

Can Parents be Sure? Background and Meaning of Canons of Dort I, 17

Part 1

The Question

Within the first chapter of the Canons of Dort, dealing with divine election and reprobation, the seventeenth article comes with a comforting message. This article speaks very specifically about the infants of believers and confesses:

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.¹

* Originally delivered as a speech at the College Evening of September 8, 1995 and subsequently published in two articles as “Can Parents Be Sure? Background and Meaning of Canons of Dort I, 17,” *Clarion* 44 (1995) 464–465, 481–483. Used with permission.

¹ The translation is taken from the *Book of Praise* (rev. ed.; Winnipeg: Premier, 1993) 539. The original Latin and Dutch texts are published in J. N. Bakhuizen van den Brink, ed., *De Nederlandse belijdenisgeschriften* (2nd ed.; Amsterdam: Ton Bolland, 1976) 236–237. This shows that the article consisted originally of one long sentence, as can be seen in the earlier English version: “Since we are to judge of the will of God from his Word, which testifies that the children of believers are holy..., godly parents ought not to doubt the election and salvation of their children whom it pleases God to call out of this life in their infancy.”

This article underlines the truth that the doctrine of election is not a theoretical issue, far removed from the daily faith life of believers. As a matter of fact, the whole first chapter of the Canons of Dort is very practical, directly addressing man in his situation.² This lively approach of the Canons, however, comes to a climax when God-fearing parents are comforted in their grief over the death of an infant. The Canons point out that the election and salvation of their child ought not to be doubted.

At first glance, Article 17 clearly teaches that the election and salvation of such children is certain. This is a well-established interpretation. Already in 1818, Thomas Scott wrote: “The salvation of the offspring of believers, dying in infancy, is here scripturally stated, and not limited to such as are baptized.”³ The general Reformed commentaries on this article agree with Scott in maintaining that the church confesses that children of believers are saved when they die in infancy.⁴ Some even take the old-fashioned expression “ought not to doubt” as a very strong statement of the opposite: The parents may be convinced that such children are saved.⁵

² The practical, non-academic character of the Canons is intentional; see H. Kaajan, *De groote Synode van Dordrecht in 1618–1619* (Amsterdam: De Standaard, n.d.) 175.

³ Th. Scott, *The Articles of the Synod of Dort, Translated from the Latin, with Notes* (with Introductory Essay by S. Miller; repr., Harrisburg: Sprinkle Publications, 1993) 270.

⁴ To give an older example, M. Meijering concludes his discussion with the following words: “When God-fearing parents cry over their precious gifts they could only briefly enjoy having, they may look up together and remind one another: Our children were fruits early ripe for heaven. And with this they can comfort one another,” *De Dordtsche Leerregels* (Groningen: Jan Haan, 1924) 82; C. Trimp writes: “It began with separation in the covenant of God’s love and ended with that death which only for covenant breakers is not an entering into eternal life, no means of regeneration. The death of our children who are called God’s children may become a confirmation of baptism for us, a definitive separation from the world of sin,” in J. Faber et al., *The Bride’s Treasure: Introduction to the Canons of Dort* (Launceston: Publication Organisation of the Free Reformed Churches of Australia, 1979) 55.

⁵ J. G. Feenstra writes: “This, too, is a very strong expression.... But looking at the covenant of grace, they now have comfort, for God is faithful. He promised this and will fulfil it,” *De Dordtse Leerregels* (3rd ed.; Kampen: Kok, 1968) 71. Joh. Francke wrote: “We have to take the words ‘ought not to doubt’ as a litotes. That is a figure of speech seemingly diminishing the meaning but in fact used to strengthen it. ‘He is not a fool’ means, in fact, ‘He is very smart.’ We must there-

Others, however, do not take the article as a declaration of certainty. They give different reasons for their interpretation. One reason is that the expression “ought not to doubt” itself falls short of full certainty because it does not determine explicitly the fate of such children. The article merely states that the parents ought not to be filled with anxious doubt concerning the salvation and election of their child. They should rest in God who in his good pleasure saves his children out of our children.⁶ In other words, the Canons do not determine the salvation of these infants; they only determine the attitude of the parents.

