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Notes on the Canons of Dort

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The Historical Background to the Canons of Dort

INTRODUCTION

The Canons of Dort are "statements of doctrine adopted by the great Reformed Synod of Dort in 1618-1619". (Book of Praise, p. 531). This synod, which took place in the Dutch town of Dort, the Netherlands, commenced on November 13, 1618 and lasted for almost one year. Why is it that in 1997, some 380 years later, we, Australians, find ourselves studying Dutch synodical decisions that date back so many years? What is it about their content that we still find relevant today? Wouldn't it be far more beneficial for us to study today's issues, and seek today's answer for today's questions? Is a study on the centuries old and European Canons of Dort not a misplaced endeavour in our post-modern and technological culture?

The Preacher in Ecclesiastes 1:9,10 warned us that "That which has been is what will be, that which is done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which it may be said, "See this is new"? It has already been in ancient times before us." The very same issues which demand our attention today in the twentieth century turn out to be so similar to issues which kept our fathers busy back in the seventeenth century. Hence the answers our fathers arrived at in addressing these issues can certainly benefit us in seeking answers today. More, given that the answers of the fathers of long ago were based on Scripture, it is for to work today with their answers of yesteryear.

The Belgic Confession was completed in 1561, in a context of severe persecution. To be Reformed at that time was not 'cheap', or easy. To choose to be Reformed meant that one was prepared to give up one's life for the sake of one's faith. In 1567, Guido deBres himself was hung because he wanted to be Reformed and refused to renounce his Reformed faith.

The Reformed suffered much at the hands of their Roman Catholic oppressors and Spanish overlords. However, it was not only the Reformed who resisted their Catholic oppressors and attempted to overthrow the Spaniards, but so did the Liberals (or Libertines). The latter believed in freedom, not necessarily in a political sense, but specifically in a spiritual sense. They embraced a concept of the self which considers man as being good. As far as sin is concerned they believed that man is not dead in sin even though man commits sin. Sinful is the way one describes some of man's deeds, but not man's nature. Man was good, and had within himself the wherewithall to choose the good on his own accord.

In 1572 the Netherlands were freed from Spanish oppression and consequently from persecution. This allowed for growth in Reformed Church life. Believers, individually and collectively, could come out of hiding; churches could be established openly. From this time on one notes a development of the Church Order, and the convening of provincial and national Synods. All in all the following years were a prosperous time for the Reformed Church. However to assume that all who embraced the Reformed faith were of one mind in matters of doctrine is a false assumption.

There were, in actual fact, two kinds of Reformed people at the time namely, the Calvinistic Reformed (those who adhered to Calvinism) and the Arminian Reformed (as we understand it today, for at the time Arminius, only a young boy, had not yet influenced people's thinking; the term is used simply to 'tag' the group and give it some colour in our minds). For the second group, the term 'reformed' is hardly a fitting label, for they were at heart not at all 'reformed'.

THE CALVINISTIC REFORMED

The Calvinists understood the Bible to be the inspired Word of God. Therefore, the Bible is to be believed, and it is to be regarded as the final authority in all aspects of life. Out of respect for the Bible as God's Word, this Bible was not to be challenged (said the Calvinists) but was rather to be accepted and obeyed in humility. If we can believe the Bible, we can also echo what the Bible says (confessions). Because these confessions are based on what the Bible says, one can also hold one to the confession. So these Calvinistic Reformed people demanded that office bearers sign a Form of Subscription, by means of which they promise to adhere to the confessions.

THE ARMINIAN REFORMED

The Arminian Reformed on the other hand were not so submissive to the absolute authority of Scripture. The reason for their refusal to grant such a high place to Scripture (and by extension to the confession since it echoed the Scripture) was their positive perception of man. They rightly understood that the position of the Calvinistic Reformed implied the notion that man is depraved and so cannot know the truth for himself, nor can he discover for himself what is right and good. To see the self as dead in sin (in the words of Ephesians 2:1) was anathema to these Arminian Reformed people. To have to make such a confession concerning the self was offensive to the Arminian Reformed because it challenged their belief that the mind and heart of man is not dead. Sacrosanct to these people is the notion that man is not depraved and consequently is able to reason things out for himself and so arrive at the truth. Man is able to decide between doing good or bad, to believe or not. The Bible can be of assistance, and one should busy oneself with it, but what is essential is that one uses one's mind and so comes to understand the truth. Admittedly, with everyone thinking things through for themselves there will be many different conclusions as to what constitutes truth, and only tolerance will accommodate this.

Here we find two radically different lines of thought which, not surprisingly, brought its own tensions to church life in Holland. For with the Arminian Reformed thinking, the very heart had been cut out of the Reformed faith. What the churches together had confessed in Article 15 of the Belgic Confession was denied by the Arminian Reformed:

"We believe that by the disobedience of Adam original sin has spread throughout the whole human race. It is a corruption of the entire nature of man and a hereditary evil which infects even infants in their mother's womb. As a root it produces in man all sorts of sin. It is, therefore, so vile and abominable in the sight of God that it is sufficient to condemn the

human race. It is not abolished nor eradicated even by baptism, for sin continually streams forth like water welling up from this woeful source...."

But if people were not totally depraved, salvation did not need to depend entirely on God either. So friction arose also on Article 16 of the Belgic Confession:

"We believe that, when the entire offspring of Adam plunged into perdition and ruin by the transgression of the first man, God manifested Himself to be as He is: merciful and just. Merciful, in rescuing and saving from this perdition those whom in His eternal and unchangeable counsel He has elected in Jesus Christ our Lord by His pure goodness, without any consideration of their works. Just, in leaving the others in the fall and perdition into which they have plunged themselves."

Again, if salvation did not depend entirely on God, if people were not so dead that they could contribute nothing of their own, then the place of Christ's work as confessed in Article 21 was attacked as well:

"...He presented Himself in our place before His Father, appeasing God's wrath by His full satisfaction, offering Himself on the tree of the cross, where He poured out His precious blood to purge away our sins.... He was numbered with the transgressors.... He died as the righteous for the unrighteous...."

For those who had learned to love the doctrine of salvation by grace alone, freely given by God to the unworthy, the positions held by the Arminian Reformed constituted an attack upon the very heart of the gospel itself. And an attack it was, a Satanic attack to destroy the gains of the Great Reformation. No wonder the two sides clashed.

A CHURCH - POLITICAL STRUGGLE

But the struggle was not only related to the question of what one thought about the nature of man, and hence about whether salvation came fully from God or not. The Arminian Reformed embraced a notion of church that destroyed the confession of Article 27 of the Belgic Confession. The Church, says that confession, is made up of "the true Christian believers", that is, the members. Hence from within the membership officebearers are chosen who govern the congregation in the name of Jesus Christ.

The Arminian Reformed, on the other hand, maintained that the government of the country should control all matters in the country - including the Church. The government should control the Church by means of the ministers, who are its servants and who are also paid by the government. With the government in control it follows that there is then little room for elders and deacons. Hence, during this period of Holland's church history, one could find many churches but few elders and deacons, and those that were there were just lackeys at that, to be of service to ministers who in turn served the government. Consequently such a construction of church government left no room for a synod, and there was no place for a congregational meeting. The Church was not the members, but effectively the Church was the ministers. Where the minister is, there is the Church.

How then were vacant pulpits filled in the churches at the time? The government had the final say regarding which minister was to be appointed to fill a vacancy, in spite of the preferences of the congregation. From the 1590s onward till the 1610s Holland was under the government of a man called Oldenbarnevelt, a Liberal. He too embraced the idea that people are essentially good, have a free will, and so are able to decide between good and evil. It isn't so surprising then that a government with such a tendency worked together with the Arminian Reformed. There existed a kinship between the Arminians and the government who together tried to shut out those who were Calvinistic Reformed. It culminated in a Church political struggle.

The Government of the day, together with the Arminian Reformed, refused to give permission for the churches to convene a synod in order to deal with the doctrinal differences in the churches, for, they claimed, the government was the final authority in all church matters. Hence there were no synods between 1586 and 1618. The Calvinistic Reformed however believed it was unscriptural for the government to interfere in Church matters, and therefore continued to request permission to hold a Synod.

Once a synod was finally convened, therefore, it did not just concern itself with matters of doctrine, but also with matters of Church Polity, i.e. Church government. The Synod of Dort even finalised a Church Order which we still use today: the Church Order of Dort. It firmly fixes responsibility for church matters with the churches themselves.

"IF IT HAD NOT BEEN THE LORD WHO WAS ON OUR SIDE ..."

Psalm 124, used at the time of the Liberation of 1944 to describe the Lord's hand in liberating the churches from hierarchy, is also very applicable as a description of what the Lord did for His Church at this early stage of the history of the Reformed Churches. There we read, "If it had not been the LORD who was on our side, when men rose up against us, then they would have swallowed us alive. . . . Blessed be the LORD, who has not given us as prey to their teeth. Our soul has escaped as a bird from the snare of the fowlers; the snare is broken, and we have escaped. Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth" (Psalm 124:2,3,6-10).

The Reformation had started in Europe in 1517 when Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Church at Wittenberg. Central to the Reformation was the doctrine that man is saved by grace alone; salvation is God's gift and not man's doing (Ephesians 2.) The Reformation had a widespread influence on Holland, and Calvinism was widely embraced. However, the doctrine of salvation by grace alone was not embraced by all, and in the least by Satan. The events that unfolded in the last two decades of the 16th century and the first two decades of the 17th century clearly point up how determined Satan was to undo the work God had begun in the Netherlands and throughout Europe. The Arminian Reformed, affected by humanistic thinking, sought to snuff out the gains of the Reformation in the Netherlands. And close they came to doing so. Humanly speaking, there ought to be no Church in Holland in view of the circumstances during this 40 year period. It truly must be ascribed to a miracle by God's grace that there came a break from oppression. Oldenbarnevelt virtually ruled Holland as a dictator. So opposed was he to the doctrine of man's total depravity that he even organised for those who embraced it to be persecuted. In 1617 the Calvinistic Reformed were

persecuted in the same way as in the days of Guido deBres, the only exception being that there was no death penalty. One's faith could cost one's job, one's land, one's comforts. To be truly reformed in 1617 was not cheap. Through the combined forces of the Arminian Reformed and the Liberal government of Oldenbarnevelt, Satan had as it were a stranglehold on the Calvinistic Reformed churches - the churches of Jesus Christ. The Reformed faith certainly came close to being 'swallowed up', snuffed out.

SATAN'S ATTACK THROUGH OLDENBARNEVELT / GOD'S DELIVERANCE THROUGH MAURITZ

Note well though what our God did! His hand provided for the fact that a prince by the name of Mauritz should reign in Holland. Mauritz was not a man given to religious business, but was a man of the military. He was nominally Reformed however, and went to Church. The church he attended in the Hague was served by four ministers, one of whom was Utenbogaart. Utenbogaart was the 'Court preacher' or, as we would say, had the royal family in his ward. He faithfully taught Arminian Reformed thinking, namely, that man is not dead in sin, but has the capacity freely to choose to accept the salvation God kindly offers him.

The Lord used Oldenbarnevelt's heavy hand to move Prince Mauritz initially to sympathise with the Calvinistic Reformed, and later to embrace Calvinistic Reformed thinking. Mauritz considered Oldenbarnevelt's disposition to the Calvinistic Reformed to be unjust, and at their encouragement, ended up going to Church with the Calvinists. He had sworn an oath that he would defend the Reformed faith, and now made clear what he understood by the word 'reformed'. When Oldenbarnevelt in turn encouraged the taking up of arms and the hiring of soldiers in a last ditch attempt to free Holland of all Calvinistic Reformed, Mauritz, recognising that Holland was close to being involved in a civil war, took action. He saw to it that Oldenbarnevelt and his followers were imprisoned, and Oldenbarnevelt himself was hung. Herewith the political strength of both the Liberals and the Arminian Reformed was broken, and so the Calvinistic Reformed could breathe a deep sigh of relief. Their persecution came to a sudden end, as Satan's stranglehold on the church of Christ was broken. This was none other than God's gift for the preservation of His Church in the face of Satan's attack on the Church.

Mauritz further saw to it that the Church finally received the Synod it had requested for so long. It commenced on November 13, 1618. We must see this Synod in the light of the Lord's work. If He had not 'stood in the breach', there would be no Church in Holland today. And we, heirs as we may be of God's work in the Netherlands, would not be Calvinistic Reformed. All of 400 years ago already God wanted me to be reformed today, and so guided events to that end.

FURTHER READING:

Faber, J., Meijerink, H.J., Trimp, C. & Zomer, G. (1979). *The Bride's Treasure*. Launceston, Tasmania: Publication Organisation of the Free Reformed Churches of Australia.

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Background Theology to the Canons of Dort

The Synod of Dort, 1618-1619, was held in view of the rising influence of Arminianism in the Reformed Church. The heresy known to us as 'Arminianism' was, however, not new at all.

HUMAN NATURE: IS IT GOOD, SICK, OR TOTALLY CORRUPT?

In 354 A.D. two men were born, both of whom would make an enormous impact on the Church of Jesus Christ. Their names were Pelagius and Augustine. Their paths crossed in the later years of their lives, due to their widely opposing viewpoints on the following three doctrinal issues:

1. Human nature
2. Man's need for grace
3. God's sovereignty

The fundamental difference between the opposing systems of thought of these two men rested on their radically opposing views concerning human nature. The crucial question was, 'Is man good or not'? How one answers this question determines what one believes concerning man's need for grace and what one confesses concerning the sovereignty of God. To what extent is God's grace needed? The moment one disputes man's total depravity and consequently man's total dependence on God's grace one simultaneously disputes God's sovereignty. If man by his free will is able to take the initiative for his own salvation, deciding for himself whether or not he will be saved, God's sovereignty is restricted for then God's role in the salvation of man is limited by the decisions and actions of man.

PELAGIUS

Pelagius believed the following:

- God created Adam neither good nor bad, but 'neutral'. Adam was in a position to choose for himself whether he would do good or bad. Adam had a free will; Adam had the capacity to choose between good and evil.
- Pelagius taught that God made Adam a mortal being; 'death' was simply part of being a creature. In other words, Pelagius believed that death was not the wages of sin.
- Adam chose to sin, to do evil. The consequence of this choice was not that Adam became sinful, depraved, or dead in sin, but rather that Adam became a sinner. However, after the fall into sin Adam retained a free will and so was still able to come back from doing evil and do good (be it that, once he had tasted the forbidden fruit of sin it was harder to refrain from it). Contrary to what Scripture states in Genesis 6:5, namely, "that every intent of the thoughts of his heart (i.e. every thought and every

imagination behind all thoughts) was only evil continually" Pelagius taught that Adam did not become depraved in his heart but rather, he could commit isolated sinful acts if he so desired.

- when Adam chose to sin, he injured himself alone, and not his descendants. Adam's fall was Adam's alone; his descendants did not fall with him. So no other human is guilty of original sin, nor did any one become depraved. Adam's children remained the way Adam was created: neutral. As to why people sin, Pelagius reasoned that children sin because they follow a wrong example, and sinning can become habitual. Consequently, people sin. Yet Pelagius believed that it was possible for children, born innocent, sinless, with neutral minds and hearts, to grow up without knowing sin if they are never exposed to a bad example.
- As to man's need for God's grace, Pelagius believed that man did not need God's grace in order to be saved, but man could choose for himself whether or not he would be saved.

AUGUSTINE

Augustine believed that the Bible taught the following:

- God created Adam good. Adam was not neutral, (i.e. neither good nor bad), or in a position to choose between being good or evil but he was good and able to do good. As far as Adam's free will was concerned, Adam, created good, was able to do either good or evil; i.e. Adam was able to sin. By placing the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Garden of Eden God placed Adam before a test.
- Adam was not created mortal; he would not die unless he sinned. Death, in other words, is the wages of sin.
- When Adam fell into sin he changed from being good to being evil. He did not merely become a sinner but he became sinful, dead in sin, depraved. Having made himself depraved, Adam did not have the wherewithal to revert to being good. Having placed himself on the side of Satan, Adam would stay lost forever unless God took him away from Satan back to Himself. In order to go back to God, Adam was totally dependent on God's grace.
- With Adam's fall into sin, all his descendants fell also. The whole human race was present in Adam when he fell into sin and so all are affected by original pollution, i.e., all have lost their goodness and become depraved, dead in sin. More, all are responsible for their own fall into sin, so that each is guilty of original sin.
- In order to be saved, then, Adam and all people are in need of God's grace. We all are totally dependent on God for all things. I can contribute absolutely nothing to my salvation.
- An acknowledgment of total dependence on God for salvation implies an acknowledgment of God's sovereignty. Only those predestined by God to be saved shall receive salvation. My dependence on God is such that there is no salvation for me unless God chooses to save me and unless God acts upon me.

SEMI-PELAGIANISM

Pelagius propounded his teachings in Rome and on account of these met with opposition from Augustine in 409 AD. In 431 AD the Synod of Ephesus officially condemned Pelagius' teachings as heretical, and upheld the position of Augustine as Scripturally accurate. Herewith, the Lord's Church was once again put back on the right path. However, Satan was not content to let matters rest at that. Although people agreed that Pelagius' teachings were not correct, Augustine's teachings were perceived to be too extreme. Whereas Pelagius was condemned for being too positive in his views concerning human nature, Augustine was said to be far too negative. Hence a compromise was sought, leading to what is known as 'Semi-Pelagianism'.

On the three points mentioned earlier, Semi-Pelagianism settled for the following positions:

- Human nature is neither good nor bad, but sick. Just as a sick person can't quite do whatever he'd like to do, so likewise through the fall into sin man's capacities became restricted. His free will remained, but was weakened by the fall. Man, then, can still decide to request and receive help.
- Man's need for grace: Although Semi-Pelagianism believes in man's need for God's grace (for man is too sick to help himself), man by his free will is able to decide whether he wants God's grace. Whereas Pelagius taught that salvation is totally man's own doing, and Augustine taught that salvation is totally from God, Semi-Pelagianism teaches that salvation is a combination of the efforts of BOTH man and God. According to Semi-Pelagianism, salvation = God's grace + man's acceptance of grace. Man can only be saved if man decides to co-operate with God and accepts the grace God offers him.
- God's sovereignty: Semi-Pelagianism restricts the sovereignty of God in that it is limited by man's decision to co-operate with God or not. God's offer of salvation can be refused by man and so return to God empty. Though God may wish to save someone, He can only do so if that person is interested in taking Him up on the offer.

Over the course of time, Semi-Pelagian doctrine became the official theology of the Roman Catholic Church, and remains so even today.

THE REFORMATION'S RESPONSE TO SEMI-PELAGIANISM

God in His grace sent reformers to His Church in persons as Martin Luther and John Calvin. These men read the Scriptures of God, studied the writings of the church fathers, and came to the conclusion that the official doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church about human nature, the grace of God, and God's sovereignty were incorrect. In their disputes with the position of the Roman Catholic Church concerning matters of doctrine, the reformers were essentially opposing Semi-Pelagianism. In doing so they went back to Augustinianism.

The position of the reformers on these points of disagreement found their way into the Confessions. Possibly the easiest way to draw out the reformers' thinking on these points is by drawing attention to the Heidelberg Catechism.

- Human nature: The Heidelberg Catechism (published in 1563) summarises well the Reformed position on what the Bible teaches concerning human nature. In Lord's Day 3, Q&A 6 one reads, "God created man good ..." i.e. not neutral, as taught by Pelagius, but good (Augustinian). Further, Q&A 7 reads, "From where then did man's depraved nature come?" The question admits to general depravity, admits that people as a whole are not good. The answer is this: "From the fall and disobedience of our first parents Adam and Eve in Paradise, for there our nature became so

corrupt that we are all conceived and born in sin.". Again, this is distinctly Augustinianism as opposed to Pelagianism. According to Pelagius only Adam fell into sin, but Augustinianism and Reformation theology teaches that we all sinned in Adam with the consequence that our nature became corrupt. Q&A 8 elaborates on the extent of our corruption. "But are we so corrupt that we are totally unable to do any good and inclined to all evil?" Pelagius would have answered in the negative; man is basically good, and by means of his free will can choose to do good. Semi-Pelagians would answer, 'man is corrupt but not so corrupt that he is unable to do any good. Man is sick.' The Catechism however, in agreement with what Augustine taught, answers, "Yes", man is totally unable to do any good and inclined to all evil because human nature is totally depraved. In fact, the Heidelberg Catechism says, man is so corrupt that he can do no good unless God work on him through his Holy Spirit. · Man's need for grace: In LD 23, Q&A 60 the Catechism asks "How are you righteous before God?" Pelagius would have responded, "By my free will I can decide to do the good, and so be righteous." Together with Augustine, the Reformers answered, "Only by true faith in Jesus Christ". Semi-Pelagians would not dispute that man's righteousness is attained by true faith, but man must first decide if he wants this faith. In other words, it is not only by true faith but also by man's free will (ie, salvation = God's grace + man's acceptance of grace). The Augustinian language here adopted by the reformers is not a language of sickness but of deadness. Man has "grievously sinned against all God's commandments" and is "still inclined to all evil". Since a dead person can do nothing, let alone will anything, faith cannot be a choice of man. Hence A60 continues, "... yet God, without any merit of my own, out of mere grace, imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ." Without me requesting it, God imputed to me what was Christ's. God took what was Christ's and attributed it to me; God credited 'my account' with Christ's righteousness. Contrary to what Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism teaches, the Catechism teaches that because I am by nature dead, I am totally dependent on God's grace. · God's sovereignty: Lord's Day 23, Q&A 60, confesses too God's sovereignty in salvation with these words: "...God...out of mere grace, imputes to me." One can confess this only if one confesses too that man is totally depraved and consequently is totally dependent on God's grace for salvation. God is God and therefore His work of salvation is not limited by man's decision to be saved or not. "God imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ." God does not first ask me if I desire these gifts of grace. These doctrines have come to be known by the term Calvinism.

"... THERE IS NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN ..." : SOCINIANISM AND ARMINIANISM = PELAGIANISM AND SEMI-PELAGIANISM RETURNED

The preaching of the Reformers about human nature, God's grace, and God's sovereignty in working salvation was not appreciated by all. A man by the name of Socinius did not like the return to Augustinianism. He believed that Adam was created neutral (neither good nor bad) and that when Adam sinned he, and he alone, was affected by his sin. All Adam's descendants are born neutral, he claimed, and can choose between good and evil. This was plainly a return to the Pelagianism rejected by the church some 1000 years earlier. Beside the Calvinism (= Augustinianism) of the Reformers, Socinius placed his Socinianism (= Pelagianism).

But now again, as happened centuries earlier, Socinianism was written off as being too positive about human nature. And Calvinism was seen as too negative, too damning and depressing. The resulting compromise was at heart a return to Semi-Pelagianism. Jacob

Arminius in particular was responsible for bring Semi-Pelagianism to life again in the midst of the Reformed Churches.

RELEVANT?

One might well question the relevance of busying ourselves in 1997 with the issues relating to a synod convened some 380 years ago. However, the study of church history proves that heresies do not just arise and die to give way to new heresies, but that heresies surface and resurface. A study of the Canons of Dort and how they were compiled by the Synod of Dort in order to defend Reformed theology over against Arminianism is not just a study of historical interest; it is rather a study which assists us concretely as we strive to live as Christians today. The compromise on human nature known as Semi-Pelagianism is widely embraced on the Christian world of today. Society's optimistic view of man prompts society to turn up its nose at Augustian thinking (= the Calvinism of our confessions). Countless of the Christians around us have consequently adopted a Semi-Pelagian position about the nature of man. One recent survey in America, for example, reports that 84% of Christians interviewed (they call themselves 'evangelicals') agreed that in matters of salvation "God helps those who help themselves" and 77% believed that human beings are basically good. In the face of such pressures from the Christian world around us, a study of the Canons of Dort can only help us to discern between Arminian (Semi-Pelagian) and Reformed Theology.

Chapter 1 - Divine Election and Reprobation : Articles 1-5

INTRODUCTION

In 1610, the followers of Arminius compiled five articles or statements of faith based on the teachings of Arminius. These five articles were subsequently examined by the Synod of Dort 1618-1619. The Reformed, scriptural stance this Synod took in relation to the doctrinal issues raised in these Five Articles of the Remonstrants has been formulated into what we today call the Canons of Dort. Since the first article of the Remonstrants concerned itself with God's eternal decree concerning man's salvation, Chapter 1 of the Canons of Dort sets forth the Scriptural teaching concerning God's eternal decree. Hence this first head of doctrine is entitled "Divine Election and Reprobation".

Said the Arminians in Article 1 (and the error of their position is most clearly deciphered when the following key words are lifted out), "We believe that God by an eternal ... decree has ... determined ... to save ... those ... who ... shall believe ... and persevere ..." By these words the Arminians are essentially saying that God, before Creation, looked into the future to see who would believe in Him, and then determined that He would save those specific persons. Salvation of man, then, follows this sequence: 1. man believes and then, 2. God saves those who believe. Having seen ahead of time that a person was going to believe, God chose him for salvation. Say the Arminians, "we believe God determined to save those who shall believe and persevere".

The issue at stake here is, what is election? The Arminians say it is not a divine decree as to who will be saved, but rather, a divine decree as to the means by which man will be saved. God does not choose the recipient of salvation (Tom or Dick or Harry), but the requirement for salvation, namely faith - and, since God sees ahead of time that Tom and Dick will believe, they are automatically included for salvation.

Hence our fathers recognised that what they first needed to do was define election. However, election as such is not discussed until Article 6. The first five articles deal with some preliminaries one needs to understand in order to be able to fully appreciate what election really is.

ARTICLE 1

ALL MANKIND CONDEMNABLE BEFORE GOD

When God created Adam, He established a covenant with Adam. Adam would be God's child and God promised to be his Father. God placed Adam in the Garden of Eden, and so supplied all Adam's needs; He was God for Adam. By the fall into sin, Adam broke this covenant with God, choosing instead to join Satan's side.

Article 1 now asks who all went from God's side to Satan's side? Was it just Adam (and Eve), or all of mankind? Did just Adam disobey God and break the covenant or did the whole

human race do so? After all, only Adam and Eve were in the Garden; they both sinned by eating of the forbidden tree and so both landed in Satan's camp. Adam and Eve had children after the fall into sin, but these children too were on Satan's side, due to their parents' sin. The critical question is whether or not Adam's children can be held responsible for being on Satan's side. If the children cannot be held responsible, is it right that God's wrath abides on them, and isn't it unfair of God to leave them on Satan's side?

By way of illustration: nobody can fault my children for the fact that they live in Australia. The fault (if one can rightly speak of fault here!) is mine, for I migrated to this land. The children 'suffer the consequences' of my decision. Can the same be said regarding the fall into sin? Are the generations who followed Adam and Eve victims of their ancestor's ill-judged decision to disobey God and join Satan?

