

FOREWORD

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE SYNOD OF DORDRECHT

The Reformation of 1517 marked a high point in the history of the church, for by it the church of Christ was reinstated and formed anew. The Reformation movement rejected the false doctrines and corrupt practices of the Roman Catholic Church as it swept like an irresistible tide across Europe. Under the leadership of Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, Beza, and many other notables, the scriptural truths were once again preached and taught, and untold thousands were converted.

The Lowlands of northern Europe, including the Netherlands, came primarily under the influence of John Calvin's teaching. For some time after the Reformation, the positive truth of Scripture was developed and summarized by the well-known five points of Calvinism (TULIP). Unity of doctrine, good order, and growth in the faith and in numbers prevailed among the Dutch churches, which came together for the propagation of the truth and the opposition of false doctrine.

However, this unity was short lived. In the last part of the sixteenth century and especially in the first two decades of the seventeenth, the semi-Pelagian heresy of Rome once more raised its ugly head and rapidly gained followers in the Netherlands. Jacobus Arminius, a learned and capable minister and professor, was the leader of those who quickly became known by his name—the Arminians. There at least three reasons for the disagreement that arose.

Many branches of the Protestant Reformation, including the churches in the Lowlands, were never able to rid themselves completely of Rome's errors of doctrine and practice, primarily because they allowed into their midst former Romish clerics who brought

with them Rome's corrupt teachings and spread them among the people.

There was certainly a doctrinal aspect to the division that wracked the church. The heart of the matter was that Calvinists taught the absolute sovereignty of God in all parts of salvation, especially regarding double predestination, while the Arminians emphasized man's free will. And these two are obviously mutually exclusive and contradictory.

A significant factor in the disunity of the church was the relation between the church and the state. While the Reformed Church was not strictly speaking a state church, the state and the church were closely connected. Religion and politics were intertwined, and because of this, it was possible for heresy to arise when the state stuck its nose in the church's business. The Arminians took advantage of this situation by gaining influence with the civil authorities to prevent or repeatedly to postpone the convening of a national synod, which was the prerogative of the state. The Calvinists for many years saw their efforts to deal with Arminianism frustrated, but they persisted until eventually a government sympathetic to their cause called a general synod.

Rapid apostasy occasioned a precipitous decline in the orthodoxy of the church. It is amazing that only a century plus one year intervened between Luther's nailing of his theses and the convening of the Synod of Dordrecht. It is even more remarkable that less than one hundred years elapsed between Calvin's heyday and Dordrecht. So quickly did error grow and spread that the truth was threatened, and the church and the state were endangered by the prospect of a major split. Against this background it is possible to understand the necessity of convening the synod.

For a more detailed account of the history surrounding the synod, the reader is directed to the first appendix.

THE SYNOD OF DORDRECHT

The synod began its work in November of 1618 and continued to meet steadily until May of 1619. During these seven months it labored carefully and patiently. This care and patience were necessary

FOREWORD

because the Arminians continued the obstructionist and evasive tactics they had used in their attempts to prevent the synod from taking place. They spoke of the synod merely as a conference between those who held differing views and rejected the authority of the synod. When eventually they challenged the nature of the synod once too often, they were expelled. But even in their absence the synod continued to work very carefully to rid the churches of their heresy, using the written opinions of the delegates to formulate the Canons.

The synod was composed of fifty-six delegates from the Netherlands, including both ministers and elders. There were also twenty-five delegates, many of them men of esteem, from other countries. Dordt was a national synod, not an ecumenical synod, because the foreign delegates had only advisory vote. It is noteworthy, however, that these delegates played a large role at the synod, and that the synod did nothing without their concurrence.

The character of the delegates varied widely. There were differences of natural ability among them, as is to be expected. Some delegates approached the issues before the synod from a supralapsarian perspective, while others were strongly infralapsarian. Some of the delegates, especially those from the Lowlands, were strong and courageous Calvinists, while others, including some of the foreign delegates, were favorable toward the Arminians, or at least leaned toward compromise. In the end, the views of the Calvinists prevailed, and the result was the Canons as we know them today.

In order to assist the reader in understanding the history surrounding and the issues faced at the Synod of Dordrecht, three appendices have been added to this book. The first appendix is the Historical Foreword to the *Acts of the Synod of Dordrecht*, which details the history leading up to the synod, as well as the events at the synod. The second appendix is the Remonstrance of 1610, also called the Five Arminian Articles. These articles were drawn up by the Arminians under the leadership of Johannes Uytenbogaert and subscribed to by forty-six ministers. The Arminians presented these articles as a statement of their faith to the political authorities. The third appendix is the Opinions of the Remonstrants. The Opinions, divided into five parts, are the Remonstrants' written convictions regarding the points in dispute at the Synod of Dor-

drecht that they were required to furnish to the synod. The Opinions are helpful for an understanding of the father's formulation of many of the Canons' articles and rejections of errors.