This interpretation is not very probable. The article says more than simply that the parents ought not to doubt. It begins by saying something about the children themselves, emphasizing that they are holy and included in the covenant. Believing parents are exhorted not to doubt because God has revealed that their children are holy.

Another reason given in support of the view that full certainty is not taught, is that the article does not state anything concerning God’s hidden judgment. The article merely refers to our knowledge which is limited, by declaring: “We must judge....” It is still possible that some deceased children of believers are reprobated in God’s hidden judgment.⁷

fore take ‘ought not to doubt’ as ‘must be firmly assured.’ Believing parents must be firmly assured about the election and salvation of their children who died in infancy,” in “Zijn de kinderen der gelovigen, die God in hun kindsheid uit dit leven wegneemt, wedergeboren?” in *De Reformatie* 44 (1968–1969) 330.

⁶ H. Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed* (trans. H. C. Hoeksema; Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1971) devotes a whole chapter to this issue, chapter 11: “Covenant children who die in infancy.” See e.g. p. 158: “With objective certainty, therefore, there is nothing more to be said of children who die in their infancy than that the Lord saves his seed out of our seed.” The chapter proves that Hoeksema has great difficulty with Canons of Dort I, 17. To give an example, Hoeksema writes: “This article leaves much to be desired as far as clarity and sharpness of definition are concerned; and it cannot be denied that in the form in which it is here cast it really cannot be considered an item for a confession.”

⁷ D. W. Sinnema, *The Issue of Reprobation at the Synod of Dort in Light of the History of this Doctrine* (doctoral dissertation, University of St. Michael’s College, 1985) 413–415. Sinnema’s approach to this article is too negative, in my view. He refers to the fact that the draft for this article began with a reference to 2 Tim. 2:19: “‘The Lord knows those who are his’” and concludes that the article first allowed for a reprobation of deceased children of believers (413). When this section was removed and thus the basis for his statement was taken away, Sinnema says that this view was not excluded (415). This interpretation of the draft is not convinc-

Again, this is an improbable interpretation. It is true, of course, that God knows more than he has revealed in Scripture. But how can a reference to God's comprehensive knowledge be used to undermine what he has revealed in Scripture? Would this not amount to a confessional admission of duplicity on the side of God? Rather, when God has revealed his will, we may hold fast to that.

It is not sufficient, however, to state that such interpretations are improbable. The seed of confusion has been sown and the certainty weakened. Our confessions are not meant to confuse us, but to summarize for us the scriptural teaching on the important issues of our faith. We should not be left with a lingering doubt as to the meaning of Canons of Dort I, 17. For that reason, it is important to delve somewhat into the history of this confession. Why was the issue of the salvation of infants included in this chapter on election? Can history shed light on the meaning of this confessional statement?

Background

The statement on the election and salvation of children of believers dying in infancy has its origin in the debates between the Reformed and the Arminians concerning election. The Reformed churches in The Netherlands confessed the doctrine of election. It was briefly mentioned in the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 21, and briefly discussed in the Belgic Confession, Article 16. The Reformed churches obviously did not overemphasize election, but they included it in their confessions as something clearly taught in Scripture.