Who sinned according to Scripture? God made His covenant not with Adam as an individual, but with Adam as the head of the human race. That is evident from the fact that when God created Adam (and Eve), God immediately gave the instruction to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth (Gen 1:28). God was interested not just in the individual Adam, but in all the offspring that would come from this one man. God's covenant would not be only with Adam (and Eve), but with any children they would receive also.

Since God made His covenant with the whole human race in its entirety, Adam's transgression in Paradise both affects the whole human race and is the responsibility of the whole human race. The action of a head of state (Prime Minister, King, etc) to declare war on another country does not make only the Prime Minister responsible for his country's being at war, but makes the nation as a whole responsible and hence target of enemy attack. In like manner, the decision of Adam to desert God and side with Satan makes the whole human race responsible for sinning. In Romans 5:12 we read, "... just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned-". Here Paul refers to Adam's sin in Genesis 3, but, says Paul, Adam was not the only transgressor in the beginning; all mankind sinned. All people were on God's side, and included in His covenant made with Adam in the beginning, and all people turned their back on God and turned instead to Satan. It will not suffice to superficially say that all people suffer the consequences of Adam's sin. No, all people participated in Adam's sin.

Further on in Romans 5 Paul draws a parallel between our union with Adam and our union with Christ. "Therefore, as through one man's offence judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man's righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous" (Romans 5:18,19). Just as our union with Adam our covenant head made us partakers of his condemnation when he sinned, so we in union with Christ do not simply enjoy the consequences of His death and resurrection but we died and rose with Him and share in His righteousness. Christ did not just die on our behalf, but we participated in His death. Says Paul in Romans 6:3-5 "... do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of his resurrection." My union with Christ means that when He died, I died; when He rose, I rose; because He lives, I live. Christ's work has been written onto my account. If I

were to deny my involvement in Adam's fall, I would by extension need to deny my participation in the saving work of Christ.

If all mankind fell into sin when Adam sinned, we consequently are all on Satan's side by our own choice. It wasn't some particular circumstance beyond our control which landed us with Satan, but it was purely our choice. We fell into sin. We cannot understand how, but because God says we did we accept what He says. His word on the matter is final. So we accept too that we rightly deserve God's wrath, His judgment. Were God to pour out His wrath upon us, we would have no grounds for accusing God of being unfair. This notion is critical to our understanding of the argument which our fathers put forward in Article 1 in opposition to the Arminians. There we read, "Since all men have sinned in Adam, lie under the curse, and deserve eternal death, God would have done injustice to no one if He had willed to leave the whole human race in sin and under the curse, and to condemn it on account of its sin..." The concept basic to Reformed faith is that I am a sinner by my own fault, and consequently am deserving of God's judgment.

ARTICLE 2

THE SENDING OF THE SON OF GOD

No-one asked God to save them. After Adam and Eve had fallen, we read in Genesis 3:8 that God came to them: sinners. In spite of man's fall, God sovereignly and mercifully came to man again. (That God came habitually to Adam and Eve in Paradise is pointed up by the fact that Adam and Eve recognised the sound of God's coming; they were familiar with God's arrival and presence). In response to His coming on the evening of the day of their fall, Adam and Eve hid themselves; they didn't want God. "And (Adam and Eve) heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden." From man's part there was unwillingness to meet God, and certainly there was no crying out for help.

The next verse tells us what God then did: "Then the LORD God called to Adam and said to him, 'Where are you?'" The Lord called: in infinite mercy He reached out to fallen man. He wanted to save. Hence we confess in Article 17 of the Belgic Confession, "When (God) saw that man had thus plunged himself into physical and spiritual death and made himself completely miserable, our gracious God in His marvellous wisdom and goodness set out to seek man when he trembling fled from Him." This is precisely the material of Article 2. Just as Adam and Eve did not reach out to God but God to them, so it is not we reaching out to God but God to us. This evidence from Genesis 3 (echoed in Article 17) is a loud condemnation of Arminianism.

From John 3:16 we learn that salvation is God's sovereign and gracious gift. "For God so loved the world (which had fallen into sin) that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life". Salvation is not us asking but God giving. In 1 John 4:9,10 we read that it was God who sent. God acted: He loved us and sent His Son. "In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins".

Article 2 echoes Scripture when it confesses, "But in this the love of God was made manifest, that He sent His only Son into the world ..."

When we place articles 1 and 2 side by side, and notice their contrasting contents, we come to see the powerful Gospel they confess. Man fell into sin by his own fault. God's response however was to freely give His Son for people like us. Sinners we are, but salvation is freely prepared for us. How amazingly merciful is the God of our salvation!

ARTICLE 3

THE PREACHING OF THE GOSPEL

Article 2 ended with a reference to the need for believing in order to receive salvation. "... (God) sent His only Son into the world, so that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life." In order to be saved, people on Satan's side need faith. But where does faith come from? "From the Holy Spirit who works it in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel..." (Lord's Day 25, Q&A 65). As quoted in Article 3, Romans 10:14, 15 says concerning the source of faith, "... 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 unless they are sent? ..." Faith is worked through the preaching. In order to come to faith one needs to hear the Gospel. Not only did God send His Son to provide salvation, but He also sends preachers to "whom He wills and when He wills".

That it is God who determines when, where and to whom His Gospel is to be preached is vividly illustrated by what we read in Acts 16. From Phrygia and Galatia Paul wanted to go north and preach in Asia. However, he was not permitted to do so by the Holy Spirit. "Now when they had gone through Phrygia and the region of Galatia, they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia" (Acts 16:6). It hasn't been revealed to us how the Spirit restrained Paul, be it by the weather, political circumstances, or ill health. Regardless of the means, Paul concluded that he was not to go north to preach the gospel. Hence he continued his travels west. When he came to Troas, God made it clear to Paul by means of a vision that he had to go further west, to Macedonia. "Now after (Paul) had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called us to preach the gospel to them" (Acts 16:10). Paul accordingly crossed the water to the district of Macedonia, and came to the city of Phillipi.

Why did God close the road to Bithynia, and instead lead Paul to Phillipi? God did so because He wanted to save Lydia. "Now a certain woman named Lydia heard us. She was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira, who worshipped God. The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul" (Acts 16:14). By God's decree Lydia needed to come to faith. By God's decree she therefore needed the apostle's preaching and hence God closed to Paul the road to Bithynia. Who will hear the Gospel? As we confess in Article 3, God sends His servants "to whom He will and when He wills". This doesn't mean that the Gospel should never go to Bithynia at all; the point is that the Gospel would go wherever God determined it should go and at a time determined by Him.

This makes for a remarkable thought. Why are we allowed to have the preaching? Do we just attribute this to certain circumstances? No. God sends His Word via servants of His choosing

to people of His choosing and at a time appointed by Him alone. As with Lydia who heard and heeded the Gospel because of God's interest in her, so it is with me. That I may hear and heed the preaching is evidence of God's interest in and care for me. In His own sovereign way and time, God caused the Gospel to come even to me. It is of great encouragement to know that God sends His Gospel wherever He has elect people.

By Article 3 our fathers refuted a specific error of the Arminians. The specific error in question is recorded in Article 9 of the Rejection of Errors attached to Chapter 1 (see page 544). The error was that "God sends the gospel to one people rather than another not merely and solely because of the good pleasure of His will, but because one people is better and worthier than another to which the gospel is not preached." Our fathers rejected this as being contrary to Scripture, for Scripture teaches that God freely chose because of His good pleasure and not because of any merits of man. Hence they quoted what Moses said to Israel (Deuteronomy 10:14,15), "Indeed heaven and the highest heavens belong to the LORD your God, also the earth with all that is in it. The LORD delighted only in your fathers, to love them; and He chose their descendants after them, you above all peoples, as it is this day." Though God could have picked any people of the globe for Himself, He was sovereignly pleased to choose Israel alone, for reasons of His own good pleasure. Similarly, Christ said to the Jews (Matthew 11:21), "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes". Chorazin and Bethsaida, two Jewish cities where Jesus preached, rejected His preaching, while Tyre and Sidon, two heathen cities, would (said Jesus) have believed if He had preached and worked there. Though a better people, God sovereignly determined for Christ to go not to Tyre and Sidon, but to Chorazin and Bethsaida.

ARTICLE 4

A TWOFOLD OUTCOME

The Lord causes the Gospel to be preached to an audience of His choosing. This preaching has a twofold result: there are those who respond by coming to faith and there are those who respond with unbelief. On those who respond with unbelief God's wrath remains. The word 'remains' is important here. With our fall into sin, the human race joined Satan's side and consequently we placed ourselves under the wrath and judgment of God. That judgment remains, in this life and the life to come, if we reject the Gospel of salvation (Lord's Day 4). At the same time we need to note that those who respond to the preaching of the Gospel with unbelief will be judged the heavier, simply because they have heard the Gospel. "For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more" (Luke 12:48).

On the other hand, those who come to faith receive from God the gift of forgiveness by imputation; i.e. their accounts are credited with the satisfaction of God's wrath which Christ attained by His death on the cross. Christ received wrath so that I might receive mercy.

Each response to the preaching of the Gospel has its own consequence: the response of faith results in life and the response of unbelief results in eternal death. As we read in John 3:16, "whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life". The Word of the Lord

never returns empty. The preaching of God's Word demands a response: a yes or a no; both are responses. God's Word always accomplishes what God sets out for it to do. We should dare to see both faith and rejection as fruits of the preaching of the Word.

ARTICLE 5

THE CAUSE OF UNBELIEF, THE SOURCE OF FAITH

Article 4 confesses that the one responds to the preaching with acceptance and faith, and another responds with rejection and unbelief. What are the causes of unbelief and faith?

1) THE CAUSE OF UNBELIEF

The Bible teaches that the person who responds with unbelief can only blame himself. The cause of unbelief is the self. I fell into sin. Though God made me able to hear His Word and able to respond to it in faith, I made myself unable to do it. As we confess in Lord's Day 4, "God (is) not unjust by requiring in His law what man cannot do ... for God so created man that he was able to do it. But man, at the instigation of the devil, in deliberate disobedience robbed himself and all his descendants of these gifts." If I respond to the preaching with unbelief, it is my own doing. I cannot blame another person, nor can I blame God; I can only blame myself.

Scripture is clear concerning man's unwillingness to believe:

ISAIAH 30:9

"... this is a rebellious people, lying children, children who will not hear the law of the LORD." Here we do not read of a people who shall not hear (in the future), but rather, of a people who will not hear, i.e., do not want to hear. Unbelief is nothing but an unwillingness to listen. Isaiah goes on to say in verse 15, "For thus says the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel: "In returning and rest you shall be saved; In quietness and confidence shall be your strength. But you would not". Again, it is a matter of unwillingness. Unbelief cannot be attributed to the Word being unclear or to particular political or home circumstances. No, the responsibility to believe lies with each individual.

LUKE 13:34

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not willing!"

JOHN 5:39,40

Said Jesus to the Jews, "You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of me. But you are not willing to come to me that you may have life." It wasn't that the Holy Spirit didn't work, but rather, the Jews were unwilling to believe. It was the Jews' own responsibility that they would not believe.

What these Scripture passages point out for us is this: anyone's refusal to believe is one's own fault. Regardless of anyone's personal circumstances, a decision not to believe is always an

unwillingness to believe. Unbelief is not a matter of 'I cannot believe', but rather a matter of 'I don't want to believe'.

One may consequently find it difficult to understand that in Exodus 11:10 we read that God hardened Pharaoh's heart. In Romans 9:18 we read "... He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens". Who then was at fault for the hardening of Pharaoh's heart: God or Pharaoh? We know that God punished Pharaoh. Yet the fault remains Pharaoh's alone. He (with all of us) fell into sin, and so wished to do evil only. Possibly one may say that God let the evil in Pharaoh's heart have free reign, so that Pharaoh resisted the promptings of God to let His people go. However it may be, we cannot ultimately understand the tension between God's sovereignty and man's responsibility. It is something we can only say 'Amen' to.

2) THE SOURCE OF FAITH

The credit for faith lies not with the self but with God. In Ephesians 2:1,4 and 5 the Ephesians and the human race in its entirety is described as dead as a result of man's fall into sin. "And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins. ... But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses..." Paul goes on to write of the remarkable thing which God did for people who were dead, namely, "... made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)". This Paul repeats in verse 8, namely, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God" Here it is said that faith is the gift of God. Therefore when I hear the preaching of God's Word and come to faith, it is only fitting for me to get on my knees and thank God for this great gift. He works faith. The cause of unbelief lies with the self, but the source of Faith is God. All credit for my faith goes to the Lord alone.

CONCLUSION

Article 1 paints a bleak picture of myself and the whole human race. After making this confession (in the face of the Arminians' positive concept of man), our fathers drew attention to God. God came to us, seeking to save us, even when we didn't want God. In order that we might be saved, God sent His Son (Article 2), and sends preachers to proclaim His Gospel of salvation (Article 3). There is a twofold response to this preaching, unbelief or faith (Article 4). Whereas unbelief is caused solely by man's unwillingness to believe (here is again the depravity of Article 1), the source of faith is God's free and gracious gift to His elect (Article 5). In Articles 2-5 the emphasis is on what God is doing. Such an emphasis is not merely characteristic of Reformed thinking, but it is fundamental to it; the focus needs to be on God. Because salvation and the means by which it is obtained, namely faith, are God's free gifts (to people who fell into sin by deliberate disobedience), all praise is to be directed to Him.

Furthermore, to know that God is busy gives a great sense of security. In Psalm 138:8 I read that the Lord brings to completion the work He has begun in me. "The LORD will perfect that which concerns me". God is busy in my life. God sends the preaching of His Word to me because He is completing the work of salvation He has begun in me. Salvation begins with God. He sent His Son. Salvation also continues with God: He sends preachers and thereby works faith in me. God also works my perseverance in faith and my ultimate glorification. All praise be to God!

THE FIVE ARTICLES OF THE REMONSTRANTS ¹

ARTICLE 1

We believe that God by an eternal and immutable decree has in Jesus Christ his Son determined before the foundation of the world to save out of the fallen, human race those in Christ, for Christ's sake, and through Christ who by the grace of the Holy Spirit shall believe in this His Son Jesus Christ and persevere in this faith and obedience of faith to the end; and on the other hand to leave the incorrigible and unbelieving in sin and under wrath and condemn (them) as alienate from Christ - according to the word of the Holy Gospel in John 3:36, "He that believeth in the Son hath everlasting life, and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth on him" and also other passages from the Scriptures.

ARTICLE 2

We believe that in agreement with this, Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world, died for all men and for every man, so that he merited reconciliation and forgiveness of sins for all through the death of the cross; yet, so that no one actually enjoys the forgiveness of sins except the believer - also according to the word of the Gospel of John 3:16, "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life". And in the first epistle of John 2:2, "And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world."

ARTICLE 3

We believe that man does not have saving faith of himself nor by his power of his own free will, since he, in the state of apostasy and sin, cannot of and through himself think, will or do any good which is truly good (such as is especially saving faith); but that it is necessary that he be regenerated by God, in Christ, through His Holy Spirit, and renewed in understanding, affections and will, and all powers, in order that may rightly understand, meditate upon, will, and perform that which is truly good, according to the word of Christ in John 15:5, "Without me you can do nothing".

ARTICLE 4

We believe that this grace of God is the commencement, progression, and completion of all good, also, in so far that the regenerate man cannot, apart from this prevenient or assisting awakening, consequent and co-operating grace, think, will or do the good or resist any temptations to evil, so that all good works or activities which can be conceived must be ascribed to the grace of God in Christ. But with respect to the mode of this grace, it is not irresistible, since it is written concerning many that they resisted the Holy Spirit, in Acts 7 and elsewhere in many places.

ARTICLE 5

We believe that those who are incorporated into Jesus Christ and thereby become partakers of his life-giving Spirit have abundant strength to strive against Satan, sin, the world and their own flesh and to obtain the victory; it being well understood (that this is) through the assistance of the grace of the Holy Spirit, and that Jesus Christ assists them through His Spirit in all temptations, extends the hand, and - if only they are prepared for warfare and desire His help and are not negligent - keeps them standing, so that by no cunning or power of Satan can they be led astray or plucked out of Christ's hands, according to the word of Christ, John 10, "no one shall pluck them out of my hands".

But whether they can through negligence fall away from the first principle of their life in Christ, again embrace the present world, depart from the pure doctrine once given to them, lose the good conscience, and neglect grace, must first be more carefully determined from the Holy Scriptures before we shall be able to teach this with the full persuasion of our heart.

¹ *The Remonstrants are the followers of Arminius*

Chapter 1 - Divine Election and Reprobation : Articles 6-11

ARTICLE 6

GOD'S ETERNAL DECREE

In articles 1-5 God's deeds stand in the foreground. See Table 1. It was God who sent a Saviour to the lost, and it is God who lets His Word be preached to the lost and works faith in the lost. Article 6 tells us now that all these deeds are rooted in God's decree.

Table 1	
Article 1	God not compelled to save any.
Article 2	God sends a Saviour.
Article 3	God sends preachers of the gospel.
Article 4/5	God works faith.

Scripture portrays this decree as being reflective of God's sovereignty. This decree of God is comprehensive, whereby God has determined all that is going to happen. In Genesis 45:5 Joseph confesses God's sovereignty when he says to his brothers, "But now, do not therefore be grieved or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life". Joseph was aware of the fact that his brothers had put him in a pit and sold him to the Midianites. Yet Joseph says that it was God who did it because it is God's sovereignty which controls all things, including jealousies between brothers and trade at the slave market.

Similarly, God says via the prophet Isaiah about Assyria (the world power of the day) and king Sennacherib, "Woe to Assyria, the rod of my anger and the staff in whose hand is my indignation. I will send him against an ungodly nation, and against the people of my wrath I will give him charge, to seize the spoil, to take the prey, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets. Yet he does not mean so, nor does his heart think so; but it is in his heart to destroy, and cut off not a few nations" (Isaiah 10:5-7). Sennacherib and his army were but tools in God's sovereign hands to do only what He determined for them to do. Though God's sovereignty would have received no mention in the news reports of Sennacherib's day, just as it receives no mention today either in news reports concerning world leaders such as President Clinton, according to Scripture all kings and rulers of this world are merely tools in the hands of sovereign God.

Again, in Acts 2:22,23 the apostle Paul says to the Jews concerning Jesus, "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves know - Him, being delivered by the carefully planned intention and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death". God had determined that the Jews would crucify Jesus. The Jews were instruments in God's hands.

If God, then, has decreed what happens on the slave market and in world politics, if He has decreed rejections and crucifixions, shall He then not determine who will be saved? The fact that God is sovereign means that it is God who determines who shall be saved. If I insist that my salvation is up to me, then I undermine the notion of God's sovereignty. With the words of Lord's Day 10, HC, I confess that I understand concerning God's sovereignty or "providence" the following:

"God's providence is His almighty and ever present power, whereby, as with His hand, He still upholds heaven and earth and all creatures, and so governs them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, indeed all things, come not by chance but by His fatherly hand. ... All things are so completely in His hand that without His will they cannot so much as move".

If this is what I confess concerning both the big and the little things in life, I must by extension confess too that matters of faith and salvation come by God's fatherly hand. Conversely, if I challenge that salvation is a matter of God's decree, then I effectively challenge the correctness of believing that God is sovereign in the big and little things of life today. To dispute what the Church confesses in the Canons of Dort about the decree of God is at bottom to rattle also what the Church confesses about the sovereignty of God in LD 10.

That God has determined who will be saved is taught in Scripture in passages as Ephesians 1:11. The apostle is moved by the Holy Spirit to write, "in whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will". Here it is emphasised that salvation is a matter of God's will, God's decree. God established this decree already before the creation of the world, says verse 4: "just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world...." God, then, had determined before creation which lost sinners He would take back to His side. Yes, He had His eye on me already before creation, and determined that I should be saved! Article 6 echoes the words of Ephesians 1:11 when it confesses, "That God in time confers the gift of faith on some, and not on others, proceeds from His eternal decree". God has determined whom He would save and He causes this decree to happen in this world, in this society. On the basis of His decree He softens the hearts of some but leaves others. Says Article 6, "According to this decree He graciously softens the hearts of the elect, no matter how hard they may be, and inclines them to believe; those not elected, however, He leaves in their own wickedness and hardness by a just judgment". How God does this softening or leaving is not explained in our article, but comes back in later articles. The focus of Article 6 is God's decree, specifically the fact that God causes His decree to unfold. The unfolding of God's decree is also an element of God's sovereignty. That some come to faith (softening of hearts) but others not (hardening of hearts) is evidence of God at work.

The knowledge that God is busy makes predestination and election an exciting concept. To use the words of Article 6, "... it provides unspeakable comfort for holy and God-fearing souls". GOD is busy! Long ago He determined whom He would save and right now HE is busy carrying out perfectly the plan He determined long ago. More, by so doing God is working out my salvation. That indeed provides "unspeakable comfort."

One can speculate much concerning the doctrine of election and reprobation. However, we do well to realise that it is not a doctrine revealed to us to merely to occupy our minds, but rather to comfort our souls. That God works for our salvation must always be the focus of our discussions concerning this doctrine.

ARTICLE 7

ELECTION DEFINED

The definition presented in the first sentence of Article 7 can be summarised as follows, "Election is the unchangeable purpose of God whereby ... He has ... chosen in Christ to salvation a definite number of persons ..."

After the fall into sin all men were by nature children of Satan. However, already before He created people, God had determined by an unchangeable purpose to save in Christ a definite number of persons. Not all, but only some would be saved. It was not a changeable number of people, nor were the names of those to be saved changeable; rather, God chose a definite number and was definite in His choice of who would be saved.

Article 7 speaks of people who are "chosen" in Christ. God sent Christ to earth in order to pay for our sins. Although we deserved God's wrath on account of our transgressions, God transferred His wrath to Christ and so Christ payed for our sins. It is because Christ did this for us that we are included in Christ, and are taken back to God's side. In Christ we are justified and declared righteous. The only possible way of return to God's side is through Christ. "For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 3:11). Christ is the only foundation for salvation. Speaking of Jesus Christ, Peter said to the Sanhedrin in Acts 4:12, "Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved". There is no salvation in Buddha or in good works, but only through Christ can one be saved. Therefore election is in Christ, "just as He (God) chose us in Him (Christ) ..." (Ephesians 1:4). This is the emphasis of Article 7. "He has also from eternity appointed Christ to be the Mediator and Head of all the elect and the foundation of salvation and thus He decreed to give to Christ those who were to be saved..." Not only has God decreed from eternity whom He would save, but also that He would do so in Christ. Christ's task was to save those the Father gave to Him: the elect. That God sent Christ into the world, then, was a necessary step in God's executing His decree to save His chosen. Take Christ away from God's saving work, and God's election collapses into wishful thinking.

Article 7 is lengthy, and provides much material for further comment. However, much of what is confessed in Article 7 receives elaboration in the following articles.

ARTICLE 8

ONE DECREE OF ELECTION

Article 8 confesses "one and the same decree concerning all those that are to be saved under both the Old and the New Testament". Our fathers saw need for devoting an article to this because the Arminians believed in "various decrees of ... election". The Arminians insisted on God having made multiple decisions or decrees, and hence they speak of various sorts of election.

THE ARMINIAN ERROR OF MULTIPLE DECREES OF ELECTION

The Arminians believe that God, before the foundation of the world made a decree of election. This was not one simple decree, said the Arminians (see "Rejection of Errors" No 2 - Error, Book of Praise, p. 540). Rather, "there are various kinds of divine election to eternal life". They spoke of two main kinds of election, namely, General or Indefinite Election and Particular or Definite Election. The second, Particular or Definite Election, was in turn subdivided into incomplete, revocable, non-decisive and conditional election or complete, irrevocable, decisive and absolute election.

a. General or Indefinite Election

God's eternal decree of election was not concerned with which persons He would save (said the Arminians in their error), but which conditions people had to meet in order to be saved from Satan's side and be taken back to God. Of all possible conditions (e.g. good works, qualifications, monetary payment) God, in His sovereign good pleasure, determined that this condition would be faith. The Arminians made conditions rather than people the object of God's elective decree. God determined to save only those persons who had faith.

b. Particular or Definite Election

Whether a person's election is incomplete or complete, revocable or irrevocable, etc. depends on the person. Said the Arminians: God, before the foundation of the world, having determined that faith was the criterion for election, looked into the future and saw who would have faith. Those whom God saw would decide to believe, God decided to elect. This is election on the basis of "foreseen faith". Those who would meet the condition of faith were elected and were written into God's book.

However, some people only meet the condition of faith temporarily; they end up rejecting the Lord in the course of their lives. In that case one still speaks of an election, but it was an election which was incomplete, revocable (i.e. it was rescinded, cancelled), non-decisive, conditional. On the other hand there are those who persevere in faith till they die. As far as these people are concerned one can speak of an election that was seen through to its completion, it was irrevocable, decisive, absolute. Faith and perseverance in faith determine one's election.

ANALYSIS

It is clear that the Arminian concept of election has no room for the sovereignty of God. Whether one's election was complete or incomplete, according to Arminian reasoning, all hinges on man's perseverance in faith. Since it is man's decision whether or not he'll persevere in faith, it is consequently man's decision whether or not he will be saved. Either way, God's sovereignty is cast aside as irrelevant when it comes to the point of who will be saved. God's sovereignty only comes into play in the general / indefinite election, when God determined that having faith was the condition for salvation. However, when it comes to particular / definite election, i.e. who will be saved, God merely waits on man. God's action of filling in names in His book before the foundation of the world is done on the basis of what God sees ahead of time that man will do. According to such reasoning man's actions become the basis of election.

REFUTATION OF ARMINIAN ERROR

Our fathers attacked this Arminian heresy on the basis of what Scripture says. The Synod of Dort refuted it as "an invention of the human mind without any basis in the Scriptures" (See "Rejection of Errors" No. 2 - Refutation, Book of Praise, p. 540). Quoting from Romans 8:30 where we read, "Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified", our fathers wished to make clear that all things begin and end with God and hence too election and faith - in that order. The apostle Paul was insistent that when God elected someone, that person, in the course of time, due to God having sent preachers to his doorstep, makes definite his calling to faith. Those whom God has called, says Paul, God justified (justification = being declared righteous before God for Jesus' sake). In full confidence of God completing the works He has begun, Paul goes on to say, in the past tense, that those whom God has justified He has also glorified, even though this glorification is not due to happen until Christ comes back. If God has begun a work, election, then He will also bring it to completion. "The LORD will perfect that which concerns me; Your mercy O LORD endures for ever; Do not forsake the works of Your hands" (Psalm 138:8). It all comes back to God' sovereignty. God does what He says He will do. God is not the 'wimp' the Arminians made Him out to be through their beliefs concerning election, reducing God to someone who can only do what man lets Him do.