THE CONFESSIONAL NATURE AND VALUE OF THE CANONS OF DORDRECHT

In an introduction to the first edition of this book, Homer C. Hoeksema defines a standard, or creed, as "an official ecclesiastical statement of what a church believes to be the truth of Holy Scripture, or the true doctrine of salvation." The frequently used term confession refers to the same declaration of the truth from the viewpoint that in doctrine and life it is professed by the church and the individual Christian. It is important to state clearly that the creeds do not possess an authority higher than that of Scripture or even on a par with it. Rather, creeds are always subordinate to Scripture, the only rule of faith and life. Only insofar as they agree with Scripture does the church acknowledge their authority. This is true also regarding the Canons of Dordt. The synod wrote this confession as a creedal expression of the doctrine of Scripture and therefore as subordinate to the word of God.

Yet creeds in general and specifically the Canons serve several purposes in the church of Christ.

Positively, they serve to define and explain the teaching of Scripture in a logical and systematic manner, something that the Scriptures do not do. The benefit of the creeds is that they are a means by which the church keeps itself doctrinally pure and strong so that it is able to fight the good fight of faith in harmony with the revelation of God given in his word. The church says, "This is the truth; this is where we stand; this is what we believe." Therefore creeds serve as a basis of unity for a given group or denomination of churches internally, as well as between groups of churches who hold to the same doctrine. They do this on the basis of true doctrine, for no unity is possible except on the basis of the truth. All of this is eminently true of the Canons, which positively and clearly set forth the truth.

FOREWORD

Negatively, the creeds serve to define what is not scriptural. They do this in distinction from the lie and evil philosophy of the world and in opposition to the errors and heresies of the apostatizing and false church. History shows that without exception, the creeds were not written in a vacuum, but arose from controversy regarding one doctrine or another. Again, all of this is true of the Canons, which in the rejection of errors sections sharply delineate and defend against the Arminians' false teachings.

This twofold nature of the Canons is necessary. There have been and still are today those who think it sufficient that the Canons be positive, and that to mention and to condemn error, sometimes in strong language, is inappropriate. They have been corrupted by false ideas of politeness, tolerance, and political correctness, so that they are afraid of offending people and driving them away from the church. Our Reformed fathers of Dordrecht rejected such thinking. They understood the antithesis between the truth and the lie, and they understood that to uphold and teach the truth implies the condemnation of the lie, in harmony with the practice of Scripture.

Further, the value of the creeds, including the Canons, is that they serve as a means for the instruction of the church, particularly of the children and youth, who need to learn and understand scriptural truth and to recognize and fight against all forms of false teaching. The creeds therefore serve as a means for the preservation of the truth in the succeeding generations of the church to the end of time.

The Canons were necessary when they were formulated in the seventeenth century. Nearly four centuries have now passed, and the Canons are still relevant to the church today.

Not all would agree. Many churches regard them as a dead letter and have relegated them to the dusty shelves of their archives. Many Reformed churches—to their unending shame—ignore, compromise, or deny the teachings of the Canons that they have sworn to uphold. Yet the Canons are just as applicable to the church today as they were when they were adopted. The truth is the same; the enemy is the same; and the battle is the same. Rightly conceived, the Canons are still a living document that guides the faith and life of the church.

THE VOICE OF OUR FATHERS

The words of Homer C. Hoeksema in his introduction to the first edition of this book ring true: “Let us therefore appreciate the heritage preserved for us in our confessions, and let us give good heed to the voice of our fathers, for in that voice of our fathers is easily detected the voice of the Lord our God himself, as by the Spirit of Christ and through the Holy Scriptures he speaks to us.”

—Mark H. Hoeksema

COMMENTARY ON THE FIRST HEAD OF DOCTRINE

Of Divine Predestination

I

INTRODUCTION

That the head concerning divine predestination is the first and longest of the five heads of doctrine in the Canons is no accident. Historically, the scriptural truth of predestination bore the brunt of the Arminians' attack and was the first subject about which they expressed themselves in their Remonstrance of 1610.¹ In view of the apologetic character of the Canons, it is to be expected that the fathers would speak first on the subject of divine predestination. Doctrinally, it is also proper that divine predestination was our fathers' first concern, for this truth is the foundation of the entire structure of the truth of salvation. To the credit of the Arminians, they were not ignorant about the fundamental truth, although they erred concerning it. They recognized that if they were to propagate their doctrine of conditional salvation, they had to overthrow the Reformed doctrine of divine predestination. Our fathers at Dordrecht also recognized the cardinal importance of divine predestination, and in their construction of the temple of the truth in the Canons, they gave this truth the place of prime importance. Having done so, they labored long and carefully to lay the foundation of predestination properly and correctly.

