesus loves me now, while I live in my sin and unbelief, why should I change? More importantly, however, is the fact that the general message to all that “Jesus loves you” is not a scriptural but an Arminian formulation. The Lord God—and so Jesus too—does not love those who hate him. He may be kind to them (and he is; see Luke 6:35), but that kindness may not be confused with God’s response to them when they appear before his judgment seat on the day of their death or on the day of judgment. For those who do not believe in Jesus Christ, the Bible mentions only one possible verdict: “*Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels*” (Matt. 25:41). The fire of God’s wrath against sin as mentioned earlier in this chapter is endlessly poured out on those who remain in their unbelief.

The phrase “Jesus loves you” belongs within the church and the circle of the saints. Of believers and the children God entrusts to believers may we confidently say that yes, Jesus loves you. For that’s his revelation (see on Chapter 1, Article 17). These are the people for whom Jesus gave his life—and that is love.

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### **Questions for Discussion:**

1. Article 1 insists that God’s justice requires that our transgression be punished.
  - a. Before we get into the heart of this article, take a moment to put into words what you think was the reason for Christ’s coming into the world. Then consider what the Arminians said was the purpose for his coming. Do you see any similarity between your position and

theirs? If so, what is it?

- b. According to the Arminians, what did the saints of the Old Testament have to do to be saved? What (according to the Arminians) must the saints of the New Testament do to be saved? Why the difference? What influence might this thought have in today's theological thinking? And: what do *you* think you have to do to be saved?
  - c. Now to Article 1: explain *why* our transgression in Paradise needed to be punished. In your opinion, is God being unduly harsh in demanding punishment? Does this demand make you afraid of God? Explain your answer.
  - d. What is death? How is physical death connected to spiritual death?
2. The Lord God in mercy gave his Son to substitute for us.
  - a. What is a substitute? Why is a substitute necessary in the gospel of redemption?
  - b. What is the significance of the little word “for” in the gospel of redemption? What emotion does the significance of the little word “for” awaken in you?
  - c. Explain what a “surety” is. How does this comfort you?
3. Christ's work has infinite value.
  - a. What comfort is there for you in the confession that Christ's sacrifice is perfect and complete?
  - b. In the following sentence, discuss the terms in italics: Christ's death is *sufficient* for all, but *efficient* only for the elect. Do you think it is arrogant to say that only those who believe in Jesus Christ can be saved? Explain your answer.
  - c. Article 3 mentions the term “expiate.” What is meant by that term? Don't be afraid of doing some homework on this one!
4. Article 4 mentions two reasons why Christ's death had infinite value for sinners.
  - a. What are the two reasons mentioned? Might there be a third reason that you would have preferred to see listed? Why would you prefer it there?
  - b. Explain how both of these two reasons work.
5. The Arminians felt that the Reformed insistence that God had elected specific persons to salvation meant there was no need for mission work.
  - a. Does the Arminian position make sense to you? Or does the Reformed reply make better sense? Explain your thoughts.

- b.** Could you serve in missions? Should you? Perhaps talk about the possibilities with someone who knows you well.
- c.** What do you think about the popular use of the well-known phrase “God loves you”? When is it fitting to use this phrase?

## ARTICLE 6

### Why Some Do Not Believe

*That, however, many who have been called by the gospel neither repent nor believe in Christ but perish in unbelief does not happen because of any defect or insufficiency in the sacrifice of Christ offered on the cross, but through their own fault.*

Those who hear the preaching of the gospel either end up believing the gospel or rejecting it. The Canons of Dort had earlier mentioned this twofold response from the perspective of God's sovereign election (Chapter 1, Articles 4 and 5). That is, those who respond to the preaching with faith do so because God had chosen them to salvation, while those who respond with unbelief do so because God had passed them by in his eternal plan of salvation. In our present chapter, the matter of response to the preaching receives further attention, but this time from the perspective of Christ's work. The guiding question this time is: did Christ die for all people, or did he not?

### The Reality of Unbelief

Everybody ought to hear the gospel of salvation (said Article 5) because there is only one way for sinners to be reconciled to the Father, and no one should be denied a chance to hear that gospel and repent. Some will indeed respond with repentance and faith; others will respond with unbelief. Article 6 focuses on the response of unbelief.

God in the beginning created people to be responsible. So, unlike rocks and rabbits, people need to think things through carefully and make well-considered decisions. That's true not just in determining what job to take, but true also in terms of deciding whether you will acknowledge and serve the Creator.