Some, however, developed reservations concerning this doctrine. When Arminius taught theology at Leiden University, he questioned and undermined this doctrine before his students. During the beginning of the seventeenth century, the opposition against the doctrine of election grew until it came into the open when forty ministers held a meeting to formulate their objections to Calvinist theology. It was at this meeting that the issue of the salvation of children of believers was broached. In fact, this issue was used to object to the doctrine of election. These ministers wrote in a statement that they rejected the idea

ing. In my opinion, the reference to 2 Tim. 2:19 was not intended to express reservation concerning the following statement. However that may be, when this reference was removed, the only acceptable conclusion is that the present article gives no ground for reservation.

that God...has decided to deliver some from this fall and corruption to declare his mercy, and to leave in damnation others, young as well as old, and even some children of covenant people, who are baptized in the name of Christ, when they die in infancy, to declare his righteousness.⁸

This objection takes its starting point in Article 16 of the Belgic Confession, where God's mercy is connected with election, and God's justice with reprobation. It contains an element, however, that is not in Article 16, namely, that even some children of covenant people, when they die in infancy, are reprobated.

What Reformed professor or minister had ever said this? The source for this objection has never been given. The Reformed have consistently denied the charge. It is possible that an expression used by Calvin in his debate with Castellio is the origin.⁹ If that is the case, it rests on a misunderstanding, for Calvin did not deal with the children of believers in that debate. Whatever the source, throughout the following debates the charge continued to be levelled against the Reformed that their doctrine of election means that some children of believers would be eternally condemned when they died in infancy.

The issue of infant salvation was, therefore, used as an emotional argument against the Reformed doctrine of election. It is clear that the Remonstrants here touched on a sensitive issue. It deeply affects parents when one of their children dies in infancy. At the time the Canons of Dort were written, this was a sorrow more parents had to suffer than today. The average recorded mortality rate in France around this time was between fifteen and thirty percent for babies born alive. Between the ages of one and five, about eighteen percent of children died. To give one specific example, this time from England, a Mary Verney, who married in 1634, had six children. Two died in infancy, and two when aged four and eight, respectively. Only two of her children lived to reach adulthood.¹⁰ In the situation where

⁸ See the text in J. Trigland, *Kerkelycke Geschiedenissen* (Leiden: Adriaen Wyn-gaerden, 1650) 525.

⁹ See for this, B. B. Warfield, "The Doctrine of Infant Salvation," in his *Studies in Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981) 435–436, n. 78.

¹⁰ These data have been taken from L. Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500–1800* (1977; abridged and revised ed., Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1985) 54–58. Another author, L. Clarkson, writes about the infant mortality rate in England before the nineteenth century that "they were possibly in the general region of 150–200 per thousand, and considerably greater in overcrowded urban communities and during the sickly years of epidemics or food shortages" in *Death, Disease and Famine in Pre-industrial England* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975) 5.

many parents had lost children in infancy, the Remonstrants charged the Reformed that their doctrine of election implies that God would arbitrarily elect some and reprobate others.

Here we find the first answer to our question concerning the meaning of Canons of Dort I, 17. If the answer had fallen short of full certainty, then Synod would have said in effect that the Remonstrants had been correct in their charge that the Reformed doctrine implied reprobation of some deceased covenant children. The whole first chapter of the Canons would show that the Remonstrants had been misrepresenting the Reformed doctrine on all scores, but the seventeenth canon would admit implicitly that the Remonstrants had been correct on this issue. If that were the case, the Canons would not have touched upon the issue at all. The inclusion of this issue in chapter 1 of the Canons of Dort implies that the Remonstrant objection was based on a misrepresentation. The Reformed did not think that God would leave in damnation children of covenant people when these die in infancy.

Part 2

The Canons of Dort have usually been taken to say that the children of believers, when these die in infancy, are with God. Some, however, have argued that the statement of the Canons do not speak with full certainty. In Part 1, we discussed the origin of the seventeenth canon: it lies in the accusation of the Remonstrants that the Reformed doctrine of election implies that some children of believers dying in infancy would be reprobated. The statement of the Canons rejects this Remonstrant accusation. Against this background, the expression of Canons of Dort I, 17 can only be taken as a positive statement of assurance.

During the Synod

We receive more information concerning the meaning of Canons of Dort I, 17 from the events during the Synod of Dort. We need not go into the many events surrounding the appearance of the Remonstrants before Synod, or their being sent away. After their dismissal, it was decided that all delegations, of the foreign churches as well as of the Dutch provinces, would come with their own considered opinion concerning the debated issues.