When God elected a definite number of persons, He did this for a purpose. As we read in Ephesians 1:4,5, "just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will". God's purpose in electing us was up in the air, indefinite, but fixed, certain: we would be holy. Will not God, being the sovereign God He is, attain what He has set out to attain? God has ONE decree of election, and God brings to completion whatever He has decreed to do.

ARTICLE 9

ELECTION NOT BASED ON FORESEEN FAITH

The Arminians said "incomplete and non-decisive election of specific persons to salvation took place on the ground of foreseen faith, conversion, holiness, and godliness, which either began or continued for some. Complete and decisive election, however, occurred because of foreseen perseverance in faith, conversion, holiness and godliness to the end" (See "Rejection of Errors" No. 5 - Error, Book of Praise, p. 542). In other words, to be elected, one needs to have certain qualities. One needs to decide to come to faith (even though one might only have faith temporarily and consequently only be indecisively elected) and one needs to persevere in faith (and consequently be decisively elected).

Wishing to point out the error of the Arminian position, the fathers at the Synod of Dort quoted several texts from Scripture to show that election comes first and faith second. In Acts 13:48 we read, "And as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed". This text places the appointment to life eternal before the decision to believe, not after. First God needs to ordain us to life and only then can we have faith. In Ephesians 1:4 we read that we are not elected because we are holy, but so that we would be holy. Hence Article 9, last sentence, quotes this text as follows, "He chose us (not because we were, but) that we should be holy

and blameless before Him". We are not elected because we have faith but so that we have faith. Once again, it is a matter of whether I see election as being dependent on me or on God. Scripture insists that we believe because God has first elected.

ARTICLE 10

ELECTION BASED ON GOD'S GOOD PLEASURE

Why does God choose certain persons? Having confessed in Article 9 that the cause of our election is not faith or holiness on our part, Article 10 confesses that the cause of our election is God's good pleasure. To say it plain English: God elected certain persons and left others because He "felt like it". In Ephesians 1:5 we read, "having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will". God did not look for people who were the most handsome, the richest, or the most civilised, but He simply chose according to His good pleasure. Article 10 quotes what we read in Romans 9:11-13, where God declared His intentions concerning Jacob and Esau even when they were still both in their mother's womb and had not yet done anything. "(For the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls), it was said to (Rebekah), "The older shall serve the younger". As it is written, "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated". Why did God choose Jacob and not Esau? Scripture simply tells us that it was because God wanted to do so.

This notion must make a person humble, for it leads to the personal question of 'why have I made profession of faith?' It had nothing to do with me but it had everything to do with what the Lord was pleased to do to me and in me. He dealt with me according to His decree concerning me so long ago. This is humbling. I am no better than my neighbour. The point is that God has worked in me, according to His eternal decree. He does so not because of me but in spite of me.

ARTICLE 11

ELECTION UNCHANGEABLE

Thankfully we may confess that Scripture teaches God's unchangeable decree of election. According to the Arminians, God could change His mind in accordance with how man changed. However, this takes away all comfort, for it negates what God has revealed concerning Himself in Psalm 102:25-28, namely, "Of old You laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands. They will perish, but You will endure; yes all of them will grow old like a garment; like a cloak You will change them, and they will be changed. But You are the same, and Your years will have no end. The children of Your servants will continue, and their descendants will be established before You". Since God Himself is unchanging, His decrees which He made before the foundation of the world also stand fixed and unchangeable. Were it possible that God's decrees could change, what security and comfort would I have? God spoke and decreed that I am His. Due to that decree He sent His Son to die for my sins, and sent me preachers of His Word so that I might come to faith. Will God, having done all that for me, then drop me?? Will God change His mind

concerning me? No matter how great and numerous my sins might be, even if they are greater and more numerous than David's sins, God does not and will not change.

Knowing that my God is dependable always and in all things, also in His decree of election, I may live securely and with comfort. Said Jesus concerning the elect whom the Father gave Him, "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me ..." (John 6:37) and "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and My Father are one" (John 10:27-30). These texts do not speak of probabilities but of certainties, because it is God who has decreed from eternity that they shall happen.

Chapter 1 - Divine Election and Reprobation : Articles 12-15

ARTICLE 12

THE ASSURANCE OF ELECTION

In the preceding articles we have confessed Scripture to teach that God has elected certain persons to life and passed others by. That confession cannot remain theoretical. The obvious question flowing from this confession is this: where do I fit in? Am I elect? Can I know whether I am elect? The Arminians answered these questions in the negative. According to the Arminians there is no certainty of election. They teach that "In this life there is no fruit, consciousness, or certainty of the ... election to glory..." ("Rejection of Errors" No 7 - Error, Book of Praise, p. 543). One can talk of election, said the Arminians, but one cannot be certain that one is elect.

Our fathers searched the Scriptures on this point and learned that the believer can be certain of his election. For example, in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul wrote, "just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will" (Ephesians 1:4,5). Who is Paul referring to when he speaks of 'us' and 'we'? The apostle was not thinking of some indefinite crowd, but rather of himself and his addressees in Ephesus. Paul is certain, convinced: "God chose us". Paul speaks in a similar manner in Romans 8:15-17 where we read, "For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, "Abba, Father." The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs - heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ" Paul himself and the Roman saints with him called God 'Father', and that is a work of God the Holy Spirit. More, that Spirit works in Paul's heart, and in the hearts of the Romans, the conviction that they are children of God, heirs to life eternal. Paul is certain, very certain that he and the Roman saints are children of God, heirs of God. That is: he was certain God had chosen himself and these saints to life eternal. If, then, Paul could be certain of his election, surely we can be also.

But how can I be certain of my election? Some say that in the course of one's life one gets a dream to confirm one's election, or a message in the heart, or a certain Bible text may speak powerfully - and that's how you know whether or not you are elect. We should be aware, though, that this certainty is something which is rooted in experience. However, the problem with experience is that I am a sinful person and all my experiences have to come through my sinful being. I cannot, then, build anything on such experiences. How then do I know if I belong to God?

In Matthew 12 we read how the Pharisees accused Jesus of being in league with the demons. In reaction to this Jesus warns them of the consequences of sinning against the Holy Spirit, and then adds the words of verses 33-35, "Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or else make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for a tree is known by its fruit. Brood of vipers! How can you, being evil, speak good things? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. A

good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things." A tree is known by its fruits. The Pharisees claimed to be God's people, yet accuse God's Son of being in league with Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons (verse 24). What of themselves then, for the mouth voices what is in the heart. If the heart is pure, then pure talk will proceed from the mouth. Conversely, if the heart is foul, the mouth will utter foul talk. The regenerate heart does not produce the works of an unregenerate heart. A person who is born again does not do the works of the devil. How can I know, then, if I am elect? In order to answer this question I need to look at what sort of fruits do I produce.

The apostle Peter takes this notion one step further. In 2 Peter 1:4, he writes "by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust." Here Peter describes our election as our having been made God's partakers by means of the promises He gave us. However, the apostle does not leave it at that, but continues in the verses 5-8, "But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ". Here Peter encourages his readers to be diligent in pursuing these things because they will produce fruits of faith, which in themselves provide one with the evidence that one belongs to the Lord. If one does these things one will be fruitful, and consequently be sure of one's election. "Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your call and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble" (verse 10). To make one's election sure means to pin it down, to tie it fast, to be extra sure. How can one do this? By what one observes in one's life: growth in faith in the Lord.

We find this material echoed by Article 12: "The elect in due time ... are made certain of this their eternal and unchangeable election to salvation. They attain this assurance ... by observing in themselves, with spiritual joy and holy delight, the unfailing fruits of election pointed out in the Word of God - such as a true faith in Christ, a childlike fear of God, a godly sorrow for their sins, and a hungering and thirsting after righteousness". "

How does a young man know whether he loves a particular girl? Surely, what he does with a letter he receives from her says something. Does he throw it in the bin without reading it? To do that is to say a lot about his feelings for her! Similarly, to tear it open and read it immediately also is very telling. For what's in the heart cannot be hidden.

Likewise, if I love the Lord I busy myself with His Word. I love what He did for me in Jesus Christ, whom He sent to earth to die in payment for my sins. What, then, do I see in myself? Do I delight in sin? Or do I resist it? Do my sins bother me, or could I not care less that I've offended God? It's the fruits I bear that demonstrate whether there is faith in my heart or not. And God does not work faith in the hearts of the reprobate.

How can I know whether I am elect? I know my life, and therefore I must first ask myself, "What sort of a tree am I? What motivates me? What makes me 'tick'? Do I love God? If I sin, does it bother me? Am I busy with God's Word?" My election is evident to me by the fruits of election.

This is not to say that everybody can be equally sure, in equal measure. In the first sentence of Article 12 we read that the elect are made certain of their election "in various stages and in different measure". The one person is not the other. Each person differs in character, ability, and also in growth in the Lord. The one person may be mature at the age of eighteen while another person may still have much growing up to do at the age of thirty. The same applies when it comes to faith; the one person may be more mature in faith at the age of thirty than someone at the age of fifty. Different people, all with different circumstances, are made certain of their election in different degrees. Yet the principle remains the same. The tree is known by its fruit. I must look at the fruits that I produce. Do I bear godly fruit, or not? Then No, I am not to compare myself to others and then, on the basis of my observing that others bear more or better fruit than I, conclude that I am not elect. I must look at myself, focussing on what God has done in my heart. So I must examine myself to see what fruits I produce. Do I find faith or unbelief? Do the things I say and do reflect a regenerate or an unregenerate heart? Do I bear the kind of fruit I should bear; 'do I bear apples or oranges'?

However, we must remain aware of two things. Firstly, God has not made His people perfect in this life and hence we must not expect ourselves to bear perfect fruit. If we looked for perfect fruit, we could never be sure of our election. The fruit we bear will always reflect our sinfulness, because we remain sinful. The fruit we produce may be stunted and damaged, but one can still tell whether it's an apple or an orange, a fruit from heaven or from hell. Despite remaining sin, the principle holds: you know a tree by its fruit. Secondly, Article 12 confesses that the elect "are made certain". Man is passive and God active. The fruit we bear is God's work, and He also works the certainty. God causes us in differing measures to draw our conclusions from the fruits of election which He works in our lives.

ARTICLE 13

THE VALUE OF THIS ASSURANCE

Whereas Article 12 explained how I can know whether I am elect, Article 13 describes why I should know. What am I going to do with the knowledge and assurance that I am elect? The Arminians reasoned that an assurance of election removes from the believer's life the catalyst for careful living and so encourages the attitude, 'If I am elect anyway, I may as well live it up!' On the basis of what they read in Scripture, though, our fathers rejected such reasoning. Jesus said that a tree is known by its fruits. If the heart of a person is changed because God has chosen that person, then that person will no longer produce evil fruit but good fruit. Therefore our fathers wrote in Article 13, "The awareness and assurance of this election provide the children of God with greater reason for daily humbling themselves before God, for adoring the depth of His mercies, for cleansing themselves, and for fervently loving Him in turn who first so greatly loved them."

An awareness and an assurance of election leave no room for arrogance, pride, or for looking down on others, but instead give the believer every reason to humble himself before God. It makes the believer ask of himself in a spirit of humility, "why should God do this for me?" That God has done this remarkable deed of electing me incites me to adore God, to praise Him for saving me. It incites me too to cleanse myself from evil and all works of the flesh. I respond, not by 'living it up' but by loving the Lord. In 1 John 4:19 Scripture says that loving God is a fruit of Him first loving us. "We love Him because He first loved us". Election is

that God loved me first, and I respond to this by loving God in return. The deeds of the believer always follow those of the Father, as we also read in 1 John 3:3, "And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure."

No, the value of this assurance lies not in giving me license to become sloppy. If I am sure of my election, I value and treasure it, and so I the more earnestly and eagerly strive to produce fruits of thankfulness for God and to live diligently for my Lord and Saviour. This is the same material which we read in LD 24, Q&A 64. There we read, "Does this teaching (righteousness by God's grace and not my good works) not make people careless and wicked? No. It is impossible that those grafted into Christ by true faith should not bring forth fruits of thankfulness". The assurance of election and bringing forth fruits of faith are inevitable consequences in the lives of those God has elected. Therefore we read in Article 13, "It is therefore not true at all that this doctrine of election and the reflection on it makes (the elect) lax in observing the commands of God or falsely secure".

FALSE SECURITY

In Christ's Church there are also hypocrites (see Article 29, Belgic Confession). These persons can be very sure of their election, and even build much on the fact that they've been to church for so many years, served as officebearer for so many years, been complimented by so many people over the years, etc. Yet these of themselves are not the evidences of election. The fruits of election as mentioned in Article 12 are decisive. Where there is not "a true faith in Christ, a childlike fear of God, a godly sorrow for ... sins, and a hungering and thirsting after righteousness" one has no right to assume election - no matter how long and with what distinction he's served in the church.

Scripture too warns those who are at ease, content, falsely secure, in a passage as Luke 6:24-26. There the Saviour speaks to the people of Israel, covenant people, possibly leaders highly esteemed and spoken well of among the people. Yet Jesus speaks His woe concerning them, saying, "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full, for you shall hunger. Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep. Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for so did their fathers to the false prophets".

The point is this: each of us are to look at the fruits we bear. It is for me to look at myself! My assurance of my election lies not in what others say to or concerning me, for that does not prove my election. What fruits do I bear? Am I content with thinking 'I'm all right', or am I driven by the opposing attitude of gratitude and humility, earnestly loving God, fearing Him, and being sorrowful on account of my sins? Do I marvel at what God has done for me, and praise Him for it?

ARTICLE 14

HOW ELECTION IS TO BE TAUGHT

At times we are tempted to gloss over the doctrine of election or to relegate it to the 'too hard basket'. One can start to feel uncomfortable speaking about the assurance of election, false security, fruits of election, for it leads to the questions, "where do I fit in? Am I where I'd like

to be?" We are easily tempted to turn the page and speak of something more 'comfortable', such as God's love. Hence in compiling Article 14, our fathers first busied themselves with the question whether we should speak of election. They were adamant that the answer is Yes, on the grounds that God Himself speaks of it in His Word. Therefore they wrote, "This doctrine of divine election, according to the most wise counsel of God, was preached by the prophets, by Christ Himself, and by the apostles, under the Old as well as the New Testament, and was then committed to writing in the Holy Scriptures."

If God has revealed the doctrine of election, it is not for me to say it's too hard and so ignore it, or to say too that it's not important. Having established that it is only by a true faith that one can be saved, LD 7, Q&A 22 continues, "What, then, must a Christian believe? All that is promised us in the gospel, which the articles of our catholic and undoubted Christian faith teach us in a summary". Therefore my attitude should be, if God has revealed the doctrine of election in His gospel, and since a Christian must believe all that God has revealed, then I must busy myself with all of it. What God has promised in the gospel has been summarised in the Articles of the Christian faith. However, even though the Apostles' Creed does not include an article concerning the doctrine of angels, the covenant, or election, that does not excuse me from believing these doctrines and studying them, no matter how difficult they might be. These are all parts of God's revelation, and therefore none may be passed by. "Therefore, also today this doctrine should be taught in the Church of God, for which it was particularly intended, in its proper time and place" It is the duty of all ministers of the Word to preach election and it is the duty of all children of the Lord to believe what God has revealed concerning it and to be busy with it.

How, then, is the doctrine of election to be taught? How, for that matter, am I to be busy with this doctrine? "Therefore ... this doctrine should be taught ... with a spirit of discretion, in a reverent and holy manner, without inquisitively prying into the ways of the Most High, to the glory of God's most holy Name, and for the living comfort of His people." So much of the doctrine of election remains beyond human comprehension. Doesn't God say in His Word that His ways are higher than our ways, (Isaiah 55:9) and that the secret things belong to Him? (Deuteronomy 29:29). It is not for me to confine God and His revelation to a neat and tidy package of knowledge which I can totally comprehend. Therefore our article also warns against "inquisitively prying into the ways of the Most High". There are some things I must simply believe with a heart of faith even though I do not understand them. So a spirit of humility is needful as we busy our minds and discussions with the subject of God's election. At the same time, discretion is needed lest weaker brothers and sisters are made to doubt their election. Election may not be taught in haughtiness or with callousness, judging others to be reprobate in the absence of evidence of fruits of faith in their lives. It should also be taught "in its proper time and place", i.e., bearing in mind the maturity of the faith of the person being taught.

Our first motive for teaching and studying the doctrine of election must be "the glory of God's most holy name." Election prompts us to praise God, that He would actually choose sinners to be His children, yes, even me. Election points up the infinite grace of God on the totally unworthy. Election therefore focuses our attention on what God does. Hence, our second motive for teaching and studying the doctrine of election is "for the living comfort of His people". Where God works, there is comfort for His children.

ARTICLE 15

REPROBATION DESCRIBED

The very word "reprobation" in the heading of our article prompts us to think we are to begin a new topic. However, this is not the case. Our article, in its opening sentence, draws our attention to the greater marvel of God's grace in electing some by recalling the fact that some not having been elected. "Holy Scripture illustrates and recommends to us this eternal and undeserved grace of our election, especially when it further declares that not all men are elect but that some have not been elected..." That God would choose some, that God has chosen me, is made the more exciting by the realisation that some others have been left with Satan: reprobation. I am no better than anyone else; yet God chose me. What a miracle and a marvel this is!! Reprobation accentuates how marvellous it is that I am allowed to be elect.

The subject of reprobation has led many over the years to think of God as being callous, hard, and cruel. They ask, how could God possibly take some poor, innocent people, and drop them into hell? However, to speak this way is wrong and is nothing but a caricature of what the Bible says concerning election and reprobation. For the assumption in this caricature is that all people are neutral, innocent before God. IF all men were indeed innocent before God, then Yes, the doctrine of reprobation does not at all flatter God's reputation. But the Bible does not present people as standing before God on neutral ground, and then God in His good pleasure sending some to Heaven and some to hell. Instead, the Bible says that we all fell into sin. The Bible speaks about all being damned. All are under the wrath of God, all are dead in sin and consequently all are deserving of God's justice. We, the whole human race, put ourselves into Satan's camp.

Election is that God chooses some who have purposefully deserted God in Paradise in favour of Satan, and returns them to His side. The reprobate on the other hand are not sent to hell but are left in the misery into which they plunged themselves. "Out of His most free, most just, blameless, and unchangeable good pleasure, God has decreed to leave them in the common misery into which they have by their own fault plunged themselves and not to give them saving faith and the grace of conversion." God, in His good pleasure, passed them by. That is reprobation. In Revelation 13:8 we read, "All who dwell on the earth will worship him (i.e. the beast, vs 1), whose names have not been written in the Book of Life of the Lamb ...". Those who will worship the beast (the beast being symbolic of the devil) are those who have been passed by, their names have not been written in the Book of the Lord, in the Book of Life. It is not that their names have been written in some Book of the Damned; they rather have been passed by, left where they placed themselves.

Both the fact that some should be passed, as well as which persons would be passed by, was also part of God's eternal decree. In 1 Peter 2:8 we read, "They stumble, being disobedient to the word, to which they also were appointed". Those who are passed by may hear the Gospel. Indeed, those concerning whom Peter writes have heard it. But, Peter adds, they 'trip over Christ'. They do not believe, they are offended by the gospel. The fact that they reject the gospel does not catch God by surprise (or disappointment), for He had determined from way long ago that they would not believe. (See also the material of Article 6, about the sovereignty of God.) God passed them by in His eternal decree to choose to salvation. Similarly, Romans 9:22,23 speaks of two kinds of vessels when referring to the elect versus

the reprobate. The context of the chapter demands that we understand the "vessels of wrath prepared for destruction" to refer to the persons God has passed by, the reprobate, and the "vessels of mercy which He had prepared beforehand for glory" to refer to the elect. God has determined beforehand who would be saved, the elect, and who would not be saved, the reprobate.

The Arminians said that God has chosen to salvation those whom God saw ahead of time that they would believe (so-called "foreseen faith"), and He passed by those whom He saw ahead of time would not believe ("foreseen unbelief"). On the basis of Scripture our fathers refuted this as incorrect. God has not chosen a person because He saw ahead of time that he would believe. Nor has God passed a person by, left him in hell, because He saw ahead of time foreseen unbelief. Were election or reprobation dependent on whether or not a person would believe or not believe, God's decree concerning election and reprobation would have depended on man. That is: God would be dependent on man's decision. No, God chose to salvation, and equally passed a person by (=left him where he put himself), because of His good pleasure. That some are saved can be attributed to God alone; it was God's good pleasure. That God passes others by is equally God's good pleasure. All went to Satan's side. That a person ends up in heaven is God's grace. That the reprobate end up in hell is God's just sentence on their misdeeds - both their original fall into sin and their daily sins. These (the reprobate) having been left in their own ways and under His just judgment, God has decreed finally to condemn and punish eternally not only on account of their unbelief but also on account of all their other sins, for the declaration of His justice. This is the decree of reprobation, which by no means makes God the author of sin (the very thought is blasphemous!), but rather declares Him an awesome, blameless, and just judge and avenger thereof". The reprobate (as did all mankind) fell and landed themselves in unbelief ; therefore God says they get what they deserve.

Those who see in themselves the fruits of election may not look down on a person who does not believe. I am no better than Judas Iscariot. That I am allowed to go to heaven is strictly God's doing. The Scripture speaks of election and of reprobation not with the intent of making us feel good about ourselves, but so that we are prompted to praise God the more. For what a God this is, that He chose some to be saved from their self chosen misery! More: what a God I have, that He chose me instead of the neighbour! The realisation of what God has done for me can lead only to deep gratitude and eternal praise of such a God.

Chapter 1 - Divine Election and Reprobation : Articles 16-18

ARTICLE 16

RESPONSES TO THE DOCTRINE OF REPROBATION

In the Articles 7-11, the fathers at the Synod of Dort made confession of God's one, unchangeable decree of election which is based on God's good pleasure. Articles 12 and 13 continued with an important confession concerning believers' assurance of election, stating that "the elect in due time ... are made certain of ... their eternal and unchangeable election to salvation". Believers attain this assurance by observing within themselves "with spiritual joy and holy delight ... true faith in Christ, a childlike fear of God, a godly sorrow for their sins, and a hungering and thirsting after righteousness." This assurance is most valuable to believers for it causes them to humble themselves before God, to adore God's mercy, to strive against sin and to love God fervently in response to the love He first showed them. In Article 15 the marvel of our election is pointed up by noting the fact that God has passed others by (reprobation), leaving them in their misery and subjected to His just judgment.

This mention of reprobation can leave one uncomfortable. Specifically, to mention God's eternal decree to pass some by can lead one to wonder whether perchance God has passed me by. That thought can lead to much unrest. For that reason, the fathers devoted an article to pastoral elements brought up by the mention of the doctrine of reprobation. In a pastoral manner they sought to reach out to people, offering guidance in how they should digest their doubts and questions concerning their growth in faith and their election.

Article 16 speaks of three different responses to the doctrine of reprobation:

1. those who do not clearly discern within themselves the fruits of election;
2. those who cannot reach the degree of godliness and faith they desire and strive for;
3. those who disregard God and live in sin.

RESPONSE 1

"Some do not yet clearly discern in themselves a living faith in Christ, an assured confidence of heart, peace of conscience, a zeal for childlike obedience, and a glorying in God through Christ; nevertheless, they use the means through which God has promised to work in us."

These people want to serve the Lord, and do serve the Lord, but when it comes to the assurance of their election, they are uncertain. When they look at themselves, they do not discern within themselves an adequately living faith. They wish for more zeal, and consider that they do not sufficiently praise God in their lives. Hence doubt enters their minds. Am I elect?? Or do I belong to the reprobate after all?? They live in uncertainty and unrest, while they look for evidence that they are indeed elect. We can relate to such self-examination. We too ask ourselves, "Do I have enough zeal for God?" and "Am I at peace with God?"

With great sensitivity, the fathers at the Synod of Dort reached out to those believers who struggled with doubts about their election. Their counsel to those who used the means of grace and yet did not see to their satisfaction the fruits of election was that they ought not to 'throw in the towel' and conclude "I must be reprobate after all". Instead, they advised that "they ought not to be alarmed when reprobation is mentioned, nor to count themselves among the reprobate. Rather, they must diligently continue in the use of (the) means, fervently desire a time of more abundant grace, and expect it reverently and humbly".

The point here is that the Holy Spirit is pleased to use a particular means to work and strengthen faith. Faith comes through the preaching of the gospel, says the apostle Paul in Romans 10:14-17 (see LD 25, Q&A 65). Accordingly, in Chapter V, Article 14, the fathers confessed what God revealed concerning the use of 'the means' as follows: "as it has pleased God to begin this work of grace in us by the preaching of the gospel, so He maintains, continues, and perfects it by the hearing and reading of His Word, by meditation upon it, by its exhortations, threatenings and promises, and by the use of the sacraments". Those who use these 'means of grace' will grow.

It is important to bear in mind that faith, like plants, needs time in order to grow to maturity and produce fruits. No one who comes to faith bears mature fruit instantly. Further, just as the one plant variety produces fruit sooner than another, so too different persons reach maturity in the Lord at different times in their lives. Growth in faith is a process. Faith, like a plant, needs cultivation and nurturing. Hence our fathers' advice to those who doubted their election was: continue working with the means God has given. That is: stay busy with His Word, study it and meditate upon it. God, in His time, will give the fruit.

God in His Word assures us of the fruits He works at His time by the means of His Word. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul addressed his readers as saints (1:1), i.e. believers, God's chosen ones whom God has rescued from Satan's side in order to return them to Himself. Concerning these saints, Paul says in verses 3 and 6, "I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, ... being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ." Are we, on reading this, to think that the Philippians are all perfect believers who are ever confident of themselves as Christians; believers who 'have arrived'? No! They, like us today, were sinners and needed God's grace as much as we do. So, in order to encourage them, Paul tells them that whatever works God begins He also completes. God will not just drop anyone halfway. God brought the Gospel to the Philippians and He also worked within them a keen desire to hear it, yes, worked faith. God will not discontinue the work He began, but He will build on it and in His time will cause fruits of faith to grow. What God has begun He will complete. See also Psalm 138:8.

The Lord offers His children the same assurance in Isaiah 14:32. The Lord's answer to the messengers of Philistia will be, "the Lord has founded Zion, and the poor of His people shall take refuge in it." Here 'poor' is a reference to those who are poor in spirit, the weak, the little; they shall find a refuge in Zion. One does not need to be a pillar or a giant in the Lord before one can say he belongs to the Lord.