1 All quotations from the Remonstrance of 1610 are taken from Peter Y. de Jong, ed., *Crisis in the Reformed Churches: Essays in Commemoration of the Great Synod of Dort, 1618-1619* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Fellowship, Inc., 1968), 207-9.

THE VOICE OF OUR FATHERS

We must not overlook the significance of their carefully laid foundation. There is absolutely no excuse for Reformed people to be ignorant concerning either the meaning or the significance of God's sovereign predestination, because in eighteen clear and concise articles and nine rejections of error, our fathers in unmistakable language set forth the Reformed conception of divine predestination. Being led into all the truth by the Spirit of truth, the church has said, with the Scriptures in hand, "This we confess. This is the truth of Holy Scripture. Here are the implications of this truth for the gospel of salvation. If you would speak the truth, if you would be Reformed, here is the clear line of the truth."

Inasmuch as the Canons function as a bulwark and a defense of the truth of God's word concerning salvation, they clearly mark the line of battle for both friend and foe. Too often the enemies of the truth of divine predestination make a caricature of predestination. They set up a straw man of some sort. They substitute fatalism or determinism for the scriptural truth of predestination. They picture the predestinating God of Scripture as a horrible tyrant who delights in the desolation of little infants, or they picture the predestined creature as a passive stock and block. Having charged the Reformed confessor with these horrors, they battle against their own caricature of the Reformed confession. The result is that these enemies of the truth often seem to be victorious in the battle. Sad to say, the simple and undiscerning are often confused by these tactics, led to believe that there is something seriously wrong with the Reformed view of predestination, and deceived into compromising or surrendering.

The Arminians at the synod were adept at such tactics, as our fathers knew. The enemies of the Reformed faith in general still follow this plan of battle to deceive the simple. We do well to understand that in the Canons the real line of battle is clearly defined. We say, as it were, in the first head of doctrine, "Put your straw men and your caricatures of the Reformed faith away. When you fight against them, you do not fight the Reformed faith. Here is the truth. Here is the Reformed confession. Here is the battle line. Here is the first line of defense. If you would vanquish the Reformed faith, you must make a frontal assault against this bulwark of divine predestination as defined in the first head of doctrine. But remember, the timbers of this bulwark are firmly fastened in the foundation of the

DIVINE PREDESTINATION

infallible word of God. Unless you can destroy that foundation, you will surely leave the battlefield utterly routed.” Behind this bulwark of the truth therefore let every Reformed believer take his stand and find his defense.

It will immediately be evident that the Canons are apologetic. This is true not only of the rejections of error, but also of the positive articles that expound the true doctrine. Even while developing the true doctrine, the fathers have one eye on the Arminians. Thus, for example, one immediately feels that the Canons are on the defensive when the first article meets the objection that the decree of predestination is unrighteous. By defending the true doctrine, our fathers develop and define true doctrine. This means, too, that frequently the Arminian position will be examined in order to understand fully what the fathers mean in various articles.

The English version of the Canons used in this exposition is taken from *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches*.² This is the translation that is officially acknowledged by the Protestant Reformed Churches in America. Regrettably, this is not the best translation, and at certain crucial points it is seriously in error. When necessary, I will make a few remarks concerning the correct translation of the various articles.

ARTICLE 1

As all men have sinned in Adam, lie under the curse, and are deserving of eternal death, God would have done no injustice by leaving them all to perish, and delivering them over to condemnation on account of sin, according to the words of the apostle, Rom. 3:19, *that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God*. And verse 23: *for all*

2 *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005), 154–180.

THE VOICE OF OUR FATHERS

have sinned, and come short of the glory of God. And Rom. 6:23: for the wages of sin is death.

TWO TRANSLATION CORRECTIONS will help to emphasize more forcefully a universal human guilt and liability to death. The words “lie under the curse and are deserving of eternal death” should be “and are become guilty of the curse and of eternal death.” The translation “by leaving them all to perish” should be “if he had willed to leave the entire human race in sin and the curse.”

The Arminians accuse the Reformed of making God an unrighteous tyrant who arbitrarily saves some and damns others. Can God be charged with injustice in election and reprobation? Is God unjust in his decree of reprobation?

The Arminians’ accusation is rationalistic, the product of sinful human reason that charges God, the only righteous judge, with unrighteousness. A careful examination of Arminianism will reveal that such rationalism characterizes its entire view. How striking it is that those who are themselves guilty of such rationalism are known for their accusations of rationalism over against Calvinism. This is much worse than the proverbial pot calling the kettle black.

The charge of divine injustice in predestination can be brought against only those who maintain that God’s predestinating decree is sovereign and free. Under the Arminian conception of predestination, based on foreseen faith or unbelief, such an accusation is unnecessary. Arminianism is alleged to have the advantage because it leaves God righteous when it makes man’s salvation or damnation depend on his free will. But, it is alleged, if God is sovereign in predestination, if his predestinating decree has its source, cause, and occasion only in himself, God is an unjust and horrible tyrant.

