



Editorial

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The covenant and Dordt (10)

Total depravity: Children incapable of fulfilling a condition

The Canons' positive treatment of the Reformed doctrine of total depravity is straightforward and relatively brief. And yet, all nine articles of the Rejection of Errors condemn errors of the Remonstrants connected with total depravity. The reason for this is simple. The Canons set forth the Reformed truth over against the specific teaching of the Remonstrants. However, the Reformed doctrine of total depravity was explicitly set forth in the existing confessions, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession of Faith. The Remonstrants did not write what they really believed about fallen man. If they had, they would obviously contradict the confessions; it would indicate that their theology was not Reformed. Accordingly, their "third point," on fallen man's condition, though meandering, is something with which Reformed believers could agree, though most would want to state it clearer.

For this reason, the Canons could easily summarize the confessional teaching of total depravity. But the section on errors described and rejected many of the errors that the Remonstrants *taught*—errors that contradicted the truth of total depravity. These errors maintained that fallen man's will is not dead, but quite able to will and chose the good, even salvation, though it might need some assisting grace. For this reason also, the Synod of Dordt answered the Remonstrants' third and fourth points in one section. The Canons unite Head III ("Of the corruption of man") and Head IV ("His conversion to God") into one head to demonstrate the contradiction in the Remonstrants' teaching, namely, that a totally depraved, spiritually dead sinner can somehow get saved by a *resistible* grace (as they taught it).

The Canons' doctrine of total depravity is fully in harmony with the other Reformed confessions. It maintains that man (Adam), though created good, by his sin brought "on himself blindness of mind, horrible darkness, vanity and perverseness of judgment, became wicked, rebellious, and obdurate in heart and will, and impure in his affections" (Art. 1). And the effect of the Fall was not only on our first parents. Rather, "man after the

fall begat children in his own likeness...by the propagation of a vicious nature" (Art. 2). As a result, "all men are conceived in sin, and by nature children of wrath, incapable of saving good, prone to evil, dead in sin, and in bondage thereto, and without the regenerating grace of the Holy Spirit, they are neither able nor willing to return to God, to reform the depravity of their nature, nor to dispose themselves to reformation" (Art. 3).

Having established the total inability of man to save himself, the Canons carefully lead to the conclusion that only sovereign, saving grace can and will save man. "Glimmerings of natural light" never bring man to a "saving knowledge of God and true conversion" (Art. 4). Neither does the law. For while the law "discovers the greatness of sin" and even convicts of sin, it never "points out the remedy nor imparts the strength to extricate him from ruin" (Art. 5). In the Rejection of Errors, the Canons repeat the truth that the unregenerate man is really and utterly "dead in sin, [and] destitute of all powers unto spiritual good (Art. 4).

This is the state of every child born into this world, also every child born to believing parents and baptized. There is no difference in this regard between a child born to unbelieving parents and a child of believers. Apart from the work of regeneration, every child is "utterly dead in sin." Every imagination of the thoughts of his heart is only evil continually (Gen. 6:5, quoted by the Canons in Rejection of Errors, Art. 4.)

Believing parents cannot know whether their child is elect or reprobate. If he is reprobate, the Holy Spirit has not worked and will not work faith in the child. The parents will teach every child to pray and to sing the Psalms. They will help the child memorize Bible verses and catechism questions. They will instruct every child concerning God, His Son Jesus Christ, the sinfulness of man, and how God sent His Son into the world to redeem lost sinners. They will teach the great salvation earned for God's beloved people in the cross of Christ and that they are saved only by faith in Jesus. They will direct their child to this Jesus.

What will be the effect of all this instruction? If their child is reprobate, he hates God and hates his neighbor. He will, therefore, hate all the instruction about God. Whether the parents talk of God's great love, His power, or His holiness and justice, the child will hate God. The more he learns of this God, the more conscious he becomes that he hates Him. All the catechism classes, all the years of instruction in home and in Christian school, all the sermons only harden his heart. This is the work of the Spirit. The Spirit softens the hard heart of the elect and gives faith in Christ and love for God. The same Spirit hardens the spiritual heart of the reprobate. This is Paul's word concerning the effect, the power, of preaching: "For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish: to the one we are the savour of death unto death; and to the other the savour of life unto life. And who is sufficient for these things?" (II Cor. 2:15, 16). The same will be the effect of preaching and all the instruction to the reprobate child in the covenant. It is a savor of death unto death.

