

# Chapter One

## **DIVINE ELECTION AND REPROBATION**

### **Introduction**

A couple of pages back, I printed the five articles or statements of faith that the followers of Arminius had compiled in 1610. They certainly weren't easy reading, but they sure generated considerable controversy at the time. To settle the controversy, the Synod of Dort, 1618–1619, examined these five articles in the light of God's Word, and supplied a considered response. This response is the document we today call the Canons of Dort. Since the first article of the Arminian statement concerned itself with God's eternal decree about man's salvation, Chapter 1 of the Canons of Dort gives the scriptural teaching on this same topic. That's why the first chapter of the Canons (called a "head of doctrine") carries the title "Divine Election and Reprobation."

No, it's not easy to get a handle on what the Arminians were saying in their first article. I found it helpful to cut out a lot of verbiage, so that a bare bones sentence emerged. Then we get this: "*We believe that God . . . determined . . . to save . . . those . . . who . . . shall believe . . . and persevere.*"

Now consider: would you say this sentence captures what the Lord God has revealed in Holy Scripture? Read it again. It says that God, back before he created the world, looked (so to speak) into the future, saw that certain persons were going to believe in him, decided that the act of believing would be the criteria one had to satisfy to be saved, and so settled on saving those specific persons who would believe in him. Chronologically, then, things happen in this order:

1. A particular person decides to believe,
2. Then God decides to make *believing* the criteria needed for salvation, and
3. Then God determines to save that (future) believer.

That is what the Arminians say: *we believe God determined to save*

*those who shall believe and persevere.* Well now, is that what the Lord revealed in the Bible? For that matter, what actually *is* God’s decree of election?

The fathers felt that before they could describe what election was and who benefitted from it, they first had to cover some essential preliminary matters. After all, all talk about election makes no sense if election isn’t necessary. So Article 1 details first what the Bible says is the problem that makes election necessary.

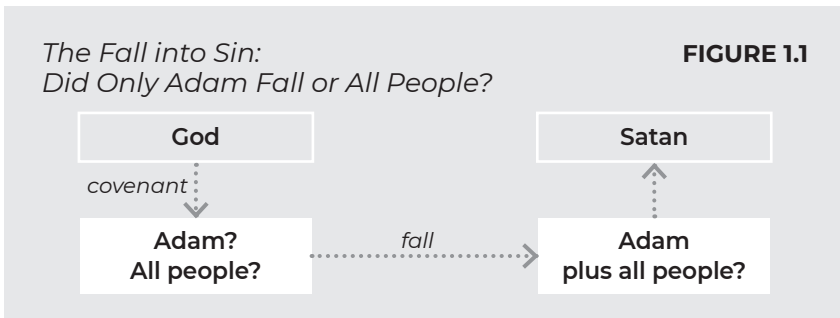
## ARTICLE 1

### All Mankind Condemnable Before God

*Since all men have sinned in Adam, lie under the curse, and deserve eternal death, God would have done no one an injustice if it had been his will to leave the whole human race in sin and under the curse, and to condemn it on account of its sin, according to these words of the apostle: so that . . . the whole world may be held accountable to God. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom 3:19, 23); and, the wages of sin is death (Rom 6:23).*

When God created Adam, he immediately established a bond of love with him, commonly known as the *covenant*. Adam would be God’s child and God promised to be his Father. In his care for Adam, God placed him in a delightful Paradise, and so supplied all Adam’s needs; he was *God* for Adam. The relationship was a privilege no creature deserved.

Through Adam’s rebellion at the fall into sin, he rejected God’s covenant with him. With that decision he implicitly chose to join the side of God’s enemy Satan (see Figure 1.1). God would be very much in the right to leave Adam in Satan’s bondage.



The question arises: did Adam alone at the fall move from God's side to Satan's side, or did the entire human race join Satan? You will recall that Pelagius had said that at the fall into sin only Adam and Eve became evil; their (eventual) children did not. To our minds there is solid logic to that position. We'd find it morally wrong to imprison children for transgressions their parents commit. Inasmuch as only Adam and Eve were in the Garden and ate of the forbidden tree, it seems to us crystal clear that it's most unfair that Adam and Eve's children would end up on Satan's side on account of the parents' rebellion. Surely, we feel, a righteous God would never do that.

We need to bear in mind that Adam (together with his wife over whom he was head) *was* the entire human race at the time. His action was the action of *mankind*. When God made his covenant with Adam (and his wife), he did not establish a bond of love with Adam-as-an-individual so that God would make another covenant with any child that might come along; rather, God's covenant with Adam was a covenant made with *mankind*, so that his bond of love initially expressed to Adam pertained to all humanity, including the wife God gave to Adam, and every child who would eventually be born to this couple.

Since God made his covenant with the human race in its entirety, Adam's transgression in Paradise both *affects* the whole human race and is the *responsibility* of the whole human race. The action of a head of state (the prime minister, for example) to declare war on another country does not mean that only the prime minister is now at war, but that the entire nation for whom he speaks is at war—and hence is justified target for enemy attacks. In similar manner, the decision of Adam to rebel against God and side with Satan makes the whole human race responsible for sinning. Paul put it like this in Romans 5:12: “*just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned.*” Adam, Paul says, was not the only transgressor, but in the Garden *all* mankind sinned. In the beginning the entire human race (that's Adam as the head and in him all humanity) was on God's side and so included in his covenant with Adam, but in the fall the *whole* human race (again, that's Adam as the head and in him all humanity) turned its back on God and joined Satan. That's why God did not place Cain or Abel or any of Adam and Eve's children back into Paradise, but left them in the fallen world. He considers each person born over the centuries responsible for their own sinfulness.

We try to understand how that is fair. Can you really hold responsible a person who wasn't even present, let alone born yet? Actually, it's this very same riddle that gets to the heart of our salvation. A few verses after Paul wrote the text I just quoted above, he drew a parallel between our link with Adam and our union with Christ. *"Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience the many will be made righteous"* (Rom. 5:18, 19). Just as our union with Adam made us share in his condemnation when he sinned, so we in union with Christ are partakers of the righteousness Christ obtained on the cross. Says Paul a few verses later, *"Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his"* (Rom. 6:3–5). My union with Christ means that when he died, I died; when he rose, I rose; because he lives, I live. I can't grasp how I was present with Christ on the cross on Good Friday, and I can't fathom either how I was buried with him 2,000 years ago and on Easter Sunday raised with him. But the apostle says it is so, and is even foundational to my salvation. To reject this link on the grounds that I'm inclined to reject my link with Adam in Paradise is to jeopardize my salvation itself—and I do not want to do that! So I humbly accept what the Scripture says about my involvement with Adam—though my little mind cannot begin to grasp how my union with Adam implies my condemnation.

So we acknowledge what Scripture teaches: on account of our own deliberate disobedience in the beginning, each of us is now on Satan's side, and thus rightly deserving of God's wrath and his judgment. I can never rightly argue that God is unfair in punishing any sinner. It is critical that we embrace this notion if we are to accept what the fathers at the Synod of Dort said in Article 1 over against the Arminians, *"Since all men have sinned in Adam, lie under the curse, and deserve eternal death, God would have done injustice to no one if he had willed to leave the whole human race in sin and under the curse, and to condemn it on account of its sin."* The concept basic to the Christian faith—and so to the Canons in their efforts to defend this faith—is that my sinfulness is my own fault, and so I fully deserve God's judgment.

## ARTICLE 2

### The Sending of the Son of God

*But in this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world (1 Jn 4:9), that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life (Jn 3:16).*

Before the fall into sin God visited Adam and Eve habitually in the Garden. That's clear from the fact that Adam and Eve recognized the sound of his coming to them after the fall into sin and in turn fled to hide among the trees (Gen. 3:8). It's marvellous enough that almighty, holy God would visit with finite creatures; it's an altogether more marvellous thing that he would visit them again after their blatant rebellion against him! God, after all, is *"of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong* (Hab. 1:13). At the moment of his coming to them, then, Adam and Eve ought to have perished.

That, however, is not what happened. Instead of destroying them through an order of de-creation the moment he approached them, holy God instead—O marvel of marvels!—sought out the terrified sinners hiding from him! *"The LORD God called to the man and said to him, 'Where are you?'"* (Gen. 3:9). This is mercy beyond comprehension: sovereign, holy God reached out to fallen man in order to save! The Belgic Confession had put the matter in moving terms: *"When [God] saw that man had . . . made himself completely miserable, our gracious God . . . set out to seek man when he trembling fled from him"* (see sidebar). This is precisely the material of Article 2. Just as Adam and Eve did not reach out to God but God reached out to them, so it is not we today who reach out to God but God who reaches out to us. This evidence from Genesis 3 (echoed in Article 17 of the Belgic Confession) is a loud condemnation of Arminianism.

John 3:16 also emphatically stresses that salvation is God's sovereign and gracious gift. *"For God so loved the [fallen] world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever*

#### *Belgic Confession Article 17*

We believe that, when he saw that man had thus plunged himself into physical and spiritual death and made himself completely miserable, our gracious God in his marvellous wisdom and goodness set out to seek man when he trembling fled from him. He comforted him with the promise that he would give him *his Son, born of woman* (Gal 4:4), to crush the head of the serpent and to make man blessed.

*believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*” Those words make plain that salvation is not people asking God for help, but God graciously providing help. Again, in 1 John 4:9, 10 we read that “*God sent*” and “*God loved.*” “*In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.*” Clearly, Article 2 accurately echoes Scripture when it confesses, “*But in this the love of God was made manifest, that he sent his only Son into the world.*”

When we place Articles 1 and 2 side by side, and notice their contrasting contents, we come to see the powerful gospel they confess. Though mankind willfully rebelled against him, God’s response was to freely give his Son for the benefit of rebels. How amazingly merciful is the God of our salvation! No wonder the fathers were convinced this was a gospel worth defending!

## ARTICLE 3

### The Preaching of the Gospel

*So that men may be brought to faith, God mercifully sends heralds of this most joyful message to whom he will and when he wills. By their ministry men are called to repentance and to faith in Christ crucified. For how will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? (Rom 10:14–15).*

Article 2 had ended with a reference to the need to believe in God’s Son in order to receive salvation. Article 3 builds on this essential role of faith by pursuing the question of where faith comes from. Perhaps we ought to pause for a moment to consider why God requires faith. Why would painting your nose not be sufficient for salvation? Or why would handwriting the fundamentals of the doctrine of redemption on a bracelet and wearing that on your wrist not be sufficient? This question gets us to the heart of what faith is.

Faith is not simply having a set of Christian truths straight in your head—even if it is the central fact of God graciously sending his Son to redeem us from our fall into sin. Rather, the result of knowing how much God gave to

save lost sinners prompts the action of entrusting yourself to this God so that his will becomes important and decisive for you in every step you take day by day. It's what the Bible calls "*walking with God*" (Gen. 5:22, 24). For faith is *action*. That's why Hebrews 11—that chapter so well known because of its list of so-called heroes of faith—includes so many action words: "*by faith Abel offered*," "*by faith Noah . . . built*," "*by faith Abraham obeyed*," etc.

If this, then, is what faith (= believing) looks like, how can we get this faith? In Article 3 the fathers echoed the answer of Scripture with their quote from Romans 10:14, 15: "*How are they to believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?*" The Lord has ordained the hearing of the gospel as the means he would (commonly) use to bring a sinner to faith. For that reason the Lord God continually sends preachers to "*whom he wills and when he wills*" with the mandate to preach to sinners to good news of his glorious work in Jesus Christ.

Acts 16 gives a vivid illustration of the fact that God determines when, where, and to whom his gospel is preached. At a given moment in his missionary travels, the apostle Paul wanted to go north to preach the gospel in Asia. But he could not carry out his plans, for he (and his team) was "*forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia*" (Acts 16:6). We're not told how the Spirit restrained Paul from going to Asia—if he used the weather, political circumstances, ill health, or some other means. Somehow, though, the Spirit made it clear to Paul that he was not to go north, and so the apostle continued his travels to the west. When he came to the sea at Troas, God showed him a vision to the effect that Paul had to cross the water to Macedonia. "*When Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them*" (Acts 16:10). Paul accordingly boarded a ship for the district of Macedonia, and came to the city of Philippi.

Why did God close the road to Asia, and instead lead Paul to Philippi? God did so because he wanted to save Lydia. "*One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul*" (Acts 16:14). By God's decree, Lydia needed to come to faith at this point in time. She, therefore, now needed the preaching of the gospel, and so God directed his preacher's path to Philippi. In step with this scriptural given, Article 3 says that God sends his servants "*to whom he will and when he wills*." This does not mean that the gospel should never go to Asia (it later did); the point is that the gospel would go wherever God wants it to go at the time of his choosing.

This makes for a remarkable thought. Why are *we* allowed to receive the preaching of the gospel? We could simply attribute this to circumstances; we're at the right place at the right time. But that answer is not sufficient. We hear the preaching of the gospel because *God* sends his Word of redemption via servants of his choosing to people of his choosing at a time of his appointment. As Lydia heard and heeded the gospel because of God's interest in her, so it is with you and me! This is an exciting marvel: that I actually hear and heed the preaching is evidence of God's interest in and care for me! How encouraging is that!

With their clear appeal to Scripture in Article 3, the fathers at the Synod of Dort showed the error of a particular Arminian teaching. The error they exposed is recorded in Article 9 of the Rejection of Errors attached to Chapter 1 of the Canons (see sidebar). The error was that God would send his gospel to one people rather than to another because the receivers of the gospel were better and worthier than those who did not receive the gospel. The fathers at the Synod rejected this as being contrary to Scripture, for Scripture teaches that God chose particular persons on the basis of his good pleasure and not because any people were worthy—as the quotes from Deuteronomy 10:14, 15 and Matthew 11:21 make clear. Though God could have picked any people of the globe to be his own, he determined for reasons of his own good pleasure to choose Israel alone. Similarly, Chorazin and Bethsaida, two Jewish cities where Jesus preached, rejected his preaching, while the heathen cities of Tyre and Sidon would (said Jesus) certainly have believed his word if he had preached there. The point is simple: irrespective of how good a people were, the Lord sovereignly determined for Christ to go not to Tyre and Sidon, but to Chorazin and Bethsaida.

### *Rejection of Errors, 1.9*

**Error:** God sends the gospel to one people rather than to another not merely and solely because of the good pleasure of his will, but because one people is better and worthier than another to which the gospel is not preached.

**Refutation:** Moses denies this when he addresses the people of Israel as follows: *Behold, to the LORD your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it. Yet the LORD set his heart on your fathers and chose their offspring after them, you above all peoples, as it is today* (Deut. 10:14, 15). And Christ says, *Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes* (Matt. 11:21).