Therefore the first article maintains the righteousness of the predestinating God and the sovereign freedom of the God of salvation.

Notice how inevitably the confession concerning God is tied with the whole subject matter of the Canons from the outset. God and his works are not to be separated. Not merely God’s decrees are at stake, but the decreeing God himself. The Arminians attack the righteousness of the decree of predestination and the righteous-

DIVINE PREDESTINATION

ness of God. They attack the absolute freedom of his decree and the sovereign freedom of God.

The Canons answer these attacks in the first article by three main truths. All men have sinned in Adam. All men therefore become liable to the curse and eternal death. Hence God would have done no injustice had he willed to leave the entire race in sin and the curse and condemned them for their sin.

The basic premise of the article is the sovereignty, the absolute freedom, of God's decree, against which the Arminians level their charge of injustice. Their charge can be formulated into three propositions. Reformed men teach that God sovereignly chooses some men unto salvation and rejects the rest of men, leaving them to perdition. Sovereignly to reject some and to save others is arbitrary and unjust of God. God has no right to do this. Hence an unjust, sovereign, divine decree of predestination is impossible because God is surely just.

When the argumentation of article 1 is followed to its proper conclusion in the light of these objections, the conclusion is that the charge of injustice against a sovereign, divine decree of predestination is false. God's sovereignty is not in conflict with his justice. The sovereignly decreeing God is also the righteous God. He is righteous in his decree.

A careful comparison of the two viewpoints in the first article will reveal how completely at odds they are. The Arminian view puts man in the position of judge. The sovereign God of all is hailed into the court of man in order to determine whether he, the Lord, is righteous. The opening words "as all men have sinned in Adam" put man in his proper place, which is not the position of judge, but the position of being judged. The Arminians charge the God of Reformed theology—the God of Scripture—with unrighteousness. The Canons take as their basis the "God forbid!" of the apostle Paul when the charge of unrighteousness is brought against God. The Arminians assume the position of those in Scripture who are the real or imagined opponents of the truth of God's righteousness and sovereign freedom. Quoting Scripture, the Canons assume the stand of Holy Writ.

Even though original sin is mentioned in the words "all men have sinned in Adam," the point of this reference to man's relation to Adam is not inherited corruption, but that as children of Adam

all members of the human race are sinners. The point is not the truth of *original* sin, but that of *universal* sin. That this is true is plain from the article's scriptural proof: "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). It is the first link in the chain of universal liability to condemnation. If the fathers had wanted to prove the truth of original sin, they would undoubtedly have referred to Romans 5:12–19.

The point on which article 1 hinges is that all men "lie under the curse, and are deserving of eternal death," that is, they are all become liable to the curse and eternal death. Since all men are sinners, they are all guilty before God. Since they are guilty, they are worthy of eternal death.

For the truth that all are guilty, the Canons give as proof Romans 3:19: "that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God." This quotation is striking because it strongly emphasizes the universality of the guilt-verdict ("every mouth" and "all the world"), and it is very applicable to the Arminians' argument opposed in the first article. Paul emphasizes that the divine purpose is that every mouth must be completely silenced before God in the final judgment and in time. No one may contradict or object when God judges. Even though wicked men rebel against his judgment, yet before God they have no ground of justice. All must be guilty, punishable, even in their own consciences, before God. How impossible, how absurd, how presumptuous that anyone should charge God with injustice when he saves some out of a race that is all guilty. How absurd to charge God with injustice when he leaves some to perish, when he might justly have left all to perish.

That all are worthy of eternal death is proved by Romans 6:23: "the wages of sin is death." Scripture is plain without any further exposition: the sinner must die. If all men are sinners, guilty before God, they are all liable to eternal death, for death is the wages of sin, and God is the divine paymaster.

The next truth that follows inexorably from the two preceding truths is that God would have done no injustice had he left all men to perish on account of their sin. The Canons offer no specific scriptural proof for this truth. It is a logical conclusion that cannot be gainsaid.

DIVINE PREDESTINATION

In the light of this argumentation the Arminian position is entirely destroyed. How strange a position it is! The Arminians consider it strange and unordinary that on God's part anyone should go lost. They take it for granted and consider it ordinary that as far as God is concerned everyone can be saved. But according to Scripture it would not be strange if no one were saved. Scripture teaches that it is a wonder, an extraordinary thing, that anyone is saved. In other words, as history has so often confirmed, the objection against predestination is not primarily against the decree of election. If there were a decree of election only, perhaps there would be no disagreement. But the objection is against the decree of reprobation. Sinful man does not want sovereign reprobation. How striking, since every man in his conscience knows that eternal death is perfectly righteous and completely deserved. No man by nature deserves anything but death. God might have justly condemned all. Let every mouth be stopped when the Lord of all determines to save some out of the common misery. The instruction of article 1 puts man, a guilty creature, in his proper place in relation to God. Man has no ground of complaint whatsoever.

