

them (CoD 12). God's children should then "place the consciousness of their election over against the fiery darts of the devil, asking: 'Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect?' (Rom. 8:33; R.E. 7). Thus encouraged, and being renewed by God's Spirit, the elect believer will experience true holiness, not carnal security (CoD 1.13).

The *Canons* explain that the doctrine of reprobation should *not* alarm those who tremblingly trust in him (CoD 1.16). It *should* only alarm those who reject God. As a young man, one of my colleagues, who was living an ungodly life, was suddenly convicted of sin and racked by fear that his reprobate lifestyle would end him in hell. But he repented and God saved him!

Neither should election promote doubt among believers regarding the salvation of their children. The *Canons*, written during a time of high infant mortality, urge godly parents not to doubt the election of their children who die in infancy (CoD 1.17).

Rightly taught, and rightly used, believers reflect on God's election with great fruitfulness, to our own comfort and to the glory of God (CoD 14). After all, "Unconditional election...does not destroy men but saves them; it is our friend, not our enemy. It does not keep out of heaven people who otherwise would be there, but it brings to heaven people who otherwise would never be welcome there. The wonder is not that God just rejects some sinners but that he graciously saves any sinners at all."ⁱⁱ

ⁱ B.B. Warfield's, "Predestination," from *A Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. by James Hastings, v. 4, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909) 47-63.

ⁱⁱ Joel Beeke, *Living for God's Glory*. (Grand Rapids: RHB, 2008), 62.



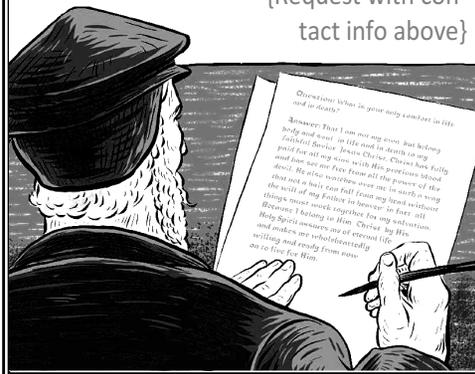
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PROCLAMATION

Promoting robust, religious thought in the tradition of orthodox, historic, Christianity

April 2013, Issue 46

THE FIVE POINTS OF CALVINISM (2)

UNCONDITIONAL ELECTION

BY WILLIAM BOEKESTEIN

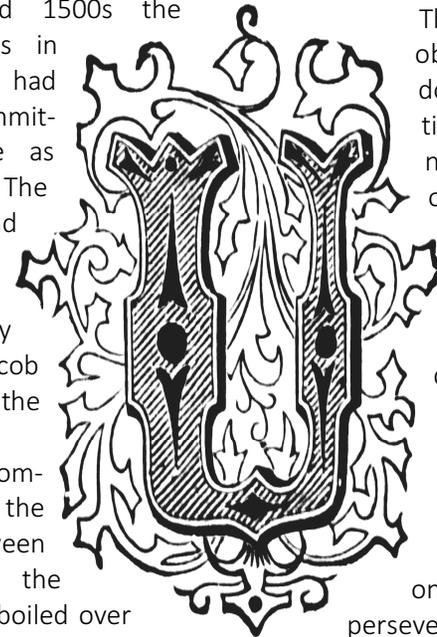
The first article in this series on the Canons of Dort (popularly known as The Five Points of Calvinism) was a historical introduction focusing on the religious and civil upheaval in the Netherlands around the turn of the 17th century due to sharp theological disagreement.

Since the mid 1500s the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands had pledged their commitment to Scripture as summarized in *The Belgic Confession* and *Heidelberg Catechism*. Early in the 17th century the followers of Jacob Arminius, known as the Remonstrants, challenged this commitment. Given the close tie between church and state, the theological conflict boiled over into societal and political unrest. The problem became so urgent that in 1618 a synod convened with the express purpose of examining *The Five Articles of the Remonstrants*. The Synod re-

jected these articles and in issued instead, five counterpoints called the Canons of Dort (CoD). These statements are commonly rearranged from their historical order under the acronym "TULIP" for ease of memorization.

The Arminians' first objection to Reformed doctrine focused on election. The Arminians did not deny that God elects or chooses some people to salvation, leaving others under just wrath. After all, the Bible frequently describes God's salvation as his choice (John 15:16, Eph. 1:4,5, etc.). They insisted, however, that God's election unto salvation is conditioned on the future faith and perseverance of the elect.

Since the Arminian position has become the unquestioned view of many churches today, we will first consider some of the issues at stake.



The Issues at Stake

First, conditional election threatens the integrity of Scripture. If the Bible teaches that God elects unconditionally, we cannot say otherwise. Election may offend our theology. But our protests do not change fact. Those who murmur at the doctrine of election need to wrestle hard with Romans 9 (CoD 1.18).

Second, conditional election undercuts the reality of Grace. Grace can be defined as undeserved favor (Rom. 4:4). If God chooses believers based on their deserving, then salvation is not of grace but of works. If man's salvation is not a work of God from beginning to end then salvation is not really gracious.

