

Lesson 17 **DIVINE ELECTION AND REPROBATION****(Canons of Dort: First Head of Doctrine)**

## 17.1 The Approach

The Canons of Dort do not begin with election, but move towards it. They begin with the confession of the deep malaise in which man finds himself after the fall into sin. The accent in the first article falls on our communal **guilt** before God. Since all men have sinned in our first parents, we all deserve eternal death.

This approach attacks the root of the Remonstrant position. For the heart of their position was that although mankind had suffered a form of loss and corruption which in itself was bad, it was yet repairable with God's help. In fact, many in the Remonstrant party held to a form of progressive advancement among mankind, (that is, immanent evolution).

## 1. The Foundation of Election

The Canons proceed from the fall to the love of God in Jesus Christ. The foundation of election lies nowhere in man, but solely in the good pleasure of God. God does not desire the death of the sinner, but that he should turn and live, Ezekiel 18:32. The central passage is the great gospel message of the New Testament: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him will not perish, but have eternal life," John 3:16 (NASB).

## 2. The Role of Preaching

The love of God in Jesus Christ must be preached everywhere, Matthew 28:18,19. The fragrance of the gospel begins with its messengers. This gospel must be seen as a message of life in a lost world. Note that the confession speaks of real things happening in time, but sees them at the same time as a fruit and result, (a putting into effect) of God's decree.

The preaching of the gospel has a two-fold effect. Some repent and turn from sin. Others are hardened in their sin, John 3:36. No sin occurs without the permission of the will of God. The sins of the enemies of God also serve His purposes. Yet God is never in any way to be seen as the Author of sin, John 5:39, 40. As the Canons state, the very thought is blasphemy. He is always the Author of grace and forgiveness, Ephesians 2:8, Philippians 1:29. The one decree then has two aspects:

- a. the hearts of the elect are inclined to faith (elected).
- b. the non-elect are left to their own wickedness and hardness of heart (passed by).

### 3. The Decree Defined

The decree of election and reprobation is an eternal decree, resting in the good pleasure of God, Ephesians 1:4-6, Romans 8:30. Note that this decree is a decision concerning created and fallen man. From this total number, God elects a certain **definite number** to salvation and life in Jesus Christ. Election always deal with particular persons, and always concerns a specific number of people, Matthew 11:25, 26.

Here the Church already comes into view. Although we deal with a specific number of people, this number should not be seen as

a loose collection of individuals. Rather, this is the new mankind, rooted in Jesus Christ, the last Adam, 1 Corinthians 15:45-49, Romans 5:14, 15.

The Church is chosen **in Christ**. This does not mean that Christ is the real Elect One, and we are then secondarily chosen in Him. Rather it means that the act of choosing us must be seen in the context of the great love and mercy of God for His Church. Without the willingness of Christ to suffer for His Church there never would have been an election of God to eternal life.

#### 4. Means to Election

Scripture speaks of various kinds of election. For example we read of the election of the people, Deuteronomy 7:7, 8, the election of the king, Psalm 2:7, a tribe, and a holy offspring, Genesis 17:19, and so on. But these acts of choosing are all subordinate to the essential choice of the holy offspring, the number of the elect, which is and remains the choice of a particular number of persons. This choice is also made without respect of persons, Genesis 25:23, 1 Samuel 16:7. Thus there is one decree both in the Old and New Testament, which includes not only the gift of salvation, but also the way to salvation, Ephesians 2:10.

In the one decree we can distinguish two moments. God sets apart a holy offspring but in that holy offspring He also distinguishes between seed and seed, that is, the holy from the unholy, the sanctified from the corrupt, Galatians 4:30. This is all determined according to His sovereign good pleasure.

#### 5. The Fruit of Election

Election is the source of all the sacred and heavenly gifts among men. No one is ever chosen by God because of certain gifts, but in order that gifts can be bestowed upon him. One may not look first to the fruits, but must look to the fountain, James 1:17.