However, while the article's viewpoint is correct and perfectly sound doctrine, there is another, higher viewpoint. The Canons already in the first article give evidence of being infralapsarian. That is, they teach that in his decrees God elected some out of a fallen race. From the infralapsarian viewpoint the argumentation of the article is to be expected. An infralapsarian is almost forced to answer the Arminians' argument this way.

Scripture teaches that the guilty creature has no claim against God and that the creature apart from his sin has absolutely no claim on God. God is sovereign! This is very plainly the teaching of Romans 9:14–23:

What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? God forbid. For he saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy. For the scripture saith unto Pharaoh, Even for this same

THE VOICE OF OUR FATHERS

purpose have I raised thee up, that I might shew my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth. Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth. Thou wilt say then unto me, Why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will? Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus? Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour? What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction: And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory.”

After he spontaneously rejects the charge of unrighteousness in God, the apostle proceeds not to defend divine righteousness, but the sovereign freedom of God over man, the creature of his hand. This becomes very plain in verses 19–23, where the apostle addresses not the sinner, but man. Man, not merely the sinner, is the clay. And the divine potter forms out of the one lump of human clay one vessel unto honor and another unto dishonor. God is absolutely free. The sinner nothing to say, and man apart from his sin has absolutely no right to answer against the sovereignly decreeing God. Such is the viewpoint of this passage, a viewpoint that is higher than that of the Canons, although the stand of the Canons is perfectly sound.

ARTICLE 2

But in this the love of God was manifested, that he *sent his only begotten Son into the world, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have everlasting life* (1 John 4:9; John 3:16).

THE FIRST ARTICLE established that God would not have been unrighteous if he had doomed the entire human race to destruction in the way of sin. Therefore, God cannot be accused of being unrighteous if he desired to save some out of the human race. Certainly no damnworthy sinner has any ground for complaint whatsoever when and if God should save some, while in all justice he might have left all to perish. Further, the underlying thought and ultimate principle in the article is not merely the perfect and unassailable righteousness of God, but his absolute freedom.

As indicated by the first word “but” the second article turns to a thought that is in contrast to the language of the previous article. From the viewpoint of divine justice, what might have been God’s will—to leave all to perish—nevertheless was not his will. Instead, God willed to save some men out of their condemnation and to give unto them eternal life. It might seem as though by this intended contrast that the divine virtues of righteousness and love are set at odds with one another, and as though God’s love is presented as overcoming his righteousness; but the Canons must not be thus misunderstood.

Some present God’s mercy as overcoming his justice. According to this presentation, God, according to his justice, might have allowed all men to perish. He would have been perfectly righteous if he had done so. But God is a God of love, and as a God of love, he does not allow himself to be governed by such strict justice. His love is greater than his justice; it overcomes his justice. Thus in his love he saves men from the condemnation to which his justice actually moves him.

Such a view denies the oneness and simplicity of God; it denies the unity of his attributes. God is one, and all his attributes are one in him. His mercy and love cannot be in conflict with his justice. On the contrary, his mercy is a just mercy, and his love is a just love. The divine love is characterized by perfect righteousness and justice, because in the triune God love is the bond of perfectness, the bond that unites Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the sphere of perfection. What is true of the virtues of God in himself is also true of his manifestation of those virtues. God does not reveal his love or his mercy as being in conflict with his justice, but he shows his love and mercy as being characterized by strictest justice.

Article 2 takes the same viewpoint. The contrast set forth is not between divine justice and divine love, but between divine wrath and divine love. To leave all men to perish and to deliver them over to condemnation on account of sin—the possibility mentioned in the first article—would be a manifestation of the just wrath of God. Article 2 speaks of the manifestation of God’s love in contrast with the hypothetical manifestation of the divine wrath suggested in the previous article.

To contrast divine wrath and divine love is correct. God’s wrath is the manifestation of his hatred. God’s hatred is the counterpart, the antithesis of his love. His hatred is a just hatred, and his love is a just love. His wrath, the manifestation of his hatred, is a just wrath; and the manifestation of his love is also just. Only love that is characterized by strictest justice is worthy of the name. Only such love is able to save. Of this divine love article 2 speaks.

In connection with the main thought of the article—God wills to save some sinners from their doom and to give unto them eternal life—notice the following elements.