That some would make a decision *against* serving God is amply evident to us from our experience in daily life. Scripture also teaches that some would reject the gospel. Consider just two passages:

- Jesus said to Nicodemus, "*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life*" (John 3:16). Jesus then went on to say in verse 19, "*And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light.*" Those last words indicate that the Lord himself knew very well that some would refuse to believe.



- Jesus himself brought the word of God clearly and plainly to the people of his day, and even underlined it with miracles. Yet countless of God's own people-by-covenant rejected his word. In Mark 6:6 we read that Jesus "*marveled because of their unbelief.*" Three years after Jesus began his public ministry the crowds who heard his word and saw his miracles demanded his crucifixion (Matt. 27:22).

This response of unbelief is, of course, not pleasing to the Judge of all the earth, and so those who respond to the preaching they hear in this way receive the sentence of eternal damnation. That's what the Scripture says: "*Whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him*" (John 3:36). And elsewhere: "*I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins*" (John 8:24).

It raises the question: is a response of unbelief the sinner's own fault, or is it actually somehow God's fault? What we had confessed earlier about election and reprobation gives the question added urgency.

## Whose Fault Is Unbelief?

From their pulpits in the villages and cities of the Netherlands, Arminian preachers in the years before the Synod of Dort offered the people two possible explanations for why some who heard the Word of God would end up not believing that Word. It could be, they said, because

1. Sinners don't want Christ, or
2. Christ didn't die for all people.

Of these two possible answers, these Arminian preachers said the first was correct. So, if in fact a family member did not want Christ (and so broke with the faith), it's obvious that that decision was on his own head; that person is responsible for rejecting the Saviour who died for him. We for our part can go along with that.

The Arminians, now, told the people of the pew that the Reformed were actually teaching the second of these two options, as if Christ died only for some and *therefore* the others *had no chance* to be saved—though they might want salvation very badly. Such a teaching, of course, makes Christ out to be very mean-spirited. Imagine a sinner wanting to get on board Christ's ark of salvation, but Jesus not permitting entry! Obviously, in that scenario it's fully Christ's fault that these poor souls end up in hell.

We need to know that the Reformed simply did not teach what the Arminians said they taught. It's also certainly not what the Bible teaches, but a cold and ruthless misrepresentation of the Bible's teaching. The fathers at the Synod of Dort made it their business to explain clearly what the Reformed *did* believe. That's Article 6.

### **Not Christ's fault**

The fathers were insistent: "*That . . . many who have been called by the gospel neither repent nor believe in Christ but perish in unbelief does not happen because of any defect or insufficiency in the sacrifice of Christ offered on the cross.*" This insistence in Article 6 is the simple consequence of what the fathers wrote earlier in Article 3 of this present Head of Doctrine: Christ's death is "*the only and most perfect sacrifice and satisfaction for sins, of infinite value and worth, abundantly sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world.*" As we had written above in the discussion of that article, Christ's work on Calvary was so perfect that no sinner of any race or age would need to add anything to it to be reconciled to God. The sinner who rejects the good news of Christ's completed work can never blame Christ as if his work on the cross were in some way not adequate to pay for the sins of any or all people.

### **One's own fault**

Instead, say the fathers in Article 6, sinners perish in unbelief "*through their own fault.*" This statement recognizes that God has created all people to be responsible, and so he holds all people always responsible for all their decisions. That people have rejected God in Paradise and so joined Satan—and in the process made themselves dead in sin so as to no longer hear rightly the call of the gospel—does not take away the responsibility God has laid upon them. If my boss gives me a job to do and I destroy the tools he supplies for the job, it is not his fault that I fail to accomplish the task he assigned. God is always sincere when he causes a sinner to hear the gospel and he calls him to believe. The circumstances in which the hearer lives, the race or nationality or gender he may have, the crisis he may be in at the moment he hears the gospel, or the history he has that could conceivably make receiving the gospel more difficult never excuse him from needing to respond responsibly to the gospel and so embracing it in faith. If he for whatever reason rejects the gospel, the fault is never God's but always his own—for with his fall into sin he has destroyed the tools God gave him to be able to believe.