These judgments were published after Synod was closed. Many of these go into the issue of the children of believers dying in infancy. Because of time restrictions, I will give only two quotations, one from a for-

eign delegation and one from a Dutch delegation.

The Bremen delegation says about the children of believers who die before they can comprehend the doctrine that “God loves them with the same good pleasure, for Christ’s sake, by Christ, and in Christ, with which he loves the adults.” Therefore these, as well, are holy in relation to the covenant.¹¹ This is a strong, positive statement. It emphasizes God’s love for these children. This love is not God’s general liking for all of creation, but it is determined by God’s good pleasure, that is, by his election. It is God’s love as it is determined by our Saviour Jesus Christ. The Bremen delegation was certainly not reticent in speaking of God’s electing love in connection with such children.

The other example is taken from the statement of three Dutch professors. They quote some well-known texts, Genesis 17:7, Matthew 19:14, and Acts 2:39, and conclude on the basis of these texts that the children of believers dying in their infancy, must be counted among the elect, since they are graciously redeemed from this life before they broke the conditions of the covenant.¹² This delegation concludes on the basis of God’s Word that these children belong to the elect.

Now imagine that Canons of Dort I, 17 would be a weak proposal, leaving undecided whether these children were elect or not. Would these delegations and these professors not have jumped up to publicly state their disagreement with the proposed statement? Yet, this Canon was adopted unanimously and without discussion. Here we have found the second reason why the article on children dying in infancy must mean certainty concerning their election and salvation. Any proposal on this sensitive issue falling short of certainty undoubtedly would have created an uproar among the delegations, for the advice of the delegations speak of certainty.

After all advice had been read, a committee went to work to compose the Canons. Remarkably, the first proposal for the Canons did not contain a statement on the issue of the salvation of children of believing parents.

¹¹ J. H. Donner and S. A. Van den Hoorn, eds., *Acta of Handelingen der Nationale Synodi* (repr., Houten: Den Hertog, 1987) 397. This edition will hereafter be referred to as *Acta*.

¹² Donner and Van den Hoorn, *Acta*, 606. The professors were Polyander, Thysius and Walaeus. There were two other Dutch professors present at the Synod of Dort, Lubbertus and Gomarus, who each submitted his own opinion on the debated issues. This does not mean that the professors had an essential disagreement on these issues. Lubbertus subscribed the statement of the three; Gomarus orally stated his agreement with them.

This led to a reaction from several delegations. The Swiss delegation expressed surprise that nothing had been determined about the election and reprobation of infants, in view of the fact that the Remonstrants use this to make the doctrine of election hateful to pregnant women. They agreed with other delegations that “some moderate and sound canon not only to assuage the doubt of believing parents but also to counter the vileness of opponents” should be issued.¹³

It is improbable that an evasive statement like “God may reprobate some of these infants but parents should not doubt” would have satisfied the request of those delegations who pleaded for the Synod to deal with this issue. In the situation, only a statement expressing certainty would do. This is the third reason why the Canons cannot be taken as falling short of certainty.

The committee went to work on a proposal. It is possible to gain some insight into their considerations since their papers have been preserved. For us, it is interesting that at first a longer article was considered. The notes do not end with “God-fearing parents ought not to doubt the election and salvation of their children whom God calls out of this life in their infancy,” but continue with the sentence “rather, believe that to them belongs the kingdom of heaven.”¹⁴ The proposal, obviously, refers to Matthew 19:14, where Jesus says to bring the children to him, for to such is the kingdom of heaven. This final clause is a clear indication that the committee was positive in its conviction that these children are saved.