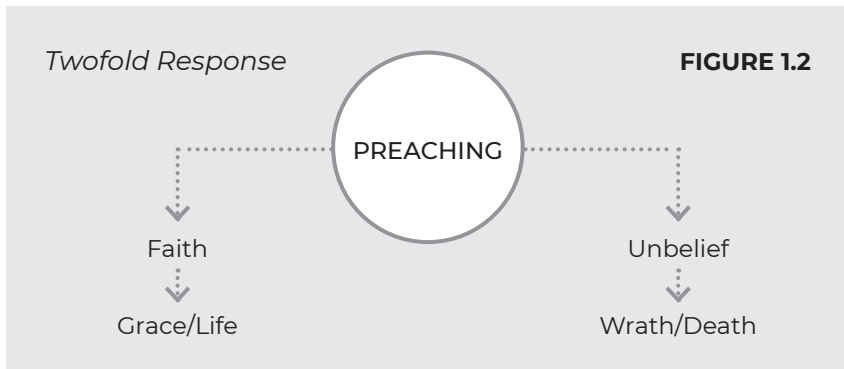


## ARTICLE 4

### A Twofold Outcome

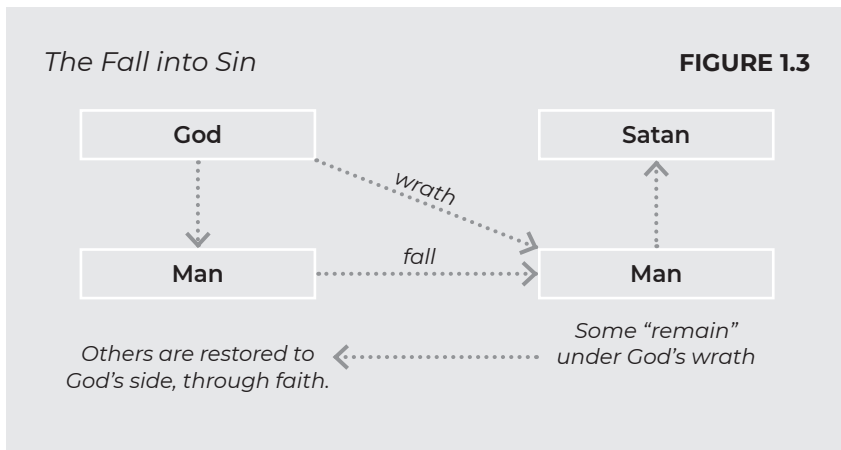
*The wrath of God remains upon those who do not believe this gospel. But those who receive it and embrace Jesus the Saviour with a true and living faith are delivered by him from the wrath of God and from destruction, and are given eternal life.*

The Lord causes the gospel to be preached to an audience of his choosing. This preaching has a twofold result (Figure 1.2): there are those who accept the Word as true (they believe it), and there are those who reject the truth of what they hear (they don't believe it).



The wrath of God *remains* on those who respond with unbelief. The word “remains” is essential here. Through our willful disobedience against God at the fall into sin, the human race rejected God’s bond of love with us and instead joined Satan’s side. Predictably, just and holy God responded to our rebellion with his righteous wrath, leaving us to taste for ourselves what life under Satan’s bondage is like (Figure 1.3). That judgment *remains*, in this life and the life to come, as long as we continue to reject the gospel of salvation. That judgment *increases* for those who hear the gospel of grace in Jesus Christ but reject it. As Jesus put it, “*Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more*” (Luke 12:48).

On the other hand, those who embrace as true the proclamation of the gospel receive from God the gift of forgiveness of sins and life eternal. The reconciliation Christ accomplished through his sacrifice on the cross



is applied to them so that they are no longer enemies of God and subject to his wrath, but are restored to God's side. The details of how this works will come up for discussion later in the Canons. For now it is enough to note that this—believing the gospel you hear—is the only way to escape the righteous wrath of God.

This reality speaks of the need for preaching and of its power. Using the voice to proclaim the Word of redemption may seem so weak; surely, we feel, there are better means in our technologically advanced society to confront people with the gospel of Jesus Christ. But God has been pleased to use the Word to work faith—even as he used the word of his mouth in the beginning to create this world. That Word is always effective, and brings about what God determines should happen. Concerning that Word, God himself declared that *“it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose”* (Isa. 55:11). So we need to dare to see both the resulting faith as well as the resulting hardening in unbelief as fruits of the preaching of the Word.

## ARTICLE 5

### The Cause of Unbelief, the Source of Faith

*The cause or guilt for this unbelief, as well as for all other sins, is by no means in God, but rather in man. Faith in Jesus Christ and salvation through him, however, is the free gift of God, as it is written: For by grace you have been saved, through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God (Eph 2:8). Similarly: For*

it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake (*Phil 1:29*).

In Article 4 we confessed that the one person responds to the preaching with acceptance and faith, while the other responds with rejection and unbelief. Why do people respond differently to the preaching?

## The Cause of Unbelief

The Bible teaches that the person who responds to the preaching with unbelief may only blame himself. God once made the entire human race able to hear his Word and able always to accept exactly what God said. Through our rebellion against God with Adam and Eve in the beginning, however, each of us made ourselves deaf to God's Word, and so hard-hearted that we could not accept it. When I, then, today refuse to believe the gospel, I illustrate that I am at heart rebellious against God and prefer to be on Satan's side. The cause of my unbelief lies within me.

The Holy Scripture repeatedly lays the blame for man's unwillingness to believe on man himself. Consider the following passages:

- Isaiah 30:9 says, "*they are a rebellious people, lying children, children unwilling to hear the instruction of the LORD.*" Notice the use of the word "unwilling." The term implies that Israel's unbelief was not due to particular political, financial, or domestic hindrances, but rather to the people's choosing not to hear.
- Luke 13:34 records Jesus' assessment of the people of Jerusalem: "*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!*" That the people of Jerusalem rejected Jesus' proclamation of the gospel of redemption was not due to, say, a lack in Jesus' presentation of the gospel, but was because the people simply did not want it.
- Jesus tells the Jews in John 5:39, 40, "*You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.*" Jesus' use of the phrase "*you refuse*" is telling of his divine analysis of why the Jews rejected him.

Passages as these point up that anyone's refusal to believe God's Word is his own choice. Unbelief is never a matter of "I can't believe," but always a matter of "I *won't* believe."

## Doesn't the Lord harden?

But, we wonder, if the Lord God is Almighty, isn't it ultimately *he* who prevents some people from believing? In fact, doesn't the Bible plainly say that "*the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart*"? (Ex. 11:10) And doesn't that in turn mean that God cannot rightly hold Pharaoh responsible for his unbelief? More, what are we to do with Paul's word: God "*has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills*" (Rom. 9:18)?

It is undoubtedly true that the LORD punished Pharaoh through hardening his heart. Yet God's hardening Pharaoh's heart does not mean that Pharaoh no longer had responsibility for his hardening. Pharaoh, we need to remember, was not on some neutral ground so that he could freely choose right or wrong; rather, through his fall with Adam and Eve in the beginning, he (like the rest of us) had joined Satan's side. On Satan's side Pharaoh delighted only in imaging Satan, not in obeying God. As the Bible puts it, he lived in the passions of his flesh, carrying out the desires of his body and mind, and was by nature a child of wrath, like the rest of mankind (see Eph. 2:3). He was a slave to sin (Rom. 6:16, 17), and God simply left him the freedom to do what came naturally to him. So Pharaoh resisted the lessons the previous plagues (and perhaps his advisers) pressed on him, namely, to let God's people out of Egypt as fast as possible. We'll need to speak more about the interplay between God's sovereignty and man's responsibility in another place.

## The Source of Faith

It would seem logical to us that if the fault for unbelief lies with us, the credit for believing God's Word ought also to lie with us. But that's not the picture of Scripture. Indeed, it cannot be, for as a slave to Satan—that's what every person is as a result of our fall into sin—I can do only what's rebellious in God's eyes. The apostle puts it clearly in Ephesians 2: all people "*were dead in . . . trespasses and sins*" (v. 1). But, he continues, "*God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved*" (vv. 4, 5). He repeats this delightful work of God in verse 8: "*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.*" It could not be clearer: when I respond to the preaching of God's Word with faith, it is only fitting that I get on my knees and thank God for his wonderful gift. Who am I that *he* should work faith in my heart! All the credit and the praise for my faith belong to him alone.

## Conclusion

Article 1 had painted a bleak picture of humanity, myself included. After making this confession (in the face of the Arminians' positive concept of mankind), our fathers drew attention to *God*. God came to us to save the lost, even when we did not want God. To accomplish our salvation, God once sent his Son (Article 2), and over the years continues to send preachers to proclaim his gospel of salvation (Article 3). The preaching receives a twofold response: some believe it, some do not (Article 4). Whereas unbelief is caused solely by man's unwillingness to believe (here is again the depravity of Article 1), the source of faith is God's free and gracious gift (Article 5). So the emphasis in Articles 2–5 is on what *God* is doing.

Such an emphasis is not merely characteristic of Reformed thinking, but is *fundamental* to biblical thought. Our focus is never to be on people (whether on what they think or say or do), but always to be on *God*—for the world exists for God's glory and praise. Salvation and the faith needed for salvation are God's free gifts to people who rebelled against him, and so all praise is to be directed to him.

In fact, that salvation is his plan and his initiative and his work is so very encouraging for sinful people—for “*the LORD will fulfill his purpose for me*” (Ps. 138:8). This glorious gospel will require our full attention in Chapter 5 of the Canons of Dort.

## Questions for Discussion:

1. There are many people in this world (perhaps “good” to human understanding, perhaps “evil”) who, through no fault of their own, die without ever having heard the good news of Jesus Christ. That raises a number of questions:
  - a. Would you think these people go to heaven or to hell? Explain your answer.
  - b. If their eternal destiny is hell, doesn't that make God out to be cold and harsh and unfeeling? Are you happy to worship such a God?
  - c. How do you feel about being told that *you* are responsible for your own sinfulness? Explain your answer. What's the biblical argument for insisting that *you are* responsible?

- d.** Would it make any difference to salvation if we argued that our depravity was not our own fault? If yes, explain that difference.
- 2.** Article 2 says that God sent his Son to save sinners from Satan's side and restore them to God's side.
  - a.** Why can't you crawl your own way back to God's side? Or buy or fight your way back? Or get a piggyback ride with an esteemed parent?
  - b.** Prove from Genesis 3 that God, not man, initiates salvation. Find other evidence from Scripture that gives the same message.
- 3.** God sends his most joyful message "to whom he will and when he wills."
  - a.** You and I are among those in this world who have come to hear the gospel. What does that say about God's interest in us? What encouragement follows from this?
  - b.** What would God want us to do with the Word he's given to us? What are your Bible reading habits? Justify why your habits are as they are.
- 4.** Article 4 says there are two *responses* to the preaching, belief and unbelief.
  - a.** Would sitting on the fence, making no decision, be a third option? Why or why not?
  - b.** Is *your* response to the preaching faith or unbelief? If you say faith, how do you know?? If you say unbelief, how do you know? If you say you don't know, would that put you in the camp of the believers or the unbelievers?
- 5.** Article 5 appears to contain an unhappy tension, for it says that blame for unbelief belongs with the sinner while credit for believing belongs to God.
  - a.** Is it right to assume that we stand on neutral ground before God so that we have as much likelihood to respond to the gospel with faith as with unbelief? Explain your answer.
  - b.** Explain why the blame for unbelief belongs to the sinner.
  - c.** Explain why the credit for believing belongs to God.

## ARTICLE 6

### God's Eternal Decree

*That God in time confers the gift of faith on some, and not on others, proceeds from his eternal decree. For he knows all his works from eternity, and he works all things according to the counsel of his will” (Eph 1:11). According to this decree he graciously softens the hearts of the elect, no matter how hard they may be, and inclines them to believe; those not elected, however, he leaves in their own wickedness and hardness by a just judgment. And here especially is disclosed to us the profound, merciful, and at the same time just distinction between men equally worthy of condemnation, or that decree of election and reprobation which has been revealed in God’s Word. Although perverse, impure, and unstable men twist this decree to their own destruction, it provides unspeakable comfort for holy and God-fearing souls.*

The first five articles of Chapter 1 of the Canons of Dort stressed very much the deeds of the Lord God, as Table 1.1 makes clear. *God* sent a Saviour to the lost, and God lets his Word be preached to the lost, and God works faith in the lost. Article 6

tells us now that all these deeds are rooted in God’s *decree* of election, with the subsequent articles drawing out further details about this decree.

Art 1	• God is not compelled to save any
Art 2	• God sends a Saviour
Art 3	• God sends preachers of the gospel
Art 4/5	• God works faith

God’s decree concerning the salvation of sinners reflects God’s total *sovereignty*. By a word of command, Almighty God called this world into existence, and by this same power he keeps this world existing and directs all that happens in it, past, present, and future. Consider the following bits of biblical data:

- After Joseph revealed himself to his brothers in Egypt, he told them, “*And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life*” (Gen. 45:5).

Joseph was of course very aware that his brothers had cast him into that pit and sold him to the Midianite traders so many years ago. But he acknowledged that behind their misdeed was God's mighty hand; this God sovereignly controlled even the jealousies between brothers and the activities of slave traders.

- God says concerning Assyria (the world power of the day) and its king, Sennacherib, "*Woe to Assyria, the rod of my anger; the staff in their hands is my fury! Against a godless nation I send him, and against the people of my wrath I command him, to take spoil and seize plunder, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets. But he does not so intend, and his heart does not so think; but it is in his heart to destroy, and to cut off nations not a few*" (Isa. 10:5–7). The Lord's point is that Sennacherib together with his army were but tools in God's sovereign hands to do only what he determined for them to do. Undoubtedly this angle would not have received coverage in the news reports of the day, but God would want Israel to know that the media's perspective does not constitute ultimate reality.
- The apostle Peter says to the Jews concerning Jesus, "*Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men*" (Acts 2:22, 23). His point is clear: behind the Jews' decision to crucify Jesus was the mighty hand of God.

If God, now, decreed what would happen at slave markets and in world politics and even in kangaroo courts, would he not also have determined who would be saved? I cannot on the one hand embrace the confession of Lord's Day 10 of the Heidelberg Catechism about God's providence (see sidebar), and on the other hand insist that salvation is in the final analysis up to me. It's one or the other: all things are in God's hand, or they are not. The Bible's insistence is that all things are in his sovereign control, and by definition that includes the determination of who shall receive eternal life. The doctrine of divine election is part and parcel of the doctrine of God's providence.

In fact, God is very clear in Holy Scripture that he decides who shall be saved. The apostle Paul writes about "*having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will*" (Eph. 1:11). The apostle clarifies that God's decree of predestination



*Lord's Day 10***What do you understand by the providence of God?**

God's providence is his almighty and ever present power, whereby, as with his hand, he still upholds heaven and earth and all creatures, and so governs them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, indeed all things, come not by chance but by his fatherly hand.