RESPONSE 2

"Others seriously desire to be converted to God, to please Him only, and to be delivered from the body of death. Yet they cannot reach that point on the way of godliness and faith which they would like".

We all, on a daily basis, battle with sin, be it a bad temper, a loose tongue, an urge to steal, sins of a sexual nature, etc. To our dismay, we find ourselves falling into the same sins again and again. The sins which continue to cling to us bother us so much, and we don't like the person we have to call 'me'. We see so much sin in ourselves, see so little evidence of triumph over sin, and we wonder: "is election really for me?" And doubt creeps in....

It is as if Paul has taken the words out of our mouths when he, in Romans 7, describes himself and his battle against sin. Paul is an apostle of the Lord, has received from the Lord a new heart, has been born again, been changed by the Holy Spirit. Yet he has this to say of himself to fellow saints (persons also changed by the Holy Spirit), "I am carnal, sold under sin" (verse 14). 'Carnal' means to be flesh, sinfully human, incapable of withstanding the temptation of sin. "For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will (desire) to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do" (verse 15). It bothers the apostle to find himself so enslaved to sin. "For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice" (verses 18, 19). One senses his frustration: "I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members." (verse 23). Paul recognises that there is a war raging within him; with his mind he serves the law of God but in his flesh he serves the law of sin. He cries out his despair, "O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (verse 24). There is but one answer: there is redemption in the blood of Jesus Christ! This Saviour forgives sins today through His blood and tomorrow renews sinners totally through His Holy Spirit. Paul's reference in verse 24 to "the body of death" has found its way into Article 16. Believers, faced as they are with the continuing (and evidently futile) struggle against sin, cry out with Paul "to be delivered from the body of death". These believers seek escape; they desire to be delivered. They don't want to fall into sin again and again.

Paul, a believer, elect, chosen by God, rescued from Satan's side and brought to God's side, has described himself as a sinful man who wills to do what is right but cannot do it. We are no different than Paul. Do our sins then mean that we are reprobate? No! "Those converted to God (cannot) keep these commandments perfectly (for) in this life even the holiest have only a small beginning of this obedience" (see LD 44, Q&A 114 and the accompanying proof texts). I may try ever so hard to resist sin. Nevertheless I fail. Should this hurt and bother me? Yes, indeed it should. Should I be surprised that I fail? No. The Lord has changed His people and renewed their hearts, but He has not as yet perfected them. In the meantime I must battle on. I need not be surprised at sin, and the fact that I keep falling into sin must not lead me to conclude that I do not belong to the Lord.

The "Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper" (Book of Praise, p. 595) also reckons with this very real (and repeatedly unsuccessful) battle against sin in the life of the believer. Before attending the supper of our Lord, we are called to examine ourselves, taking into consideration whether we are humble before God on account of our sinfulness, whether we believe in the forgiveness of sins which Christ has obtained for us and whether we strive to live lives of thankful service to God. The Form then continues, "God will certainly receive in grace all who are thus minded and count them worthy to partake of the supper of our Lord

Jesus Christ. But those who do not feel this testimony in their hearts, eat and drink judgment upon themselves. Therefore, according to the command of Christ and of the apostle Paul, we admonish all those who know themselves to be guilty of the following offensive sins to abstain from the table of the Lord, and we declare to them that they have no part in the kingdom of Christ ..." and there follows a list of sins based on God's ten commandments.

When we read this list, honesty compels us to admit that we are guilty of the very sins mentioned in the Form. That conclusion in turn prompts us to consider ourselves addressed by those words of the Form: "we admonish all those who know themselves to be guilty of the following offensive sins to abstain from the table of the Lord, and we declare to them that they have no part in the kingdom of Christ" Especially the last words can make us so uncomfortable: 'I must be reprobate after all....' Here is the same doubt as the fathers mentioned in Article 16.

The same "Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper", though, would not leave us discouraged and doubting. On p. 596 the Form says this, "all this ... is not meant to discourage broken and contrite hearts, as if only those who are without sin may come to the table of the Lord. For we do not come to this supper to declare that we are perfect and righteous in ourselves. On the contrary, we seek our life outside of ourselves in Jesus Christ and, in doing so, we acknowledge that we are dead in ourselves. We also are aware of our many sins and shortcomings. We do not have perfect faith and we do not serve God with such zeal as He requires. Daily we have to contend with the weakness of our faith and with the evil desires of our flesh." How our sins and lack of faith bother us! How we wish we could get beyond the fight! However, that is a grace God does not grant in this life. Each day of our lives here on earth sees us contend with the weaknesses of our flesh. "Yet, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, we are heartily sorry for these shortcomings and desire to fight against our unbelief and to live according to all the commandments of God." Even in our sorrow for sin we are confronted with our sinfulness, for we cannot bring up a perfect sorrow. Even in this respect we have but "only a small beginning" of the righteousness God desires of us. Nevertheless, we do have sorrow for sin. We are then comforted by the following words of this Form: "Therefore we may be fully assured that no sin or weakness which still remains in us against our will can prevent us from being received by God in grace and from being made worthy partakers of this heavenly food and drink."

Am I reprobate? I know that my sins are many and that I fall into the same sins repeatedly. However, by the grace of God I am sorry for my sins (however imperfect my sorrow is!). How can I know for certain if I am elect or reprobate? "The elect ... attain this assurance ... by observing in themselves, with spiritual joy and holy delight, the unfailing fruits of election pointed out in the Word of God - such as a true faith in Christ, a childlike fear of God, a godly sorrow for their sins, and a hungering and thirsting after righteousness" (Article 12). It is true that sin remains a reality in my life, but God works within me a sorrow for sin. If God has begun a work in me, He will not give up on it. God is ever faithful; He persists. Hence our fathers offer this encouragement to those who become discouraged by the fact that they cannot reach the degree of godliness and faith they desire and strive for: "they should be even less terrified (than those of Response 1) since a merciful God has promised not to quench the smoking flax nor to break the bruised reed" (see Isaiah 42:3).

RESPONSE 3

"Still others disregard God and the Saviour Jesus Christ and have completely given themselves over to the cares of the world and the lusts of the flesh."

Here 'others' is a reference not to those outside the Church but to people within the Church. In Article 29 of the Belgic Confession we confess that within the Church there are also hypocrites (see the parable of Jesus in Matthew 13 about the Sower and the Seeds). These people too hear of election and reprobation. Mention of reprobation can engender a guilty conscience within them, which is no bad thing, for this is a warning to repent from sin while God still gives the opportunity. Such repentance is distinctly necessary, since it remains a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Hebrews 10:31). As the fathers also said: "For them this doctrine of reprobation is rightly fearsome as long as they are not seriously converted".

THE DOCTRINE OF REPROBATION: A CHALLENGE TO ALL BELIEVERS

The doctrine of reprobation challenges us all. I am to see to it that I make diligent use of the means God has given to me i.e. His holy Word, in order to encourage growth in Him. It also challenges me to derive comfort and reassurance from the knowledge that though my sins and imperfections remain many, this does not mean that I have to despair. God Himself works within me a sorrow for sin. The very presence of this sorrow is a fruit of His having elected me.

ARTICLE 17

CHILDREN OF BELIEVERS WHO DIE IN INFANCY

Article 16 dealt with the pastoral problem of how mature believers respond to the doctrine of reprobation. Our fathers also saw need to devote attention to the matter of whether children of believers are saved if they die in infancy. That there was a need to address the issue is demonstrated by the relatively high infant mortality rates prevalent at the time of the Synod of Dort in 1618-1619. Though the infant mortality rate in our society today is very low, we today too want to know where our children go if they die in infancy.

The Arminians had said that God elects to salvation on the basis of foreseen faith, and destines others to hell on the basis of foreseen unbelief. Infants, however, neither believe nor dis-believe; they are too young to choose the one or the other. God, then, said the Arminians, merciful as He is, grants salvation to all children who die. Infants, then, are saved 'automatically', but the destiny of adults is determined by their own choice of whether to believe or not believe.

The fathers turned to Scripture in order to find what out the Lord says concerning the position of children. Scripture speaks of the whole human race having fallen into sin when Adam sinned, and so the whole human race joined Satan's side. Paul in Romans 5:12 makes reference to the fall into sin of Genesis 3 when he states, "therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned". This text insists that when Adam sinned, I sinned; we all sinned. If I fell with Adam -as this text insists- then my children also fell with Adam. In a way we cannot understand, the

entire human race sinned with Adam. So the entire human race is guilty before God. This is true of the adults of any given generation, and is equally true of the children of any given generation. So the anger of the Lord rests upon all men, irrespective of age or talent or tribe or location on the globe.

THE LORD DISCRIMINATES BETWEEN CHILDREN

All children, then, are by nature children of wrath. Can we believe that any are saved, and if so, on what basis? The fathers at the Synod of Dort understood from Scripture that the Lord discriminates between children, treating the one child differently than another. The Lord makes a distinction between the children of believers on the one hand and the children of unbelievers on the other. The children of believers belong to God; the children of unbelievers do not. Our fathers concluded this on the basis of God's Word as we read it in Genesis 17:7. There the Lord says to Abraham, "And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you." Whatever God said in this passage concerning Abraham, God said equally concerning Abraham's offspring. God promised to be Abraham's God; He equally promised to be God to Abraham's children. That is the thrust of the words: "and your descendants after you". So God viewed Abraham's children differently than He viewed the children of Abraham's neighbour. That is to say: God discriminated between these children. Those of the one family He claimed for Himself; those of the other family He did not.

In Acts 2 we read Peter's Pentecost sermon, preached to an audience of Jews who had come together in Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Weeks. In verse 22 we read that he addressed a specific group of people, namely, "Men of Israel", i.e., God's covenant people. To them specifically Peter says in verse 39, "For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call." The promise was not to the children of the Greeks or the children of the Egyptians, but to the children of the Israelites: "and to your children."

Paul says to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 7:14, "For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy." The fact that they are children of a believing parent makes these children special to God; they are holy, says the apostle.

On the other hand, the children of unbelievers are "unclean" (I Corinthians 7:14). That these children do not belong to God is pointed up in Paul's word to the saints at Ephesus. Paul reminds these saints of who they once were before the Holy Spirit had renewed them. "Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh - who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands - ...were without Christ, aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (Ephesians 2:11f). In their childhood, then, these Ephesian saints were not God's people, were "strangers from the covenants of promise". But later in life the Lord gave them faith and from then on they (and therefore their children too, see Genesis 17:7; see also Acts 11:14, 16:15, 29ff, 18:8) were "no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (verse 19).

God, then, discriminates between the children of believers and the children of unbelievers. God has established His covenant with believers and the children He gives to believers; these

children He claims for Himself. The children of my unbelieving neighbour do not belong to God and so his children are unclean.

BELIEVERS OUGHT NOT TO DOUBT THE ELECTION OF CHILDREN WHO DIE IN INFANCY

On the basis of the above texts from Scripture, our fathers concluded that God claims for Himself the children of believing parents. Therefore they wrote in Article 17 that the Word of God "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 if a child of believing parents dies, the parents, on the authority of what the Bible says, may believe that God's promises are fulfilled for their child. "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."

Believing parents are excited by the rich promises God bestows on their children, as signified and sealed in the sacrament of Baptism. Since God has revealed Himself in His Word to be ever faithful, is it possible that He would cause the same parents to be left with comfortless doubts as to the eternal destiny of a child of theirs which dies in infancy?! If God is faithful this cannot be so. By baptism God seals His promises to be Father to the child "and promises to provide (the child) with all good and avert all evil or turn it to (the child's) benefit." The child is also promised forgiveness of sins through the blood of God the Son and regeneration by God the Holy Spirit. Shall God then turn a sickness or an accident into the catalyst that places the child eternally in hell?! Is this the God we have?? No, God's promises to a child of believing parents are not empty promises. God is always true to His Word.

It is faith in this very promise of God which comforted David at the death of the child that was born to him and Bathsheba after their sin of adultery. On hearing that the baby died, "David arose from the ground, washed and anointed himself, and changed his clothes; and he went into the house of the LORD and worshipped. Then he went into his own house; and when he requested, they set food before him, and he ate. Then his servants said to him, "What is this that you have done? You fasted and wept for the child while he was alive, but when the child died, you arose and ate food." And he said, "While the child was alive, I fasted and wept; for I said, "Who can tell whether the LORD will be gracious to me, that the child may live? But now he is dead; why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me" (2 Samuel 12:20-23). When a child of ours dies, we give ourselves to grief. David, however, responded to death by breaking his fast. In so doing, David expressed his conviction that God had taken his child to Himself. In other words, David did not grieve as one who had no hope. Further, that David was sure that God had taken the child to Himself is evident from David's words: "I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me" (verse 23). Where shall David go? David is a believer and he knows that at his death he shall go to be with the Lord; to where the Lord has taken his child ahead of him.

The children of believers belong to God. That is as true before birth as after their birth. Also through the womb the Lord gathers His Church. The child which dies of cot death is the Lord's, and so is the child which is still-born or the child which dies after three months of development in the womb. This knowledge contains a definite and very rich comfort for God-fearing parents.

ARTICLE 18

NO PROTEST BUT ADORATION

In reaction to those who mock what is so clearly taught by Scripture, our fathers wrote this last article. It is the Lord Himself who teaches election and reprobation in His Word and therefore we confess in Article 18, "To those who argue against this grace of undeserved election and the severity of righteous reprobation, we reply with this word of the apostle: But who are you, a man, to answer back to God?" In other words, "who do you think you are?" The only truthful answer with which I can reply is, "I am but a man, and a sinful one at that".

Here I confess that the first fitting response on my part to what the Lord has revealed concerning election and reprobation is deep humility before God. Job, having contested before God the loss of his children, his possessions, his health, finds himself challenged by God. Said God to Job, "Shall the one who contends with the Almighty correct Him? He who rebukes God, let him answer it." Job's response was this: "Behold, I am vile; what shall I answer You? I lay my hand over my mouth. Once I have spoken, but I will not answer; yes, twice, but I will proceed no further" (Job 40:2-5). This is equally the attitude I am to assume before God in view of the doctrine of election and reprobation: humility. If it has pleased the Lord to save some and leave others, am I allowed to complain? No. As Paul said: "But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God?" (see Romans 9:20ff). Humble I must be, and from that must flow praise and adoration for the Lord. "Lord, that You should choose people for Yourself, even me, is more than I fathom. What a God You are!" To say it with the words of the apostle as we read it in Romans 11:33-36, "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and how inscrutable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been His counsel? Or who has given a gift to Him that He might be repaid? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be glory for ever. Amen".

Chapter 2 - The Death of Christ and Redemption : Articles 1-5

THE DEATH OF CHRIST AND THE REDEMPTION OF MAN BY IT

INTRODUCTION

Chapter 2 of the Canons of Dort focuses on a new facet of doctrine: the death of Christ and our resulting redemption. In order to appreciate why the fathers at the Synod of Dort saw a need to include a chapter on the death of Christ, we need to go back to the teachings of the Arminians. The Arminians do believe that Christ died for sin, but by their teaching they hollowed out what Christ's death really accomplished. By analysing the Arminian teaching concerning the death of Christ, it becomes evident that Christ's death does not have the same value for the Arminian person as it does for the Reformed person.

ARMINIAN TEACHING CONCERNING THE DEATH OF CHRIST

According to the Arminians, the Lord God after the fall into sin established a set of conditions that man had to fulfil in order to be saved. These conditions, they said, were obedience to the laws of the Old Testament. Only through obedience to God's laws could one receive eternal life. But, said the Arminians, the Lord realised that this condition was too demanding of man; God realised He had set a threshold out of man's reach. So God found Himself 'in a corner', so to speak, for God demands justice. Man fell into sin, and God would not let man go unpunished. Since God insists on justice, justice had to be obtained. Yet man could not obtain it. So, not only was man stuck, but God also.

So God sent His only Son to earth for sin. That is: Christ came not to pay for sins, but came rather to satisfy the justice of God so that God could start again with man. If Christ could satisfy the demands of the old conditions (obey the law), then God's justice would be satisfied, and God could set new conditions for man to meet in order to be saved. Christ was successful in satisfying the justice of God, Christ's death made it possible for God to do away with the Old Testament set of conditions, and so God was free to start afresh with a set of conditions. The new condition God chose was faith. So we today need faith in order to be saved. Faith is not an unmanageable threshold for us, for fallen man is not dead in sin, but sick (see Chapter 3). Sick people are still able to believe.

According to the Arminians, then, Christ's death was not a payment for our sins. Christ's death only made it possible for God to lower considerably the threshold of His demands on man. Now that God has set a manageable threshold (faith), it is for us to do the rest if we wish salvation: we need to believe. It will be evident that with this structure, the God of the New Testament shows considerably more mercy than the God of the Old Testament.

The fathers summarised this teaching of the Arminians in Chapter 2 under the heading 'Rejection of Errors,' as can be found in the Book of Praise, p. 548. There we read that

according to the Arminians the purpose of Christ's death was "that He should acquire for the Father the mere right to establish once more with man such a covenant as He might please ..." (Rejection of Errors, no. 2). In other words, Christ died so that the Father may have opportunity to set up a new set of conditions for man. Again, Christ "acquired for the Father only the authority or the perfect will to deal again with man, and to prescribe new conditions as He might desire" (Rejection of Errors, no. 3). Here again one finds the same thought that Christ satisfied the old set of conditions so that God, no longer bound by them, could set up a new set of conditions. This new set of conditions "consists in the fact that God has revoked the demand of perfect obedience of the law and regards faith as such and the obedience of faith, though imperfect, as the perfect obedience of the law" (Rejection of Errors, no. 4).

During the early decades of the 1600s, the Arminian teaching concerning the death of Christ was being taught from the pulpit of the churches. We can appreciate that this teaching caused much unrest among the faithful. The fathers at the Synod of Dort, therefore, concerned as they were about what the people were hearing in the pew about the purpose of Christ's death, saw a need to set straight the heresy of the Arminians. Chapter two of the Canons of Dort is therefore the result of the efforts of the fathers to put in writing the scriptural truths concerning the death of Christ and the redemption of man.

ARTICLE 1

THE JUSTICE OF GOD REQUIRES PUNISHMENT

The fathers commenced their rebuttal of the Arminian teaching by first writing an article concerning God's justice. Scripture teaches that God is not only merciful, but also just. To appreciate this justice of God, we need to go back in our thinking to Paradise.

In Genesis 2 we read that God created man and placed him in the Garden of Eden with the command to tend it and keep it. With His gift of the garden and man's place in it, God straightaway made His covenant with man, including both a promise and a demand. "And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "Of every tree of the garden you may eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Genesis 2:16,17). The promise was that if man would eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil he would die, but if he would not eat from it he would live. God's demand of man was therefore not to eat of that one tree.

What did Adam do - and in him, we all (see Chapter I, Article 1)? We failed to meet God's demand and we ate of the forbidden tree. Given the promise God had made -if you eat you die- this transgression was not something which God could overlook. We transgressed His covenant, and so He did not and could not 'let us off the hook' to give us a second chance. IF God had responded by disregarding His promise in Genesis 2:17, what kind of a God would He be? Wouldn't that make Him a God who changes according to the circumstances; a whimsical God? But the Bible insists that God is an unchanging God. "God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent. Has He not said, and will He not do? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?" (Numbers 23:19). "... the Strength of Israel will not lie nor relent. For He is not a man, that He should relent" (1 Samuel 15:29). "If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself" (2 Timothy 2:13). In Paradise we became faithless, but God, who does not change, remained faithful. So man had to die,

because God had said so. "God's justice requires that sin committed against the most high majesty of God also be punished with the most severe, that is, with everlasting, punishment of body and soul" (LD 4, Q&A 11). If God does not change, then all that is left for man to expect is death and God's curse. God does not change, and so the punishment God promised (death) must be meted out on man. That is: His justice must be satisfied.

We are all familiar with death. We generally understand that a person dies physically when his heart stops beating. However, when God speaks of death He means not only physical death but also spiritual death. Spiritual death, the deeper element of what death really is, means to be cast away from God. Jesus, hanging on the Cross in the dark, knowing that God had left Him, cried out, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matthew 27:46). That was death: to be forsaken by God. That is what God's justice required. Afterwards Christ "yielded up His spirit", i.e. He died a physical death (Matthew 27:50).

It is with this material that the fathers began in Article 1. Man fell into sin, and God's justice required that man either had to pay or perish. Man was either to satisfy God's justice and make good his sin, or he had to die. It was either the one or the other. Hence the concluding words of Article 1, "We cannot escape these punishments unless satisfaction is made to the justice of God".

We perceive justice to be something awful, daunting, dark; and so it is. Yet God's justice also speaks of comfort and gives hope to the penitent, for God said by the mouth of His prophet Isaiah, "Zion will be redeemed with justice ..." (Isaiah 1:27). God links His justice to the redemption of the sinner; His justice is also the way of salvation.

ARTICLE 2

THE SATISFACTION MADE BY CHRIST

Having established in Article 1 that God's justice required that we either pay for our sins or perish on account of them, Article 2 goes on to say that we cannot make this payment. "We ourselves, however, cannot make this satisfaction and cannot free ourselves from God's wrath." Our article does not elaborate on why we cannot make this payment. Chapter Three of the Canons of Dort will deal further with this aspect. Here the confession of LD 5, Q&A 13 will suffice, which reads, "Can we ourselves make this payment? Certainly not. On the contrary, we daily increase our debt". We are too sinful to make payment to God for the debt we incurred with Him.

However, God did not leave man stuck with this debt. Instead, God Himself gave His Son to die in order to remove man's debt. Consider the marvel of this act of God! He had made His Covenant with us in Paradise. However, we chose against God, choosing instead for Satan. We fell into sin and landed ourselves on Satan's side. There God's justice hung over us. There were no other options open to us but to pay for our sins or perish on account of them. Pay for them we could not and so hell was the destiny we deserved. But God was merciful. He gave up His only Son to death for us so we might live. Christ had to be our Surety. As our Surety (or 'Guarantor' in today's English), Christ became liable for our debt, undertaking to answer for the payment of our debt.

THE GOSPEL OF SUBSTITUTION

A 'surety' or 'guarantor' is the person who under writes a debt for us, so that a bank can claim payment from him in the event we renege on a borrowed loan. The concept of a 'surety' before God is taught us in the Bible. Job prayed to God to "put me in a surety with Thee" (Job 17:3, KJV). David likewise prayed to the Lord, "Be surety for Your servant for good; do not let the proud oppress me" (Psalm 119:122). That God did promise a surety was pointed up by the sacrifices of the Old Testament. If the people of Israel had sinned, they had to go to the tabernacle with an animal they would sacrifice in payment for their sins. However, before they sacrificed the animal they had to lay their hands on the animal's head, an action which symbolised the transfer of their sins to the animal. The blood of the sacrificial animal served as a pledge of the payment of their sins by the blood of THE LAMB on the cross. This we read in Hebrews 7:22, "Jesus has become a surety of a better covenant." The Old Testament sacrifices prophesied of Jesus' sacrifice. In Matthew 20:28 the word 'ransom' is used, Christ having bought our freedom or redemption with His life: "just as the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

This is the Gospel of Substitution: Christ serving in the place of man. In 2 Corinthians 5:21 Paul says, "For (God) made (Christ) who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him". The Arminians preached that Christ died in order to satisfy God's first set of conditions so that God would have the opportunity to start anew with man. The fathers on the other hand, concerned about the confusion such instruction could instil in the minds of the people in the pew, said, "That is not what the Bible teaches. In the Bible one reads that Christ was sent into the world to die in order to satisfy God's justice. Christ came to pay for man's sin so that man might go free". As we read in Article 2, "For us or in our place He was made sin and a curse on the cross so that He might make satisfaction on our behalf".

The little word 'for' is of critical importance here. That Christ died for me means that He died in my place, or instead of me. I deserved hell, but Christ received hell instead. God's wrath hung over man on account of his sin and therefore I too deserve to have God's wrath come down on me. Did Christ now die so that God could start again with me? No! Christ put Himself between me and God's wrath so that He received God's wrath in my place, for me, instead of me, so that I could go free. Christ is my Substitute! Said Paul in Romans 5:6-9, "For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly... God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him". Ungodly we were whilst on Satan's side, with God's wrath hanging over us. Yet here God reveals to us the heart of His Gospel to sinners, that Christ died for the ungodly, in their place. As a result of Christ's dying for me, I am justified. That means that God will not pour out His wrath on me because God mercifully put Christ in between me and His wrath. Christ bore the full load of God's wrath on my behalf.

ARTICLE 3

THE INFINITE VALUE OF THE DEATH OF CHRIST

The Arminians said that Christ died so that God could start again in stipulating a set of conditions that man must satisfy in order to be saved. Over against their teaching, the fathers

were insistent: "this death of the Son of God is the only and most perfect sacrifice and satisfaction for sins". By means of this article the fathers wished to go one step further than saying that Christ's death was for the satisfaction of God's wrath, i.e. to pay for man's sin. Christ's death paid for sin, more, His sacrifice is the only possible sacrifice and satisfaction for sins. Here the fathers used absolute language, based on what they read in the Bible. Jesus also used absolute language when He said to Thomas in John 14:6, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me". There isn't a Buddhist in the world, no matter how pious he may be in his religion, who can come to the Father, unless he embraces Christ as his Saviour - and then he is a Buddhist no longer. Peter spoke in equally absolute language when he addressed the Sanhedrin, saying, "Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). In other words, "Do you want salvation?" asked Peter. "Do you want your debt with God to be paid? Do you want to satisfy God's justice? If so, there is only one way!"

Such absolute language was anathema to the Arminians 400 years ago and still is anathema to many people today. Today we are to be tolerant of each other, including each other's beliefs, for don't we all get 'there' in due time? But that is not what the Lord or our confessions say. In Scripture and in our confessions we read that Christ, and only Christ made satisfaction for sins. We also find this in LD 11, Q&A 29, namely, "Why is the Son of God called Jesus, that is Saviour? Because He saves us from all our sins, and because salvation is not to be sought or found in anyone else". Neither Buddhism, my ancestry, my race, my Church attendance or my status in life can settle my debt with God; Christ alone can do this.

Article 3 says more than that Christ's sacrifice is the only sacrifice and satisfaction for sins. The fathers confessed Scripture to teach also that Christ's sacrifice is the "most perfect sacrifice and satisfaction for sins". The fathers could confidently say this on the basis of what Hebrews 9:12 says, namely, "Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption". Christ's work doesn't have to be finished off yet, or be done over again. No, it is complete and it was completed most perfectly. "... we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. And every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God" (Hebrews 10:10-12). A most perfect sacrifice requires no repetition, and no addition. Christ's task was done, and so He could sit down.