It could be objected that this sentence was omitted in the final version. That is obviously correct, but the question is what the reason was for this omission. It is not imaginable that it was scratched out because the committee could not agree with it. After all, they wrote the sentence themselves. A better explanation is that it was left out because the sentence as is was seen as sufficiently positive. Several other proposals were also left out from the final version. It appears that everything was left out that was not absolutely necessary. Even without this addition, it was sufficiently determined that such children were elected and saved. That is the fourth reason to support the view that the Canons of Dort comforts parents with full certainty.

The fifth and conclusive reason can be found in the text of the Canons themselves. After canons had been made concerning the five issues debated between the Reformed and the Remonstrants, a conclusion was added. In this concluding section, some statements were rejected as slandering the Re-

¹³ This can be found in Sinnema, *The Issue of Reprobation*, 412–413.

¹⁴ See the Hague manuscripts, document 1.5.18, in Sinnema, *The Issue of Reprobation*, 413. My reconstruction differs slightly from that of Sinnema.

formed doctrine. Among these is the allegation that the Reformed teach that

many innocent children of believers are torn from their mothers' breasts and tyrannically thrown into hell, so that neither the blood of Christ nor their baptism nor the prayers of the church at their baptism can be of any help to them.¹⁵

The Synod of Dort, therefore, said in effect: 'The rumour that the Reformed would teach that some children of believers dying in infancy are reprobated is slander. This conclusion makes it impossible to take the confession of Canons I, 17 as less than certain. Parents can be sure.

This is confirmed by the Reformed theology after the Synod of Dort. Concerning the children of believers, it is stated that they are saved when they die in infancy.¹⁶ The conclusion was reached, the matter decided, and the doctrine accepted.

Finally

One more question needs yet to be answered. If the Synod of Dort was convinced that these children were saved, why did it not state this explicitly? Why did they not say outrightly that children of believers, when God calls them out of this life in infancy, would be saved? Why did they not so much focus on the fate of the children but rather on the parents by emphasizing that the parents need not doubt? Does this not indicate that the framers of the confession, even though personally convinced that these children would be saved, wanted to stay on the safe side in their final rule?

The formulation, however, should be understood against the background of the debate with the Remonstrants. These had alleged that the Reformed doctrine of election implied that some children of believers dying in infancy would be thrown into eternal damnation. This was an argument that spoke to the many families that had experienced loss of an infant. As we saw, one of the delegations stated that the Remonstrant charge was intended to make the doctrine of election hateful, particularly to pregnant women. The Reformed were accused of teaching that children of believers were torn from their mothers' breasts and tyrannically thrown into hell. The Remonstrants mobilized the parents' opinion against the Reformed doctrine of election.

Faced with these allegations, the Reformed could not limit themselves

¹⁵ *Book of Praise*, 575; see for the original text, Bakhuizen van den Brink, *De Nederlandse belijdenisgeschriften*, 279.

¹⁶ See Warfield, "The Doctrine of Infant Salvation," 431ff.; see esp. 434.

to a statement of fact that these children are holy and are saved. They felt they had to go on and address the parents: believing parents ought not to doubt the election and salvation of their deceased infants. Canons of Dort I, 17 does not fall short of certainty; rather, it moves beyond a statement of fact by directly addressing the situation of the parents.¹⁷ It begins by pointing out the certainty that their children are holy in virtue of the covenant of grace. Then it turns to the parents to comfort them on this basis that they ought not to doubt. Rather, they should trust the words of God in 1 Corinthians 7:14, Genesis 17:7, and Acts 2:39. It is radically against the intention of this confession to use the practical direction of this statement to undermine the certainty of the doctrine. The parents are comforted on the basis that God himself promised salvation. Before the certainty of God's promises, the doubt of parents melts away.

The Canons are not the best known of our confessions. To some people, they seem aloof and abstract. That impression is not correct, however. They address the life of the believers in a heartwarming, practical way. That is also the case in I, 17, where parents in their sorrow are comforted with the sure promises of God.

¹⁷ The Canons had already addressed the situation of the believers in the previous section, I, 12–16.