**What does it benefit us to know that God has created all things and still upholds them by his providence?**

We can be patient in adversity, thankful in prosperity, and with a view to the future we can have a firm confidence in our faithful God and Father that no creature shall separate us from his love; for all creatures are so completely in his hand that without his will they cannot so much as move.

was established already before the creation of the world: “*even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world*” (1:4). We find it hard to grasp: before he created this world God had determined which lost sinners he would take back to his side. How amazing! That means that before God created the world he already had his eye on my generation, and determined that I should be among those who are saved! That’s astounding! What majesty characterizes this God!

Article 6 echoes those words from Ephesians 1:11 when it confesses, “*That God in time confers the gift of faith on some, and not on others, proceeds from his eternal decree.*” That’s where salvation begins: God has determined whom he would save, and so as the years go by, he causes his ancient decree to become reality in this world.

Sovereignly he softens the hearts of some, but others he rightly leaves in their hardness—and he does that on the basis of his eternal decree. That’s Article 6: “*According to this decree he graciously softens the hearts of the elect, no matter how hard they may be, and inclines them to believe; those not elected, however, he leaves in their own wickedness and hardness by a just judgment.*” This article does not explain how God does this softening or this leaving, because that matter comes back in later articles.

The thought that *God* is at work makes predestination and election an exciting concept. To use the words of Article 6, “*it provides unspeakable comfort for holy and God-fearing souls.*” The point is simply that the work God has begun will necessarily come to perfect completion—for God never changes his mind or leaves a job half done. It’s the conviction of the psalmist: “*The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever*” (Ps. 138:8). “Unspeakable comfort,” indeed!

I grant that we are inclined to speculate much about the doctrine of election. Let's realize, however, that the Lord did not reveal this doctrine merely for us to study or to puzzle about; he revealed it, rather, to comfort our souls. Instead of intellectualizing this doctrine, let us permit this part of God's revelation to comfort and encourage us in life's struggles and questions. Better put: instead of getting bogged down in the questions this doctrine raises, let's delight in the God who is working out our salvation.

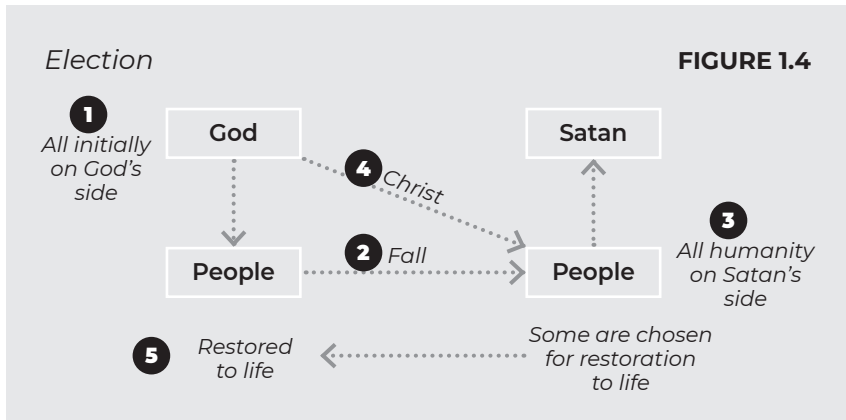
## ARTICLE 7

### **Election Defined**

*Election is the unchangeable purpose of God whereby, before the foundation of the world, out of the whole human race, which had fallen by its own fault out of its original integrity into sin and perdition, he has, according to the sovereign good pleasure of his will, out of mere grace, chosen in Christ to salvation a definite number of specific persons, neither better nor more worthy than others, but involved together with them in a common misery. He has also from eternity appointed Christ to be the Mediator and Head of all the elect and the foundation of salvation and thus he decreed to give to Christ those who were to be saved, and effectually to call and draw them into his communion through his Word and Spirit. He decreed to give them true faith in him, to justify them, to sanctify them, and, after having powerfully kept them in the fellowship of his Son, finally to glorify them, for the demonstration of his mercy and the praise of the riches of his glorious grace. As it is written: God chose us in Christ, before the creation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved (Eph 1:4–6). And elsewhere, those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified (Rom 8:30).*

That definition of election is quite the mouthful! To get to the core of what election is, we can trim some of the descriptive verbiage from the opening sentence of this article, and then we're left with this working definition: "*Election is the unchangeable purpose of God whereby . . . he has . . . chosen in Christ to salvation a definite number of . . . persons.*"

The assumption behind this article is that the entire human population was in such a bad place that it needed “salvation,” and only those would receive it who would be “chosen” thereto. The reference, of course, is to the misery resulting from the fall into sin, when we had joined Satan and so became by nature his slaves (see Figure 1.4). Since Satan is a cruel master, we experienced on his side the holy wrath of the God against whom we sinned—and that was crushingly and eternally deadly. Altogether, being on Satan’s side is a predicament from which we certainly need salvation.



God, however, before he had created the world, had determined by an unchangeable purpose to rescue a certain fixed number of persons from Satan’s bondage. More, God determined not just precisely *how many* persons to be saved, but determined also *who* would be saved. I will not pause at this point to demonstrate from Scripture that God determined both the number of the elect and their identity, as we’ll come back to that in subsequent articles. For now it is sufficient to note that the Arminians would have the folk of the pew believe that God’s decree of salvation involved nothing more than a decision to save whoever might in the future decide to believe in Jesus Christ and persevere in that faith (see sidebar, Error 1). As we’ll see in more detail as we proceed, this was a position the fathers soundly and firmly rejected.

## In Christ

Article 7 says that this choosing happened *in Christ*. God sent Christ to earth in order to pay for our sins. Although we deserved God’s wrath on account of our transgressions, God transferred his wrath from

*Rejection of Errors, 1.1*

**Error:** The will of God to save those who would believe and persevere in faith and obedience is the whole and entire decree of election to salvation. Nothing else concerning this decree has been revealed in God's Word.

**Refutation:** This error is deceptive and clearly contradicts Scripture, which declares not only that God will save those who believe but also that he has chosen specific persons from eternity. Within time he grants to these elect, above others, both faith in Christ and perseverance. *I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world (Jn 17:6). And as many as were appointed to eternal life believed, (Acts 13:48). Even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him (Eph 1:4).*

his elect onto Jesus Christ so that Christ might make the payment we ought to have made. Christ made this payment through his suffering and sacrifice on the cross of Calvary (see further Chapter 2, Article 2). When God received Jesus again, he also received with Jesus those elect persons for whom Jesus died, so that these people are taken back to God's side. Jesus insists that he himself is the only possible way through whom sinners can return to God's side, for he said, *"I am the way, and the truth, and the life"* (John 14:6). Peter echoed that thought when he told the Sanhedrin, *"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). Paul repeated it, *"For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ"* (1 Cor. 3:11).

The Bible would have us know, then, that there is no escape from Satan's side and no restoration to the God against whom we rebelled in Paradise through, for example, Buddha or our personal efforts, but only through Jesus Christ. That may sound highly exclusive of other religions—and it is. But since this is what Almighty God has revealed the situation to be, it is for me (finite creature as I am) to cease my protest, embrace this revelation, and confess with Article 7 that God *"has . . . from eternity appointed Christ"*—and no other—*"to be the Mediator and Head of all the elect and the foundation of salvation."* Take Christ away from God's saving work, and the benefits of God's electing grace collapse into wishful thinking.

Article 7 is lengthy, and provides much material for further comment. However, much of what is confessed in Article 7 receives elaboration in the following articles, and so we'll proceed to consider them.

## ARTICLE 8

### One Decree of Election

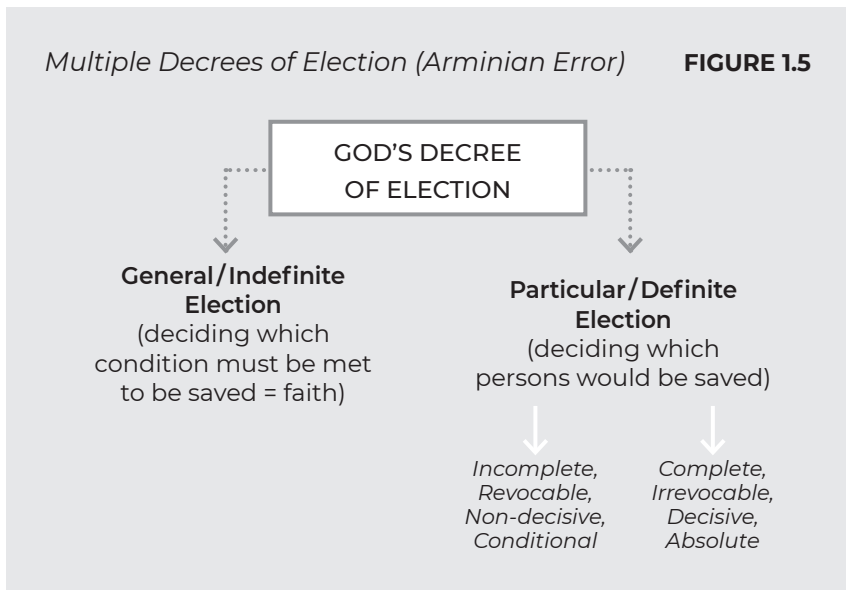
*There are not various decrees of this election, but there is one and the same decree concerning all those that are to be saved under both the Old and the New Testament. For Scripture declares that the good pleasure, purpose, and counsel of the will of God is one.*

*According to this purpose he has chosen us from eternity both to grace and to glory, both to salvation and to the way of salvation, which he prepared for us that we should walk in it.*

Why would Article 8 care to confess that “*there is one and the same decree [of election] concerning all those that are to be saved under both the Old and the New Testament*”? That’s because the Arminians insisted that there were “*various decrees of . . . election.*” God, they said, had made numerous decisions or decrees in relation to election.

### The Arminians on Multiple Decrees

The Arminians insisted that “*there are various kinds of divine election to eternal life*” (see sidebar, Error 2). They spoke of two main kinds of election, namely, general (or indefinite) election and particular



*Rejection of Errors, 1.2*

**Error:** There are various kinds of divine election to eternal life. One is general and indefinite, another is particular and definite. The latter in turn is either incomplete, revocable, non-decisive, and conditional, or it is complete, irrevocable, decisive, and absolute. In the same fashion there is an election to faith and another to salvation. Therefore election can be to justifying faith, without being decisive to salvation.

**Refutation:** All this is an invention of the human mind without any basis in the Scriptures. The doctrine of election is thus corrupted and the golden chain of our salvation broken: *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 8:30).

(or definite) election. The second, particular election, they in turn subdivided into incomplete, revocable, non-decisive, and conditional election *or* complete, irrevocable, decisive, and absolute election. See Figure 1.5. What, we wonder, did they mean with all those terms?

### **a. General or Indefinite Election**

God's eternal decree of election, the Arminians said, was not about which persons he would save, but was about which *conditions* God wanted people to meet in order to be taken from Satan's side back to God's side. As possible conditions, the Arminians said, God could have stipulated that one had to donate \$25,000 to charity, or have brown eyes, or swim across Lake Erie, or any other option of his choosing. But of all the possible conditions available

to him, they said, God in his good pleasure stipulated that the one single criterion one needed to satisfy was *faith* (see sidebar, Error 3).

This general decree of election, then, was about the *criteria* one needed to satisfy to be saved, and not about which *persons* would be saved. This election was general or indefinite, that is, all people were subject to the criteria God set. God made this decision before he made the world.

### **b. Particular or Definite Election**

A second sort of election, said the Arminians, was about *who* would be saved. Once God had settled on *faith* as the quality one had to possess in order to be saved, God, as it were, took up his "time-binoculars" and looked into the deep future to see who would have faith. Those whom God foresaw would one day believe he chose for salvation, and so entered their names into his book of life. This (they said) is particular (or definite) election.

### Rejection of Errors, 1.3

**Error:** The good pleasure and purpose of God of which Scripture speaks in the doctrine of election is not that he chose certain specific persons and not others, but that out of all possible conditions (such as the works of the law) he chose or selected the act of faith, which in itself is without merit, as well as the imperfect obedience of faith, to be a condition of salvation. In his grace he wished to count such faith as complete obedience and worthy of the reward of eternal life.

**Refutation:** This offensive error deprives God's good pleasure and Christ's merits of all efficacy, and draws people away from the truth of gracious justification and from the simplicity of Scripture. It contradicts the word of the apostle: *God saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began*" (2 Tim 1:9).

What, though, is one to think of those who meet the condition of faith for a short time only, and after a period of believing the gospel decide no longer to believe in the Lord? These short-term believers, said the Arminians, were still the object of God's election, but now it's an *incomplete, revocable* (i.e., rescinded, cancelled), *non-decisive, conditional* sort of election. When God, so to speak, adjusted his time-binoculars to look some years deeper into history and then foresaw that a believer rejected the faith, God erased that person's name from his book of life. It's a "short-term" election.

On the other hand, there are those who God foresaw would persevere in faith even till death. Concerning these people the Arminians would speak of a *complete, irrevocable, decisive, and absolute* sort of election. This sort of election was permanent; their names would never be erased from God's book of life.

## Analysis

In the Arminian concept of election, does God act sovereignly and freely, or is God dependent on the decision of created people? Actually, it depends on what kind of election you're talking about.

In the so-called general (or indefinite) sort of election, where God chose faith as the condition you need to fulfil (instead of you needing to have brown eyes or pay a sum of money), the Arminians indeed acknowledged God's sovereignty. God, after all, freely chose this condition, and there's nothing people can do about that. As an aside, I do not know

of any passage in Scripture where the notion of election refers to God choosing the criteria one needs to fulfill. Let's, though, leave that little difficulty to one side. . . .

On the matter, though, of so-called particular (or indefinite) election—that's the type of election that zeroes in on *who* will be saved—it's obvious that the Arminians left no room for the sovereignty of God. After all, whether your election was complete or incomplete hinged on your own decision to persevere in your faith or not. Since sticking with the faith, or departing from it, is to Arminian thinking your own decision, it's clear that ultimately *you* decide whether or not your name stays in God's book of life. Your actions, then, become the basis of God electing you decisively, absolutely, and completely.

## What Does the Bible Say?

Our fathers criticized this teaching as heresy on the basis of what Scripture says. They were strong in their words: it's "*an invention of the human mind without any basis in the Scriptures*" (see sidebar above, Error 2—Refutation). The fathers quoted from Romans 8:30 where we read, "*And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.*" With that reference our fathers wished to make clear that all things begin and end with God, including being predestined (that's your election) as well as being called and justified and glorified. I should add: Paul had earlier written that God justifies those with faith (Rom. 3:22). Predestination (election) here obviously comes before calling, calling before justification (and faith), and justification before glorification; there's an order in the chain of salvation. When the Arminians, then, put faith logically before election, they did injustice to Paul's word in Romans 8:30. Sovereignly, God chooses particular persons, then in time calls them, then eventually justifies them (through their faith in Jesus Christ), and then ultimately glorifies them on the last day. It's his work from beginning to end.