First, the origin, or cause, of this divine will to save is the love of God: “But in this the love of God was manifested.” In other words, God wanted to reveal not only his wrath, but also his love. It is unnecessary to develop in detail the scriptural conception of the attribute of God’s love. It is sufficient to say that God’s love is the infinite and eternal bond of fellowship that is based upon the ethical perfection and holiness of the divine nature and that subsists among the three persons of the holy trinity. God was pleased to make known, or to reveal, this divine love. This implies that the reason for God’s manifestation of love is not to be found ultimately in the object of his manifestation of love, but in God’s eternal love of himself. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit love one another with an eternally perfect and infinite love and are pleased to manifest that love for their own sake. The highest revelation of God’s love is in salvation, the work of God whereby, in the desire to manifest his own infinite love, he reaches down to the lost and damnable sinner, makes him a fit object of God’s love, receives the sinner into the intimate fellowship of God’s love in the covenant of friendship, and causes the sinner to partake of divine love, thus making him to reflect the love of God that is shed abroad in his heart.

It is important to notice how our fathers conceive of the rela-

DIVINE PREDESTINATION

tionship between God's love and the revelation of Christ. Frequently this is presented as though God was filled with hatred and wrath against men, but Christ loved them, died for them, and merited for them the love of God, thus changing divine hatred into divine love toward them. Christ is a third party between God and men, and he becomes the reason for God's love toward men. However, our fathers follow Scripture and present the relationship the other way around. God's love is first. Because God loves his people from all eternity with an unchangeable love in the Son of his love, he sent his only begotten Son into the world. If it were not for God's love, Christ would never have come. Christ therefore is the manifestation of God's everlasting love.

Second, this article calls attention to the way and the ground of the salvation of some, namely, that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that whosoever believes should have everlasting life. The sending of his Son, therefore, is the manifestation of divine love, of love that saves its object. The sending of his Son and the entire work of Christ are the ground of the salvation of those whom God desires to save out of the whole human race.

Third, faith is the means through which some are saved and receive everlasting life: "that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

Numerous scriptural passages can be adduced as proof for the truths in article 2, but the article mentions only two. Striking it is that where the Canons present the positive thought, they give no human reasoning whatsoever, but only simple and literal scriptural quotations. With the exception of the first word "but," the entire article is literally Scripture. The fathers do not use isolated texts, but use the current thought of Scripture. They take the first part of 1 John 4:9 and add to it the last part of John 3:16.

Let those who boast that they want only the simple Scriptures and will have nothing to do with creeds—something that is characteristic of many Arminians—take note of the style of the fathers, who allow the Scriptures to speak. It is not an accident that the fathers of Dordrecht chose these two passages. Even as in our day Arminians love to leave the impression that, in contrast with Reformed believers, they hold to such passages as John 3:16, almost as though they have a monopoly on them, so the Arminians in the days of the Synod of Dordrecht tried to leave the impression that

their God was a God love, while the God of our Reformed fathers was not the God of John 3:16. From the outset the Canons make plain that the Reformed also believe that “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

Need it be mentioned that the second article is only a beginning? The work of Christ is mentioned, but it is not fully described. The means of faith is mentioned, but its origin and activity are not defined. The love of God is mentioned, but the saving power of that love is not defined, nor are the objects of that love determined. Still more, although the subject of the first head of doctrine is divine predestination, the decree of election and reprobation is not mentioned. Especially the question that remains is, who are the “whosoever” in this article? Who believe? Or to state the question more precisely, how do men come to believe? This question is crucial, for the answer decides who will be saved and who will receive everlasting life. To this question the following articles furnish the answer.

ARTICLE 3

And that men may be brought to believe, God mercifully sends the messengers of these most joyful tidings to whom he will and at what time he pleaseth; by whose ministry men are called to repentance and faith in Christ crucified. Rom. 10:14–15: *How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach except they be sent?*

STEP BY STEP the Canons unfold the truth of salvation and carefully lead up to the subject of divine predestination, the main subject of the first head. First, the principle was laid down that God is not obligated to save anyone, but that he justly could have left all men in their sin and condemnation. The second

principle is that God's purpose was to save some, and he manifested his love in the sending of his only begotten Son into the world that whosoever believes on him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

Since only believers shall not perish but have everlasting life, this crucial question must be answered: How do men come to believe in God's only begotten Son? If men are to believe in God's only begotten Son, there must be a point of contact between him and them. They must know of him in order to believe in him. This article begins to furnish an answer to this question by teaching that the preaching of the gospel is the means whereby some are brought to believe.

Several elements in this article can be distinguished. God sends preachers (*praecones*, criers or heralds) of the gospel. God sends preachers "mercifully [*clementer*]." Even the kind and the scope of gospel preaching are strictly according to God's good pleasure, for he sends preachers "to whom he will and at what time he pleaseth." Through the gospel ministry men are "called to repentance and faith in Christ crucified." The fathers substantiate these points by quoting the well-known Romans 10:14–15.