The death of Christ was of such "infinite value and worth" that it was "abundantly sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world". Christ's work was not just good enough to save only the Jews or just a limited number of persons, but it was sufficient to save everybody, "the whole world". Every sinner deserves to have God's wrath directed at him still. However, with Christ having satisfied the justice and wrath of God, all sinners would go free if they all received what Christ obtained. Christ's work is of adequate value to be able to benefit all. Said Jesus in John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life". The same we read in 1 John 2:2, "And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world", and in 2 Corinthians 5:15, "and He died for all..." Although these texts are not to be understood to say that all will be saved, they do all underline the fact that Christ's sacrifice is of such value that all are able to benefit. See further Article 8.

This confession contains immense comfort for the believer. No matter how bad my sins are, Christ has paid for all of them. Christ has suffered sufficiently for even my worst sins. Christ's death on the cross is of such value that all sin can be taken away by that work. As the Lord also says in Isaiah 1:18, "Come now, and let us reason together," says the LORD, "though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool". No matter what sins are on my record, Christ has washed my record clean. Here is warm comfort for the people in the pew - certainly when they in the preaching had heard so much of the Arminian teaching!

ARTICLE 4

WHY HIS DEATH HAS INFINITE VALUE

Whereas Article 3 confessed the fact and the extent of the value of Christ's death, Article 4 gives two reasons why Christ's death has infinite value. The two reasons given concern:

1. the Person of Christ, and
2. the wrath of God on account of sin.

THE PERSON OF CHRIST:

"This death is of such great value and worth because the person who submitted to it is not only a true and perfect holy man, but also the only Son of God, of the same eternal and infinite essence with the Father and the Holy Spirit, for these qualifications were necessary for our Saviour".

On the one hand Christ is true and holy man and on the other hand Christ is true God. We recognise here the argumentation of LD 6. Concerning why Christ needed to be a true and righteous man we confess in Q&A 16, "He must be a true man because the justice of God requires that the same human nature which has sinned should pay for sin. He must be a righteous man because one who himself is a sinner cannot pay for others." The emphasis in our article lies on the fact that Christ is true God. Concerning the necessity of His Godhead we read in Q&A 17, "He must be true God so that by the power of His divine nature He might bear in His human nature the burden of God's wrath, and might obtain for us and restore to us righteousness and life." For the very reason that our Saviour is true God, He is more of a 'somebody' than we are, and therefore His death has more impact. Our deaths do not do anything for us; Christ's death, because He is the Son of God, can do something for another.

THE WRATH OF GOD ON ACCOUNT OF SIN:

"Further, this death is of such great value and worth because it was accompanied by a sense of the wrath and curse of God which we by our sins had deserved".

The death of a person does not come accompanied with a sense of the wrath of God. Certainly, death itself is the wages of sin, and hence expression of God's curse, God's wrath on sin. However, when Christ died on the cross, God's wrath was loaded upon Him in full force. God's wrath was so intense that Christ suffered in terrible agony - far more than any

person suffers, even in the face of death. So intense was His anguish in the face of the coming suffering that Jesus prayed to the Father to "take this cup away from me" (Luke 22:42). Similarly, "His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground" (Luke 22:44). This acute expression of God's wrath became the more pronounced when Christ hung on the cross, for darkness settled on the land. God is light. Darkness is hell. In other words, God was gone, and that spells death: desertion by God. In response to suffering God's wrath, i.e. separation from God, spiritual death, Christ called out in agony, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matthew 27:46). Though the wrath of God was so enormous, Jesus, being true God, could handle God's wrath. After the three hours of darkness had passed Christ could triumphantly cry out with a loud voice, "Father, into Your hands I commend My spirit" (Luke 23:46) and "It is finished!" (John 19:30). After that He sovereignly "gave up His spirit" (John 19:30). Death did not overtake Christ, but Christ gave Himself to death. For that reason Christ's death has such great value. It was not just somebody who died, but it was Christ, true God. It is His death which is of great benefit to us and to so many.

ARTICLE 5

THE UNIVERSAL PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL

The death of Christ has infinite value and consequently the only way of salvation is to be found in Christ. As Article 5 states, "The promise of the gospel is that whoever believes in Christ crucified shall not perish but have eternal life". For that reason, the fathers go on to confess that this promise must also be preached. "This promise ought to be announced and proclaimed universally and without discrimination to all peoples and to all men to whom God in His good pleasure sends the gospel, together with the command to repent and believe." The fathers had to make a separate mention of the preaching of this gospel because of the wrong conclusions the Arminians were drawing from the Reformed teaching that Christ's work is limited only to the elect. If that is so, argued the Arminians, why then preach the Gospel to all people. If Christ's work is not for all, then why tell all about His work?

In reaction to that caricature, the fathers simply echoed what the Lord Himself had said in John 3:16. God didn't send His Son for the Jews only, or for the first thousand who asked Him for salvation. Rather, "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." Therefore the Gospel of Christ's redeeming work should also be preached to all, in obedience to the command Christ Himself gave His disciples. Jesus said to them before His ascension, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19,20). We read a similar command of Christ in Acts 1:8, namely, "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." The Gospel was not only to be preached in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, but everywhere.

Here the Church has received a mandate from the Lord to spread the Gospel. Christ has come for all men, and therefore the Church may not keep this Gospel to itself, but must see to it that this Gospel goes out so that all men hear it. Cost ought not be a hindrance for the Church. The Lord has commanded to go and preach, and He will show the way. Mission work is

something we ought to engage in more aggressively, seeking new areas where the good news of Christ's work on the cross may be proclaimed.

This preaching will have a twofold effect; some will believe and others will not (see Articles 6 & 7). However, the way in which people will respond to the Gospel is known to God alone. We don't know who are elect; this will only become evident from the way people respond to the preaching. We must simply obey the command of Matthew 28:19,20 and leave the fruits of this work to God.

All around us we see and hear the message, 'Jesus loves you'. However this is not a scriptural but an Arminian formula for salvation. It is simply not true that Jesus loves one and all. Within the circle of the saints we may say to each other that 'Jesus loves you', because we know of each other that God has made His covenant with us and our children. However, to those people whom we do not know we can only pass on the promises of God that He, in infinite mercy gave His Son to die for men. Together with this promise we must also pass on the demand and the challenge to repent and to believe the Gospel of Christ crucified. Only when one comes to faith can we say to them that Yes, Jesus loves you too.

Chapter 2 - The Death of Christ and Redemption : Articles 6-9

THE DEATH OF CHRIST AND THE REDEMPTION OF MAN BY IT

ARTICLE 6

WHY SOME DO NOT BELIEVE

This article is not the first time that the matter of how one responds to the preaching is raised in the Canons of Dort. Chapter I, Articles 4 & 5 confessed the twofold response to the preaching from the point of view of God's sovereignty; the Lord sends His messengers to whomever He wills, and works a response of faith in the hearts of those chosen to life. In Chapter II, Articles 6 & 7 the matter of response to the preaching comes up in the context of Christ's work: did Christ die for all men or not?

THE REALITY OF UNBELIEF

That "the promise of the gospel ... ought to be proclaimed universally and without discrimination to all peoples" was the focus of Article 5. However, the preaching of the gospel has a twofold response: faith or unbelief. Article 6 confesses that not all who hear the preaching respond with faith. It confesses also why it is that some do not believe.

The fact that the preaching meets from time to time with unbelief is nothing new. One finds examples of this reaction in Scripture. For example, in John 3:16 Jesus, speaking to Nicodemus, said, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.". Jesus went on to say in verse 19, "And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light" It already happened in the days of Jesus that people rejected the gospel. In Mark 6:6 we read that Jesus "... marvelled because of their unbelief." Three years after Jesus began His public ministry Pilate asked of the Jews who had gathered to witness Jesus' trial, "What then shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" The response of the Jews was, "Let him be crucified! ... His blood be on us and on our children" (Matthew 27:22-25). Jesus had preached the gospel for three years, showing in word and in deed that He was indeed the Messiah. Yet the people's response to Jesus' preaching was one of unbelief.

How we'd love to see that the preaching of the gospel results only in faith! However, that does not happen and though this may disappoint us, it should not surprise us. Experience with mission work amongst the Aborigines or amongst the people of Port Moresby, for example, has taught us that despite great investments of time and money, the fruits of our labours may be minimal. It's disheartening, but we shouldn't be surprised because unbelief is a reaction to the preaching of the gospel.

Those who respond to the gospel with unbelief are sentenced to eternal condemnation. As one reads in John 3:36, "... he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of

God abides on him." And in John 8:24, "Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for if you do not believe that I am He, you will die in your sins."

THE REASON FOR UNBELIEF: CHRIST'S FAULT OR THE SINNER'S FAULT?

This raises the question of why it is that people respond to the gospel with unbelief. This question has its setting in the context of Arminian thinking at the time of the Synod of Dort. The Arminians suggested two possible explanations, namely:

1. sinners don't want Christ, or,
2. Christ didn't die for all people.

The Arminians accused the Reformed of teaching the second of these two, namely, that Christ didn't die for all people. Now, it's true that Christ did not die for all people (see below). However, when the Arminians accused the Reformed of this teaching, they meant to portray the Reformed as teaching that Christ's death was for some only and therefore the others had no chance to be saved; after all, Christ didn't die for them. So: the Arminians sought to portray the Reformed of teaching a cruel doctrine: some may want to be saved but cannot be because Christ did not die for them. So it's Christ's fault that these poor people end up in hell.

This accusation of the Arminians, however, was a caricature of what the Reformed believed and taught. This is NOT Reformed teaching but a deliberate and cruel misrepresentation. Therefore, in the face of this caricature, the fathers at the Synod of Dort felt obliged to set forth what the Reformed do believe, namely, that unbelief is due to the sinner not wanting Christ. The fathers said, as we read in Article 6, "That ... many who have been called by the gospel neither repent nor believe in Christ but perish in unbelief does not happen because of any defect or insufficiency in the sacrifice of Christ offered on the cross" The fathers were insistent: that sacrifice was perfect. See what the fathers wrote in Article 3 concerning Christ's death: it is "the only and most perfect sacrifice and satisfaction for sins, of infinite value and worth, abundantly sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world." If a sinner does not believe, and so perishes in unbelief, one can never blame Christ's sacrifice, as if Christ's death were in some way not adequate to pay for the sins of any or all people. Sinners perish in unbelief "through their own fault".

In explaining the Reformed position in such a way, the fathers also accented that those who hear the preaching are responsible for the way in which they respond to it. The preaching to mankind is a genuine call to all who hear, irrespective of what era one lives, what race or nationality or gender one is. All who hear must repent and believe. All are responsible for their response. No-one can say, "I wanted to believe, but I couldn't".

This is as true for those who sit under the preaching in church Sunday by Sunday as it is for those who hear the gospel for the first time from the mouth of a missionary. Though we are so used to the gospel, we must respond to the preaching; the responsibility to do so is ours. In Hebrews 3:7-11 the apostle quotes the following words from Psalm 95:

"Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, in the day of trial in the wilderness, where your fathers tested Me, proved Me, and saw my works forty years. Therefore I was angry with that generation, and said, "They always go astray in their

heart, and they have not known my ways." So I swore in my wrath, "They shall not enter my rest."

Paul then continues in the verses 12 & 13, "Beware brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily while it is called "Today," lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin." Note here how Paul emphasises the word 'today'. Note too that Paul was writing to Hebrew Christians, i.e. people who had come to faith in Christ and who sat under the preaching in Church. What was true for the Hebrews is also true for us today, namely, that we are responsible for responding to the preaching. If we do not respond to the preaching which we hear Sunday by Sunday, the fault is entirely our own.

ARTICLE 7

WHY OTHERS DO BELIEVE

FAITH: BY THE FREE WILL OF MAN OR BY GOD'S GRACE?

It is by grace alone that a person responds to the preaching with faith. As Paul writes in Ephesians 2:8, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God." Likewise, in Philippians 1:29 Paul writes concerning the faith of the gospel, "For to you it has been granted ..."; i.e. it was not earned, nor was it the choice of the Philippians, but it was given to them. In 1 Corinthians 4:7 Paul writes to the Corinthians, "For who makes you differ from another? And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you glory as if you had not received it?" And: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new. Now all things are of God ..." (2 Corinthians 5:17,18). It all leads Paul to say, "... he who glories, let him glory in the Lord" (2 Corinthians 10:17).

If our response to the preaching of the gospel is unbelief, this is our fault; if our response is belief, it is God's grace. That God by His grace is pleased to make me respond to His Word with faith makes me respond by praising Him, for this work of His points up what a wonderfully gracious God He is.

The Arminians will readily agree that man is saved by grace alone. The Arminians, though, give quite a different loading to the word 'grace' than do the Reformed. According to the Arminians, when man fell into sin and landed himself on Satan's side the only way back to God's side was by satisfying the condition which God placed between Himself and man, namely, obedience to His law. (The reader is referred to the Introduction to Chapter II, on page 34.) Realising that this was an insurmountable hurdle for man, God gave Christ to remove this hurdle by paying for sin by His death on the cross. In so doing Christ satisfied God's justice. Since God's justice was satisfied, the way was open for God to place between Himself and man a new, more manageable hurdle, namely, faith. Therefore, say the Arminians, people who want to get back to God's side make the decision themselves to believe, and by so doing, God reckons it to man as obedience to His law. 'Grace', said the Arminians, is that God gave Christ to remove the impossible hurdle between God and man. Man cannot save himself by obeying God's law, as one can read in Ephesians 2:8; in His grace God gave Christ to do so. But now that God in 'grace' has given Christ and so

established a lower threshold, it is now man's responsibility to meet the lesser condition set by God, namely, to believe. This is a condition, a responsibility, which man can handle because man has the free will to decide whether or not he will believe. To the Arminians, then, the phrase 'by grace alone' means nothing more than that God has set a new condition. Now that God in grace has set the new condition, it is totally and completely up to man whether or not he will be saved.

However, the confession of Article 7 loads the word 'grace' with quite a different content than the Arminians taught. With the words of this article we confess, "... those who truly believe and are by the death of Christ freed from their sins and saved from perdition, this benefit comes only through God's grace, given to them from eternity in Christ. God owes this grace to no one." Whereas the Arminians say that grace refers to a deed of God in the past, the Reformed say that grace is God's work in man's heart today.

In the "Rejection of Errors" No 6 - Error, (Book of Praise, p. 548), the fathers quoted the Arminian heresy concerning the above. The Arminians taught, "As far as God is concerned, He has been minded to apply to all men equally the benefits acquired by the death of Christ; however, some obtain the pardon of sin and eternal life and others do not. This difference depends on their own free will, which applies itself to the grace that is offered without distinction, and not on the special gift of mercy which so powerfully works in them that they rather than others apply this grace to themselves." In other words, grace is offered by God without distinction to all people, say the Arminians. However, man gets to decide if he appreciates God's grace or not. This totally contradicts LD 23, Q&A 60, where we confess that we are "righteous before God only by true faith in Jesus Christ.... God, without any merit of my own, out of mere grace, imputes to me, the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ. He grants these to me as if I had never had nor committed any sin." In other words, it is God who freely gives, grants, imputes to us the benefits acquired by the death of Christ. As Romans 3:24 puts it, we are "justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus".

As far as the differences between the Arminians and the Reformed are concerned, these all hinge on the pivot of man's free will; is salvation a choice made by man or not?

ARTICLE 8

THE EFFICACY OF THE DEATH OF CHRIST

Article 8 brings us to the heart of what Chapter II is all about namely, "The death of Christ and the redemption of man by it". Article 8 makes confession of the fact that the death of Christ is effective: it accomplishes what it sets out to do.

THE ARMINIAN POSITION

In refuting the Arminian position concerning the efficacy (=effectiveness) of Christ's death, the fathers pointed out that the Arminians taught a wrong distinction between the "acquisition of salvation" and the "application of salvation". Said the fathers: those who teach that it is man's free will which determines who shall believe or not "misuse the difference between acquisition and application of salvation ..." (Rejection of Errors, No 6 - Refutation, Book of

Praise, p. 550). Article 8 confesses that Christ's work is effective. The Arminians on the other hand said, No, it is not necessarily effective. According to the Arminians, Christ died for all people. That is: by His death Christ removed the hurdle between God and man and so acquired (obtained) for all people the possibility of salvation. Man however, by his free will, can decide if he likes what God has prepared; this is the application of salvation. The Arminians separated the acquisition of salvation from the application of it.

It is true that the 'acquisition' and the 'application' of salvation need to be distinguished. For example, acquiring (=obtaining) sorbelene cream is something different from applying the cream. Acquisition and application are certainly two different things. But: how does one distinguish between the acquisition of salvation and the application of salvation? The Arminians said that the acquisition of salvation was the work of Christ, whereas the application of salvation is the work of man. But here they go wrong. It is true that the acquisition of salvation is the work of Christ; Christ acquired salvation on the cross long ago. But the application of salvation is also the work of Christ. It is not man who applies to himself the redemption that Christ has acquired; it is rather Christ who both obtained salvation and applies it to sinners. The way the Arminians differentiated between the two concepts meant that whereas Christ died for all, it is up to each individual whether he wants what God has prepared. Therefore, it was theoretically possible that God could end up with an empty heaven; i.e although Christ had acquired salvation for all, it was possible that no-one applied it.

THE REFORMED POSITION

On the basis of what they knew from Scripture, the fathers said that this could not be so. Man's salvation does not hinge on man's free will. The Bible says that those for whom Christ acquired salvation shall also receive salvation. The fathers said this on the authority of texts as the following:

Romans 8:29,30

"For whom He foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified."

Here the apostle says very emphatically that God is all the time working with the very same number of people. The number in each group remains constant. Those whom God predestined are all called, justified and also glorified. All whom God predestined are also brought to faith and receive eternal life.

Matthew 1:21

Said the angel to Joseph, "And (Mary) will bring forth a son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins."

Who did the angel say Jesus would save? For whom did Jesus acquire salvation? Not for all people, but for His people. This is a group of definite size, is the people whom the Father has given to the Son. For these (and no more) Jesus would die, for these He would acquired salvation. And these people shall also receive salvation, for this set number is "His" people.

John 10:11; 27,28

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives his life for the sheep My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of my hand".

Christ gave His life, not for everyone, but for the sheep; those of His flock. All these sheep therefore have life. The acquisition and the application of salvation are for the very same people.

CHRIST EFFECTIVELY REDEEMS ALL WHO ARE CHOSEN TO SALVATION

"God the Father has ordained His Son to the death of the cross without a specific and definite decree to save any," said the Arminians (See Rejection of Errors, No 1 - Error, Book of Praise, p. 548). Although Christ died to acquire salvation, they said, it would be possible that no one benefit from it. "What Christ obtained (i.e. acquisition) by His death might have been necessary, profitable and valuable, and might remain in all its parts complete, perfect, and intact, even though the redemption He acquired had actually never been applied to any person (i.e application)." Note here how the Arminians have separated the acquisition and the application. But, says Article 8, "This was the most free counsel of God the Father, that the life-giving and saving efficacy of the most precious death of His Son should extend to all the elect." The efficacy of Christ's death applied to all the elect. "It was His most gracious will and intent to give them alone justifying faith and thereby to bring them unfailingly to salvation." Christ effectively redeems all who are chosen to salvation. Christ's death accomplishes what it is supposed to accomplish. All who are given to the Son are given life eternal. In prayer Christ said to the Father, "Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son also may glorify You, as You have given Him authority over all flesh, that He should give eternal life to as many as You have given Him (i.e. the elect)" (John 17:1,2). See Figure 5.

ARTICLE 9**THE FULFILMENT OF GOD'S COUNSEL**

In their refutation of the Arminian error that those for whom Christ acquired salvation does not equate with the number of those who receive this salvation, the fathers said, "this error contradicts the article of faith concerning the Church" (Rejection of Errors, No 1 - Refutation, Book of Praise, p. 548). In other words, if it is true that Christ has died for all (acquiring salvation for all) but that people can themselves choose whether or not they want the salvation Christ obtained (and so theoretically only a few or even none choose to receive it), then there would be a time when there may not be a church on earth.

However, with a view to the fulfilment of God's counsel, this cannot be so - said the fathers. God, according to His eternal plan, determined that some shall be saved and what He has determined will definitely come to pass. The fathers said this on the authority of Scripture, for they read in Ephesians 1:11: "In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of His will." And Isaiah 46:9-11: "...I am God, and there is none like Me..., saying, 'My

counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure,' calling a bird of prey from the east, the man who executes my counsel, from a far country. Indeed I have spoken it; I will also bring it to pass. I have purposed it; I will also do it". Therefore, if God has determined to save a certain number of people, then this shall happen, no matter how much Satan may rage at this.

In Article 27, Belgic Confession, we confess that the "one catholic or universal Church ... has existed from the beginning of the world and will be to the end, for Christ is an eternal King who cannot be without subjects. This holy Church is preserved by God against the fury of the whole world, although for a while it may look very small and as extinct in the eyes of man. Thus during the perilous reign of Ahab, the Lord kept for Himself seven thousand persons who had not bowed their knees to Baal." The Church will always be there because the counsel of God stands firm, irrespective of the attacks of hell. There will always be the faithful "7000": possibly an actual number in the days of Ahab but which today symbolises the number of fullness. "Concerning the holy catholic church of Christ I believe that the Son of God, out of the whole human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, defends, and preserves for Himself, by His Spirit and Word, in the unity of the true faith, a church chosen to everlasting life" (LD 21, Q&A 54). The Church of God, of which Christ is King, shall stand. In the face of the Arminian error, the fathers clung to the promises of God about His church.

Scripture warns us of the hellish attacks which the Church must endure. "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour" (1 Peter 5:8). "Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and the sea! For the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, because he knows that he has a short time" (Revelation 12:12). But Satan's attacks do not necessarily come with loud shouting. Paul warns the Corinthians that Satan "transforms himself into an angel of light" (2 Corinthians 11:14). The attacks of hell are certainly felt by the Church. In the days of the Arminius, Satan dressed himself as a minister of light, ascending the pulpits to preach not the gospel of salvation by God's grace, but the Arminian doctrine of salvation by man's free will. However, even though Satan attacks the Church from the pulpit, God's counsel shall stand; God's faithful were preserved in those days too.

Therefore the fathers wrote in Article 9, "(God's) counsel, proceeding from eternal love for the elect, has from the beginning of the world to the present time been powerfully fulfilled, and will also continue to be fulfilled, though the gates of hell vainly try to frustrate it. In due time the elect will be gathered together into one, and there will always be a Church of believers, founded on the blood of Christ. This Church shall steadfastly love and faithfully serve Him as her Saviour (who as a bridegroom for his bride laid down His life for her on the cross) and celebrate His praises here and through all eternity."

Here the fathers are echoing the confident confession of Paul in Romans 8:31-39. Having just established that God brings to faith and salvation the full number of His elect in verse 30, Paul goes on to say to the Church at Rome, "If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things? Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies." Even though the Church and the saints shall be hated by the devil, the world and their own flesh, "who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril or sword?" Certainly, hellish hatred is the lot of the Christian. "As it is written (in Psalm 44): 'For your sake we are killed all day long; We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.' Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors

through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities (i.e. which Ephesians 6:12 describes as the host of demons) nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." If God has loved us so much, already from eternity, that He gave up His own Son to death in order that we might be saved from eternal death, then who can make God discontinue His love for us?? Scripture tells us that no-one can. With God we are safe, no matter how great and intense the rage of the gates of hell. God's counsel shall stand.

In Revelation 7:9-17 we read of John's vision concerning a "a great multitude ... standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes..." In his vision John was told that "These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb The Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to living fountains of waters." The Lord sees to it that on the last day all His saints shall be gathered around His throne. Said the Lord Jesus, the Good Shepherd, concerning His elect, "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of my hand." The Father gave all the elect to His Son, and with Him they are eternally safe. As to the number of this multitude, we read in Revelation 14:1 that John saw "one hundred and forty- four thousand." This is a special number: 144 representing the 12 tribes of Israel who were the foundation of the Church in the Old Testament, multiplied by the 12 apostles who were the foundation of the Church in the New Testament; 1000 = 10 x 10 x 10: God's number. On the last day, no less than God's chosen number of elect shall be gathered around God's throne; not one shall be missing. What more reason do we need to "celebrate His praises here and through all eternity!"

Chapters 3 & 4 - The Corruption of Man... : Articles 1-3

THE CORRUPTION OF MAN, HIS CONVERSION TO GOD, AND THE MANNER IN WHICH IT OCCURS

ARTICLE 1

THE EFFECT OF THE FALL

The Canons of Dort are comprised of five chapters, each chapter defending an aspect of the Reformed Doctrine over against the heresies taught in the five articles of the Remonstrants (see Page 6 for a copy of the Five Articles of the Remonstrants). However, when the fathers set out to answer Article 3 of the Remonstrants, they realised that they could not answer it independently of what the Remonstrants wrote in their fourth article. For Article 3, read by itself, appears to be Scripturally quite correct. But read with the error of Article 4 in mind, Article 3 rattles. To expose properly the error of both articles, the fathers combined the material of Articles 3 and 4 of the Remonstrants into one Chapter, III/IV.

Articles 3 and 4 of the Remonstrants read as follows,

ARTICLE 3

We believe that man does not have saving faith of himself nor by his power of his own free will, since he, in the state of apostasy and sin, cannot of and through himself think, will or do any good which is truly good (such as is especially saving faith); but that it is necessary that he be regenerated by God, in Christ, through His Holy Spirit, and renewed in understanding, affections and will, and all powers, in order that he may rightly understand, meditate upon, will, and perform that which is truly good, according to the word of Christ, in John 15:5, "Without me you can do nothing".

ARTICLE 4

We believe that this grace of God is the commencement, progression, and completion of all good, also in so far that the regenerate man cannot, apart from this prevenient or assisting awakening, consequent and cooperating grace, think, will or do the good or resist any temptations to evil, so that all good works or activities which can be conceived must be ascribed to the grace of God in Christ. But with respect to the mode of this grace, it is not irresistible, since it is written concerning many that they resisted the Holy Spirit, in Acts 7 and elsewhere in many places.

Note especially the concluding sentence of Article 4, namely, "But with respect to the mode of this grace, it is not irresistible, since it is written concerning many that they resisted the Holy Spirit, in Acts 7 and elsewhere in many places". In other words, the Arminians said that God gives grace but that I can resist it. Behind this statement lies the conviction that a person is in a position to offer resistance to God's offer of grace. That is: the sinner is not dead but alive; after all, we've never yet seen a corpse do anything, let alone accept or refuse an offer.