One could refer also to the words of Ephesians 1:4, 5. Paul praises God for every spiritual blessing God has given, "*even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will.*" According to the apostle, God had a purpose in mind when he elected particular persons to life, and that purpose was that "*we should be holy and blameless before him.*" But the Arminians held that God could elect someone, only to find out later that this person was not holy and



without blame before him because he ceased to believe. That is contrary to what Paul wrote.

So the fathers rejected the Arminian structure of multiple kinds of election as a fabric of human imagination. On the basis of Scripture they confessed just one decree of election. Since Almighty God himself made this decree concerning who would be saved, one may be confident that God will see his decree become reality. As the psalmist put it, “*The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever. Do not forsake the work of your hands*” (Ps. 138:8). God is not the “wimp” the Arminians made him out to be, where God can only walk in step with what man decides to do.

## ARTICLE 9

### Election Not Based on Foreseen Faith

*This election is not based on foreseen faith, the obedience of faith, holiness, or any other good quality or disposition, as a cause or condition in man required for being chosen, but men are chosen to faith, the obedience of faith, holiness, and so on. Election, therefore, is the fountain of every saving good, from which flow faith, holiness, and other saving gifts, and finally eternal life itself, as*

### *Rejection of Errors, 1.5*

**Error:** Incomplete and non-decisive election of specific persons to salvation took place on the ground of foreseen faith, conversion, holiness, and godliness, which either began or continued for some time. Complete and decisive election, however, occurred because of foreseen perseverance in faith, conversion, holiness, and godliness till the end. This is the gracious and evangelical worthiness because of which the person who is chosen is more worthy than the one who is not chosen. Therefore faith, obedience of faith, holiness, godliness, and perseverance are not fruits of unchangeable election to glory. Instead, they are necessary conditions and causes required and foreseen as accomplished in those who are to be fully elected.

**Refutation:** This error militates against all of Scripture, which constantly impresses the following upon us: *Election is not because of works but because of him who calls* (Rom 9:11); *as many as were appointed to eternal life believed* (Acts 13:48); *he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him* (Eph 1:4); *you did not choose me, but I chose you* (Jn 15:16); *But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace* (Rom 11:6); *In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins* (1 Jn 4:10).

*its fruits and effects. This the apostle teaches when he says, Even as he chose us (not because we were, but) that we should be holy and blameless before him (Eph. 1:4).*

As we learned above, the Arminians had said that to be decisively elected, you needed to satisfy certain qualities, namely, you had to decide to believe (even though you might have faith only temporarily and consequently only be indecisively elected) and to persevere in faith (and consequently be decisively elected). In the words of Error 5 quoted in the sidebar: *“Incomplete and non-decisive election of specific persons to salvation took place on the ground of foreseen faith, conversion, holiness, and godliness, which either began or continued for some time. Complete and decisive election, however, occurred because of foreseen perseverance in faith, conversion, holiness, and godliness till the end.”*

To show that this teaching did not agree with Holy Scripture, the fathers in Article 9 quoted a portion of Ephesians 1:4. The full text reads, *“He chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.”* The words *“that we should be”* link the first part of the sentence (*“he chose us”*) with the last part of the sentence (*“be holy and blameless before him”*). The sentence teaches that holiness and blamelessness do not come *before* the choosing, but clearly come *after* the choosing—and are in fact the *result* of the choosing. To say it differently: we are not elected *because* we have faith but we are elected *so that* we might have faith.

#### *Rejection of Errors, 1.4*

**Error:** Election to faith depends on the condition that man should use the light of nature properly, and that he be pious, humble, meek, and fit for eternal life.

**Refutation:** If this were true, election would depend on man. This smacks of the teaching of Pelagius and is in open conflict with the teaching of the apostle: *we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast (Eph 2:3–9).*

Other texts demonstrating this point received a place in the Rejection of Errors (see sidebar, Error 5). Note, for example, the logic of Acts 13:48: “*As many as were appointed to eternal life believed.*” This text clearly places the appointment to life eternal *before* the decision to believe, not after. The flow of thought is that God first ordains persons to life and only then do they come to faith.

Once again, then, it is a matter of whether election depends on me or on God. Scripture insists that God freely elects, with no contribution on our part, and we as a result end up believing. The point is drawn out with clarity in the refutation the fathers appended to Error 4 as printed in the sidebar, to which the reader is referred.

## ARTICLE 10

### **Election Based on God's Good Pleasure**

*The cause of this gracious election is solely the good pleasure of God. This good pleasure does not consist in this, that out of all possible conditions God chose certain qualities or actions of men as a condition for salvation, but in this, that out of the common mass of sinners he adopted certain persons to be his own possession. For it is written, though they (the twins) were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad, and so on, she (namely, Rebekah), was told, “The older will serve the younger.” As it is written: “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated” (Rom 9:11–13; cf. Gen 25:23; Mal 1:2–3). And, as many as were appointed to eternal life believed (Acts 13:48).*

Why does God choose certain persons? Article 9 had insisted that the cause of our election was *not* that we have faith or were so holy as to please God. Now Article 10 says what the cause of our election actually is, namely, *God's good pleasure*. To say in it plain English: God elected Bob (and not Bill) because he felt like it. That's the testimony of Scripture in Ephesians 1:5: “*He predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will.*” God did not look for people who were the most handsome, civilized, or the richest, or conversely who were the poorest and most down trodden, but he simply chose specific persons according to his good pleasure.

Paul's instruction in Ephesians 1 is not new. Before the Lord gave to his people Israel the land he promised them, he told them plainly that

*“it was not because you were more in number than other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all the peoples”* (Deut. 7:7). The word translated here as “fewest” denotes Israel’s insignificance and weakness; they were slaves in Egypt, utterly unable to rescue themselves from their oppressors. There was simply nothing attractive about that people (see also Ezek. 16:6).

Yet it was God’s good pleasure to make this undeserving nation his. He did so *“because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers”* (Deut. 7:8). The oath to the fathers refers to the fact that God claimed Abram for himself, and Isaac, and Jacob too. Concerning Jacob specifically, God said that he chose him for himself when he was yet in the womb, when he had *“done nothing either good or bad”* (Rom. 9:11, as Paul described the events of Gen. 25:23).

The fact that Almighty God sovereignly chooses whomever he wishes makes a person humble and privileged, for it leads to the very personal question: how come I actually believe? The fact that I believe has ultimately nothing to do with me but has everything to do with what the Lord was pleased to do to me and in me. He dealt with me in the years of my life according to the decree he settled on concerning me so long ago. Delightful: God considered my salvation even before he began creating this world! More, as he leads world history according to his eternal plan, he ensures that I come to faith and persevere. Though I am no better than my neighbour, I am *that* precious in his sight! How wonderful this God is!

## ARTICLE 11

### **Election Unchangeable**

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

With gratitude we note that God’s decree of election is unchangeable. The Arminians had insisted that God could and would change his mind depending on whether individuals came to faith or deserted the faith (see sidebar, Error 6). God’s revelation about himself, however, teaches us that God does not change his mind. The Holy Spirit, for example, prompted Balaam to tell Balak, *“God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he*

*spoken, and will he not fulfill it?"* (Num. 23:19) Note that Balaam's statement comes in response to pressure that Balak thought to put on God through his abundant sacrifices (Num. 23:14). But in the face of the insistence and wishes of particular persons, God's decision remains unchanged.

There is something so very comforting in this. If God were sufficiently fickle to alter his plans on the basis of my erratic preferences, I would have no security or comfort in relation to my eternal future. After all, I could not count on God's constant faithfulness in the face of my enduring weaknesses. As I struggle with doubts and failures, I could only conclude that God is watching me to see whether I'll stay in the faith or not, and if I don't, he'll erase my name from his book of life. That's hardly encouraging.

As it is, God has decreed that I am his. In step with that decree he sent his Son to die for my sins, then sent preachers of his Word to cross my path so that I might hear the Good News, and has even prompted me to embrace that gospel in faith. Will the God who has done so much for me turn around and drop me? Will this God change his mind concerning me—even if I in a moment of weakness change my mind concerning him? Here is the delightfully reassuring promise of Scripture: no matter how great and numerous my sins might be, God does not and will not change his mind concerning me. As Jesus put it, *"All that the Father gives me will come to me"* (John 6:37). Note the absoluteness of Jesus' words: *"All . . . will come"*—without exception. In another place Jesus said, *"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. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one"* (John 10:27–30). These texts (and others too) do not speak of probabilities but

### *Rejection of Errors, 1.6*

**Error:** Not every election to salvation is unchangeable. Some of the elect can and do indeed perish everlastingly, notwithstanding any decree of God.

**Refutation:** This gross error makes God changeable, destroys the comfort which the believers obtain from the firmness of their election, and contradicts Holy Scripture: *The elect cannot be led astray* (Mt 24:24); *And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day* (Jn 6:39); *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 8:30).

of certainties. That's because God ensures that his eternal decrees will most certainly actually happen.

For God's children this confession is so wonderfully comforting!

## Questions for Discussion:

- 6.** Article 6 would have us know that our election is rooted in God's sovereignty.
  - a.** Is anything in today's world excluded from God's sovereign control and planning? Prove your answer from the Scriptures. What comfort is there here for you? Try to give specific examples from your own life where the doctrine of God's total sovereignty was a source of comfort.
  - b.** How does the doctrine concerning God's sovereignty connect to the subject of election?
  - c.** What criteria would you think God used to elect you to salvation?
- 7.** Article 7 provides a working definition of election.
  - a.** In your judgment, what is the key word in this definition? Give reasons for your choice.
  - b.** Do you think you are elect? Why do you think that?
- 8.** The Canons insist there is but one decree of election.
  - a.** What is that one decree? Why would the Arminians have spoken of multiple decrees?
  - b.** What comes first: election or faith? Explain how the order of these two highlights or belittles God's sovereignty. Do the same in relation to what the order says about people.
- 9.** Supply biblical evidence that God's election actually comes before our believing or being attractive to God.
- 10.** God has his own reasons for choosing particular persons to eternal life.
  - a.** On what ground(s) does God elect the one to salvation and not the other?
  - b.** Why did he choose you to salvation? How does that encourage you?
- 11.** People are fickle, moody, and changeable.
  - a.** Does God change? Prove your answer.
  - b.** Explain how the answer to this question gives you comfort.

The topic of election raises numerous questions in our minds. Take a moment at this point to write down the questions you have—and feel free to add to the list as you keep working through the Canons of Dort. The articles ahead will undoubtedly answer several of your questions. In that case, tick the questions off as answered. On the other hand, some of your questions may not be (sufficiently) answered by the time you're finished the Canons. In that case, it may be advantageous to take your questions to your minister or elder for further discussion.

## ARTICLE 12

**The Assurance of Election**

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

Previous articles caught what Scripture teaches concerning election: God has chosen certain persons to eternal life and passed others by. The question that jumps at us next is this: Where do *I* fit in? Am *I* elect? For that matter, can I even *know* whether God has chosen me to eternal life? Pressing questions indeed!

The folk back in the days of the Synod of Dort heard the teaching of the Arminians on this point, and many didn't like what they were told. The Arminians said that you cannot know whether you are elect or not. They insisted that "*in this life there is no fruit, consciousness, or certainty of . . . election to glory*" (see sidebar, Error 7). You can talk about election as a doctrine, they said, but you cannot be certain that you yourself are one of the elect.

**Certainty**

The fathers at the Synod of Dort searched the Scriptures to see what the Lord God had revealed on the question. They found ample evidence that yes, the Lord does permit sinners to know whether he has chosen them to life eternal. For example, Paul wrote to the "*saints who are in Ephesus*": God "*chose us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.*" He added, "*In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ*" (Eph. 1:1, 4, 5). With the words "*us*" and "*we*" Paul was obviously not thinking of some undefined crowd, but rather was referring to himself and his very specific addressees in the church of Ephesus. In Paul's mind there is no doubt: God "*chose us.*" That's certainty!

In similar manner Paul had very personal words for "*all those in Rome who are loved by God*" (Rom. 1:7),



### *Rejection of Errors, 1.7*

**Error:** In this life there is no fruit, consciousness, or certainty of the unchangeable election to glory, except such as is based upon a changeable and uncertain condition.

**Refutation:** To speak about an uncertain certainty is not only absurd but also contrary to the experience of the believers. As a result of the awareness of their election, they glory with the apostle in this favour of God. With the disciples of Christ they rejoice that their names are written in heaven. They put the consciousness of their election over against the flaming darts of the devil, when they exclaim: *Who shall bring any charge against God's elect?* (Rom 8:33).

several of whom Paul knew personally (Rom. 16:3–15). To these specific persons he wrote: “*For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ*” (Rom. 8:15–17).

Notice again those personal pronouns “*we*” and “*us*.” Paul’s reference is to himself and specific persons in Rome, people who by the working of the Holy Spirit already call God “*Father*.” More, this Spirit works in Paul’s heart and in the hearts of these Romans the conviction that they *are* children of God, heirs to life eternal. As we’ve drawn out earlier, a fallen sinner can be a child of God and heir to life eternal only because God has

elected that sinner to such privilege. Well now, if Paul could be certain of his election, surely we can be also.

## **How?**

But how does that work? Do I receive certainty of my election through a dream? Or might that certainty arise from a conviction that presses upon my heart? Or perhaps through the way a certain Bible text speaks to me? In the course of church history there have been those who insisted that events as these were indeed the means through which a sinner could obtain the desired certainty.

There is, however, a major difficulty with rooting your certainty of election in a dream you had or a message you felt in your heart or the jolt you received from reading a particular passage of Scripture. Each such experience is exactly that—an *experience*. Given that we’re sinful to the core, we can never build towers of certainty on a foundation of experience. My depravity means that I’m quite capable of *wanting* an experience

so much that I actually end up having the experience. Further, it's very possible on a depressive day to doubt the dream I had, or the sensation or the conviction. . . . The result is that the clouds and storms I'm now experiencing today sweep away the certainty I had on a sunny day last week.

So the question is: does the Lord himself perhaps give us a way of knowing whether he has chosen a specific person to salvation? If so, what is it?

## The Lord's Means

The Pharisees once accused Jesus of being in league with demons. In response Jesus warned them of the consequences of sinning against the Holy Spirit, and then added these words: *"Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit. You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil"* (Matt. 12:33–35). As the plums on a tree convince you that you're not dealing with an apple tree, so the fruit you bear indicates what kind of a tree you are. The Pharisees claimed to be God's people, yet accused God's Son of being in league with Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons (v. 24), a totally absurd claim (vv. 25–27). That evil fruit-of-the-mouth gave evidence that their hearts were evil. Conversely, if a sinner's heart is sanctified, his mouth will produce the good fruit of sanctification. The regenerate heart, after all, does not produce the works of an unregenerate heart. How, then, can I know if God has chosen me to life eternal? The answer lies in the fruit I produce.