This is as true for those who hear the preaching Sunday by Sunday in church as it is for those who hear the gospel for the first time from the mouth of a missionary in some (concrete) jungle. Every Sunday is a renewed call to repent and believe. We are so used to hearing the gospel, and so familiar with its content too, but each time the Lord God puts the word of life on our path he holds us responsible to respond to the preaching with renewed faith and repentance; always the responsibility is ours to do so. The apostle once reminded his readers that God’s covenant people Israel—we might even say, faithful churchgoers—rejected the gospel and so could not enter the Promised Land of Canaan. That observation became grounds for a warning to the Hebrew Christians; *“Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin”* (Heb. 3:12, 13). Notice how the apostle emphasizes the word “today.” And notice, too, that these words were written to Christians, people who had come to faith in Christ and who heard the preaching in church Sunday by Sunday. What was true for the Hebrew Christians of long ago is equally true for us today; we are responsible to respond to the preaching with faith and obedience. If we reject that response, and are satisfied to go through the motions or even coldly discard what’s said, the fault is entirely our own—and the resulting eternal penalty is fully justified.

If, then, some reject the gospel because of their own hard heart, why is it that others *do* believe? That’s the topic of Article 7.

## ARTICLE 7

### Why Others Do Believe

*But to those who truly believe and by the death of Christ are freed from their sins and saved from perdition, this benefit comes only through God’s grace, given to them from eternity in Christ. God owes this grace to no one.*

Though some respond with unbelief to the gospel they hear, others welcome it eagerly and believe it heartily. Those who respond with unbelief are responsible for their decision, and will need to bear the eternal penalty that follows from that unhappy decision. Those, however, who believe the gospel may not pat themselves on the back as if their decision was somehow fully their own doing. The Holy Scripture is very clear on the point:

- Paul writes in Ephesians 2:8, “*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.*”
- In Philippians 1:29 Paul writes, “*For it has been granted to you that . . . you should . . . believe in him.*” Notice the force of the term “*granted to you.*” The Philippian Christians did not ultimately decide for themselves to embrace the gospel, but their decision to believe was God’s gift to them.
- Paul says to the Corinthians, “*What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?*” (1 Cor. 4:7). And elsewhere: “*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God*” (2 Cor. 5:17, 18). It all leads Paul to say, “*Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord*” (2 Cor. 10:17).

Clearly, the Bible would have us know that when anyone believes the gospel he hears, it is God who must receive the credit.

To our way of thinking, this leads to an unbalanced and seemingly unfair picture. A response of unbelief to the preaching is our own fault, while a response of faith is God’s work so that he needs the credit? Is that not inconsistent? The Arminians, I might add, taught that man should receive the credit for either decision—and that’s attractive to us. The fine point now is this: why did the Arminians think man should receive the credit for whatever he decides? It turns out that the Arminians had an interesting but unscriptural understanding of what “grace” is.

## Grace

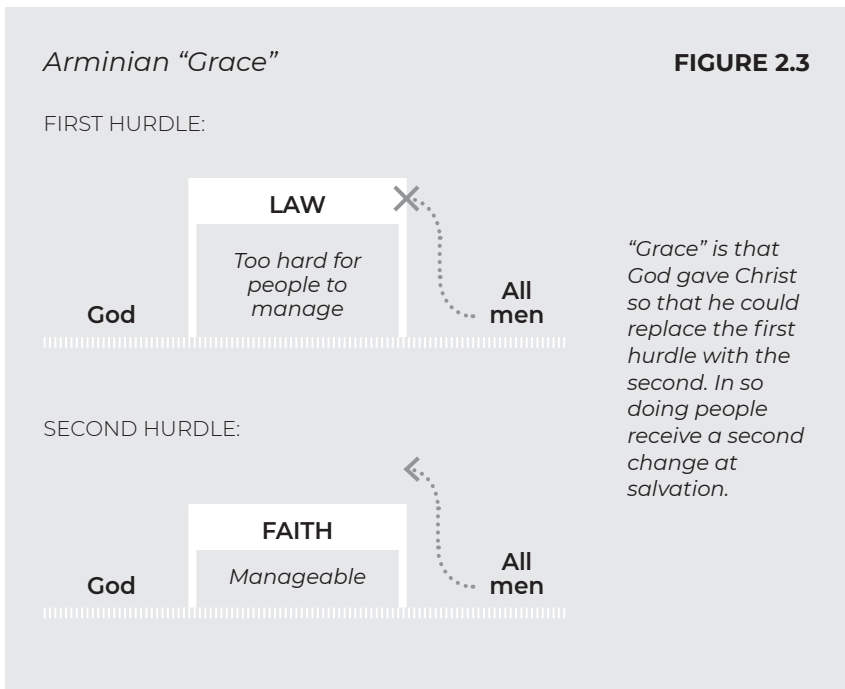
The Arminians agreed with the Reformed that people are saved by grace alone. That, after all, is the clear instruction of Scripture. Paul writes, for example, that we “*are justified by his grace as a gift*” (Rom. 3:24), and “*by grace you have been saved*” (Eph. 2:8). That’s clear.