From the outset the Canons emphasize that the gospel of salvation and salvation itself are entirely God's work. The most joyful tidings are those spoken of in the previous article: God manifested his love by sending his only begotten Son into the world that whosoever believeth on him might have everlasting life. Of the Son of God as the manifestation of God's love toward us there is no knowledge possible for mere man. It cannot be discovered by the power of human intellect and reason or from God's revelation in the created things. Surely, the created things manifest God's eternal power and Godhead, but apart from the light of the gospel of Christ crucified, the speech of God in nature testifies only of his wrath. There is in it no speech of divine love. Hence if the love of God is to be known by men, God himself must make it known. He does so by sending preachers.

The good tidings of the gospel are strictly God's and are not of man at all. Even when the gospel is preached, it is not man's gospel. Men are only heralds, messengers, of the good tidings. Characteristic of a herald is that he functions as a servant of his sender, that his message is not his own, that the authority of his message is not

his own, but that both the content and authority of the message belong to his sender.

A preacher must be sent by God. This is commonly overlooked both in evangelistic circles, where it seems that almost anyone who has a hankering to preach can be recognized as a preacher, and in Reformed circles, where too often the calling and sending of a preacher are viewed as purely the work of the congregation that extends a call, sends a preacher forth, and supports him. In contrast, the calling and sending of a preacher are of God, and only where it pleases God to call someone to this task through the church does true preaching exist.

In order to believe one must hear *Christ*. This is the point of the quotation from Romans 10:14, which correctly translated is not “how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard?” but “how shall they believe in him whom they have not heard?” Unless Christ himself is heard through the preaching of the gospel, faith cannot be the result.

The sending of preachers of the gospel is in itself a great mercy. There are some who understand this as meaning that God’s sending is a manifestation of his favor toward the preachers. Others take it to mean a manifestation of God’s mercy toward the hearers of the gospel. Both are included and the meaning is that even the proclamation of the gospel has its reason not in any right of fallen man, but only in the pure goodness of God. Just as the first article maintains that God might justly have left the entire race in sin and condemnation, so in the third article it is equally true that God might justly have withheld from the entire race the preaching of the gospel.

That the objects of God’s mercy are not further defined does not mean that the preaching of the gospel is grace to all who hear it, for later the Canons make clear that God’s grace is only for the elect. God has the gospel preached to some in his wrath. Here, however, the *objects* of God’s mercy are not in the picture.

The most striking element in this article, and at the same time the most telling blow against the Arminian view, is the truth that even the *scope* and the *time* of the preaching of the gospel are strictly determined by God. What an entirely different note this is than what is sounded only too frequently by many evangelicals. Today we hear much of the lie that Christ has made salvation pos-

DIVINE PREDESTINATION

sible for all men and it is up to men to see that the gospel of Christ reaches as many men as possible, so that all can have an opportunity to believe in Christ. We are pointed to the areas of the earth that have not been reached by the gospel, to the millions who have never heard about Christ. We are vehemently urged to evangelize the world, to gain as many souls as possible for Christ, and to hurry because time is running out. If so many millions go lost without having heard the gospel, it will really be our fault. To be sure, the church has the calling to preach the gospel to every nation, and under the guidance of the Spirit to carry out this calling. But it is not true that it is the divine purpose that all men should be in contact with the gospel of Christ. Nor is it true that it is up to men to see that the gospel of Christ reaches as many men as possible. Even the scope and time are according to God's sovereign purpose. He has his gospel preached to whom he wills and when it pleases him.

History teaches that the majority of mankind never comes into contact with the gospel. All through the ages of the old dispensation only a few heard the promise of the gospel. For many centuries the gospel was mostly limited to one nation, the people of Israel. In the new dispensation it is the same. The proclamation of the gospel followed a definite course. In general, the path led westward from Jerusalem to Asia Minor, from Asia Minor to Europe, from southern Europe to northern Europe, and from Europe to America. Many millions from the dawn of the new dispensation until the present have never heard the gospel preached. Even today millions upon millions of the earth's inhabitants have never heard of Christ.

Why is this true? Is the Lord God shorthanded? Does he not have enough men to proclaim his gospel? Is it the fault of men who are disobedient to the calling to preach the word? Will the result be that some places in the house of many mansions will go unoccupied?

The answer is simple. It never was God's will that all men should hear the gospel. It was his purpose that the majority of mankind would never come into contact with Christ. The sending of preachers is all of him. How shall they preach, except they are sent? If it pleases God not to have the gospel proclaimed to any other nation than Israel for century after century, who will countermand his

order? If it pleases him not to have the gospel universally proclaimed until Pentecost, who will prevent the realization of his purpose? And what is true in general is true in every individual case. Every child of Adam who comes into contact with the gospel of Christ crucified does so according to God's sovereign determination, even regarding the exact moment.