Third, conditional election diminishes the sovereignty and glory of God. If God's salvation depends on man's choice then God's choice is no longer ultimate. In this case salvation becomes less marvelous and God does not deserve to receive all the glory.

Fourth, conditional election destroys the comfort of God's children. If our salvation rests on our faith and perseverance then God does not have an unchanging will in which we rest.

For these and other reasons, the Canons define God's election as, "The unchangeable purpose of God, whereby, before the foundation of the world, He has out of mere grace, according to the sovereign good pleasure of His own will, chosen from the [fallen] human race...a certain number of persons to redemption in Christ, whom He from eternity appointed the Mediator and Head of the elect and foundation of salvation" (CoD 1.7).

This definition suggests three important biblical components of election.

Election and God's Gracious Love

To truly appreciate God's grace and the necessity of his sovereign choice we must grasp the fact that all men stand rightly condemned before God (CoD 1.1). We are not a desirable people for God to choose! This is true in three ways. First, before we ever commit a sin we are guilty before God because of our association with Adam. "...By one man's disobedience many were made sinners" (Rom. 5:19). The Puritans used to say, "In Adam's fall we sinned all." Second, at our conception, by virtue of our fallenness we have a built-in hostility toward God. This hostility, while latent in very young children, certainly blossoms as a person grows. Third, by nature we are dead in trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1) and lack the ability to do any real good (Rom. 3:10-18).

God, therefore, "would have done no injustice by leaving [us] all to perish and delivering [us] over to condemnation on account of sin" (CoD 1.1). The right question isn't, "Why *doesn't* God choose to save all," but "why *does* he choose to save any?" Whenever God chooses to save it is a gift of grace.

One persistent claim against the Reformed view of predestination is that it opposes God's love and discourages people from proclaiming and believing the gospel. A few years ago "The John 3:16 Conference" was held to refute the *Five Points of Calvinism*. That title suggests that the *Five Points* are inconsistent with this great verse. Ironically, the fourth sentence of the *Canons* uses John 3:16 to highlight God's grace!

Election is not *opposed* to God's grace and love. It is God's vehicle to *convey* his grace and love. God showed

his love by sending his Son to save fallen man (CoD 1.2). He still sends his ministers to call sinners to repentance and salvation (CoD 1.3). To this ministry, God adds his promise that those who repent and believe will be saved; the rest remain condemned (CoD 1.4).

Man's guilt is his own; salvation is God's gracious gift (CoD 1.5).

Election and God's Sovereignty

God Is Sovereign

The first four words of the Bible are, "In the beginning, God..." The Bible is primarily God's story not ours. B.B. Warfield has well said, "Nothing happens in this universe apart from the sustaining power of God. But, in the infinite wisdom of the Lord of all the earth, each event falls with exact precision into its proper place in the unfolding of His eternal plan; nothing, however small, however strange, occurs without His ordering, or without its peculiar fitness for its place in the working out of His purpose; and the end of all shall be the manifestation of His glory, and the accumulation of His praise."¹

We must confess that God is sovereign over the elect and the reprobate (those whom God justly leaves in the state of misery into which they have willingly plunged themselves; CoD 1.15; Rejection of Errors (R.E.) 1.8). The Bible teaches that not everyone is saved. We cannot "solve this dilemma" by limiting God's sovereignty (Rom. 9:17; CoD 1.6). God teaches us to trust his sovereign judgment believing that the judge of all the earth will do right (Gen. 18:25).

God is either the creator or a reactor. If God reacts, whoever makes him react is more powerful than he.

God is Purposeful

God's sovereign choice is also as unchangeable as he is (CoD 1.11). Since God's election is unchangeable, those who are chosen for salvation cannot perish (R.E. 1.6).

Because of his purpose, God's decree of election to salvation is also unified throughout the testaments (R.E. 1.8). The Remonstrants taught that as God elected all Israelites yet only some were saved, so today God elects some to faith who will yet perish. But in neither testament is there an election unto faith and another unto salvation. Such "election" would destroy God's golden chain of salvation (Rom. 8:30; R.E. 1.2).

The sole cause of God's election is his good pleasure (CoD 1.10). God does not send the gospel to one people rather than another because of their merits or demerits (Deut. 7:7; R.E. 9). God's election is not based on foreseen faith or perseverance (R.E. 1,3,5). Neither does man use the light of nature to make himself fit for salvation (R.E. 4). Faith and holiness are fruits, not conditions of election to salvation (CoD 1.9).

Election and Believers' Comfort

To historic Arminians, the doctrine of unconditional election seemed to promote either hopeless introspection or carnal security. They painted the picture of honest Christians desperately gazing inward wondering whether or not they were elect, being either endlessly tossed about in doubt or judging themselves to be reprobate.

In fact, God revealed the doctrine of predestination to do just the opposite. In reality, the elect gain assurance of their election by observing its fruit in