The critical question now is: what does this grace actually refer to? Recall the position of the Arminians: God had insisted that people *contribute* to their having a wholesome relationship with God. God had put the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the garden of Eden so that man through his work of obedience could maintain his relationship with God. Mankind disobeyed, and so fell into sin. God, however, continued to insist on obedience, and so gave Israel detailed laws they needed to obey in order to receive God’s blessing. And, the Arminians added, God knew

mankind had the wherewithal to obey his commands sufficiently. We'll say more about this point in the discussion of Chapter 3/4.

But, the Arminians added, God soon enough realized that his expectation was too much for people; if God would keep insisting that people obey the law as condition for salvation, he would end up with a rather empty heaven. So Almighty God rethought how to provide salvation for sinners, and then determined to send his only Son into the world to satisfy the demands God had laid out for all people. Christ, then, came to remove the hard hurdle of perfect obedience, and his doing so would give God opportunity to establish a more manageable hurdle for people. On the cross (said the Arminians) Christ actually did obey the law perfectly. With the initial hurdle now out of the way, God was free to organize a lower threshold for people to cross (see Figure 2.3). The lower hurdle God settled upon was faith. And fallen people—only injured as they are—are quite able to believe.

*Grace*, then (said the Arminians), is that God gave Christ to remove the first hurdle between God and people—all people. That, they say, is what Paul means when he says that we are saved “*by grace*.”



With this thought in mind, Error 5 now is clear (see sidebar). “*All men have been received into a state of reconciliation and into the covenant of grace,*” the Arminians taught. No one is still stuck behind the first hurdle and so trapped in condemnation. The phrase “*state of reconciliation*” did not mean that everyone is now on God’s side so as to actually be his children and heirs of life eternal. Rather, the phrase meant that everyone was restored to a neutral ground so that each person was free to tackle the lower, second hurdle. Being delivered from the need to satisfy the first hurdle, and so being set free to be able to decide upon the second hurdle, was—said the Arminians—the “*grace of God*” in Jesus Christ.

### *Rejection of Errors, 2.5*

**Error:** All men have been accepted into the state of reconciliation and into the grace of the covenant, so that no one is liable to condemnation on account of original sin, and no one shall be condemned because of it, but all are free from the guilt of original sin.

**Refutation:** This opinion is in conflict with Scripture, which teaches that *we were by nature objects of wrath* (Eph 2:3).

### *Rejection of Errors, 2.6*

**Error:** As far as God is concerned, he wished to bestow equally upon all people the benefits acquired by the death of Christ; however, some obtain the pardon of sin and eternal life and others do not. This distinction depends on their own free will, which applies itself to the grace that is offered indifferently, and not on the special gift of mercy which so powerfully works in them that they rather than others apply this grace to themselves.

**Refutation:** Those who teach this, misuse the difference between the acquisition and the application of salvation and confuse the minds of imprudent and inexperienced people. While they pretend to present this distinction in a sound sense, they seek to instil into the minds of people the pernicious poison of Pelagianism.

Please note carefully what is happening here. To the Arminian, the phrase “*grace*” describes something God did *in the past*, when he gave his Son to satisfy the demands of the hurdle of the law. All men have received this grace already and no longer need additional grace today.

That loading of the term “*grace*” also helps us understand what’s written in Error 6 (see sidebar): God’s “*grace . . . is offered indifferently,*” without discrimination, valid for the one person as much for the other. As the Error continues: “*As far as God is concerned, he*

*wished to bestow equally upon all people the benefits acquired by the death of Christ.”* What Christ accomplished is intended for all, so that no one needs to obey the law anymore in order to escape the just judgment of God; people need only to decide to believe. That deciding-to-believe, and so in fact believing, is the sinner’s own work as he exercises his free will.