The only hope for anyone, be it a child born into a home of unbelief, or a baptized child born to believing parents, is the work of the Holy Spirit. He alone gives life and faith!

The Arminian had a theological problem. Pretending to believe that all men are born totally depraved and dead in sin, they yet taught that Christ died for all and salvation is offered to all on the condition of faith. But how can the dead sinner respond to this supposedly gracious offer of salvation? For some, the solution was that fallen man has power of free will, at least enough power to accept the offer. Others said that God gives all men common grace that enables them to accept or reject the offer. The Canons reject all these attempts. In the Rejection of Errors, Article 5 specifically rejects the term common grace:

Error 5: Who teach: That the corrupt and natural man can so well use the common grace (by which they understand the light of nature), or the gifts still left him after the fall, that he can gradually gain by their good use a greater, namely, the evangelical or saving grace and salvation itself. And that in this way God on His part shows Himself ready to reveal Christ unto all men, since He applies to all sufficiently and efficiently the means necessary to conversion.

Rejection: For the experience of all ages and the Scriptures do both testify that this is untrue. "He showeth his word unto Jacob, his statutes and his ordinances unto Israel. He hath not dealt so with any nation: and as for his ordinances, they have not known

them" (Ps. 147:19, 20). "Who in the generations gone by suffered all the nations to walk in their own ways" (Acts 14:16). And: "And they [Paul and his companions] having been forbidden of the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia, and when they were come over against Mysia, they assayed to go into Bithynia, and the Spirit suffered them not" (Acts 16:6, 7).

Present-day conditional covenant theology has the very same problem as the Arminians. Conditional covenant theology maintains that God promises salvation to every baptized child. They go beyond the Arminians who taught that God "shows himself ready to reveal Christ to all." Rather, in the conditional covenant, God claims the baptized child as His own, established an eternal covenant of grace with the child, and promises eternal life on the condition that the child believes. It is not an empty promise. But the problem is that the child is born dead in sin and cannot "accept" the promise.

Their solution? God gives a certain grace to every baptized child. For Christian Reformed Church (CRC) theologian William Heyns, this is God's common grace. This is fully in harmony with the first point of common grace adopted by the CRC in 1924. The well-meant offer of the gospel is given as evidence of God's grace to all men. And Heyns insisted that this grace is not merely external, a gracious attitude, or an external influence, for that is Pelagian grace. On that point he was correct.

Klaas Schilder, nonetheless, rejected Heyns' theology of a subjective grace. He taught only an external grace. Such grace is obviously ineffectual, so other Liberated theologians in Schilder's day and since have insisted that there *is* a subjective grace operating in each covenant child. That God gives *grace* to all baptized children, along with the promise of salvation in Christ—if they believe—is the only way that conditional covenant theology can be consistent. A sincere promise that God claims that child as His own, makes His eternal covenant with him, a promise of forgiveness and eternal life, all that to the covenant child dead in sin who *cannot* accept the promise, is foolishness. There must be some receptivity, some ability to respond! So one must either deny that the child is totally depraved and dead in sin, or teach a grace that lifts him up to be able to respond.

The problem is, neither of these is Reformed as defined by the Canons of Dordrecht. Every child born into this world is "utterly dead in sin." And the Canons also reject the notion of a common grace that enables the baptized child gradually to gain saving grace, that is, to be saved.

The Canons' doctrine of total depravity condemns the theology of a conditional covenant.

On the other hand, the unconditional covenant gov-

erned by election is perfectly in harmony with the Canons also on this point. At baptism, God's promises are to the elect alone. All the beautiful promises laid out in the Baptism Form are genuine promises to those chosen in Christ in eternity. And God's promises never fail. In the elect, baptized child born dead in sin, the Spirit plants the seed of eternal life and works faith. The godly instruction of believing parents, teachers, and ministers, though rejected by the old man of sin in the child,

is received and embraced by the believing, renewed heart. This instruction feeds the soul of the child, nourishes and strengthens the child to grow up into spiritual adulthood, "a man of God, perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works" (II. Tim. 4:17). God realizes every promise that He speaks. That is the only hope for the totally depraved child, utterly dead in sin. He cannot fill any condition. And thanks be to God, that is not required of him.