The apostle Peter takes this concept one step further. In 2 Peter 1:4, he reminds his readers of God's promises, adding that *"through them you may become partakers of the divine nature."* Obviously only those chosen to life eternal will *"become partakers of the divine nature"*; the reprobate will not share in God's identity. Of significance, now, is the fact that Peter adds this instruction: *"For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ"* (2 Peter 1:5–8). Notice, Peter has a reason for encouraging his readers to pursue these qualities so diligently: in

doing so they will produce fruits of faith that in turn form evidence that one belongs to the Lord. And that's to say that you can be sure of your election. As Peter concludes: "*Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election*" (v. 10). To make your election sure means to pin it down, to tie it fast as a boat to a dock, so that you become extra sure that your certainty of election will not drift away in the storms of life. You do that by observing in your life that you are actually supplementing your faith with increased knowledge, maturing virtue, steadier godliness, more self-denying love for the brethren, etc. In other words, the fruits you bear become a source of encouragement to you.

This is the biblical material the fathers echoed in Article 12: "*The elect in due time . . . are made certain of this their eternal and unchangeable election to salvation. They attain this assurance . . . by observing in themselves, with spiritual joy and holy delight, the unfailing fruits of election pointed out in the Word of God—such as a true faith in Christ, a childlike fear of God, a godly sorrow for their sins, and a hungering and thirsting after righteousness.*"

How can I know whether I am elect? I need to consider what fruit I bear. I know my own heart, my own thoughts, my own actions, what motivates me, what makes me "tick." I know whether I delight to do God's will, and know, too, whether my sins bother me. I know whether "*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control*" (which Paul calls "*the fruit of the Spirit*") characterize me, or whether I'm into "*sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these*" (which Paul calls "*the works of the flesh*") (Gal. 5:19–23). The sort of fruit I bear tells me much about the kind of tree I am.

## Difference

This is not to say that everybody can be equally sure, in equal measure. In the first sentence of Article 12 we read that the elect are made certain of their election "*in various stages and in different measure.*" No two people are alike. The one person may be mature at the age of eighteen while another person may still have much growing up to do at the age of thirty. The same applies when it comes to faith: the one person may be more mature in faith at the age of thirty than someone else at the age of fifty. Different people, all with different circumstances, are made certain of their election in different degrees. Yet the principle remains the same: the tree is known by its fruit. So I must look at the fruit I produce. Do I bear godly fruit, or not? No, I am

not to compare myself to others and then, on the basis of my observing that others bear more or better fruit than I, conclude that I must not be elect. I must look at myself and dare to describe what God has done in my heart. Do I see evidence of faith or of unbelief? Do the things I say and do reflect a regenerate heart or an unregenerate heart? In the strength of the Lord I may draw the fitting conclusion, and be much encouraged.

We need, however, to be aware of two dangers. In the first place, let's not insist on perfection in ourselves (nor in others). In this life God has not made his people perfect yet (see sidebar, Lord's Day 44.114), and so we must not expect ourselves to bear perfect fruit. David, a man after God's own heart (Acts 13:22), committed adultery, murdered his neighbour, and swept his sins under the carpet till he was exposed. More, in his psalms he makes clear that he had very optimistic and positive days as well as very down and dark days. Also, none less than the apostle Paul—servant of God and saint—says concerning himself, "*I am of the flesh, sold under sin. . . . Wretched man that I am*" (Rom. 7:14, 24). If we could not rest until we found perfect fruit in ourselves, we could never be sure of our election. In this life the fruit we bear will always reflect our sinfulness, because we remain sinful. The fruit we produce may be worm-infested or hail-damaged, but one can still tell whether it's an apple or a plum, a fruit from heaven or from hell. Despite the sin remaining in us, the principle holds: you know a tree by its fruit. And secondly, it is significant that Article 12 confesses that the elect "*are made certain.*" We do not make ourselves certain, but God does it—and he does it at the time of his choosing. Instead of being impatient with the questions we have, we do well to keep asking God to strengthen us in the face of the weaknesses we see in ourselves. The more we keep our eye on him and his promises—and so off ourselves and our weaknesses—the more certain we become of our election.

#### *Lord's Day 44.114*

#### **But can those converted to God keep these commandments perfectly?**

No. In this life even the holiest have only a small beginning of this obedience.

Nevertheless, with earnest purpose they do begin to live not only according to some but to all the commandments of God.

## Detail

Article 12 uses some loaded language: people attain an assurance of their election "*by observing in themselves . . . the unfailing fruits of election pointed out in the Word of God—such as a true faith in Christ, a childlike fear of God, a godly*

*sorrow for their sins, and a hunger and thirst for righteousness.”* What, we wonder, do these fruits actually look like??

### **True faith in Christ**

“Faith” is not a thing you can put on a shelf, but is an action. “Faith in Christ” is the ongoing and repeated action of *accepting* the blessed consequence of Jesus’ work on the cross. Jesus died to atone for the sins of particular people, viz., those whom the Father gave to him (John 17:2). Those particular persons, however, do not benefit from Jesus’ work unless they embrace as true the message they’ve been told: Christ died to atone for *your* sins. Knowing doctrine correctly is not sufficient for “*true faith in Christ*”; you need also to embrace the content of that doctrine as true for yourself. You know in your heart whether you accepts this message as gospel truth or whether you write it off as wishful thinking or total bunk.

Again, this is not to say that the person who struggles with the wealth of the gospel in the light of his own sins does not have true faith. God gave us many psalms in the Bible that speak of doubt, of God seeming to be far away, of prayer seemingly being unanswered, of thinking your sin to be too great to be forgiven, of promises being too glorious, etc. We don’t need perfect faith in Christ to be sure of our election, but we do need genuine faith in his promises, an authentic acceptance of what Christ did on the cross for sinners.

### **Childlike fear of God**

The “fear” mentioned in this article is not a sense of dread of God, as when one is scared of God’s majesty and so trembles at the judgments we deserve on account of our sins. To be sure, every sinner does need to be deeply aware that God hates his sins with a perfect hatred, and punishes them with such a just judgment that the sinner must perish eternally under its crushing weight. But the gospel is that God has placed my penalty onto his only Son Jesus Christ, who stood tall under its weight so as to satisfy God’s justice. As a result I adore this glorious God and stand in awe of him. This awe is the “fear” referred to in Article 12. Coupled with this awe and admiration for this wonderful and gracious God is an implicit trust: if this God has done so much for my salvation, I’m surely safe with him wherever he may lead. It’s the picture of the child fully confident that he’s safe in the arms of the father he admires so much.

I repeat that no one in this broken life has perfect adoration for God or trusts him with never any hesitation. Yet we know well whether or not

we admire God for his work of redemption, and we know too whether we feel safe in the care of this Saviour.

### **Godly sorrow for sin**

Sinners can be sorry for sin for numerous reasons, including the embarrassment of being caught out, the inconvenience of the resulting fine, or the hassle of the strained relationship that follows our exposure. The apostle Paul calls this “*worldly grief*” (2 Cor. 7:10). In contrast to this worldly grief he mentions “*godly grief*,” which sorrows at the pain our sins cause God. Once a sinner grasps, even in small measure, a sense of the greatness and majesty and holiness of God, and then considers that we have rebelled against this God in the beginning and continue to rebel against him day by day, and if that sinner then adds to the picture that this God gave his only Son to save sinners from the damnation we continue to earn through our ongoing and even deliberate disobedience against his commands—well, then we begin to get a little sense of how our transgressions must hurt the Lord. That’s the grief that prompted Paul to cry out, “*Wretched man that I am!*” (Rom. 7:24), that prompted Peter to burst into bitter weeping (Matt. 26:75), that prompted David to lament, “*Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight*” (Ps. 51:4), and that prompted so many of the saints of the Old Testament to present a heartfelt sin offering.

We’d dearly love to see this godly sorrow for sin be a perfect sorrow, or perhaps even be as intense and heartfelt as we imagine Paul’s cry or Peter’s tears or David’s lament to have been. But here it holds true too that we have but a small beginning of the obedience God requires (recall Lord’s Day 44.114). Even so, we know well whether our sins actually bother us for the sake of God’s name, or whether they bother us because of the embarrassment or the inconvenience that results.

### **Hunger and thirst for righteousness**

The “righteousness” referred to here is the sort of conduct that reflects God’s standards. He gave up his dearest Son to redeem the undeserving. In like manner, the child of God wants to do what can be done to love his neighbour and so help the downtrodden and the needy. To achieve that goal, he strives to live in obedience to God’s commands and encourages others to do the same. In a word, he is God-centred in his lifestyle.

His hungering and thirsting for such righteousness will never be perfect in this life. Yet the child of God can determine without much

difficulty whether he has a desire to glorify God and an appetite to advance the wellbeing of his neighbour, or whether he is self-centred and seeks his own advantage.

## ARTICLE 13

### The Value of This Assurance

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

Article 12 had addressed the question of how I can know whether God has chosen me to eternal life. Article 13 now goes on to consider *why* I should know the answer to that question. Does it make a difference in my daily life? Should it?

The Arminians had reasoned that if you could be sure of your salvation you would no longer try to live a careful life—for you'd say: I'm elect, my place in heaven is reserved, nothing can change that, so who cares how I live in this life? Or, as the fathers worded the Arminian position in Article 13: it makes people "*lax in observing the commands of God.*"

The fathers, however, rejected the thought that certainty of election makes you sloppy in God's service. Their argument was that a deep sense of God's grace upon the undeserving moves the believer to adore God the more, and show his gratitude through a life of devotion to God. The link between redemption and gratitude will receive detailed attention in Chapter 3/4 of the Canons. It is sufficient for now to refer to Paul's words to people once dead in their trespasses and sins but subsequently saved by grace: "*For we are [God's] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them*" (Eph. 2:10). Not carelessness but good works, insists Paul, characterize those who received salvation. That surely includes those aware of their election to life. That is why the fathers dared to confess in our article, "*The awareness and assurance of this election*

*provide the children of God with greater reason for daily humbling themselves before God, for adoring the depth of his mercies, for cleansing themselves, and for fervently loving him in turn who first so greatly loved them.”*

Perhaps we can understand the thought. That God chooses to forgive the sins of any and in turn make them his children is obviously a wonderful marvel of grace. But that God chooses *me* to salvation is obviously, from a personal perspective, a far greater marvel of grace still—for I know my own history and my own heart. That God would nevertheless choose me for redemption from Satan’s bondage—this awareness invariably stimulates abundant adoration for God and praise for such mercy! Instead of leaving the redeemed sinner with a sense of pride or superiority, the assurance of his election and salvation prompts in the believer a deep sense of humility and of lasting dependence on God. And it incites him to a renewed effort to rid his life of evil and every work of the flesh. No, the grateful Christian does not respond to God’s mercy with increased carelessness in God’s service, but responds with increased love for this God of such grace. As John put it, “*We love because he first loved us*” (1 John 4:19). “*He first loved us*”: that’s his gracious election, with the privilege of faith that invariably follows. As a result, “*we love*” God and neighbour alike. The deeds of the believer always follow the deeds of the Father.

## **False Security**

In the church of Jesus Christ are persons of various spiritual colours. Some have been faithful church members for decades, and over the years served in various committees and offices. Others are younger, are faithfully in church and in Bible study societies, and never miss an opportunity to help another. Still others are present but uninvolved, yet to all intents and purposes look like faithful believers. Yet none of these things of themselves form credible evidences of election. The fruits of election as mentioned in Article 12 are specific. Anyone lacking “*a true faith in Christ, a childlike fear of God, a godly sorrow for . . . sins, and a hungering and thirsting after righteousness*” has no right to assume election—no matter how long and with what distinction he has served in the church. Not for nothing does the church confess elsewhere that there may be hypocrites in the church of Jesus Christ (see sidebar, Belgic Confession, Article 29).

In fact, Scripture warns those who are at ease and falsely secure. The prophet Amos addressed the people of Jerusalem: “*Woe to those who are at ease in Zion, . . . the notable men of the first of the nations*” (Amos 6:1). Jesus



spoke similar words to the covenant people of his day, perhaps including leaders highly esteemed and well-spoken of among the people. *“But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep. Woe to you, when all men speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets”* (Luke 6:24–26).

The point is this: it is not for me to bother my head on someone else’s salvation; it is for me to look at the fruit *I* bear. Assurance for my election does not lie in what others—even elders!—think of me or even say to me, for they cannot look in my heart.

Yes, their word concerning my fruit can be encouraging, but at the end of the day only I know what makes me tick. Hence the need for self-examination: in the midst of all the laudable things I do, do I actually fear God? Do I actually sorrow for sin? Do I hunger and thirst for righteousness? What actually makes me tick? These are extremely personal questions, about which we all do well to meditate prayerfully. It also makes for excellent conversation material with a trusted spouse, parent, friend, or accountability partner. Again, the point is not whether I see perfection in myself; in this life no one will. The point is rather whether the fruit I bear demonstrates whether I’m an apple tree or a plum tree, a tree inspired by heaven or by hell.

## Walk before Talk

We need yet to pause at the closing words of Article 13: laxness in observing God’s commands and a false security that one is chosen to salvation typically characterize those who *“rashly presume to have the grace of election, or idly and boldly chatter about it, but refuse to walk in the ways of the elect.”* Note the contrast in these words between talk and walk, between verbal confession and lifestyle. Here the Canons of Dort warn us not to focus on the *talk* of election, but to concentrate on the *walk* of election. To be clear: there certainly is place to study and talk about God’s

### *Belgic Confession, Article 29*

We believe that we ought to discern diligently and very carefully from the Word of God what is the true church, for all sects which are in the world today claim for themselves the name of church. We are not speaking here of the hypocrites, who are mixed in the church along with the good and yet are not part of the church, although they are outwardly in it. We are speaking of the body and the communion of the true church which must be distinguished from all sects that call themselves the church.

revelation on the topic of election and strive to understand its details to the extent that God has revealed them (as in fact the Canons of Dort do). But such study and conversation is a waste of time and counter-productive if we do not “*walk in the ways of the elect.*” God’s revelation about election may never be simple theory that floats above daily life; instead, what God has revealed about election is meant to touch the real lives of his people in the questions and challenges of daily living. In their daily living the elect give expression to the reality of election—their election—because they visibly illustrate “*the unfailling fruits of election*” listed in Article 12.

## ARTICLE 14

### How Election Is to Be Taught

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

We’re tempted at times to discard doctrines we find too hard to grasp—and that’s certainly true of the doctrine of election. Talk concerning God choosing persons before the foundation of the world, fruits of election, false security, assurance of election, and so much more can spin the heads of the average Joe who spends his day focusing on construction tools or computer screens. Add to that such personal questions as whether *I’m* among the elect, whether perhaps *I’m* falsely secure, and we’re well and truly tempted to turn the page and be onto easier and less unsettling material—like God’s love for sinners, for example.