When the fathers, though, dug into the Scriptures to figure out what the Bible means with the word *grace*, they learned that the term did not at all mean what the Arminians claimed it meant. Scripture uses the term to describe the undeserved goodness God displayed when he sent his Son to take on himself the infinite judgment sinners deserved (recall Figure 2.2). That grace received glorious expression some twenty centuries ago when Jesus Christ was crucified on Calvary’s cross for sin, and it receives continuing expression in the present as God applies the Saviour’s completed work to our accounts today. That is why the fathers spoke in Article 7 about “*grace*” as a *present* reality, and not simply as a work to be dated fully in the past. As the article refers to “*those who truly believe and are by the death of Christ freed from their sins and saved from perdition,*” it adds that “*this benefit comes only through God’s grace, given to them from eternity in Christ.*” “*Given*” refers to God’s action *today*, be it indeed that this grace is rooted in eternity and was displayed in an historical event some 2,000 years ago. The article adds, “*God owes this grace to no one*”—and again the reference is to God working with this grace *now*.

Unbelief is the sinner’s own fault because he willfully destroyed the tools God had given to enable him to believe. God in grace gave his only Son so that Christ Jesus might bear the burden of sin in our place. That is his grace—to which sinners need not and cannot contribute anything. We can only receive what he has given—and receiving it is his gracious work in our hearts. That’s why God is to be praised when any sinner comes to faith in him.

## ARTICLE 8

### The Efficacy of the Death of Christ

*For this was the most free counsel of God the Father, that the life-giving and saving efficacy of the most precious death of his Son should extend to all the elect. It was his most gracious will and intent to give to them alone justifying faith and thereby to bring them unfailingly to salvation. This means: God willed that Christ through the blood of the cross (by which he confirmed the new covenant)*

*should effectually redeem out of every people, tribe, nation, and tongue all those, and those only, who from eternity were chosen to salvation and were given to him by the Father. God further willed that Christ should give to them faith, which, together with other saving gifts of the Holy Spirit, he acquired for them by his death; that he should cleanse them by his blood from all sins, both original and actual, both those committed after faith and before faith; and that he should guard them faithfully to the end and at last present them to himself in splendour without any spot or wrinkle.*

Article 8 brings us to the heart of what the second chapter of the Canons of Dort is all about. You will recall the title of this chapter: “Christ’s Death and Man’s Redemption through It.” Article 8 confesses that the death of Christ actually accomplishes what God intended it to accomplish—and that’s the complete redemption of each one of those whom the Father had given to the Son. Christ’s work on the cross, in other words, is *effective*. That in turn is why the title can talk about the *efficacy* (the term means *effectiveness*) of the death of Christ.

## The Arminian Position

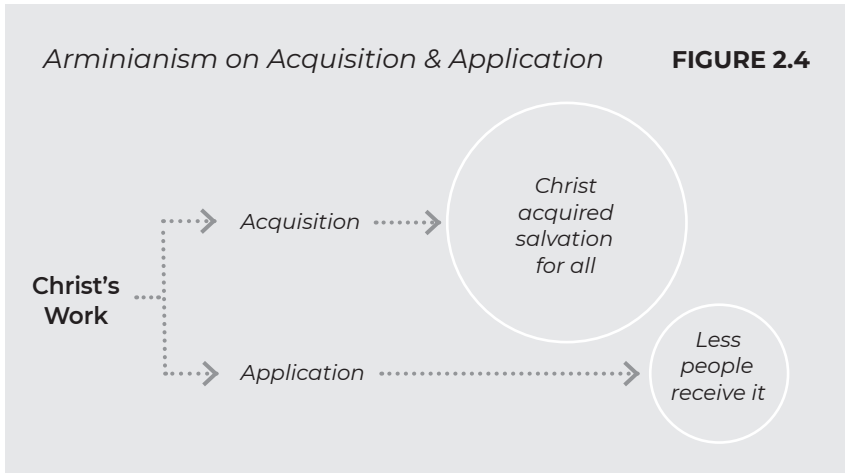
The Arminians did not agree. Christ, they said, came to clear away the hurdle of the Law so that God could replace it with a more manageable hurdle, namely faith (see Figure 2.3). Since all fallen people are able to manage the second hurdle, every person could in theory be saved. But the Arminians knew that not everybody would choose to believe, and so—they said—the circle of those who would end up being saved would actually be smaller than the circle of those for whom Christ died (see sidebar, Error 1). That is why in turn the

### *Rejection of Errors, 2.1*

**Error:** God the Father has ordained his Son to the death of the cross without a specific and definite decree to save any. What Christ obtained by his death might have been necessary, profitable, and valuable, and might remain in all its parts complete, perfect, and intact, even though the redemption he acquired had actually never been applied to any person.