## 6. The Power of the Decree

The Canons describe the decree of God as an unchangeable decree. This means that the greatest of powers in the universe is not able to assail the work of God, Romans 8:37-39. God has established a link between foreordination and glorification, and that chain of love and mercy can never be broken. This chain of love covers His whole Church as a complete and integrally united body.

## 7. Reprobation

The decree of reprobation is not simply the effect of not having been chosen but forms a distinct decision made by God. The one decree is composed of two aspects: initially the reprobate are passed by and then they are finally condemned and eternally punished because of their sins according to the justice of God. This decree not only illustrates the supreme justice of God, but commends His mercy and grace in His decree of election.

The cause of reprobation is to be found in the sin, guilt and hardness of heart of the unrepentant, and not in God, 1 John 4:9-11. God manifests His righteous judgment in bringing the reprobate to condemnation, 2 Corinthians 5:10.

## 8. The Children

Although the Canons of Dort, like the other confessions, are drawn up from the perspective of adults, the children are not forgotten. This is especially evident in the pastoral tone of Chapter 1/17. This article asserts that godly parents may be confident of the salvation of their children dying in infancy by virtue of the covenant of grace. It forms a response to the charges of the Remonstrants, who held that the Reformed party defended a cruel God who arbitrarily relegated a countless number of innocent children to hell, (see the *Conclusions*).

However, the Canons do not wish to promote an automatic salvation. Note that Article 17 speaks of **God-fearing** parents, and urges these parents to find their comfort in the certainty of the promises of God. The children of believers are holy by virtue of the power of God's promises, 1 Corinthians 7:14, Acts 2:39.

### 9. Teaching the Decree

The Canons make clear that the decree of election and reprobation must be preached and taught, Psalm 2:7, Isaiah 46:10, 2 Thessalonians 1:9. There are various kinds of people in the Church. Some are unsure, others plagued with failure and defeat. Still others are indifferent to the gospel message. Only the latter need to be fearful when the doctrine of reprobation is mentioned.

The *Conclusions* of the Canons urge the teachers to conduct themselves in a reverent and God-fearing way in teaching this doctrine. It must be taught in such a way that it promotes the glory of God's name, the holiness of life, and the comfort of the afflicted. Scripture consistently presents this doctrine in these contexts, Romans 11:33; Philippians 2:12, 13; 2 Peter 1:10.

## 17.2 Remonstrant Ideas Opposed

The Remonstrants maintained many of the terms of Scripture, but gave them a new meaning. For example, they freely used the word **election**, but defined this as the term describing those who of their own free will choose the way of faith, and persevere in good works.

The Remonstrants also held that grace had to be understood in relative terms. In the new order of the covenant, God could have set any number of conditions for man to be reconciled to him. Out of all possible conditions He chose the way of faith as the new condition for reconciliation and fellowship with Him. **Grace** was then viewed by the Remonstrants as the clemency of God in choosing the condition of faith for obtaining salvation. Faith in itself could never be perfect, but God's grace is manifested precisely in the fact that He graciously accepts what is imperfect, and counts it as the required condition for fellowship with Him.

In order to attempt a reconciliation between the language of Scripture and their theories, the Remonstrants defended a theory of multiple decrees, and a change in these decrees, all in accordance with the response of men. But the Counter-Remonstrants rightly saw this as an attack upon the sovereignty and superiority of the one triune God. They also saw that here the one decree was broken up into various unconnected decisions which detracted from the majesty and honour due to the one triune God.

## Exercises Lesson 17

**I. Reference Passages**

Study and Memorize:           1 Peter 2:9,10  
  1 Corinthians 7:14  
  2 Corinthians 2:14-16

**II. Review Questions**

1.       What is the way in which God's election is realized?
2.       What must we hold to when dealing with God's eternal decree?
3.       Why do the proof texts for election come mostly from the New Testament?
4.       Is reprobation the exact opposite of election?
5.       What effect does the preaching of the gospel have among the hearers? Prove your answer.

**III. Extra Questions:**

1.       What did Pelagius teach regarding man's human nature and his fall into sin?
2.       What was Erastus' theory on church government? How did it influence the Arminian controversy?