That’s why it’s important to note that the fathers actually busied themselves with the question of whether preachers even ought to mention the topic of election to the average Christian. They were adamant that yes, Christians most certainly must be informed about this ticklish subject. They gave the reason too: it must be done because God himself speaks to us about it in his Word. So he obviously considers the topic necessary for us.

## It's in the Bible

### Old Testament

Consider the following passages from the prophets of the Old Testament:

- God forbade Israel from intermarrying with the locals of Canaan because “*you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth*” (Deut. 7:6; see also 14:2; 26:18). Not only does the passage speak of God choosing Israel as his (instead of choosing any other nation), but the passage also insists that Israel’s election provides the reason for a particular form of conduct.
- The counsel of God (of which the doctrine of election is a part) features in the Psalms: “*The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the plans of his heart to all generations*” (Ps. 33:11); “*You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory*” (Ps. 73:24). Solomon teaches his people, “*Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will stand*” (Prov. 19:21). And Isaiah declares God’s word: “*My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose*” (Isa. 46:10). In each of these cases God’s counsel is portrayed as permanent and unchanging. For the elect of God, that reassurance is highly comforting—and hence valuable.

### Gospels

Jesus Christ also speaks of the eternal counsel of God concerning election:

- In the face of the refusal of many in Israel to repent in response to his preaching, Jesus prayed, “*I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will*” (Matt. 11:25, 26). God’s “*will*” to hide information from the one and to reveal it to another was established in that counsel of long ago. That includes that some would appreciate Jesus’ words while others would reject the Saviour. This, of course, is the doctrine of election.
- In the prayer Jesus prayed shortly before his arrest, he asked the Father “*to give eternal life to all whom you have given*” to the Son (John 17:2). In this petition Jesus divides the human race into two

parts: on the one hand those whom the Father gave to the Son (and for whom the Son would die), and on the other those whom the Father did not give to the Son. These are the chosen versus the not-chosen, the elect versus the reprobate (this latter term we'll explore in more detail below, in Article 15).

## Apostles

The apostles in their mention of election built on God's revelation in the Old Testament and through Jesus Christ:

- As Paul speaks about Jacob and Esau he drops the phrase "*God's purpose of election*" (Rom. 9:11), drawing out that Jacob was chosen while Esau was not.
- Elsewhere his excitement at God's wonderful work of election virtually jumps off the page: "*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world*" (Eph. 1:3, 4).
- Peter reminds the "*elect exiles of the dispersion*" that "*you are a chosen race*" (1 Peter 1:1; 2:9).
- The apostle John wrote a letter of encouragement and instruction "*to the elect lady and her children*" (2 John 1). Whether the "*lady*" of that sentence is a specific person or a particular congregation (commentators are divided) doesn't take away from the fact that she is "*elect*," chosen to life.

Well now, if God has revealed the doctrine of his eternal counsel, including the matter of election, it is certainly not for any of us to say it's too hard to grasp, or too offensive, or perhaps to say that it's not important. "*All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work*" (2 Tim. 3:16, 17). Election, too, then, is "*profitable*" for my growth in God's service. "*Therefore*," Article 14 says, "*also today this doctrine should be taught in the church of God, for which it was particularly intended, in its proper time and place.*" Mechanics and truckers, homemakers and teachers should, then, not be surprised to hear in its time a sermon in church on this challenging topic—and they certainly should not respond with aversion to a deliverance on the subject.

## Manner

How, though, ought God's revelation concerning election to be taught to God's people? For that matter, how ought we to work with this part of God's revelation?

The fathers at the Synod of Dort were sensitive to the fact that preachers could abuse the doctrine of election to the congregation's hurt. So they gave this pastoral advice to ministers and elders: *"This doctrine should be taught . . . with a spirit of discretion, in a reverent and holy manner, without inquisitively prying into the ways of the Most High, to the glory of God's most holy name, and for the living comfort of his people."*

Behind this statement is the awareness that so much of the doctrine of election remains beyond human comprehension. Why did God choose this person and not that person? Why did God choose any at all? Is God being unfair in leaving some people in Satan's clutches—especially if these people are not worse folk than the ones he's chosen to save? Can an elect child of God ever fall away from the faith? Can a person not elected to salvation long for salvation and, despite trying, never be saved? These and so many other questions tease our minds as we consider the topic. They're all legitimate questions, and we do well to seek solid answers to them (and many receive answers in following articles of the Canons). But it needs to be said upfront that the answers we receive may not fully satisfy our inquisitive minds. That's because—as God says concerning himself in his Word—his ways are higher than our ways (Isa. 55:9); we're but people created from dust while he is eternal, sovereign God, the *"Most High,"* as Article 14 has it. I shall never understand him (and that's wonderful; why else would I ever entrust myself to his care!). Besides, some things are simply God's business, not ours. As he told Israel through Moses, *"The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law"* (Deut. 29:29).

I'd love to put God and his revelation into a neat and tidy package that I can totally comprehend. But I know up front that I will never manage. Article 14 correctly warns against *"inquisitively prying into the ways of the Most High."* So much of what this God has revealed I must simply accept with a heart of faith. Several aspects of the doctrine of election definitely fall into that bracket. So we need a spirit of humility as we busy our minds with discussions on this subject.

But it's not only the difficult questions that make caution and sensitivity necessary on this topic. People have different characters, so that in turn the one person is prone to doubt while the next is inclined to take everything for granted. As we speak about election, we want to avoid presenting the topic in such a way that some brothers and sisters begin to doubt their election, while the subject lulls others into a false sense of security. Here's another reason why there is no place for a spirit of haughtiness or callousness in our discussions of this subject.

Finally, our primary motive for teaching and studying the doctrine of election should focus on *"the glory of God's most holy name."* The doctrine of election, including the reality of one's own election, prompts us to praise God—as Paul's jubilation in Ephesians 1:3, 4 (quoted above) illustrates. Think about it, that infinite God would actually choose sinners to be his children—how awesome is that! That he would even choose *me*, well, that's infinitely more awesome still! What a God this is! So our second motive for teaching and studying the doctrine of election is *"for the living comfort of his people."* His grace of election is a definite source of comfort for God's children.

## Questions for Discussion:

12. The sincere Christian would love to be certain of his election.
  - a. Has God elected *you* to salvation? How do you know?
  - b. As you sought to answer the above question, did you factor your sins into your calculation? Should you have?
  - c. Do those who know you see in you the unfailing fruits of election? Make a point of asking the opinion of a trusted fellow Christian on the subject.
  - d. Do you find the opinion of the neighbour on the topic worthwhile or not? Explain your answer.
13. The Arminians had insisted that being certain of your election leads to a sloppy lifestyle.
  - a. What was the logic behind this Arminian teaching? Do you find that logic persuasive?
  - b. How do you respond to the realization that you are chosen to life eternal?
  - c. In your opinion, do you "walk" in the way of the elect more than

“chatter” about it, or is it the other way around? Do those around you agree? What lesson follows from your observation?

- 14.** The topic of election is difficult, and so it’s tempting to avoid (the difficult parts of) this subject.
  - a.** Why ought a difficult doctrine like election to be taught?
  - b.** Is this topic sufficiently taught in your midst? Would you welcome sermons on the Canons of Dort? If yes, how would you fit that in with the agreement of the churches as expressed in Article 52 of the Church Order?
  - c.** Is this subject taught in your midst with sufficient sensitivity? Explain why you answer as you do.
  - d.** Do you find this doctrine offensive or comforting—or would you prefer another adjective?

## ARTICLE 15

**Reprobation Described**

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

The use of the word “reprobation” in the heading of this article may lead us to assume that we’re now beginning a new topic. We’re not. Article 15 seeks to drive home how marvellous the reality of God’s grace is in electing some to salvation—and does that by drawing attention to the fact that God has not elected all people. “*Holy Scripture illustrates and recommends to us this eternal and undeserved grace of our election, especially when it further declares that not all men are elect but that some have not been elected.*” If God has not chosen everybody to

**Rejection of Errors, 1.8**

**Error:** God did not simply by an act of his righteous will decide to leave any person in the common state of sin and condemnation since his fall in Adam, nor did he decide to pass by any one in granting such grace as is necessary for faith and conversion.

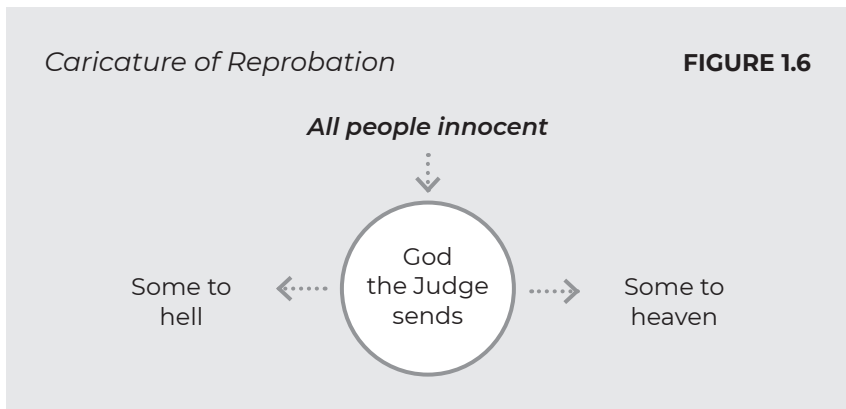
**Refutation:** Scripture, however, states, *he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills* (Rom 9:18). It also declares, *To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given* (Mt 13:11). *I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will* (Mt 11:25, 26).



salvation, *why has he chosen me??* To press that overwhelming question upon us, the Canons take a moment to speak about those God has passed by in his decree of election. In so doing, the Canons also correct the Arminian insistence that God did *not* decide to leave some sinners in their condemnation and pass them by in granting grace (see sidebar, Error 8).

The term “reprobation” is used to refer to the fact that God leaves some people on Satan’s side (recall Figure 1.4). These people, then, remain enslaved to sin and Satan, and remain subject also to God’s holy wrath. They are the “reprobate.”

Over the years, the thought of reprobation has led many to think of God as being callous, hard, and cruel. How, they wonder, could God possibly take some poor, innocent people, and drop them into hell? See Figure 1.6.

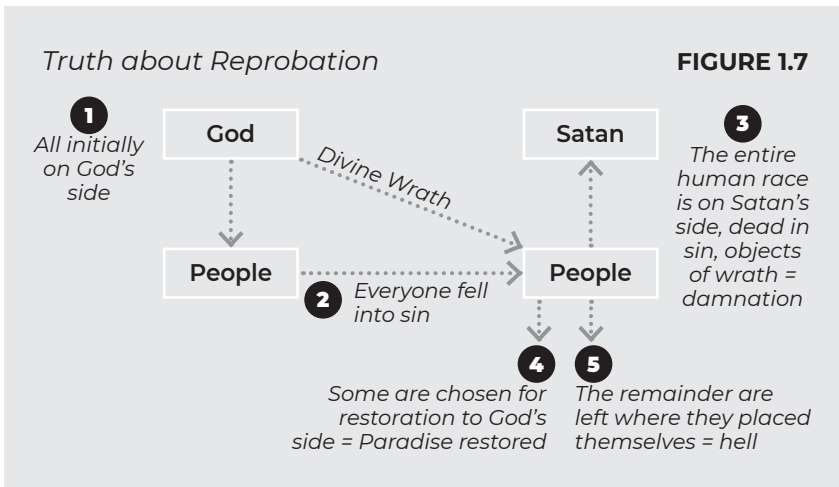


Putting it that way indeed puts God in a bad light. The problem, however, is the assumption that’s implied when the question is put this way. The assumption is that the people standing before the Judge are *innocent*, are neither good nor bad but neutral. If God indeed sent some neutral, innocent people to hell while he received other equally neutral, innocent people to heaven, yes, *that* doesn’t flatter God’s reputation at all.

The Bible, however, does not present the matter this way. Instead, the Bible says that the entire human race voluntarily fell into sin and in so doing placed itself in Satan’s camp. In response the Lord in his righteous judgment lets each person—all on Satan’s side by their own choice—feel what it’s like to be in bondage to Satan. Each person lives in a Satan-

infected world (outside Paradise), each is by nature dead in sin, each images Satan, each is inclined to any form of evil, and so each is subject to the eternal wrath of God—and that tragic reality is each person’s own individual fault. See Figure 1.7.

God, now—though under no compulsion—has chosen *some* from the countless crowd on Satan’s side, frees these specific persons from Satan’s bondage and returns them to his side. This is the blessed result of his *election*. Others he simply leaves in the misery into which they plunged themselves. This is called *reprobation*. God does not *send* the reprobate to hell, for the whole human race *put itself* on Satan’s side—and that’s hell. God simply *leaves* the reprobate there. “*Out of his most free, most just, blameless, and unchangeable good pleasure, God has decreed to leave them in the common misery into which they have by their own fault plunged themselves and not to give them saving faith and the grace of conversion.*” God was pleased to pass them by.



## Biblical Evidence?

Is there biblical foundation behind this doctrine? Consider these texts:

John relates concerning the beast (which represents Satan) that “*all who dwell on earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain*” (Rev. 13:8). Notice the negative formulation the Holy Spirit uses here when he describes those who worship the beast: these are those

“whose name has not been written.” These persons have clearly been *passed by*. It’s not that their names have been written in some Book of the Damned (in contrast to the Book of Life); they’ve rather been simply left.

- Peter mentions the concept too. He writes concerning certain people, “*They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do*” (1 Peter 2:8). These people heard God’s word of life, but instead of believing the gospel they are offended by the gospel. The fact that they reject the gospel does not, however, catch God by surprise (or disappointment), for he had determined from long ago that this was their destiny.
- Similarly, when Paul refers to the elect and the reprobate he speaks of two kinds of vessels. In Romans 9 the context demands that we understand the “*vessels of wrath prepared for destruction*” to refer to the persons God has passed by, the reprobate, and the “*vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory*” to refer to the elect (Rom. 9:22, 23). Notice that God himself had prepared the two kinds of vessels for his own purpose.

Because of scriptural data as these, the fathers felt compelled to repeat after God in Article 15 what they read in the Bible. That’s why the Article says concerning the reprobate, “*These, having been left in their own ways and under his just judgment, God has decreed finally to condemn and punish eternally, not only on account of their unbelief but also on account of all their other sins, in order to display his justice. This is the decree of reprobation, which by no means makes God the author of sin (the very thought is blasphemous!), but rather declares him to be its awesome, blameless, and just judge and avenger.*”

It’s not light material! And it certainly drives home the “*eternal and undeserved grace of our election.*” Truly, what a God that he should spare me from that righteous judgment, and grant me instead the privilege to know and serve and love and praise him!