**Refutation:** This doctrine is offensive to the wisdom of the Father and the merits of Jesus Christ and is contrary to Scripture. For our Saviour says: *I lay down my life for the sheep, and I know them* (Jn 10:15, 27). And the prophet Isaiah says concerning the Saviour: *when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand* (Is 53:10). Finally, this error contradicts the article of faith concerning the catholic Christian church.





Arminians made a distinction between the “acquisition” of salvation and its “application.” Figure 2.4 illustrates that the size of the two circles is not the same.

What, you ask, is the difference between acquisition and application? We well realize that buying (that’s acquiring) facial cream is a different thing than applying that cream. We also realize that not everybody who acquires (or buys) a tube of cream is actually going to use (or apply) the cream. I could even say: the circle of those who buy the cream may well be bigger than the circle of those who apply the cream. That’s real life.

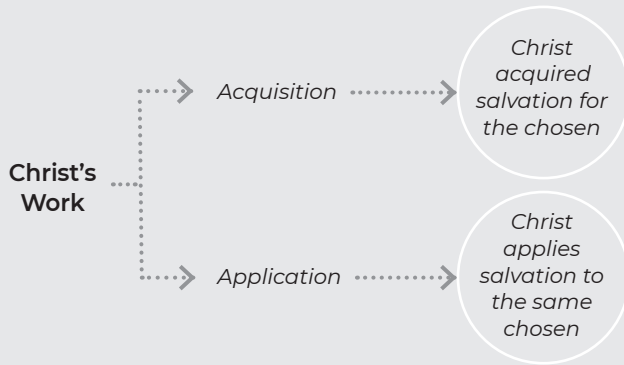
Well now, on the matter of salvation the Arminians said that Jesus Christ obtained (or acquired) salvation for *all* people, for his work on the cross removed the first hurdle for everybody so that everybody has a chance to tackle the second hurdle. But, they added, that does not mean that all people are actually going to make use of the salvation Jesus obtained for them—for some will choose not to believe, and so will not take a run at the second hurdle. It was nice that Jesus *acquired* the cream of salvation for all people, but people have the free will to *apply* this cream to themselves—and some will decline to do it.

The question now is: does the Bible allow us to separate *acquisition* and *application*, getting and using? The fathers at the Synod of Dort concluded that no, the Bible does not permit us to separate those two. Of course, we certainly need to distinguish between the two; getting cream is never the same as using the cream. In their response to Error 6 (see sidebar above), the fathers insisted that the Arminians “*misuse the difference*

*between the acquisition and the application of salvation.*” That conclusion arose from passages of Scripture as these:

- The angel told Joseph that Mary “*will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins*” (Matt. 1:21). Notice that Jesus did not come for all people but only for “*his people*.” The Arminians, then, are offside with this text when they say that Jesus came to acquire salvation for *all* people.
- In step with the angel’s announcement is Jesus’ word to his disciples, “*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. . . . My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand*” (John 10:11, 27, 28). With these words Christ teaches that he gave his life not for all sheep (the reference is to people, of course), but only for *his* sheep. Then he adds that every one of his sheep therefore has life. Here the circle of acquisition overlaps precisely the circle of application.
- Paul makes the same point when he describes the various links in the chain of salvation. “*Those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified*” (Rom. 8:29, 30). Notice how in Paul’s list the circle of those who are predestined to salvation overlaps precisely the circle of those who are called, and the circle of those who are called overlaps precisely the circle of those who are justified, and the circle of those who are justified overlaps precisely the circle of those who are glorified; each circle is the same size and covers the same territory. This passage would teach that those for whom Christ obtained salvation will all end up eventually receiving salvation—no more and no less.

Passages as these led the fathers at the Synod to insist that the circle of those for whom Jesus *acquired* salvation is identical in size and scope to the circle of those who *receive* salvation (see Figure 2.5). Christ’s work on the cross is so effective that he mightily *applies* to *all* the elect the glorious salvation he has obtained for them. Everyone whom the Father has given to him, and so for whom Jesus died, actually ends up being saved. To be more precise: Jesus does more than *acquire* the (cream of) salvation; he also *applies* this salvation, and applies it to *all* for whom he obtained it.

*Reformed on Acquisition & Application***FIGURE 2.5**

For us, *acquiring* and *applying* (cream) are two different activities that can easily be separated; for Jesus *acquiring* and *applying* (salvation) are two distinguishable activities that can never be separated.