It was the Arminian assumption that fallen man is not dead but alive that needed to be addressed before the material of Articles 3 and 4 could be exposed for the error it was. So, in Chapter III/IV the fathers deal with "The corruption of man, his conversion to God, and the manner in which it occurs". The fathers wished to determine from Scripture the extent of man's depravity and consequently ascertain whether it is indeed possible for man to refuse God and the offer of His grace.

MAN'S BEGINNINGS IN PARADISE ACCORDING TO SCRIPTURE: COMPLETELY HOLY

For this reason the fathers saw a need to take the church members back to Scripture's record of man's beginnings in Paradise. In Genesis 1:26-28 we read, "Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness...." That man was made in the image or likeness of God does not mean that man looks like God, but rather that man represents God. The notion of 'image' implies an office, a task; one which is closely linked to having dominion over God's world, for God went on to say, "... let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him, male and female He created them. Then God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

God had created the world and within it He planted a Garden for man to live. God instructed man to take care of this Garden (Gen 2:15), to have dominion over it, to rule over it. Having been created in the image of God meant that man was to exercise dominion as God would do it, as God's representative. In so doing man was to reflect God, image God, show God's creation what God is like. In order for man to carry out this task God equipped man with particular talents. God gave man the capacity to image Him. As God is holy, so man was made holy. As God is righteous, so man was made righteous. Just as God cares for His creatures with love, so God made Adam able to love. Man received the ability to reflect, to image, the characteristics of God. Because of the office God gave Adam, Adam's focus was God-centred; he was 'tuned in' to God. This is also what we read in Article 1. "In the beginning man was created in the image of God." This means that man "was adorned in his mind with true and wholesome knowledge of his Creator and of all spiritual things; his will and heart were upright, all his affections pure, and therefore man was completely holy." All of man's attention was focused on God. Man had to image God in the work assigned him, and man was capable of doing it.

MAN'S BEGINNINGS IN PARADISE ACCORDING TO THE ARMINIANS: INCLINED TO SIN

The fathers saw need to mention the above element of Paradise because in their teachings concerning man's fall into sin, the Arminians had picked up on an element from philosophy. They distinguished three parts in man: mind, heart, and will (see Figure 1). As far as the mind was concerned, man in Paradise had the knowledge, that if he did good he would live but if he did wrong he would die. Man knew this because God had told him. As far as the heart was concerned, the Arminians said that in Paradise man's heart already had an inclination to sin. The argument went like this: God put Adam and Eve to a test by forbidding them to eat the fruit of one tree. However, in order for this to be a true test, there had to be an appetite for that particular fruit. To have to refrain from eating something you don't like is no test at all.

Said the Arminians, in order for the test for sin to be real, there had to be at least a slight inclination to sin. There had to be within man's heart a bit of a desire to do wrong. As far as man's will was concerned, the Arminians taught that man had a free will in Paradise. Man's will could tell his heart to do what the mind knew it should do, namely, to do good by leaving the forbidden tree alone. Adam and Eve, by exercising their free will, could tell their hearts to refrain from eating the forbidden fruit.

According to the Arminians, man, before the fall into sin, had an inclination to sin. This was not necessarily a powerful inclination, but an inclination none the less. They taught, "The spiritual gifts or the good qualities and virtues, such as goodness, holiness, righteousness, could not belong to the will of man when he was first created, and can therefore not have been separated from his will when he fell" (Rejection of Errors No 1 - Error, Book of Praise, p. 560). That is: the will was neutral, and so the heart very able to sin. However, the fathers said very categorically in Article 1 that man "... was adorned in his mind with true and wholesome knowledge of his Creator and of all spiritual things; his will and heart were upright, all his affections pure, and therefore man was completely holy". This leaves no room for the presence of any sin or appetite to sin. We understand this to be a scriptural statement of the fathers, for in Genesis 1:31 we read that God, after He had completed His work of creation, "saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good." The man God had created did not have an appetite to sin. Rather, Adam lived in close communion with God, all his inclinations were directed to God, he was 'in tune' with God. That is further evident from the fact that God used to seek out Adam's and Eve's company - as is evident from Genesis 3:8: "And (Adam and Eve) heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day" Adam and Eve were able to recognise the sound of God coming because it was God's habit to visit. God did not visit a neutral creature.

THE RESULT OF MAN'S FALL INTO SIN

After the fall into sin man's focus was no longer God-centred. Man was no longer 'tuned in' to God. Man could no longer image or reflect God because the talents needed for doing so had been taken away. This was man's own doing. As LD 4, Q&A 9 puts it, "... man, at the instigation of the devil, in deliberate disobedience, robbed himself and all his descendants of these gifts. Likewise, Article 14, Belgic Confession, summarises Scripture to teach, "Since man became wicked and perverse, corrupt in all his ways, he has lost all his excellent gifts which he had once received from God." Since man had thrown away all his gifts, he couldn't image God any more. However, man's mandate to do so remained.

As to the extent of man's depravity, Genesis 6:5 has nothing positive to say of man. "Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually". Note here how God has piled up the expressions He used to describe man's wickedness, in order to draw out how depraved we have become through our fall into sin. Man's heart is "only evil" and "continually" so; but more, the "thoughts" behind man's heart and even the "intent" that drives "the thoughts" are only and continually evil. The words of Jeremiah 19:7 are equally damning: "the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?" See too Ephesians 2:1-3, "And you (Christ) made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others."

This is quite different from the way the Arminians spoke. The Arminian position was this, "In spiritual death the spiritual gifts are not separate from the will of man, since the will as such has never been corrupted but only hampered through the darkness of the understanding and the unorderliness of the passions. If these hindrances have been removed, the will can exert its full innate power. The will is of itself able to will and to choose, or not to will and not to choose, all manner of good which may be presented to it" (Rejection of Errors, No 3 - Error, Book of Praise, p. 560). In other words, the will didn't become bad. The will was neutral and it remained neutral despite the fall into sin. The 'only' result of the fall is that man simply finds it much harder to exercise his free will; the fall has placed a hindrance on the ability of the will to prompt the heart to do the right. For man's heart is no longer a-little-bit 'inclined to sin' but 'strongly inclined to sin'. Therefore it is difficult now for the will to tell the heart to do what the mind knows it should do. Man's will has been "hampered".

The fathers therefore saw a need to state the Reformed position concerning man's total depravity and corruption as a result of the fall by adding in Article 1, "But rebelling against God through the instigation of the devil and through his own free will, (man) deprived himself of these excellent gifts, and instead brought upon himself blindness, horrible darkness, vanity, and perverseness of judgment in his mind; malice, rebelliousness, and stubbornness in his will and heart; and impurity in all his affections." In presenting the Reformed position of man in Paradise, the fathers said that man was created perfectly, 100% good. After the fall into sin man became totally corrupt, 100% evil. The Arminians on the other hand would not speak in such absolute terms concerning either man's created or fallen state. Man was not perfectly good in Paradise in the first place, they said, because man had an inclination to sin; i.e man was only (say) 95% good. Nor did man become totally evil, they said, but only strongly inclined to sin, say, 95% evil.

Whereas the Arminians spoke of man being only sick, still able to call out for help, the Reformed spoke of man being dead. Once perfect in Paradise, man became totally and radically depraved as a result of the fall - said the fathers.

The notion that man is not dead but only sick is familiar to us today too. This philosophy of so many years ago is presently very much alive in today's New Agism: no person is dead in sin, each person is instead a god. The cause of the evils prevalent in society are not, therefore, to be found in man's depravity but in (for example) a lack of education, deprived home backgrounds, or mental illness. At bottom, though, the refusal to acknowledge that we are totally depraved is the teaching of the Arminians come alive in a different jacket again. That in turn makes it clear how relevant our Confessions still are today. Our Confessions, though written so many years ago, address very contemporary issues. Many years ago the fathers gave us the answers we need today.

ARTICLE 2

CORRUPTION PROPAGATED

In the years prior to the Synod of Dort, the people in the pews of the churches of the Netherlands were taught that man is not depraved, but sick. The Arminians repeated the error of the Pelagians: sin (it was said) was the result of imitating others. Therefore, in order to set straight the thinking of the faithful church members, the fathers saw a need to include the

material contained in Article 2. Article 2 addresses the issue of why it is that I am sinful and that I sin. The answer given is that corrupt fathers bring forth corrupt children. "Since after the fall man became corrupt, he as a corrupt father brought forth corrupt children."

In Genesis 5:1-3 we read, "This is the book of the genealogy of Adam. In the day that God created man, He made him in the likeness of God. He created them male and female, and blessed them and called them Mankind in the day they were created. And Adam lived one hundred and thirty years, and begot a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth." We read here of God having created Adam in the image of God, and of Seth being begotten in the image of Adam. In other words, Adam reflected what God was like and Seth reflected what Adam was like. Adam had been created "very good", and had received from God the ability to image what God was like; with his task to be image had come also the capacity to carry out the task.

However, between Adam's creation and Seth's birth was the fall into sin. Adam bore a son after he had discarded his capacity to image God. Adam had become evil, and so Seth -born as he was in the image of his father Adam - reflected the sinfulness of his father. The depravity and corruption and evil that characterised Adam characterised Seth also. Adam "as a corrupt father brought forth corrupt children."

This is the pattern followed from one generation to the next down through the centuries. Seth's son Enosh imaged the sinfulness of his father and so on, all the way to us who are alive today, imaging the sinfulness of our fathers. And the children we bear today possess our sinfulness and so image it too. This is the principle and the tragedy of every childbirth: children image the parents, reflect their sinfulness. This tragedy is pointed up in Leviticus 12, where we read of the Lord's instructions concerning purification after childbirth; the mother had become unclean because she had placed a sinful child in the Father's creation.

That the child born to sinful parents is himself sinful is confessed by David regarding himself in Psalm 51:5, "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me." Here David is not saying that the act of conception as such was sinful, but that sin was present in him right from the moment of his conception. With reference to man Job said, "Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean?" (Job 14:4), and adds this answer, "No one!" Man is sinful, and so his offspring are invariably sinful too. The concept that corrupt parents bring forth corrupt children is also confessed in Belgic Confession Article 15, namely, "We believe that by the disobedience of Adam original sin has spread throughout the whole human race. It is a corruption of the entire nature of man and a hereditary evil which infects even infants in their mother's womb." Said the fathers to the people in the pew: your children are sinful, not because they follow the your example as parents, but because each is born depraved. Children are born into this world as sinners.

By the grace of the Lord, God has sovereignly broken the cycle of corrupt parents bringing forth corrupt children when He caused His only Son to become man. Says Article 2, "Thus the corruption has spread from Adam to all his descendants, with the exception of Christ alone...." From generation to generation sinful parents conceived only sinful children who in turn conceived only more sinful children. Yet God has intervened to break that cycle. Christ was born of a woman, but not of a man. Said Gabriel to Mary in Luke 1:35, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God." Note the title the Child was to

receive: Holy One, i.e. without sin. The Gospel of Redemption is that God broke the cycle, giving a perfect man who could pay for sin.

Each parent could ask, "is it really fair that my children are born sinful even though they were not present in Paradise?" Note then the concluding phrase of Article 2: "... the corruption has spread from Adam to all his descendants ... by the propagation of a vicious nature, according to the righteous judgment of God." That is: God is not at all unfair in letting children be sinful - though they are born centuries after Adam's fall. For God says in Scripture: "Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned -" (Romans 5:12). Here it is said that everybody was sinned in Paradise, including Adam, Nathaniel, ... and me. How does one explain how we were there? A couple of possible explanations have been suggested, but at bottom we cannot explain definitively. The two suggested explanations are as follows:

1. The Realist Approach reasons that I was actually present in Paradise, and appeals to Hebrews 7:1-10 to explain. This passage recalls the episode of Genesis 14, when Melchizedek received from Abraham one tenth of the booty he had acquired after defeating the four kings in battle, and argues that in effect the Levites paid tithes to Melchizedek through Abraham. "Even Levi, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, so to speak, for he was still in the loins of his father when Melchizedek met him" (Hebrews 7:9,10). The Realist explanation for my involvement in the fall in Paradise says that as Levi paid tithes to Melchizedek through his being present in Abraham's loins (though born years later), so we were present in the loins of Adam when he sinned and so we partook in that act of sinning.
2. The Federalist Approach reasons that Adam was the head of the human race, and when he followed a particular course of action, the whole human race followed suit. This can be compared to a Head of State declaring war on another country. Not only is the Head of State at war with that country but his whole country is at war.

In an attempt to answer our questions concerning our participation in the act of the fall into sin, these two approaches by no means answer all our questions. The fact remains that God says that we all sinned. Whose fault is it that I am sinful? Can we say that Adam is at fault because he fell and so lost all his good gifts? No, the Lord says that I am sinful because I fell. Every man is punished for his own sins. Although the Arminians say that "It is improper to say that original sin as such is sufficient to condemn the whole human race or to deserve temporal and eternal punishment" (Rejection of Errors No 1 - Error, Book of Praise, p. 559), the Lord says it is fair. In the words of our article, it is "according to the righteous judgment of God."

ARTICLE 3

MAN'S TOTAL INABILITY

This article is a response to the Arminian belief that man did not become totally corrupt after the fall into sin, and is still able to exercise his free will. Man, they said, is not dead, but only sick. Said the Arminians, "The unregenerate man is not really or totally dead in sins, or deprived of all powers unto spiritual good. He can yet hunger and thirst after righteousness

and life, and offer the sacrifice of a contrite and broken spirit which is pleasing to God" (Rejection of Errors No 4 - Error, Book of Praise, p. 561).

In response the fathers turned to what Scripture teaches in passages as Genesis 6:5, Jeremiah 17:9 and Ephesians 2:1-3 (see Article 1 above). These texts are only open to one interpretation, namely that man's depravity and inability are not partial but total. Man is dead in trespasses and sin, and death knows no degrees. The fathers were insistent that the Bible teaches that man is inclined only to sin. Therefore Article 3 states that "... all men are conceived in sin and are born as children of wrath, incapable of any saving good, inclined to evil, dead in sins, and slaves of sin."

One finds a graphic depiction of man's radical depravity in John 6:44 where Jesus says, "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day." The word 'draw' in this passage means literally 'to drag', as the net full of fish in John 21:6. In other words, there is no co-operation on man's part to leave Satan's side in order to return to God's side. That is how radically depraved we made ourselves. We made no contribution whatsoever to our conversion. For that reason Article 3 ends with the statement, "And without the grace of the regenerating Holy Spirit they neither will nor can return to God, reform their depraved nature, or prepare themselves for its reformation." This is identical to what we read in LD 3, Q&A 8, namely, "But are we so corrupt that we are totally unable to do any good and inclined to all evil? Yes, unless we are regenerated by the Spirit of God." That is: we do not have within ourselves the capacity to do the slightest good (according to the Scriptural loading of the word 'good'; see LD 33.91) unless God acts upon us. Only if God works in us do things change or get done in our lives. My salvation does not depend on me. I cannot even call out to God for Him to help me. I depend totally on Him. As the farm-hand Klaas Kuipenga said to his minister, Rev deCock, before the Secession of 1834 in the Netherlands: "If I had to add even one sigh to my salvation, I would be forever lost."

What kind of a God is my God? He says concerning a person of His choosing, "that person is mine; I will regenerate him, give him a new heart, heal him and raise him to a new life." From beginning to end salvation is totally and completely God's doing. We are allowed to be dependent on God who freely gives life, and gives it abundantly. This moves me to voice praise to Him: what a God He is that He has chosen me, dead, with "every intent of the thoughts of my heart being only evil continually." Yet God says to me, "I work faith in you and I give you a new heart". It is all His doing - what a marvel of His grace!

Chapters 3 & 4 - The Corruption of Man... : Articles 4-8

THE CORRUPTION OF MAN, HIS CONVERSION TO GOD, AND THE MANNER IN WHICH IT OCCURS

ARTICLE 4

THE INADEQUACY OF THE LIGHT OF NATURE

In Article 1 the fathers had stated the Reformed position concerning man's total depravity and corruption as a result of the fall into sin. The fathers needed to do so because the Arminians taught that man did not become totally evil but only strongly inclined to sin. Man was not dead in sin said the Arminians, but only sick and therefore still able to call out for help. Said the Arminians: man has retained a something within him after the fall (the 'light of nature'), which, if used well, enables him to free himself from the depths to which he has fallen and reach out to God. The fathers summarised this error as follows, "The corrupt and natural man can so well use the common grace (which for the Arminians is the light of nature), or the gifts still left him after the fall, that he can gradually gain by their good use a greater, that is, the evangelical or saving grace, and salvation itself" (Rejection of Errors No 5 - Error, Book of Praise, p. 561).

The fathers are vague in Article 4 as to what the 'light of nature' actually is. They did not set out to define the term, but used it as they received it. So they could write towards the end of the article, "whatever this light may be." We ought not, then, to conclude that there is (according to the fathers) a 'light of nature'. They rather acquiesced to the language used. Their point was not so much to discuss whether there is some sort of a natural light as to consider the Arminians' argument that this light of nature was of benefit to fallen man. According to the Arminians, there is a natural light that assists man in "arriving at the saving knowledge of God and true conversion."

The fathers denied it. Certainly, God had created man in His image and so also given to man the capacity to fulfil his mandate of imaging God. God had equipped man with particular gifts so that man could carry out his task of being God's representative (see III/IV, Art 1). However, through the Fall man lost these gifts. Man lost his ability to image God (though the mandate to image Him remained). This loss did not mean, though, that man become an animal; man remained man. Nor did people after the Fall always commit every possible sin they were capable of. There is a something, call it a 'light of nature', if you will, "whereby he retains some notions about God, about natural things, and about the difference between what is honourable and shameful, and shows some regard for virtue and outward order." Man retained a small remnant of what he used to be. Just as the wreckage of a ship floating on the water is a remnant of what there used to be (and it certainly isn't a ship anymore!) so an evidence remains in man of what man used to be. The question of the fathers was therefore: can we use this evidence, namely that man remained man and has retained a measure of decency within him, to our advantage in order to work our way into God's favour again, to come to faith? Whereas the Arminians said this was possible, the fathers insisted it was not

so, because man is dead, totally depraved (see Articles 1-3). The fathers could only be sure it was not so on the basis of what Scripture says in passages as the following.

Romans 1:20-32

"For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened" (vs 20,21).

God's attributes can be perceived by man in the things God has made. Man knows God. Yet what does man do with this revelation? Does man use whatever 'light of nature' there might be to work with this revelation in order to come closer to God? Not at all! rather, as the next verses state, man uses this revelation to make idols.

1 Corinthians 2:14

"But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned."

Does a 'light of nature' help man? No. The Scriptures teach that the things of the Spirit of God remain foolishness to fallen man.

Matthew 16:22,23

Jesus had just told His disciples of His imminent suffering, death and resurrection.

"Then Peter took (Jesus) aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "Far be it from you, Lord; this shall not happen to you!" But (Jesus) turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me Satan! You are an offence to me, for you are not mindful to the things of God, but the things of men."

Peter had spent many months under Jesus' tutelage and witnessed His many signs and miracles. Yet he responded to Jesus' words so negatively. If there is within us a something by which we can reach out to God, certainly Peter -advantaged as he was with his time with Jesus- would have used it. But, despite his advantage, he does not reach out to God; he spoke rather as a follower of Satan.

The fathers wanted to point out that what the Arminians taught does not work. Man cannot use a 'light of nature' to find his way back to God. This light of nature -"whatever this light may be"- is inadequate to save man. In fact, the remnant that is left within us testifies against us and only serves to accentuate how deeply we have fallen from the position God had once given us. So it leaves us without any excuse before God. As the fathers said, "... whatever this light may be, man wholly pollutes it in various ways and suppresses it by his wickedness. By doing this, he makes himself inexcusable before God."

ARTICLE 5

THE INADEQUACY OF THE LAW

The Arminians taught that fallen man could also use the Ten Commandments to attain salvation. By obeying the law of God man could climb his way back into God's favour, for "the will (of man) as such has never been corrupted but only hampered through the darkness of the understanding and the unorderliness of the passions. If these hindrances have been removed, the will can exert its full innate power. The will is of itself able to will and to choose, or not to will and not to choose, all manner of good which may be presented to it" (Rejection of Errors No 3 - Error, Book of Praise, p. 560). In other words, given training and education, man could again learn to obey the Ten Commandments. After all, God gave the Ten Commandments and man is able to obey them; therefore the Ten Commandments can help man. Given the right education man would not only be able to obey the law again, but he would even do so very willingly!

However the fathers did not recognise the above teaching of the Arminians as being scripturally correct. Granted, God did indeed give His law to the Jews through Moses. However, obedience to the law would not save the Jews. That was not God's purpose for the law. Rather, the law served to convict man of his sin and guilt. "... For though (the Ten Commandments) reveals the greatness of sin, and more and more convicts man of his guilt, yet it neither points out a remedy nor gives him power to rise out of this misery. Rather, weakened by the flesh, it leaves the transgressor under the curse. Man cannot, therefore, through the law obtain saving grace." The fathers wrote this on the basis of what they learned from Scripture in the following passages:

Romans 7:5

"For when we were in the flesh, the passions of sins which were aroused by the law were at work in our members to bear fruit to death."

The law did not encourage us to reach out to God, to know how to do good or to please Him. Rather, the law aroused within us sinful passions, the fruits of which is our death.

Romans 7:7-11

"What shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, "You shall not covet". But sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all manner of evil desire. For apart from the law sin was dead. I was alive once without the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died. And the commandment, which was to bring life, I found to bring death. For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it killed me."

I only know what sin is because the Lord has told me by means of His Law. God's Law spells out my sinfulness and how deserving I am of death. By saying in Article 5 that the Law "reveals the greatness of sin ... yet it neither points out a remedy" for man, the fathers are echoing the message of Romans 7. The Law itself is no remedy for man's total depravity; it offers no hope of salvation.

Romans 8:3

"For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh."

In Paradise the Law was able to do what it was supposed to do. That is: in Paradise man was able to obey the law perfectly, and so keep the obligations of the covenant. With the fall into

sin the law became weak. Not that the Law itself became weak and lost its capacity to accomplish its purpose. Rather, man through his own sinfulness lost his capacity to obey it and so the law was of no advantage to him in working his way out of the pit into which he had fallen through his fall into sin. Therefore the fathers wrote that the Law does not give man "power to rise out of this misery. Rather, weakened by the flesh, it leaves the transgressor under the curse. Man cannot, therefore, through the law obtain saving grace."

Galatians 3:10

"For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.'"

If man wants to gain access to God via the Law, then he must obey it perfectly; and sinful man cannot. Therefore the apostle Paul instructs that the law does not save us.

ARTICLE 6

THE NEED FOR THE GOSPEL

By means of Article 6 the fathers put emphasis on God's work of salvation. Man is not saved by the light of nature, nor by obedience to the Law. In no way is salvation man's doing. Rather, it is God who is at work, reaching out to man in order to save him from the perdition into which he had thrown himself. "What, therefore, neither the light of nature nor the law can do, God performs." What God does (and what neither the law nor this light of nature could do) is work in human hearts the faith needed to be righteous before God.

How does God work this faith? God does it "by the power of the Holy Spirit." Yet the Holy Spirit does not place faith into human hearts just like that, without the use of means. The Spirit uses a tool, an instrument. The instrument used is "the word or ministry of reconciliation, which is the gospel of the Messiah." As we use a tool, the hammer, to place in a nail in a plank, so the Holy Spirit uses a tool, the Word, to work faith in our dead hearts. The following evidence may be drawn from Scripture:

Romans 10:14,17

"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? ... So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."

Faith, then, comes through the word. But the word in turn does not act by itself. For:

Ephesians 6:17

"And take ... the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God".

In the preceding verses the apostle has instructed his readers to "put on the whole armour of God." This armour includes a sword, the word. A sword lying on a table is harmless. But in the hands of a soldier, the sword becomes deadly. Likewise with the word of God. On its own the word does nothing. However, when God the Holy Spirit uses the word, it is effective and gets things done; it reaches into hearts dead in sin and works faith. We must understand, then,

that the Holy Spirit and the Word are not two separate tools of God, but rather, that the Holy Spirit is sent by God to use the tool of the Word in order to work faith. See Figure 1.

1 Thessalonians 1:5

"For our Gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit ..."

Said the apostle to the Thessalonians: the Word didn't come to you by itself, but with (the power of) the Holy Spirit, and therefore it is effective: i.e. "and you became followers of us and the Lord..." (verse 6).

This is also the material of Lord's Day 7, Q&A 21: "What is true faith? True faith is a sure knowledge whereby I accept as true all that God has revealed to us in His Word.... This faith the Holy Spirit works in my heart by the gospel." That is: the Holy Spirit works faith by means of the Word. Likewise, in Lord's Day 25, Q&A 65 we confess, "Since then faith alone makes us share in Christ and all His benefits, where does this faith come from? From the Holy Spirit who works it in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel"

At the end of Article 6 the fathers saw need, in the face of Arminian teaching, to state that God's way of saving sinners was the same in both Old and New Testament times, viz, salvation comes only through faith, worked by God in the hearts of man. In the Old Testament one was not saved through obedience to the Law, but by faith. This is equally true for those who live in the times of the New Testament: faith is a gift; it is God's doing alone. As the apostle wrote to the Ephesians, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8).

What the fathers wished to make clear so many years ago to those who sat under the preaching of Arminians week by week was that salvation is not an achievement of man, but a sovereign deed of God. God works faith and therefore salvation is God's doing.

ARTICLE 7

WHY THE GOSPEL IS SENT TO SOME AND NOT TO OTHERS

If God works the faith that is needed for salvation by means of His Word, then why doesn't His Word go out to all? The Arminians conceded that in the Old Testament God revealed Himself to only a few: Israel. For example, one reads in Psalm 147:19,20, "He declares His word to Jacob, His statutes and His judgments to Israel. He has not dealt thus with any nation; and as for His judgments, they have not known them. Praise the LORD!" In the New Testament, the circle was broadened; God sends His Gospel to many peoples. However, it is not true that the Gospel goes to everybody. For example, in Acts 16:6,7 we read of Paul and his companions, "Now when they had gone through Phrygia and the region of Galatia, they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia. After they had come to Mysia, they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit did not permit them." God forbade Paul and his co-workers from preaching the Gospel in specific areas of the world.

Why doesn't God permit His Word to be preached everywhere? The Arminians explain this as being due to the fact that some people are better than others, and are hence more worthy of

receiving the Gospel. Said the Arminians, "God sends the gospel to one people rather than to another not merely and solely because of the good pleasure of His will, but because one people is better and worthier than another to which the gospel is not preached" (Chapter 1, Rejection of Errors, No. 9 - Error, Book of Praise, p.544). The fathers on the other hand explained in Article 7, "The cause of this very distribution of the gospel is not be ascribed to the worthiness of one people above another, nor to the better use of the light of nature, but to the sovereign good pleasure and undeserved love of God." It is simply because God was pleased to do it this way. See Deuteronomy 9 as evidence that Israel was not privileged above other nations because they were better. In the context of this article, the point of the fathers' insistence is that each tribe is as depraved as the next; all are dead in sin and there equally undeserving of salvation.