## ARTICLE 16

### Responses to the Doctrine of Reprobation

*Some do not yet clearly discern in themselves a living faith in Christ, an assured confidence of heart, peace of conscience, a zeal for childlike obedience, and a glorying in God through*

*Christ; nevertheless, they use the means through which God has promised to work these things in us. They ought not to be alarmed when reprobation is mentioned, nor to count themselves among the reprobate. Rather, they must diligently continue in the use of these means, fervently desire a time of more abundant grace, and expect it with reverence and humility.*

*Others seriously desire to be converted to God, to please him only, and to be delivered from the body of death. Yet they cannot reach that point on the way of godliness and faith which they would like. They should be even less terrified by the doctrine of reprobation, since a merciful God has promised not to snuff out the smouldering wick nor to break the bruised reed.*

*Still others disregard God and the Saviour Jesus Christ and have completely given themselves over to the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth. For them this doctrine of reprobation is rightly fearsome as long as they do not seriously turn to God.*

The flow of thought from the previous articles makes Article 16 predictable. Articles 7–11 had summarized what the Lord has revealed in the Bible about his one, unchangeable decree of election. Article 12 had followed that confession with the observation that “*the elect in due time . . . are made certain of this their eternal and unchangeable election to salvation.*” Believers gain this assurance as a result of observing within themselves “*with spiritual joy and holy delight . . . a true faith in Christ, a childlike fear of God, a godly sorrow for their sins, and a hunger and thirst for righteousness.*” Article 15 had added that Scripture also reveals that when God determined to save some he necessarily passed others by; he “*decreed to leave them in the common misery into which they have . . . plunged themselves.*”

Well now, this mention of God’s eternal decree to pass some by can bring me to puzzle whether perchance God has passed *me* by. Obviously, that thought can lead to much unrest within the sensitive soul. In a pastoral manner the fathers sought in the present article to reach out to the troubled, offering guidance in how they should digest the doubts and questions they might have concerning their faith and their election. Article 16 mentions three possible responses to the doctrine of reprobation, and adds in each case a word of comfort or admonition. The three are:

1. Those persons who do not clearly discern within themselves the fruits of election.

2. Those persons who cannot reach the degree of godliness and faith they desire and long for.
3. Those persons who disregard God and live in sin.

We shall deal with each of these three separately.

## 1. Not Discerning in Oneself the Fruits of Election

The fathers described the first possible response to the reality of God's election with these words:

*Some do not yet clearly discern in themselves a living faith in Christ, an assured confidence of heart, peace of conscience, a zeal for childlike obedience, and a glorying in God through Christ; nevertheless, they use the means through which God has promised to work these things in us.*

These people want to serve the Lord, and do serve the Lord, but when it comes to the assurance of their election, they are uncertain. They do not see in themselves the degree of zeal for God's service they want to see, they feel they have too many questions about the faith, they do not find themselves delighting in God the way they think they ought to, they have so many questions and internal struggles concerning the truth of the faith, etc. The weaknesses they see in themselves prompt doubts in their minds about whether God has actually chosen them for salvation—for, they ask, if God had chosen me, surely I would live a more godly life and would be more excited about his goodness and experience more peace in my heart. . . . It's a struggle so many of us can relate to.

With great sensitivity, the fathers at the Synod of Dort reached out to these believers in their struggles and doubts. Their counsel was this:

*They ought not to be alarmed when reprobation is mentioned, nor to count themselves among the reprobate. Rather, they must diligently continue in the use of these means, fervently desire a time of more abundant grace, and expect it with reverence and humility.*

This answer is based on the awareness that growth always takes time. Just as that is true in nature around us and even in our bodies, so it is also true in our souls. As a child can expect to grow toward adulthood, so the battling believer can expect to grow in the Lord's service.

For the child to grow, however, he needs to eat. Similarly, the struggling believer needs to feed continually on the Word of God. That's

what the fathers were referring to when they mentioned above the “*means through which God has promised to work*” in us. The Holy Spirit uses the means of hearing the Word to work and strengthen faith. That’s the message of Scripture: “*How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? . . . So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ*” (Rom. 10:14, 17). Elsewhere in the Canons the fathers work this out further: “*Just as it has pleased God to begin this work of grace in us by the preaching of the gospel, so he maintains, continues, and perfects it by the hearing and reading of his Word, by meditation on it, by its exhortations, threats, and promises, and by the use of the sacraments*” (Chapter 5, Article 14). We’ll devote more attention to the link between growth in faith and the preaching of the gospel when we come to that part of the Canons. For now it is sufficient to note that just as God placed a link between eating and bodily growth, so too he has placed a link between hearing the Word and spiritual growth. For that reason, the struggling Christian does well to “*diligently continue in the use of these means.*”

Meanwhile, the struggling believer may be assured from Scripture that the weaknesses he keeps seeing in himself do not mean that God has rejected him. Isaiah, for example, says, “*The LORD has founded Zion, and in her the afflicted of his people find refuge*” (Isa. 14:32). The term “afflicted” in this passage refers to those who are down on themselves, poor in spirit, weak. But it is *they* to whom the Lord grants a refuge in the gospel proclaimed in the temple on Mount Zion. Similarly, Paul assures Christians in Philippi that “*he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ*” (Phil. 1:6). When Paul wrote those words, God’s work among the saints in Philippi only recently “*began,*” and so those young Christians had their struggles and their doubts. But Paul knew that the Lord God would not forsake the work of his hands (see Ps. 138:8), and so he was confident that growth would come in due time and God would ultimately perfect his own on the last day. Passages as these offer rich encouragement for those who struggle.

## 2. Not Reaching the Desired Degree of Godliness and Faith

From their pastoral work in the congregations, the fathers were aware of a second sort of response to the mention of election and reprobation. They described it like this:

*Others seriously desire to be converted to God, to please him only, and to be delivered from the body of death. Yet they cannot reach that point on the way of godliness and faith which they would like.*

The reference in this second response is not so much to the weaknesses of faith the Christian feels inside himself as to the sins he keeps seeing in himself. Your temper gets away on you again, you talk past your mouth again, you feel the inner urge to steal is virtually irresistible, you fell again in the face of the temptations of pornography, and all that despite your most valiant efforts to control yourself. . . . And the result is self-loathing—and the burdened conviction that God must hate me too. . . . *Wretched man that I am. . . .*

Paul in Romans 7 describes his own battle against sin. We tend to look up to Paul the apostle as an extra-holy man. Yet he says of himself: “*I am of the flesh, sold under sin*” (v. 14). His reference to “*of the flesh*” means that Paul sees himself as sinfully human, incapable of withstanding the temptation of sin. “*For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate*” (v. 15). Notice that it bothers the apostle greatly to find himself so dominated by sin. “*For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing*”

### *Romans 7:14–8:1*

<sup>7:14</sup> For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. <sup>15</sup> For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. <sup>16</sup> Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. <sup>17</sup> So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.

<sup>18</sup> For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.

<sup>19</sup> For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.

<sup>20</sup> Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.

<sup>21</sup> So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. <sup>22</sup> For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, <sup>23</sup> but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. <sup>24</sup> Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? <sup>25</sup> Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.

<sup>8:1</sup> There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

(vv. 18, 19). We sense his frustration with himself: *“I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members”* (v. 23). That war within, and his repeated failures in that war, makes him cry out his despair, *“Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?”* (v. 24). He cannot deliver himself, cannot rise above the struggle, and cannot win in the struggle either; he’s nothing but a loser. But Paul knows there is a way out: *“Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”* (v. 25). Because of his work on the cross, this Saviour today graciously washes away the enduring imperfections and sins of those who believe in him, and on the last day he will renew these sinners completely through his Holy Spirit. That’s why Paul can begin the next chapter with these delightful words, *“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus”* (Rom. 8:1).

In the face of our struggles, those words are so very encouraging! Read those words again, and consider what Paul means with the word *“now.”* That’s a reference to *today*, now, while we see the war still raging within and notice ourselves caving in again and again to that enemy called Sin. Paul is confident concerning himself and the saints he’s writing to: ongoing weaknesses and imperfections do not condemn those who are in Christ Jesus. That’s gloriously reassuring, indeed! I do not need to be a (nearly) perfect man before I may conclude that Christ actually died for my sin, that I actually am among the elect of God! Hallelujah!

Paul’s reference in Romans 7:24 to *“this body of death”* has found its way into Article 16 of the Canons. As believers are faced with the ongoing and seemingly futile struggle against sin, they cry out with Paul *“to be delivered from the body of death.”* Well, these believers may quote not just verse 24 but also the gospel of verse 25: there is escape from God’s judgment in the blood of the Saviour. So all is well—despite how I feel. Given that evidence of Scripture, we can appreciate the fathers’ encouragement to those who struggle with their sinfulness:

*They should be even less terrified by the doctrine of reprobation, since a merciful God has promised not to snuff out the smouldering wick nor to break the bruised reed.*

The references here to a “smouldering wick” and a “bruised reed” come from Isaiah 42:3. The prophet sets before God’s people what the coming servant of God will be like: *“He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice”* (vv. 2–3).



The prophet uses here two analogies. A reed is so flexible that it will scarcely break under the force of a strong wind. But once it does kink, it's useless to try to get it to stand tall again, for it will always collapse again at the point of the kink. In fact, a gardener may well be tempted to cut a bruised stalk off at its stem so as to cut the blemish out of his collection of reeds. A wick on a candle will throw a good flame and provide light in the room. It's possible, though, for the wick to be cut or burnt too short, or for the candle wax to be of such poor quality that the wick scarcely burns. In frustration you're tempted to extinguish that faintly burning wick precisely because it fails to cast the needed light. In both cases, the prophet says, the coming servant of God (and that's ultimately Jesus Christ) will not give in to the temptation; on the contrary, he'll see value in the kinked reed and in the faintly burning wick. Of course, the prophet means more here than the literal kinked reed or faint wick. The coming servant of God, says the prophet, will not crush people kinked by the storms of life, nor will he extinguish the flame of those exhausted by the battles of life. On the contrary, *“he will faithfully bring forth justice”* for the weak and the oppressed. We understand that here Isaiah points to the glorious gospel of Christ's redeeming work for the undeserving, the weak, the broken as illustrated so often in, for example, the miracles Jesus performed during his life on earth. Indeed, Jesus would even die to atone for the sins of such broken and inadequate people, and so obtain justice for them before God. But it follows that if the coming servant of God would go so far in order to preserve the kinked and the smouldering, no Christian ought ever to fear that their remaining weaknesses are evidence that God has passed them by in his electing grace. On the contrary, the very worry they have concerning their ongoing weaknesses is itself the work of God who makes them long the more for redemption in Christ—and that's evidence of his work in their hearts, even in their weaknesses.

The pastoral care required for those struggling with ongoing sin and weakness suggests that it's worthwhile to pursue this aspect a bit further. The church for centuries has recognized that *“those converted to God”* cannot *“keep [God's] commandments perfectly”* because *“in this life even the holiest have only a small beginning of this obedience”*

*Lord's Day 44.114*

**But can those converted to God keep these commandments perfectly?**

No. In this life even the holiest have only a small beginning of this obedience.

Nevertheless, with earnest purpose they do begin to live not only according to some but to all the commandments of God.

(Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 44.114). I may try ever so hard to resist sin, but I need to know that I shall certainly fail. Should this bother me? Yes, indeed it should. Should I be surprised that I fail? No, I should not be surprised. Through his Holy Spirit the Lord has indeed changed his people and renewed their hearts, but he has not as yet perfected them. I shall, then, remain vulnerable to the very sins I have come to hate, as long as I live in this broken life. Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Peter, and so many other giants of Scripture all fell into sins none of them would beforehand have anticipated. Yet their failures gave none of them grounds to conclude that they were not God's children after all. The Holy Spirit does not perfect us in this life, but does give us a sharpened conscience so that our sins increasingly bother us. That our sins, then, bother us is itself a sign of God's love and grace upon us!

The *Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper* historically used in Reformed churches also reckons with this very real (and repeatedly unsuccessful) battle against sin in the life of the believer (see sidebar). Notice how that Form describes so truthfully the struggle characteristic of every honest reader of this page. Yet this Form would not have the believer despair in the face of his failures, but would direct the participant in the sacrament to the Saviour's blessed mercy.

Did God pass me over in his decree of election, so that I am one of the reprobates after all? I know that my sins are many and that I fall into the same sins repeatedly. By the grace of God, though, I *am* sorry for my sins (however imperfect my sorrow is!). How can I know for certain whether I am elect or reprobate? *"The elect . . . attain this assurance . . . by observing in*

### *Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper*

God will certainly receive in grace all who are thus minded and count them worthy to partake of the supper of our Lord Jesus Christ. But those who do not feel this testimony in their hearts, eat and drink judgment upon themselves. Therefore, according to the command of Christ and of the apostle Paul, we admonish all those who know themselves to be guilty of the following offensive sins to abstain from the table of the Lord, and we declare to them that they have no part in the kingdom of Christ. . . . While they persist in their sins, they shall not take of this food, which Christ has ordained only for his believers; otherwise their judgment and condemnation will be the heavier.

But all this . . . is not meant to discourage broken and contrite hearts, as if only those who are without sin may come to the table of the Lord. For we do not come to

this supper to declare that we are perfect and righteous in ourselves. On the contrary, we seek our life outside of ourselves in Jesus Christ and, in doing so, we acknowledge that we are dead in ourselves. We also are aware of our many sins and shortcomings. We do not have perfect faith and we do not serve God with such zeal as he requires. Daily we have to contend with the weakness of our faith and with the evil desires of our flesh. Yet by the grace of the Holy Spirit, we are heartily sorry for these shortcomings and desire to fight against our unbelief and to live according to all the commandments of God. Therefore we may be fully assured that no sin or weakness which still remains in us against our will can prevent us from being received by God in grace and from being made worthy partakers of this heavenly food and drink.

*themselves, with spiritual joy and holy delight, the unfailing fruits of election pointed out in the Word of God—such as a true faith in Christ, a childlike fear of God, a godly sorrow for their sins, and a hunger and thirst for righteousness”* (Article 12). In weakness I see the outline of those fruits of election in my life and heart. That, obviously, is God’s work in me. Well now, if God has begun a work in me, he will not give up on it. My focus is not to be on myself so that I stare myself blind at my remaining weaknesses, but my focus is to be on the Lord God—so that I delight in his mercy to the weak. This God is ever faithful, and he will complete what he has begun.

### 3. Not Regarding God and Enjoying Sin

The third possible response to the doctrine of election the fathers list for consideration is this:

*Still others disregard God and the Saviour Jesus Christ and have completely given themselves over to the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth. For them this doctrine of reprobation is rightly fearsome as long as they do not seriously turn to God.*

The “others” mentioned here is not a reference to those outside the church but to people within the church. The fathers at the Synod of Dort, we need to remember, were seeking to comfort and correct those who were confused or misled by their Arminian preachers. Besides, those outside the church do not tend to bother their heads on the church’s teaching on election (and reprobation).