Could it be otherwise? Jesus on Good Friday shed his blood to redeem the specific persons the Father had given to him. Through his sacrifice, he delivered these elect persons from Satan's bondage and reconciled them to God his Father. On Pentecost Day seven weeks later he poured out his Holy Spirit so that this Spirit might indwell these very same specific persons, cause them to be born again, renew them. Through this Spirit, then, these persons would be made to believe the gospel of Jesus' accomplishments on the cross and be renewed so as to no longer image Satan but image again their God and Father. Is it conceivable that Jesus would have his Spirit renew *fewer*, or perhaps *different*, persons than those for whom he shed his blood? The answer surely is so obvious. Those very people he loved enough that he would die for them surely are the obvious recipients of his Holy Spirit—no more and no less. As you cannot separate the two sides of one coin (though you certainly need to distinguish them), so you cannot separate the blood of Christ from the Spirit of Christ. Through his blood he *acquired* salvation, through his Spirit he *applies* salvation, and obviously the circle of two groups of necessity is identical.

That, of course, is deeply reassuring and comforting for the people of God. What Christ has obtained for me he does not ultimately leave to me to apply, but he will himself cause me to make it my own.

## ARTICLE 9

**The Fulfilment of God's Counsel**

*This counsel, proceeding from eternal love for the elect, has from the beginning of the world to the present time been powerfully fulfilled, and will also continue to be fulfilled, though the gates of hell vainly try to frustrate it. In due time the elect will be gathered together into one, and there will always be a church of believers, founded on the blood of Christ. This church shall steadfastly love and faithfully serve him as her Saviour (who as bridegroom for his bride laid down his life for her on the cross) and celebrate his praises here and through all eternity.*

The Arminians had said that the circle of those for whom Christ acquired salvation (to their mind that was everybody) is bigger than the circle of those who end up receiving salvation. In fact, since people can decide for themselves whether they will accept God's new condition for salvation (you need to have faith), they insisted that in theory it is possible that no one will embrace faith so that in turn God still ends up with an empty heaven. Similarly, they thought it in theory possible that in a given generation or century there would be no believers on earth. That being said, they felt that with the second hurdle in place it was less likely that heaven remain empty and a given generation have no believers than had the first hurdle remained in place.

The Scriptures taught the fathers at the Synod of Dort something rather different. The Bible promised that the New Jerusalem would most certainly be well populated and that there would be believers in every generation. Consider these promises:

- God had proclaimed in the Old Testament, "*I am God, and there is none like me, . . . saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose,' calling a bird of prey from the east, the man of my counsel from a far country. I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have purposed, and I will do it*" (Isa. 46:9–11). In the course of the years, God demonstrated that his counsel did stand and his purpose was accomplished, for he actually summoned Nebuchadnezzar from the east to function as a bird of prey upon Jerusalem. That's illustrative of the fact that God accomplishes whatever he intends to do. In relation to Jesus' work this means that God would certainly accomplish what God intended when he sent his Son to earth. God

did not send his Son to earth in the *hope* that some would believe and be saved (and so God could in theory be disappointed), but sent his Son to set in motion the salvation of particular people who actually would end up being saved.

- Paul repeats this thought many years later: “*In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will*” (Eph. 1:11). It is simply not possible for God’s plans to fail. He is too much *God* for that to happen.

On the basis of passages as these, the fathers at the Synod of Dort dared to say concerning the Arminian thought (you’ll remember: that heaven could be empty, or at least a given generation has no believers): “*This doctrine is offensive to the wisdom of the Father and the merits of Jesus Christ and is contrary to Scripture*” and “*This error contradicts the article of faith concerning the catholic Christian church*” (see sidebar above, Error 1). God’s plan to save a certain number of specific people shall invariably succeed, no matter how much Satan may rage.

With this conviction the fathers at the Synod embraced again what was already confessed in the Belgic Confession (Article 27; see sidebar). The “*one catholic or universal church . . . has existed from the beginning of the world and will be to the end, for Christ is an eternal King who cannot be without subjects.*” The church may certainly for a while “*look very small and as extinct in the eyes of man,*” but precisely because the triumphant Christ is an eternal king there will always be those whom the Father has given to the Son who will in turn acknowledge Christ’s kingship and obey him willingly. And that’s to say that there will always be a church. As the Heidelberg Catechism has it, “*The Son of God, out of the whole human race, from the beginning of*

### *Belgic Confession, Article 27*

We believe and profess one catholic or universal church, which is a holy congregation and assembly of the true Christian believers, who expect their entire salvation in Jesus Christ, are washed by his blood, and are sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit.