In view of the fact that all are equally depraved, and that God sovereignly and graciously sent His Gospel of salvation to me so I might have faith and be saved, heightens the gratitude and the humility that must fill my heart. "Therefore we to whom so great a grace is granted, beyond and contrary to all we deserve, ought to acknowledge it with a humble and grateful heart."

At the same time the very depravity of our hearts and mankind's common unworthiness halt us from trying to determine why the Lord sends His gospel to the one nation and not to the other. "But as regards others to whom this grace is not given, we ought with the apostle to adore the severity and righteousness of the judgments of God but by no means inquisitively to pry into them."

ARTICLE 8

THE EARNEST CALL BY THE GOSPEL

The Arminians questioned the earnestness of God's call to faith. They accused the Reformed of portraying God as being hypocritical. For, they said of the Reformed, you say that God sends His preachers to proclaim the Gospel to all, whereas God knows ahead of time that only the elect are able to respond positively to this call and the reprobate can not. So, the Arminians concluded, you Reformed people must teach that God is not serious, not genuine, not earnest when He calls a reprobate to repentance. And, they continued, if you say that God is genuine, is earnest, is sincere in His offer of salvation, then God must surely want every hearer to be saved, doesn't want any in hell. According to the Arminians the Reformed could not have it both ways, the Reformed could not maintain both that a) some people are reprobate and shall go to hell, and b) God is serious, sincere, genuine in His call to all hearers to repent. According to the Arminians, these two positions were contradictory; to maintain them both is to say that God is hypocritical.

In response to the above reasoning of the Arminians the fathers wrote Article 8. God, said the fathers, is serious in His call. God's call to repent and believe is always well meant. "As many as are called by the gospel are earnestly called, for God earnestly and most sincerely reveals in His Word what is pleasing to Him, namely, that those who are called should come to Him. He also earnestly promises rest of soul and eternal life to all who come to Him and believe."

A. Various passages of Scripture reveal something of the sincerity of God in His call to repentance and faith.

Ezekiel 33:11

"As I live", says the Lord God, "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why should you die, O house of Israel?"

Does God seriously mean what He says here, or is He merely 'having Israel on'? No one who reads as passage as this could seriously contend that God does not mean here what He says. God certainly does not come with an invitation to repent, only to turn around and say to the repentant that he has to go to hell. Such is not the God of the Bible!! When God says "turn from your evil ways" then God means exactly that. It comes down to who one thinks God is.

Isaiah 55:1

"Ho! Everyone who thirsts, Come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat. Yes, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price."

Here, too, none who reads this invitation can maintain that does not mean what He says here. The question is really, If God invites to come and drink of the waters of salvation, how can one doubt that He means it?

2 Corinthians 5:20

Paul says, "... we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God."

Luke 13:34

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not willing!"

Who is not touched by the laden emotions of the Lord in this passage? And who could maintain that Jesus is not sincere in His appeal to Jerusalem?!

B. Not only, though, do the Scriptures teach that God is most sincere in His call to repentance and faith. The Bible at the same time teaches that some are reprobate and will certainly go to hell.

I Peter 2:8

"They stumble, being disobedient to the word, to which they also were appointed."

Romans 9:22

"What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction...?"

The fathers were convinced: the Lord also reveals that some are reprobate, yes, even of those who hear the word.

Is God's call of the Gospel to repent and believe serious? Yes, indeed it is. Are all who hear this Gospel saved? No, not all. How then does one correlate the two? One cannot. The

problem with the Arminians is that they are rationalists to the core. The Arminians will only believe what is logical and understandable to the human mind. That is to be expected, for the Arminian maintains that man is not completely dead in sin; the mind is only "hampered" by the fall (see Rejection of Errors, No 3).

But the Reformed believer knows that a creature cannot possibly understand the ways of God. And he knows also that a fallen creature can understand the ways of God even less. So the reformed believer is not surprised that not every part of God's revelation adds up logically. The reformed believer confesses that God's ways are perfect, and his own mind is depraved, and so he quietly accepts all that God has revealed - even when to the human mind that revelation is contradictory. So I acknowledge Who God is and I acknowledge what I am. Then, in humble adoration of God, I say with David in Psalm 147, "Praise the Lord!"

Chapters 3 & 4 - The Corruption of Man... : Articles 9-13

THE CORRUPTION OF MAN, HIS CONVERSION TO GOD, AND THE MANNER IN WHICH IT OCCURS

ARTICLE 9

WHY SOME OF THE CALLED DO NOT COME

Although God's call for repentance to all people is an earnest call, not all who hear this call respond positively. Article 9 explains why it is that some people reject God's call.

In order to understand the material of this article, one first needs to appreciate that everybody remains responsible for responding to the Gospel in faith. It is true that by the fall into sin each member of the human race became dead in sin. Yet God continues to hold each person responsible for his actions; our fall into sin is in God's eyes not an excuse that gets us off the hook of our God-given responsibility. So, when God causes His Word to come to particular hearers so that they are called to repentance, He is serious about this call and He holds each person responsible for responding in faith. Therefore we read in John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life". All are responsible to answer the call positively, and whoever does answer positively will certainly receive the promised life. God's call is always well-meant.

Why is it then that some respond differently than others? This is not because different people hear a different call. Nor is it because God's call is genuine to some and not to others. As our article states, the fault lies not with God, nor with the Word, nor with the work of Christ as proclaimed by the Word. "It is not the fault of the gospel, nor of the Christ offered by the gospel, nor of God, who calls through the gospel and who even confers various gifts upon them, that many who are called through the ministry of the gospel do not come and are not converted." Where does the fault lie then? Says Article 9, "The fault lies in themselves." The problem lies with man, with us. Our own self-inflicted deadness-in-sin is the cause for some not responding to the gospel in faith and obedience.

That the problem lies with the hearer is drawn out by the reference to Jesus' parable of the sower in Matthew 13. One kind of seed is sown, some falling by the wayside, some in stony places, some among the thorns and some on good ground. Though the seed falls in different places, it is the same seed. It is likewise with God's call of the gospel. All people hear the same call. In Church we all hear the same preaching. Yet people respond differently. The problem is not that the Word differs. Rather, the problem lies with the soil, i.e. the hearts of the hearers. The one person remains cold and indifferent when he hears the preaching; like the seed which falls on the path and is snatched away by the birds. Another person hears the Word with much initial enthusiasm, but this enthusiasm doesn't last for other cares of life receive priority; like the seed which falls among the stones, grows into a plant but soon withers and dies because its roots have not gone down deep enough.

Where the response to the call of the gospel is not one of faith, God holds the person responsible. One's circumstances will never excuse a negative response. Man's heart is at fault. Man is dead in sin by His own fault, and so by nature responds with rejection to the call of God's Word.

ARTICLE 10

WHY OTHERS WHO ARE CALLED DO COME

If it is man's own fault if he does not come and is not converted when called through the ministry of the gospel, who must receive the credit when man does come and is converted? Says Article 10, "This is not to be ascribed to man.... It is to be ascribed to God." This emphatic statement was made in the context of what the Arminians taught. Said the Arminians: man is not totally dead in sin, but man is only sick, injured, and still has the capacity to cry out for help and to make decisions for himself. Man is still capable of responding to God's call in whichever way he wills. The Arminians believed (in the words of Article 10) that the person who responds with faith to the call of the gospel "distinguish(es) himself by his free will above others who are furnished with equal or sufficient grace for faith or conversion." In other words, the 'better people' respond positively to God's call. However, the fathers rejected this. Said they: it is strictly God's doing alone, and this is pointed out by Bible passages such as:

Romans 9:16

"So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy." Man can try all he wants to do it alone, but he cannot.

Ephesians 2:8

"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God."

Man's heart does not want to respond to God's call with faith. If God did not work faith in man's heart, man would not respond with faith.

If a positive response to God's call is God's work alone, then we owe God much praise. Said the fathers in their conclusion to Article 10, "All this (God) does that (men) may declare the wonderful deeds of Him who called them out of darkness into His marvellous light, and may boast not of themselves but of the Lord, according to the testimony of the apostles in various places." As to this testimony of the apostles, Paul said in 1 Corinthians 1:31, "He who glories, let him glory in the LORD," and in Romans 11:36, "For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory for ever." To give God all the glory is exactly what the Arminians didn't want to do. They wanted man to receive some of this glory. But what can depraved, sinful man do to save himself? Man is totally dependent on the Lord for salvation. To the Lord alone be praise for the miracle of man's positive response of faith!

ARTICLE 11

HOW GOD BRINGS ABOUT CONVERSION

In order for man to respond to God's call, the Arminians taught that God didn't have to instil anything new into man's heart, for all that man needed to make a response was already present in man. Said the Arminians, "In the true conversion of man, no new qualities, powers, or gifts can be infused by God into the will. Therefore faith, through which we are first converted and because of which we are called believers, is not a quality or gift infused by God but only an act of man. It cannot be said to be a gift, except with respect to the power to attain this faith" (Rejection of Errors No 6 - Error, Book of Praise, p.562). This is consistent with their teaching that man did not become totally dead in sin after the fall into sin but merely sick, injured, still capable of making decisions and able to ask for help. Fallen man still has the capacity to make a decision in favour of God. Little wonder then that the Arminians go on to say that nothing has to be added to man's will in order to make him believe. The fathers rejected this teaching of the Arminians as false. Said the fathers: man is dead, and a carcass simply doesn't respond no matter how long you preach to it.

How then can man, totally dead in sin, be saved? It can only be God's doing. God has elected certain persons from eternity. For the salvation of these persons, God ensures that a preacher is sent to them and that they hear the preaching. God in turn ensures also that, as a result of the preaching they hear, their hearts are changed.

One can distinguish between two groups among the elect. All the elect hear the Word, but some hear it first through the home, others first through the missionary. As it is, over the centuries so many of the elect have first heard the Word from Godly parents in the home. Those who first hear the Word this way are God's children by covenant, claimed by Him to be His in the covenant. In His care for these children of His, God has entrusted them to the care of believing parents, and given to the parents the instruction to teach their children (His children) Who their Father in heaven is (cf Deut 6:1-9, Ps 78, etc). The children in turn hear and normally respond with faith to the call to repent and believe. This is the norm. However, there are also other people whom God has chosen to life but who have not been entrusted to the care of believing parents. To reach these elect with the life-giving gospel, God has commanded the Church to send out missionaries to the ends of the earth (cf Matthew 28:19).

CONVERSION: THROUGH THE WORD AND THE SPIRIT

The Word does not work on its own, but together with the Holy Spirit. Better put: it is the Holy Spirit who works in the heart of the hearer through the Word. The reason why the Word does not work on its own is not because the word is of itself ineffective. It is rather because of the condition of the human heart. So dead in sin is the human heart that it does not and can not respond positively to the Word.

Consider Bill and Bob. If Bob cannot understand Bill, the problem could be that Bill is not speaking clearly. The problem could also be that Bob is deaf. As it is, there is no problem with the Word of God itself, as if it might in some way be unclear or not well-meant (see Article 9). Rather, the problem is with the hearer, for the fallen human race is dead, spiritually dead (Eph 2:1), and therefore very deaf. So the Holy Spirit needs to work through the Word to cause man to hear. That is: the Spirit uses the Word to reach into the heart of man to this dead heart is made able to hear what the Lord says. This close working relationship between the Spirit and the Word in the heart of the sinner is pointed out by the following passages from Scripture:

Ephesians 6:17

Paul, having exhorted the Ephesians to "put on the whole armour of God", (Ephesians 6:11) continues to say in verse 17, "And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God." The Word of God is the sword of the Spirit.

Hebrews 4:12

"For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joint and marrow...."

In the hands of the Holy Spirit, the Word becomes a powerful two-edged sword which pierces the heart petrified by sin. The Spirit breaks the heart so that it can respond to the Word which reaches into it.

Ezekiel 11:19

"Then I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within them, and take the stony heart out of their flesh, and give them a heart of flesh".

The Holy Spirit removes the petrified heart, and replaces it with a heart of flesh.

Ezekiel 36:26,27

"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes, and you will keep my judgments and do them".

It is the work of the Spirit to reach into the heart of sin. The Spirit makes the person, dead in sin, undergo a 'heart transplant' as it were, replacing the stony, dead heart with a heart of flesh which responds to the Word.

Article 11 too, points out how the Spirit uses the Word to work faith. God "takes care that the gospel is preached to them, and powerfully enlightens (the minds of the elect) by the Holy Spirit, so that they may rightly understand and discern the things of the Spirit of God." The Spirit penetrates the heart of man in order to make it receptive to the Word. "By the efficacious (=effective) working of the same regenerating Spirit He also penetrates into the innermost recesses of man. He opens the closed and softens the hard heart, circumcises that which was uncircumcised, and instils new qualities into the will." Contrary to what the Arminians claimed, new qualities and powers MUST be infused by God into the will in order for conversion to occur.

THE EFFECTS OF THE OUTPOURING OF THE SPIRIT AT PENTECOST

Christ spent all of three years preaching the Gospel in Palestine, and one reads of many followers. However, by the end of His life, how many were still dedicated to Him? In Herod's courtyard the masses cried out their rejection of this Jesus of Nazareth by their loud calls to "crucify Him, crucify Him!" His disciples too did not stay by Him. One, betrayed Him, another denied Him, the rest fled. All that was left of Jesus' following was some women who came to the cross. Given such dismal numbers, one is much inclined to speak of Jesus' ministry being a failure.... But see, after the Holy Spirit was poured out on Pentecost, we read of 3000 people being converted in one hit (Acts 2:41). Here is pointed up the effective

working of the Holy Spirit; hearts hardened by sin were broken open. It happened as Jesus prophesied during the course of His ministry:

John 14:26

"But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you."

John 15:26

"But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me." The Helper Jesus spoke of is the Holy Spirit.

John 16:13

"However, when he, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth...."

The Spirit works in the hearts of people and so changes people. That explains a text such as Acts 16:14, where Paul writes, "Now a certain woman named Lydia heard us. She was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira, who worshipped God. The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul." Of her own strength Lydia could not respond to the preaching.

The Word cannot be believed without the Holy Spirit's work of transformation of the human heart. Therefore Article 11 concludes, "(The Holy Spirit) makes the will, which was dead, alive; which was bad, good; which was unwilling, willing; and which was stubborn, obedient. He moves and strengthens it so that, like a good tree, it may be able to produce the fruit of good works."

Just how radical a change the Holy Spirit works in the heart of sinful man is pointed up by passages of Scripture as the following:

1 Corinthians 6:9-11

In 1 Corinthians 1:2 we read that Paul addresses this letter to "the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints." To these persons, now, Paul writes, "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God."

Said Paul to the saints at Corinth, "and such were some of you". Note the past tense: not 'are' some of you, but 'were' some of you. No longer are they fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, homosexuals, sodomites, thieves, etc. By the Spirit of God they were washed, radically changed, so that what they used to be they no longer are.

Ephesians 5:8-10

Said Paul to the Ephesians, "For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth), proving what is acceptable to the Lord." The saints at Ephesus too had been changed and so were to show this in their conduct. To use the words of Article 11, "He makes the will,

which was dead, alive; which was bad, good ..." The change worked by the Spirit in the heart of depraved man is real and it is radical.

Romans 7:18

Paul writes of the Christian, the person changed by the Spirit, "... for to will is present with me..." I can will to do the will of God; the drive to do so is there. The very same Paul who once went out collecting court orders in order to imprison Christians now says that he wants to do good. This is a radical change worked in Paul's heart by the Holy Spirit. Certainly, it is not a total change, so that Paul can carry out God's will perfectly. Not at all; "In this life even the holiest have only a small beginning of this obedience. Nevertheless, with earnest purpose they do begin to live not only according to some but to all the commandments of God" (HC, LD 44, Q&A 113, 114).

Such is the effect of the Spirit's work in my heart. He changed me so radically, that in spite of once having a dead, petrified heart, incapable even of desiring to doing God's will (let alone doing it), I now want to do His will.

ARTICLE 12

THE DIVINE CHARACTER OF REGENERATION

Whereas Article 11 focused on the role of the Holy Spirit in the work of conversion (He changes the hearts of people), Article 12 focuses on the conversion itself. Concerning this conversion, our article gives a list of terms that mean the same thing taken from various places of Scripture. Some examples of the terms are given in Table 1.

Table 1	
Term	Scripture Passages
Regeneration	Titus 3:5
New Creation	2 Corinthians 5:17, Ephesians 2:10
Resurrection of the Dead	Romans 6:4
Making alive	Romans 6:13, Ephesians 2:5

CONVERSION: THE WORK OF GOD OR OF MAN?

The Lord used the word 'born again' when He spoke of conversion (John 3:5). As man has no involvement at all in his birth, so many has no involvement either in his rebirth, ie, his conversion. As man can generate himself, so many cannot re-generate himself. As Adam did not contribute at al to his creation (he didn't, for example, collect the dust for God to assemble him), so Adam after the fall could not contribute to his re-creation. As Lazarus could contribute nothing to his physical resurrection from the dead, so he could contribute nothing to his spiritual resurrection from the dead. The very terms Scripture uses to describe conversion rule out any involvement from man himself in that conversion; his contribution to

conversion is nil. We do not recreate ourselves, regenerate ourselves, or raise ourselves from our spiritual death. Our conversion is exclusively God's work.

The first part of Article 12 emphasises that it is God who is busy in the work of man's conversion. The fathers saw the need for such emphasis because of the teaching of the Arminians who said, "Grace and free will are partial causes which together work the beginning of conversion. In the order of these causes grace does not precede the working of the will. God does not efficiently help the will of man unto conversion until the will of man moves itself and determines to do this" (Rejection of Errors No 9 - Error, Book of Praise, p. 564). Quite clearly, the Arminians said that Yes, man can and man does contribute to his conversion. God's grace and man's free will are both "partial causes" leading to conversion. The fathers however, on the basis of the following Scripture passages, pointed out the error of the Arminian teaching. Man's conversion is exclusively the work of God:

Romans 9:16

"So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy."

Ephesians 2:8

"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God."

WHO NEEDS TO BE BORN AGAIN?

Having been raised in the Church does not exempt anyone from needing to be born again. We all need to be born again if we wish to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Jesus did not say this to a heathen, but to Nicodemus - a child of the covenant as any of us, a man 'raised in the Church', yes, even "a teacher in Israel", a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews, a man who knew his Bible (see John 3). To him Jesus said, "Nicodemus, you must be born again." If a man of Nicodemus' standing and pedigree had to be born again, I certainly too need to be born again!

Automatically we go on to ask, "Am I born again?" and if so, "When did it happen?" One hears repeatedly of the need to have a 'conversion story' - like Paul had on the road to Damascus (Acts 9). However, experiences as Paul had are not the norm for how conversion takes place in all people's lives. Adam came into being as a mature adult, for God called him into existence in a moment. Yet none of us expects the rest of the human race to come into existence in the same way. For we all understand that Adam's creation is not the norm for the way people come into existence. The norm is that people come into existence by a process involving a vague conception (who can tell when that occurs, or even how?), a period of hidden growth in the womb, an eventual birth, and more growth before one becomes the adult Adam was. That Paul was converted instantly and that he could recall his conversion was not the norm. Faith is a process, a growth that takes years. As none of us can recall the moment of our conception or birth, and yet we are convinced it happened, so it may well be that we cannot recall the moment we began to believe or were born again - and yet we can be convinced it happened.

CONVERSION: A SUPERNATURAL AND POWERFUL WORK OF GOD

"But this regeneration is by no means brought about only by outward preaching, by moral persuasion, or by such a mode of operation that, after God has done His part, it remains in the

power of man to be regenerated or not regenerated, converted or not converted." This is a direct reference to what the Arminians taught, namely that "The grace whereby we are converted to God is only a gentle advising" (Rejection of Errors No 7 - Error, Book of Praise, p. 562). According to the Arminians, God's role in man's conversion is no more than a kind whisper that he has something better to offer us than the competition (ie, Satan) can offer. That advise, say the Arminians, is grace. They go on to say, "This manner of working which consists in advising is the most noble manner in the conversion of man and is most in harmony with man's nature." In other words, man is a 'somebody' and would be offended if God compelled him to believe. Remember that according to the Arminians man is not dead but sick. God is portrayed as a 'gentleman' who knows better than to exercise force on us; rather, God advises us. "There is no reason why this advising grace alone should not be sufficient to make the natural man spiritual. Indeed, God does not bring about the consent of the will except through this moral suasion. The power of the divine working surpasses the working of Satan, in that God promises eternal while Satan promises only temporal goods." In other words, Satan also whispers in our ear, but we have enough wherewithal to decide that God's offer is better than Satan's offer.

The fathers could not accept the Arminian stance that God gently advises man, for that is an injustice to God and His Word. Regeneration is God working in a supernatural manner in a heart which is dead in sin. "It is ... clearly a supernatural, most powerful, and at the same time most delightful, marvellous, mysterious, and inexpressible work. According to Scripture, inspired by the Author of this work, regeneration is not inferior in power to creation or the resurrection of the dead." Paul, in Ephesians 1:19,20 speaks of God's mighty power at work in us who believe, the same power which He used to raise Christ from death. God works mightily with mighty power and as a result of this we believe.

ARTICLE 13

REGENERATION IS INCOMPREHENSIBLE

Articles 11 and 12 have certainly not answered all our questions concerning our conversion. In Article 13 the fathers wish to point out that believers in this life "cannot fully understand the way in which God does this work." Can you explain God's work of Genesis 1, namely that God simply called into being the light, plants, and animals? It is beyond my understanding and explanation. Can you explain that Christ was able to raise Lazarus to life after he had lain dead in the tomb for four days? I can't. Creation and resurrection are concepts we cannot understand, not because they defy reason, but because our minds are finite - and sinful too. Concepts as creation and recreation extend beyond our understanding. God's ways are higher than our ways (Isaiah 55:8f).

However, that does not mean that conversion is beyond belief. A little child may ask how a motor runs, and his father may tell the child also, but the child will not understand - not because the concept is too difficult but because the child is but a child. The Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has told us that every Christian is reborn. I might not understand how my rebirth came about, in fact, I do not understand it. But I accept the Word of my God, and so believe that Yes, a sinner can be born again, I can be born again, I am born again. I believe: the God Who created the world and man, Who raised Lazarus from death, has also changed my heart by His Spirit and Word.

I believe it. And because I believe it, I also experience the effect of His work of conversion in my life.

Chapters 3 & 4 - The Corruption of Man... : Articles 14-15

THE CORRUPTION OF MAN, HIS CONVERSION TO GOD, AND THE MANNER IN WHICH IT OCCURS

ARTICLE 14

FAITH IS A GIFT OF GOD

On the basis of the confession that regeneration is a gift of God, a work of the Lord through the Holy Spirit in the hearts of God's people, Article 14 draws the conclusion that "faith is therefore a gift of God". Faith and regeneration alike are worked by God. Article 14 arrives at this conclusion because faith and regeneration cannot be separated. One can distinguish between the two but one cannot separate them. The person who has faith has been regenerated and the person who has been regenerated has faith. If regeneration, then, is a gift of God (as was confessed in previous articles), it follows that faith is also a gift of God.

That faith indeed is a gift of God is what Scripture teaches:

Ephesians 2:8

"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God."

Salvation comes through faith, says the apostle, and faith is God's gift.

Philippians 1:29

"For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake."

Paul mentions two things that are given by God, and the one is "to believe in Him": faith.

So we also confess in LD 25.65, "Since then faith alone makes us share in Christ and all His benefits, where does this faith come from? From the Holy Spirit who works it in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel...."

THE ARMINIAN POSITION: FAITH IS AN ACT OF MAN, BECAUSE MAN HAS A FREE WILL

The fathers confessed the material of Article 14 in reaction to what the Arminians were saying, namely,

"In the true conversion of man no new qualities, powers, or gifts can be infused by God into the will. Therefore faith, through which we are first converted and because of which we are called believers, is not a quality or gift infused by God but only an act of man. It cannot be said to be a gift, except with respect to the power to attain to this faith" (Rejection of Errors No. 6, Book of Praise, p. 562.)

Said the Arminians: faith is not God's gift; faith is man's doing. In view of the Arminian belief concerning the notion of the free will, it is not at all surprising that they concluded that faith is an act of man. The Arminians insist that man is not dead as a result of the fall into sin, but only sick, injured. Because man is not dead, man is able to make decisions; he has a free will. When God comes with the Gospel and offers faith to man, man is able to decide what to do with this offer - and God respects man's ability to choose.

To clarify further: the act of giving implies two steps: 1) giving, and 2) accepting and receiving. The person to whom something is given decides whether or not to accept or receive what is given. I may give to you a rose, but my act of giving does not at all guarantee that you will accept the rose and take it home. When God offers salvation, say the Arminians, I get to decide whether or not I will accept it. That is: I decide whether or not I will believe, have faith.

THE REFORMED POSITION: FAITH IS A GIFT OF GOD BECAUSE SCRIPTURE TEACHES THAT MAN IS DEAD IN SIN

Ephesians 2:1-5

Paul wrote to the saints who were in Ephesus,

"And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, ... But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)."

One can offer to a dead person the nicest gifts of the world, but the dead person -for obvious reasons- will not accept what is offered. We are spiritually dead. When the Lord, then, offers salvation to us, we are not in a position to make a decision as to whether or not to accept it. Yet some believe. How come? Faith is not only a gift of God; faith is also worked in certain persons. That is: God does more than give faith, offer faith. He makes my heart willing to accept this faith. The giving and the receiving are both God's deeds.

1 Corinthians 12:3

"Therefore I make known to you that no one speaking by the Spirit of God calls Jesus accursed, and no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit."

The phrase "Jesus is Lord" is a profession of faith. The apostle is moved by the Holy Spirit to say that no one can make such a profession of faith unless the Holy Spirit works in one's heart. A profession of faith is, then, not my doing but the Lord's.

For that reason we pray to God at the conclusion of the celebration of Holy Supper, "We thank Thee that Thou givest us a true faith, through which we may share in such great benefits" (Book of Praise, page 602). God has freely given faith. It is not my doing. All thanks be to God that I believe.