Within the church are not just those who shall be saved, but also hypocrites. Jesus in his parable about the Sower and the Seeds in Matthew 13 speaks of listeners whose hearts are as hard as the path through the grain field; no seeds of faith gain root in them. He mentions also hearers whose hearts are

so shallow that the sun immediately scorches the Word that sprouted, so that again there is no crop at all. He even mentions those who are initially excited by the word, but the cares of this life, its wealth and pleasures, choke out the Word so that it cannot grow or bear fruit. In each of these cases Jesus is describing people within the church who hear the preaching. These church-going people, however, have closed themselves off to the Word they hear Sunday after Sunday. Potentially, mention of reprobation in a sermon can engender a guilty conscience within them (which is no bad thing), but it brings about no change. These church members actually reject the gospel and God's call to repentance despite their continued attendance. As a result they shall experience what it's like to fall into the hands of the living God (Heb. 10:31). As the fathers also said, *"For them this doctrine of reprobation is rightly fearsome as long as they do not seriously turn to God."* And that they answer the call to change is of course imperative, lest they suffer the eternal judgment of the God they claim to serve.

### *Matthew 13:18–23*

<sup>18</sup> Hear then the parable of the sower: <sup>19</sup> When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path. <sup>20</sup> As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, <sup>21</sup> yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away. <sup>22</sup> As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. <sup>23</sup> As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.

## **The Doctrine of Reprobation: A Challenge to All Believers**

The doctrine of reprobation challenges us all. I am to see to it that I make diligent use of the means God has given to me, namely, his Holy Word, in order to encourage godly growth within myself. It also challenges me to derive comfort and reassurance from the knowledge that, though my sins and weaknesses remain many, their presence does not mean that I have to despair. God himself works within me a sorrow for sin. The very presence of this sorrow is a fruit of his having elected me.

## ARTICLE 17

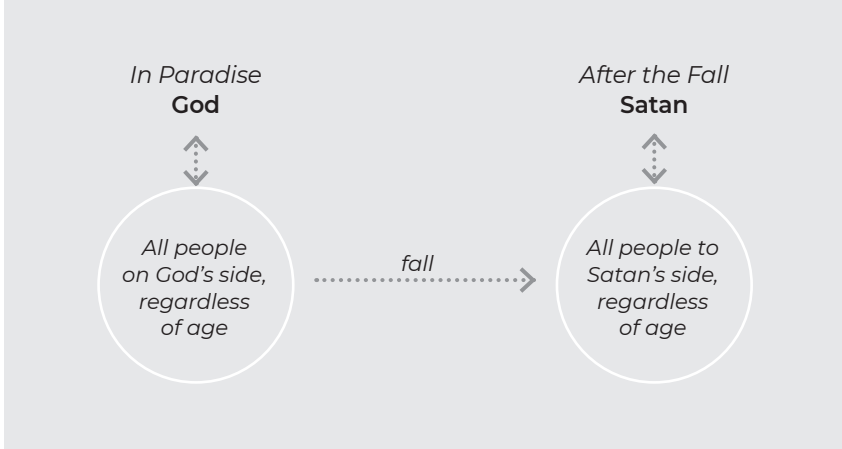
### Children of Believers Who Die in Infancy

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

Article 16 dealt with the pastoral problem of how mature believers respond to the doctrine of reprobation. Our fathers saw need to address a second pastoral problem, and that relates to whether God-fearing parents whose child died in infancy could know their deceased child to be with the Lord or not. Given that infant mortality rates in Europe at the end of the early 17th century were relatively high, it's obvious that this question was not theoretical. Though in our society today few children die in infancy, we nevertheless also want to know about the eternal destiny of our little ones who die in infancy.

The Arminians had said that God chooses particular persons to salvation because he sees ahead of time that they are going to believe; similarly, he destines others to hell because he sees ahead of time that they are not going to believe. That, however, raised a question about children. Since infants neither believe nor disbelieve (they're too young for either), are they saved or not? The Arminians answered the question this way: since God is merciful, he freely gives salvation and eternal life to each and every child who dies. Infants, then, are always saved, while the destiny of adults depends on their own choice to believe or not believe. In Article 9 the fathers had already shown that God does not elect particular persons on the ground of foreseen faith. What, though, is the biblical answer about the salvation of deceased children?

The fathers at the Synod of Dort learned from Scripture that at the fall into sin in Paradise the *entire* human race joined Satan's side (see Figure 1.8). That's what Paul says: "*Sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned*" (Rom. 5:12). The term "*all*" describes the entire human race, and so includes every man, woman, and child who would ever be born in the time of earth's history, irrespective, obviously, of how long they would live. Elsewhere, the apostle says something similar: "*We*"—that's Paul and

*Children on Satan's Side***FIGURE 1.8**

the believers of Ephesus—“*were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind*” (Eph. 2:3). The “*rest of mankind*” necessarily includes children. Irrespective of age, the fact that one is part of the human race means that one is by nature on Satan’s side. That explains why God did not bring Cain and Abel into Paradise upon their birth.

## The Lord Distinguishes between Children

All children, then, irrespective of tribe or location on the globe or era in which they live, are by nature subject to God’s wrath. May we believe that any are saved, and if so, on what basis? God’s Word addresses the matter in passages as these:

- In Genesis 17:7 the Lord said to Abraham, “*And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.*” The passage tells us first that God is going to be something for Abraham the adult that he was not going to be for Abraham’s adult neighbour, namely, “*be God to you.*” It tells us in second place that whatever he’ll be to Abraham he will equally be to Abraham’s offspring. Whatever that is (“*be God to you*”) would not, however, pertain to the offspring of Abraham’s neighbour. The point is that God distinguishes between children, so that he viewed Abraham’s children differently than he viewed the children of Abraham’s neighbour.

God's specific view of Abraham's children was decidedly to each child's advantage. God declared that he would "*be God to*" that child, and that is to say that he would claim Abraham's children as his own, and so love them and care for them better than any earthly father could do.<sup>3</sup> To say it in theological terms: God established a bond of love between himself on the one hand and Abraham *and his children* on the other. This bond of love God did not establish with Abraham's neighbour, nor with the children he sovereignly gave to Abraham's neighbour.

- After the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, Peter addressed a crowd of Jews. These people, we need to know, were descendants of Abraham and so children of God by covenant. He told these people to repent of their sins (including their transgression of crucifying the Son of God) and believe the gospel of Jesus' victory. He then added, "*For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself*" (Acts 2:39). Note the force of the term "*your*" in the phrase "*for your children*." The promise was not applicable to the children of the Greeks or the children of the Egyptians, but to the children of these Jews. Clearly, God distinguishes between children.

The term "promise" refers back to the Genesis 17 passage, where the Lord claimed Abraham's children for himself so that he would "be God to" them. Children of repentant believers in the New Testament dispensation may know on God's authority that the same promise God extended to Abraham is valid for the children the Lord has entrusted to their care. That's because (as Paul explains elsewhere) Gentile Christians of the New Testament dispensation are grafted into the tree of Abraham (see Rom. 11:17–24).

- Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7:14, "*For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.*" The term "holy" describes that one is set apart, distinguished from another. This passage, then, again makes clear that God differentiates between children, specifically between children of believers and children of unbelievers.

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3 The church has worked out in the Form for the Baptism of Infants what the content of the phrase "to be God to you" actually means. For detail, the reader is referred to Clarence Bouwman, *The Privilege of Parenting: A Biblical Explanation of the Form for the Baptism of Infants* (Winnipeg: Premier Printing, 2011), p. 38-43.

That the children of unbelievers do not belong to God is also the claim of Scripture. Consider these passages:

- The passage from 1 Corinthians 7 quoted above refers to the children of unbelievers as “*unclean*.” From the Old Testament law it is plain that anything unclean is offensive to God (see, for example, Lev. 7:21)
- Paul tells the saints at Ephesus what they used to be before the Holy Spirit renewed them: “*Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles . . . were . . . separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world*” (Eph. 2:11, 12). In their childhood, then, these Ephesian saints were not God’s people, but were “*strangers to the covenants of promise*.” But later in life the Lord gave them faith and from then on they (and therefore their children too; see Gen. 17:7; also Acts 11:14, 16:15, 29ff., 18:8) were “*no longer strangers and aliens, but . . . fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God*” (v. 19).

God, then, clearly distinguishes between the children of believers and the children of unbelievers. God has established his covenant with believers and the children he gives to believers; these children he claims for himself. The children of your unbelieving neighbour, on the other hand, do not belong to God and so are unclean before him.

Permit me a moment to emphasize the sovereignty of God in relation to children. We’ll readily accept that the formation and growth of a child in the womb, and its eventual birth also, is distinctly the work of sovereign God—and we praise him for it. But we need to know that the power and control of God is so great that he also determines which child to give to which parents, and which parents to give to which child. If God had so pleased, he could just as easily have entrusted the particular children my wife and I received to heathen parents in some dark corner of Mongolia. As it is, he sovereignly entrusted specific children to our care—and he had a reason for doing so. That’s because he claimed these children for himself in his covenant—and so in his care for those children ensured that they would receive believing parents. That perspective is particularly encouraging for believing parents as they busy themselves in raising their sinful children!

## Salvation for the Children?

Back, then, to the question of whether the children of believers who die in infancy are elect or not. The fathers at the Synod of Dort concluded



that yes, God indeed claims as his own the children he entrusts to believing parents. So they wrote in Article 17 that the Word of God “*declares that the children of believers are holy, not by nature but in virtue of the covenant of grace, in which they are included with their parents.*” If, then, a child of believing parents dies as an infant, those parents, on the authority of what God says in his Word, may be convinced that God’s covenant promises to their child are fulfilled. “*Therefore, God-fearing parents ought not to doubt the election and salvation of their children whom God calls out of this life in their infancy.*”

Could it be differently? Could it actually be that God would allow “*tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword*” to separate a child of his from him? It cannot be (Rom. 8:35). God is always true to his Word.

This is the faith that comforted David at the death of the child that was born to him after his adultery with Bathsheba. “*I shall go to him,*” David confessed (2 Sam. 12:20–23), and that’s because he knew his son was already with the Lord in Paradise.

When a child of ours dies, then, we may certainly grieve, but not as one who had no hope. For our little ones belong to God, and even death cannot separate them from their Master and Saviour (Rom. 8:38, 39). That is true for the toddler, true for the stillborn, and true even for the child who dies in the womb months before she was expected to be born. Here is a rich and definite comfort for God-fearing parents.

## As the Children Grow

Thankfully most children in our culture survive infancy and grow into adults. With adulthood comes also the responsibility to respond to God’s covenant promises with obedience and faith. Those children of believers who are elect will one day indeed embrace in faith the promises God gave them in their infancy (and signified and sealed in their baptism). Those covenant children whom God has passed by in his eternal counsel will not embrace those promises in faith. Biblical examples of the latter include Esau (see Mal. 1:2, 3; Rom. 9:13) and Judas Iscariot (Acts 1:25).

The fact that covenant adults need to make a decision to embrace the promises of the covenant does not undermine the fact that those children of believers who die in infancy are actually saved. God is sovereign to take a person out of this life any time he pleases. Some covenant infants he takes out of this life in infancy—and these receive eternal life. Other covenant

infants he leaves in this life to grow to adulthood—and these may be elect or may not be elect. The fruits they bear over the course of the years makes plain what God’s eternal plan for them was (recall Article 12).

## ARTICLE 18

### **Not Protest but Adoration**

*To those who complain about this grace of undeserved election and the severity of righteous reprobation, we reply with this word of the apostle: But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? (Rom 9:20). And with this word of our Saviour: Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? (Mt 20:15).*

*We, however, with reverent adoration of these mysteries, exclaim with the apostle: Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgements and how inscrutable his ways! “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counsellor?” “Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?” For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen (Rom 11:33–36).*

Finally, there were those who mocked what is so clearly taught by Scripture. In response to them, our fathers wrote this last article of the first Head of Doctrine. Since the Lord himself teaches election and reprobation in his Word, it will never do to protest that God has chosen some to life and passed others by. As Article 18 puts it, “*To those who complain about this grace of undeserved election and the severity of righteous reprobation, we reply with this word of the apostle: But who are you, O man, to talk back to God?*”

The posture confessed in this article is so fully biblical. Job lost all his children, his wealth, his health, and even his wife (as a faithful helpmeet), and so we can well understand that as he sat on his ash heap scratching his sores, Job had plenty of big words to say against God. But when God challenged him to consider his divine power and majesty, Job’s response was telling: “*Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but I will proceed no further*” (Job 40:4, 5). We have numerous thoughts and questions we would love to throw at the Lord as we reflect on what God revealed about election and reprobation, particularly in relation to loved ones who clearly do not walk in the way of the Lord. Yet we do well to

adopt an attitude of humility. It simply is not for me to complain that the Lord was pleased to save some and leave others. Paul caught our position so well: “*But who are you, O man, to answer back to God?*” (Rom. 9:20). The apostle’s rhetorical question puts us distinctly in our spot.

Instead of challenging God in my thinking and assembling criticisms for him to answer, we do better to adore God for his mercy. He, after all, did not have to save anybody—and certainly did not have to save me. Yet he did! With humble earnestness we echo the closing words of the first Head of Doctrine: “*Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! ‘For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?’ ‘Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?’ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory for ever. Amen*” (Rom. 11:33–36).

Indeed!

## Questions for Discussion:

15. The subject of reprobation is tough to deal with.
  - a. What have you commonly understood reprobation to be? What emotion has the concept of reprobation awakened in you?
  - b. The Canons provide a working definition of reprobation. In your opinion, what is the key word (or phrase) in the Canons’ definition of reprobation that highlights what reprobation actually is? Explain your choice.
  - c. Is it biblically correct to imagine all people as on some neutral ground before God, and then God sending some to heaven and some to hell? Why or why not?
  - d. Where is the doctrine of reprobation taught in Scripture? Why has God revealed this doctrine?
  - e. Do you fear that you might be reprobate? Why do you feel that way?
16. The doctrine of reprobation can arouse unsettled responses in the reader.
  - a. List the three responses to reprobation mentioned in Article 16, and show how the Canons of Dort is pastorally busy in each case.
  - b. To which of these three responses do you relate the best? How does the Canons’ reply to each response assist you?

- 17.** Despite the medical advances of our culture, children still die in infancy, even before birth.
- a.** Ought believing parents to doubt the salvation and election of their deceased infant? Justify your answer biblically.
  - b.** Does the salvation of a miscarried infant depend in any way on whether that child died in the first trimester of pregnancy or the second or the third? Again, justify your answer biblically.
  - c.** How would you comfort a loved one who struggles with a miscarriage, or has lost a child in infancy?
- 18.** God's revelation concerning election and reprobation awakens a particular response.
- a.** Why do the Canons stipulate that a response of adoration is fitting?
  - b.** Do you find this response filling your heart, or do you find this doctrine awakening in your heart a spirit of criticism against God for choosing the one and not the other? If it's the latter, try to list why you feel critical of God and then consider how those grounds for criticism measure up to God's divine identity.