This church has existed from the beginning of the world and will be to the end, for Christ is an eternal King who cannot be without subjects. This holy church is preserved by God against the fury of the whole world, although for a while it may look very small and as extinct in the eyes of man. Thus during the perilous reign of Ahab, the Lord kept for himself seven thousand persons who had not bowed their knees to Baal.

*the world to its end, gathers, defends, and preserves for himself. . . a church chosen to everlasting life*" (Lord's Day 21). That scripturally based confession exposes the lie in the Arminian error.

It is certainly true that Satan attacks the Lord's church-gathering work strongly. "*Woe to you, O earth and sea,*" pronounced the loud voice from heaven, "*for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!*" (Rev. 12:12). Peter gave a similar warning: "*Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour*" (1 Peter 5:8). Satan's attacks can also be subtle, for the devil (the term means "deceiver") "*disguises himself as an angel of light*" (2 Cor. 11:14) in an effort to persuade his hearers that he speaks truth. It is certainly possible, then, that Satan can have his servants on the church's pulpits proclaiming a word that sounds like the truth but is in fact a perversion of the truth. Preachers in the school of Arminius would serve as living examples to the first readers of the Canons of Dort. Those readers could, however, be encouraged with the lesson of Scripture that "*the gates of hell vainly try to frustrate*" the Lord's efforts. His counsel shall stand; he will preserve his own no matter the nature of Satan's attacks.

That confidence is so scriptural. "*If God is for us, who can be against us?*" The apostle belts out his answer with confidence: "*He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies.*" The church and the saints may experience hateful attacks from the devil, the world, and their own flesh, but no "*tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword*" shall be able to "*separate us from the love of Christ.*" So the saints throughout the ages have dared to sing triumphantly, "*In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us*" (see Rom. 8:31–37).

With gratitude, then, we read John's vision concerning "*a great multitude*" who had been through "*the great tribulation,*" all on the last day

### Lord's Day 21.54

#### **What do you believe concerning the holy catholic Christian church?**

I believe that the Son of God, out of the whole human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, defends, and preserves for himself, by his Spirit and Word, in the unity of the true faith, a church chosen to everlasting life.

And I believe that I am and forever shall remain a living member of it.

“standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes” (see Rev. 7:9, 14). This is the church, triumphant in the face of Satan’s rage, because of the victory of the Lamb.

Could it be otherwise? God’s very *Godness* dictates that his eternal counsel will definitely work out in the course of time. So “*this church shall steadfastly love and faithfully serve him as her Saviour (who as a bridegroom for his bride laid down his life for her on the cross) and celebrate his praises here and through all eternity.*”

## Questions for Discussion:

6. People respond differently to the preaching of the gospel.
  - a. Why is it that some people respond with unbelief? Whose responsibility is that?
  - b. The Christian hears the gospel repeatedly. Does the Christian have a responsibility to keep responding positively to the gospel? Or is his initial coming to faith sufficient for the rest of his life? Why (not)?
  - c. The Arminians insisted that it was cold and cruel to teach that only the elect can respond to the gospel with faith. How do you feel about that position? And how would you answer that accusation?
  - d. Does the responsibility God gave the human race to respond to the gospel with faith *clash* with the doctrine of God’s sovereign election? Explain your answer.
7. Article 6 had focused on the response of unbelief, while Article 7 now highlights the response of faith.
  - a. Who receives the credit when someone responds to the preaching with faith? Given the responsibility mentioned in Article 6, do you think this is fair? Explain your answer.
  - b. What did the Arminians mean with the phrase “by grace”? What is the scriptural meaning of that phrase? Which position offers its adherents the most comfort, and why?
8. Christ’s death accomplished what God intended it to accomplish.
  - a. What is meant by the word “efficacy” in Article 8?
  - b. What is the difference between “acquisition” and “application”? Is it acceptable to separate “acquisition” from “application” when it comes to Christ’s work on the cross? Prove it.

- c.** Why did the Arminians separate “acquisition” from “application”?
- 9.** God always accomplishes his purposes.

  - a.** In the Arminian way of thinking, why could heaven potentially be (nearly) empty? Is there any comfort in that line of thought? What does the Scripture say on this point?
  - b.** Why can the gates of hell not destroy the church of God? Can Satan tear you from the church? Why do you answer as you do? Is there comfort here for you in the midst of life’s struggles?