In the light of this fact, supported by numerous scriptural passages, how foolish is the Arminians' general grace of salvation. How utterly insane is their claim that Christ died for all and every human being, when it was never God's intention that they would know of Christ. It must be then that God's eternal purpose was to reject some in such a way that they would never have the Arminian "chance" to be saved.

Already the third article, without mentioning election and reprobation, places a severe and divine limitation on the preaching of the gospel and therefore on salvation. The positive purpose of the preaching is that some should be called to repentance and to faith in Christ crucified. This calling is not further defined in the article, but even the form of the words implies that the preaching is only the means, while the calling is of God.

To conclude from the article that our fathers believe in mediate regeneration is unwarranted. The distinction between mediate and immediate regeneration is not under discussion here. While it is correct that faith as a conscious activity of the soul is wrought through the preaching of the gospel by the Holy Spirit, it is nevertheless true that the power, or faculty, of faith is implanted in the heart immediately, that is, without the preaching of the gospel as a means.

ARTICLE 4

The wrath of God abideth upon those who believe not this gospel. But such as receive it, and embrace Jesus the Savior by a true and living faith, are by him delivered from the wrath of God and from destruction, and have the gift of eternal life conferred upon them.

THIS TRANSLATION IS substantially correct, provided that “receive” is understood as meaning “to take to one’s self.” This is the clear meaning of the Latin and is in harmony with the rest of the article, which speaks of “embrac[ing] Jesus the Savior by a true and living faith.”

The Canons approach the subject of divine predestination gradually and from the historical viewpoint. It would be possible to follow a different method and to begin with an objective exposition and maintenance of the truth of God’s decrees. This is the method of the Westminster Confession in chapter 3. But the Canons, rather than beginning with the doctrine of sovereign predestination and then developing the whole truth of salvation out of that doctrine, follow the inductive method. Article 2 presents the truth that the love of God was manifested in the sending of his Son, in order that whosoever believes on him should have everlasting life. Article 3 speaks of the point of contact between the manifestation of the love of God and the minds and hearts of men, namely, the preaching of the good tidings “to whom he will and at what time he pleaseth.”

What takes place when the gospel is proclaimed? What is the twofold reaction to those good tidings? Only after articles 4 and 5 answer these questions do the Canons explain why some receive the gift of faith from God and others do not receive it. This leads to the subject of God’s eternal decree of predestination.

Article 4 treats only the twofold reaction to the good tidings of the gospel. For the first time the fathers directly say that not all men are saved. They make a distinction. On some persons the wrath of God abides, and some men are delivered from the wrath of God and from destruction and have the gift of eternal life conferred upon them (are gifted with eternal life). Some men are saved; some are not saved, and upon them the wrath of God remains.

It is important to notice again the fathers’ viewpoint. While they do not quote Scripture or give scriptural references, they speak scriptural language. Clearly they refer in this article to John 3:36: “He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him.”

Also, they do not deal with God’s decrees or their logical order—supralapsarianism or infralapsarianism—but with the effect in time among men of the preaching of the gospel. Their viewpoint

is historical, that is, all men are under the wrath of God, apart from Christ, and upon some men the wrath of God remains, while others are delivered from it. Some are under that wrath, and it is not removed from them. Others are also under the wrath of God by nature, but it does not remain upon them. They are delivered.

This historical distinction between those who are delivered and those who are left under the wrath of God, the fathers view strictly from historical faith and unbelief. If you ask, who are saved and upon whom does the wrath of God remain? you receive this answer: “The wrath of God abides upon those who do not believe this gospel. But those who receive it and embrace Jesus the Savior by a true and living faith, are by him delivered from the wrath of God.” The unbelievers go lost; the believers are saved.

The fathers do not define faith, give its elements of knowledge and confidence, or discuss the relation between faith and salvation. Strictly speaking, these elements do not belong to this article, which emphasizes only the truth that the wrath of God abides on those who do not believe and those who believe are delivered from his wrath and receive eternal life. It is important to notice that the *activity* of faith and the *activity* of unbelief are on the foreground. Those who *receive* the gospel and *embrace* Jesus by a true and living faith are saved. Those go lost who *believe not* the gospel. It is also important that the fathers describe the real activity of faith as “embrac[ing] Jesus the Savior.” But the fathers do not stop here regarding the subject of faith. Later in the context of their exposition of the truth of divine predestination they treat it in detail.

Here therefore the fathers give sound instruction on how to preach about the activity of faith. They teach that it will never do to stop after proclaiming the truth of article 4. To stop there is to become guilty of Arminianism. Any Arminian will readily agree with this article taken in isolation. This means that a Reformed preacher will not stop there either. Nor will he, in faithfulness to his ministerial vow, take for granted that his congregation knows that faith is not of man and that only the elect receive the gift of faith. It also will not suffice to place the truth of about faith in this article and the truth of divine predestination alongside each other without establishing any connection between them, or leaving the connection to the imagination of the hearers, or what is worse,