ARTICLE 15

CHRISTIAN ATTITUDE WITH RESPECT TO GOD'S UNDESERVED GRACE

To understand adequately what the attitude of the Christian should be in response to God's gift of faith, one first needs to appreciate that man is not at all deserving of these good gifts. "This grace God owes to no one," begins Article 15. Why doesn't God owe us anything? Why is God's grace grace? Why is man undeserving of God's grace? The answer is twofold:

1) "What do I have that I did not receive?" (1 Corinthians 4:7)

On the sixth day of Creation God collected the clay He needed to fashion Adam. Having fashioned him, God breathed into Adam's nostrils the breath of life. What did Adam have that he did not receive? The Garden of Eden perhaps, or his wife? No, all that Adam had was given to him, including life itself. Because God is the Creator and Adam but a creature, God doesn't owe Adam a single thing. Adam had no right to ask or demand anything of God.

The same is true for me. Where do I come from? I did not make myself, did not conceive myself or give birth to myself. I participated not a thing to my coming into existence. I am here because of what God did. My life, my breath, my very being, then, is given. This principle is true also of the various bits and pieces I may have collected for myself in the course of my life. God's very sovereignty means that I have amassed nothing that I did not receive. To use the words of Acts 17:28, "for in Him we live and move and have our being." God, then, does not owe me a thing. On the contrary, I am deeply indebted to Him.

2) God made me His child but I rejected and deserted Him.

Though God in mercy established His covenant of grace with the human race in Paradise (though God did not owe us this gift), we rejected God in the fall into sin. My rejection of God in Paradise makes me infinitely more indebted to God than I already was.

Does God, then, owe me anything? NO, for all that I deserve is damnation, not salvation. Says Article 15, "This grace God owes to no one. For what could He owe to man? Who has given Him first that He might be repaid? What could God owe to one who has nothing of his own but sin and falsehood?" I am totally undeserving. But this is the marvel: God freely gives!!!

THE CHRISTIAN'S ATTITUDE IS TO BE ONE OF HUMILITY AND THANKFULNESS

Fitting response to God's free giving is pointed up in Daniel's prayer to God in Babylon after the seventy years of exile are approaching their end. In Daniel 9:4-19 we read the prayer of a man who is humble. Says Daniel,

"And I prayed to the LORD my God, and made confession, and said, ... we have sinned and committed iniquity, we have done wickedly and rebelled, even by departing from Your precepts and Your judgments. Neither have we heeded Your servants the prophets ... O Lord, righteousness belongs to You, but to us shame of face, as it is this day ... because we have sinned against You.... To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness, though we have rebelled against Him. We have not obeyed the voice of the Lord our God, to walk in His

laws.... Yes, all Israel has transgressed Your law, and has departed so as not to obey Your voice; therefore the curse and the oath written in the Law of Moses the servant of God have been poured out on us, because we have sinned against Him."

Daniel in his situation, displays an attitude which acknowledges before God that he does not deserve a thing, except damnation. Daniel knows and portrays that anything he receives beyond damnation is by grace alone.

In His parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, Jesus held up the attitude of the tax collector as an example for His disciples to follow.

"And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, "God be merciful to me a sinner!" I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be abased, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 18:13,14).

Such humility is a fitting attitude for me also, because daily I transgress the commandments of my God. In LD 23.60 I confess what I learn from Scripture, namely, that "my conscience accuses me that I have grievously sinned against all God's commandments, have never kept any of them, and am still inclined to all evil" God does not owe me grace. Here is room only for humility.

At the same time, this humility in the face of my unworthiness comes coupled with deep gratitude in the face of God's undeserved grace. For that is the exciting and delightful surprise of the gospel: God nevertheless gives grace, more, He gives grace to me! Paul, in acknowledgment of this great marvel, writes in his letter to Timothy, "And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry, although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief" (1 Timothy 1:12-15). Paul, like Daniel, is humble. He knows what he is: a sinner. That knowledge motivated Paul to thank Christ Jesus his Lord (vs 12).

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul expressed similar thankfulness for what God gave. He begins his letter (after the customary opening lines) with an outburst of hearty gratitude: "I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given to you by Christ Jesus, that you were enriched in every thing by Him in all utterance and all knowledge." Likewise in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul expresses his excitement and thankfulness on account of what God has done for the unworthy. Writes Paul, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, ... in Him we have redemption ... in Him we have obtained an inheritance ... Therefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers" (Ephesians 1).

The fathers gave expression to the grace they received with these words of their confession: "He, therefore, who receives this grace owes and renders eternal thanks to God." The Christian today, aware as he is of his own unworthiness, and aware also of God's boundless

mercy to him in Jesus Christ, echoes in words and deeds the faith of the fathers. I am deeply thankful that the Lord God has not treated me according to what I deserve, but instead gave His Son for a wretch like me.

THE ATTITUDE OF THE PERSON WHO HAS NOT RECEIVED GOD'S UNDESERVED GRACE

What about those to whom God has not given grace? What is their attitude like? Said the fathers, "He who does not receive this grace, however, either does not care at all for these spiritual things and is pleased with what he has, or in false security vainly boasts that he has what he does not have." When speaking of persons who have not received this gift of God's grace in Christ Jesus we immediately tend to think of the people around us who don't worship with us in Church or people on the mission fields. However, the Lord has revealed in His Word that there are also those in the Church who have not received the grace of God. In Article 29, BC, we confess in the Church are hypocrites "who are mixed in the Church along with the good and yet are not part of the Church, although they are outwardly in it." We do well, then, as we consider "he who does not receive this grace," in first instance to look close to home.

Our Lord Jesus Christ wrote a letter to His Church at Laodicea (Revelation 3:14-22). The letter of Jesus to the church of the Laodiceans was addressed to 'the angel of the church of the Laodiceans'; i.e. to the minister of that Church, so that this letter could be read to the entire congregation. To people, then, who regularly sat in church and listened to the preaching of the Gospel, Jesus said the following: "These things says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God: 'I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot'" (vs 14,15). It is a noteworthy and disturbing sentence. To people who did all the things expected of them, who sang along lustily in the church services, who read along in their Bibles, who listened to the preaching, who gave their money in the collections, who joined in prayer, Jesus says that they were "neither cold nor hot." That is: they were neither turned off by the faith (so that they didn't bother coming to church any more) nor fired up by the faith. Though God had given so much in Jesus Christ for undeserving sinners, these Christians of Laodicea did not get enthused at God's grace.

Jesus adds: "...you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing' - and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked." The reference to riches and wealth was not meant in a financial sense, but spiritual. The Laodiceans considered themselves rich in the sense of, "look at what Christ has done for us!" But Christ tells them that though they think they are spiritually wealthy, they don't know how spiritually bankrupt they in reality are. Therefore Christ instructs them, "I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed ..." (Vs 18). Forget about the riches you think you have, Laodiceans, and come to Me. The Lamb offers the Laodiceans white garments washed in His blood; i.e. the forgiveness of sins. Christ offers this because these people, contrary to what they themselves think, are not forgiven of their sins. There was no faith; they were not born again, not regenerated. The Laodiceans were not enemies of the Cross in the sense that they were hostile to it, but they were not in love with the Cross either.

This letter to the Laodiceans has been included in the Bible for our instruction. In accordance with Article 29, BC, we confess that in the Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott there may very well be hypocrites. That we go to Church does not make us Christians in the full sense

of the word; going to church is not a guarantee that we are regenerated. We may well say that we are rich, but that does not mean we have the riches of Christ. Yes, there can be those in the Church who have not received God's grace. They either live in the false security that they have received what they actually haven't got, or they don't care.

What does this mean for me? How can I know whether I have received the grace of God? The "Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper" (Book of Praise, p.595) exhorts us to examine ourselves. It describes the three parts that constitute true self-examination, these being identical in content to the three parts of the Heidelberg Catechism namely, 1) Our Sin and Misery, 2) Our Deliverance, and 3) Our Thankfulness. "First, let everyone consider his sins and accursedness, so that he, detesting himself, may humble himself before God.... Second, let everyone search his heart whether he also believes the sure promise of God that all his sins are forgiven him.... Third, let everyone examine his conscience whether it is his sincere desire to show true thankfulness to God with his entire life...." Which sins are meant here? My general depravity? Yes, certainly. But not only my general depravity! I need to consider also my personal sins, the ones I committed today. God's wrath applies to all my specific sins. My act this afternoon of loosing my temper with my child and so lashing out at him in uncontrolled anger was sin. This sin, says the Form, I need to consider and repent of with humility. The sins of which David repented in Psalms 32 and 51 were very specific sins. Then (as the second aspect of self-examination would have me know), these specific sins, when confessed before God as sin, are forgiven. God freely grants forgiveness for specific sin of mine. This is an act of His undeserved grace. In response to Him not punishing me for all my specific sins, but having punished His Son on my behalf, I am deeply thankful to God, and show this thankfulness with my whole life.

Self-examination such as prescribed here is intended for every day of the Christian's life. Each day I consider my unworthiness before God, each day I confess the sins of the day, and each day I delight in the forgiveness God grants for those sins. Where such sorrow for sin and delight in forgiveness pervades my life, I need not fear that I am a hypocrite.

THE ATTITUDE OF THE CHRISTIAN TO THOSE WHO HAVE RECEIVED GOD'S UNDESERVED GRACE

"Further, about those who outwardly profess their faith and amend their lives we are to judge and speak in the most favourable way, according to the example of the apostles, for the inner recesses of the heart are unknown to us." This is a scriptural attitude, for the Lord Jesus said in Matthew 7:1 "Judge not, that you be not judged." It is not for me to say that God has given me a lot, and so look down my nose at another in disdain for how he uses what he has received. I may not have such an attitude because anything I have received is undeserved grace. Instead, if the other person, be he of the Church or not, says that he too is saved and complements his words with Christian conduct, then I am to accept that person as a fellow believer. My attitude is to demonstrate that I know myself undeserving of the abundance God has given, and so I accept the other in a spirit of humility. I am to "judge and speak in a most favourable way." It is not a Christian spirit to be condemning of the other.

THE ATTITUDE OF THE CHRISTIAN TO THOSE WHO HAVE NOT RECEIVED GOD'S UNDESERVED GRACE

"As for those who have not yet been called, we should pray for them to God, who calls into existence the things that do not exist. But we must by no means act haughtily towards them, as if we had distinguished ourselves." This statement in our Confession is lifted from the Scriptures. In 1 Timothy 2:1 Paul writes, "Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men." The reason we are to pray for all men is this, "For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (vs 3,4). So, in thankfulness to God for what He gives me, I ask Him to cause His grace to come also upon those who haven't yet received His grace. I ask for God's grace towards those who still live in darkness, be they for those who may sit with us in Church or those in far off places whom we don't know. Exactly because I do not at all deserve the wonderful gift of faith God has given to me, I seek that gift also for others - who are as unworthy as I am.

However, I need to accompany such a prayer with deeds. For example, I do well to support or be involved in mission work, eager to see the Gospel spread to the ends of the earth. What motivates me to do so? It is my thankfulness to God for what He has given me. Further, my efforts to have the gospel come to others is a drive to live a life of thankfulness. In the words of Lord's Day 32, "that by our godly walk of life we may win our neighbours for Christ." Again, the way I live includes the way I speak with the other (evangelism), showing the other that I would like for him to have what I have. "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify My Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16).

Chapters 3 & 4 - The Corruption of Man... : Articles 16-17

THE CORRUPTION OF MAN, HIS CONVERSION TO GOD, AND THE MANNER IN WHICH IT OCCURS

ARTICLE 16

MAN'S WILL NOT TAKEN AWAY BUT MADE ALIVE

FALLEN MAN RETAINED HIS WILL

In the preceding articles we have confessed Scripture to teach that regeneration is a gift of God which "He works in us without us." We confessed too (Article 15) that the Christian is to be grateful to God for such abundant mercy bestowed on sinners. Article 16, now, focuses on how God works conversion in fallen man, and so begins with a description of what fallen man is like: "Man through his fall did not cease to be man, endowed with intellect and will; and sin, which has pervaded the whole human race, did not deprive man of his human nature" We fell into sin but we did not become animals. We were not deprived of our human nature. We remained people with a brain, capable of thinking things through, and we retained our will. However, as a result of our depravity, our will became twisted. Whereas God had created man with a will which fully inclined man towards Him, so that in all he did man pleased God, after the fall into sin man did not lose his will but his will turned him against God.

For that reason our article confesses that God in His work of regeneration "does not act upon men as stocks and blocks." God does not treat us as stones, as though we are neutral towards Him, but He treats us as people with a will which makes us hostile to Him, enemies of Him. That is also how fallen man is described in Romans 5:10. "For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son" Fallen man is an enemy of God and consequently fights against God. Says Paul in Romans 8:7, "Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be." In His work of regeneration God begins to work on us, hostile sinners, so that our wills which are turned against Him will be redirected towards Him. At the Fall man did not die an instant physical death but a spiritual death. For that reason God did not re-create a human race, but He regenerated fallen man, redirecting man's ruined will.

THE LORD MAKES FALLEN MAN'S WILL ALIVE

It is clear from Scripture that it is the Lord alone who works in the heart of fallen man in order to make his will spiritually alive:

Philippians 2:13

"For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure."

Of my own accord I am not able to turn myself from one direction to another. By my own power I am incapable of doing what is pleasing to God. Paul therefore stresses that the changed will is God's work. Contrary to what the Arminians believe, that man by his free will

is able to change the inclination of his heart, Scripture would have us believe that God alone is busy in the hearts of man whose will had become totally corrupt.

Psalm 51:10,11

"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from Your presence, and do not take Your Holy Spirit from me."

David confesses his total dependence on God. He knows that without God he has no hope. Implicit in David's words are an admission that were God to abandon him, he would never be able to find God.

Ephesians 2:4,5

"But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)."

God doesn't start all over again, creating new people, but He works upon us who were dead and brings us to life, turning our wills to Himself and making us willing to serve Him again. Regeneration is evidence of God at work.

THE LORD BENDS THE WILL OF FALLEN MAN PLEASANTLY AND POWERFULLY

Having confessed in Article 12 that regeneration is God's work, Article 16 describes the manner in which God goes about this divine work. In response to a question of Zechariah, the Lord reveals to him how it is that He works: "Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit..." (Zechariah 4:6). This quiet yet effective work of regeneration performed by God in the hearts of man is described in Article 17 as follows, "... this divine grace of regeneration ... does not take away the will and its properties, or violently coerce it, but makes the will spiritually alive, heals it, corrects it, pleasantly and at the same time powerfully bends it." Whereas man may wish to see instant and radical change in the life of another person the Lord works quietly, without great force, noise or fanfare, yet most effectively.

REGENERATION IS A PROCESS

In Article 16 we read some carefully worded formulations of the fathers which are crucial to our understanding of how God regenerates the will of man. Said the fathers: the divine work of regeneration "makes the will spiritually alive, heals it, corrects it, pleasantly and at the same time powerfully bends it." Embedded in this formulation of the fathers is the element of growth. 'To make alive': for Adam this was an instantaneous act of God's creation. God formed Adam from clay, and breathed into His nostrils the breath of life, so that Adam came to life as a mature adult. In a similar manner God created Eve, forming her out of a rib of Adam. Yet Adam and Eve were exceptions, for that is not how any of Adam and Eve's descendants came to life. We come into the world as the result of a process. At our conception we were so small that our existence went unnoticed by our parents; only gradually, over time, did our parents become aware of our presence. Our growth inside our mother's womb was subtle and slow. Even at birth a baby is not independent; only after years of nurturing does a person reach mature adulthood. 'To make alive' is a process.

So is healing a process. The fathers also described regeneration as a 'healing of the will'. In Mark 5:24-34 we read of the woman with a flow of blood who was instantly healed when she touched Jesus' garment. However, her instantaneous healing is not the normal way healing occurs. The normal pattern for healing is that we follow a course of treatment or rest, and then slowly, gradually, healing occurs.

Regeneration of the heart, like our coming into existence and the healing of our bodies, is also a process which becomes evident over time. Although we read in Scripture of the radical and instant change which the Spirit worked in the heart of Paul, that is not the way the Lord normally works regeneration - no more than Adam's generation is the normal way God brings people into existence. At a certain point in time we will notice a change in our lives, but we will not know the exact moment the change started. One can compare this to becoming aware of how one came into existence. Although we cannot recall the moments of our conception and birth, that makes them no less real to us. The same counts for faith and rebirth: I am convinced of the reality of my regeneration even though I don't know the exact moment when it started. Regeneration is a process of growth.

THE RESULT OF THE PROCESS OF REGENERATION

"As a result, where formerly the rebellion and resistance of the flesh fully dominated, now a prompt and sincere obedience of the Spirit begins to prevail."

Prior to regeneration: "rebellion and resistance of the flesh fully dominated."

These words capture the notion of being dead in sin. At the fall into sin I left God to join Satan. When I was still on God's side I was righteous and holy because God had created me in His image. However, as soon as I joined Satan I became dead in sin, a slave of sin, totally depraved. As a child of Satan my flesh was fully dominated by rebellion and resistance to God.

God sent His Son to redeem me from the power of the Devil and return me to His side. However, once I was restored to God's side, God did not leave me to remain dead in sin but He regenerated me: He changed my heart. This is the material we confessed with Canons of Dort, III/IV, Articles 11 and 12.

After regeneration: "a prompt and sincere obedience of the Spirit begins to prevail, in which the true, spiritual renewal and freedom of our will consists."

Does my regeneration mean that I have become perfect? NO! Rather, what only "begins to prevail" in me is "a prompt and sincere obedience of the Spirit." The word 'prevail' is battlefield terminology, capturing the notion of victory after a struggle. The life of the Christian is precisely that: a struggle, for "our sworn enemies -the devil, the world and our own flesh- do not cease to attack us" (LD 52.127). We do not have the where-with-all to resist these attacks: "in ourselves we are so weak that we cannot stand even for a moment" (LD 52.127). But the Lord has given His Holy Spirit "so that in this spiritual war we may not go down to defeat" (LD 52.127). Yet the Lord does not give His Holy Spirit in such measure that we totally renewed, perfected. Instead, because of the gift of the Spirit in the hearts of the regenerated, the battle can be fought. For that reason the fathers so aptly wrote that we only begin to prevail. One reads of no hint of triumphalism here.

That the regenerated person is by no means made perfect is what Scripture teaches:

Ephesians 4:20-24

"But you have not so learned Christ, if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus: that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness."

Paul wrote these words, not to unregenerate people, but "to the saints who are in Ephesus" (Ephesians 1:1). Paul's addressees had been washed in the blood of Christ and had been renewed by the Spirit of Christ. Paul instructs these saints to put off the old nature and to put on the new man. These were not tasks which the saints in Ephesus had accomplished, but tasks they were instructed to do. That is: it's an ongoing task.

Ephesians 4:25ff

What did 'putting off the old man' and 'putting on the new man' involve? Paul continues to speak in imperatives:

"Therefore, putting away lying, let each one of you speak truth with his neighbour ... be angry and do not sin ... let him who stole steal no longer ... let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth ... let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamour and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice ... be kind to one another ... walk in love do not be drunk with wine"

Paul commands the saints in Ephesus to make it their business to love, not to steal, to mind their language, etc. They are engaged in a struggle in which they only begin to prevail, and therefore they must keep at it. Paul urges them to make it their business to be what the Lord has made them to be.

LD 33 - The content of texts of Scripture as the above is confessed here as follows:

Q&A 88: "What is the true repentance or conversion of man? It is the dying of the old nature and the coming to life of the new." Notice here the verbs 'dying' and 'coming to life'. The term 'dying' does not describe a momentary action; then the word 'kill' would have to be used. The term 'dying' rather describes a process. 'Dying' of cancer can take weeks, months. That the term 'dying' is used in this LD captures the notion that death of the old nature is not a momentary occurrence, but a process, a continual happening.

Likewise the term 'coming to life'. It describes a process, the way we come into existence (as opposed to, say, the way Adam was called into being). The 'coming to life' of the new is an ongoing process. Both the dying and the coming to life commonly begin unnoticed in the life of the regenerated person (see above).

Q&A 89: What is the dying of the old nature? It is to grieve with a heartfelt sorrow that we have offended God by our sin, and more and more to hate it and flee from it." The dying of the old nature is not something I do once and never again. It is an ongoing process, something I do more and more - progressive.

Q&A 90: "What is the coming to life of the new nature? It is a heartfelt joy in God through Christ, and a love and delight to live according to the will of God in all good works."

To live denotes action, to continue on. Life itself is not static or unchanging but is dynamic. Life means growth, change, development.

Conversion is a combination of the two ongoing processes of the dying of the old nature and the coming to life of the new. However, this does not mean that one reaches the goal of perfection in this life. What Jesus taught us to pray by means of the second petition of the Lord's prayer, "Thy kingdom come", is taught us in a summary in LD 48.123. By this petition we actually ask God, "So rule us by Thy Word and Spirit that more and more we submit to Thee." Does that mean I totally submit to my Lord? No, daily I continue to pray that I may submit more and more to God. Here is need for growth. LD 44.114 speaks of no 'arrival' or climax when it comes to the Christian's submission to God in this life. "In this life even the holiest have only a small beginning of this obedience." The spiritual life of the regenerated person is one of ongoing growth and development and in that development I never get beyond the beginning. In LD 44.115 we confess that even though "in this life no one can keep the ten commandments perfectly ... God (has) them preached so strictly: First, that throughout our life we may more and more become aware of our sinful nature, and therefore seek more eagerly the forgiveness of sins and righteousness in Christ. Second, that we may be zealous for good deeds and constantly pray to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit, that He may more and more renew us after God's image, until after this life we reach the goal of perfection."

The apostle Paul was regenerated and yet he was the author of a chapter such as Romans 7. "For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do" (vs 15). Paul knows what is the right thing to do, and he wants to do what is right, i.e., offer the Lord prompt and sincere obedience, but does he do it? "... what I hate, that I do." Paul repeats his despair in verses 18 and 19: "For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice." The apostle recognises a battle raging within him: "For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (vss 22-24). We confess the same vulnerability of this body of death in LD 52.127: "In ourselves we are so weak that we cannot stand even for a moment." Have we been changed? Yes, indeed we have but we have not yet been brought to perfection. Like Paul, we begin to prevail but we can be so disappointed that it only remains a beginning. Like Paul did, we are to look to Christ who grants forgiveness for our daily failures, and delivers us from sin totally in His time: "I thank God - through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

If the Lord would abandon us and discontinue His work of regeneration in us, we'd be totally lost. The Arminians believe that man can accept salvation and grow in faith in the Lord by his own free will. But in Article 16 the fathers have pointed out once more that if faith and salvation had to be the accomplishment of man, we would get nowhere. Man would then remain a slave to the sin into which he'd plunged himself. God imperceptibly moulds us, changes us, gently bends our will and brings us to the goal He has set for us. Regeneration is God's work alone, and that's why it happens.

ARTICLE 17

THE USE OF MEANS

The Article begins with a reference to the providence of God: "The almighty working of God whereby He brings forth and sustains this our natural life...." In LD 10 we confess that God is busy in all aspects of our lives. God gives us the health, strength, willingness, and the means to do all He gives us to do. God works all things sovereignly. Article 17 goes on to say, that "The almighty working of God ... does not exclude but requires the use of means by which He according to His infinite wisdom and goodness has willed to exercise His power." The point here is that it is the Lord who keeps me alive, and He does so by using certain means.

In order to stay alive I need to eat, and to breathe. The Lord uses the means of food and oxygen to sustain my life. It is not so of course, that the Lord has to use these means in order to keep me alive. Being the almighty God that He is, He is able to keep me alive without food or oxygen. The Lord took Moses to the top of the mountain to write the two tables of the law and "he was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights; he neither ate bread nor drank water" (Exodus 34:28). How did Moses stay alive? God does not need to give a person food and drink in order to keep him alive. Normally God does use food and drink, but He is not bound to these means; God can keep a person alive without food. However, precisely because God is pleased to use a particular means to keep a person alive, I need to make use of the means He provides. If I decline to eat or drink because 'God is able to keep me alive without food and drink', I shall die. I need to make use of the means God is pleased to use to keep me alive and healthy.

GOSPEL IS THE MEANS GOD USES TO WORK REGENERATION

The principle described above with regards to the body is true also with regards to the soul. Say the fathers in Article 17, "So also the aforementioned supernatural working of God whereby He regenerates us, in no way excludes or overthrows the use of the gospel, which the most wise God has ordained to be the seed of regeneration and the food of the soul." The gospel is the means God uses to work regeneration. Not that God has to use this means, for God -almighty as He is- can do without. But in Scripture the Lord has revealed to us that He is pleased to regenerate by a particular means, and the tool which He uses is the gospel.

Romans 10:14-17

"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 unless they are sent? ... But they have not all obeyed the gospel.... Paul then concludes, "So then faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God." The Word of God is the tool God uses to work faith.

1 Peter 1:23

"having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever."
God is pleased to work rebirth, regeneration through His Word.

James 1:18

"Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first fruits of His creatures."
Here again God states that God has worked conversion by means of His Word.

Therefore we confess in LD 25.65 that faith comes "from the Holy Spirit who works it in our hearts by the preaching of the Gospel" The norm is that faith is worked through the

preaching. Exactly because the Lord uses means to work faith did the apostles make it their business to preach. They did so in obedience to Jesus command to His disciples to "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations..." (Matthew 28:19,20). They could not make disciples of all nations unless they used the means that God was pleased to use: the preaching.

SCRIPTURE TESTIFIES OF ITS EFFECTIVENESS AS GOD'S MEANS OF WORKING REGENERATION

Acts 13:48,49

"Now when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of the Lord. And as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed. And the word of the Lord was being spread throughout all the region."

Belief was a result of hearing the Word, and hence the importance of the gospel message being spread throughout the region.

1 Corinthians 3:6

"I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase."

God did not give the increase spontaneously, but only after Paul and Apollos preached the gospel.

2 Timothy 4:1,2

Paul instructed Timothy, "I charge (adjure) you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: Preach the Word!"

No matter how Timothy felt about it, Paul charged him to preach the Word, because it is the means the Spirit uses. Yes, precisely the preaching is the means used by the Spirit, it is so absolutely imperative that the Word be preached! Hence the powerfully worded instruction from Paul to Timothy.

"For this reason the apostles and the teachers who succeeded them, in the fear of the Lord instructed the people concerning this grace of God, to His glory and to the abasement of all pride." (Article 17).

THE PURE PREACHING OF THE GOSPEL AND WHERE THIS CAN BE HEARD

Since God has given us the means of His Word for our regeneration and our growth in faith, it is imperative that we make use of the means He gives us. In Article 17 the fathers echoed the apostles' emphasis on the preaching of the gospel when they wrote, "In the meantime, however, (the apostles) did not neglect to keep (the people), by the holy admonition of the gospel, under the administration of the Word, the sacraments, and discipline." Here the fathers listed the three marks of the Church as we confess them in the Belgic Confession, Article 29. There we confess, "We believe that we ought to discern diligently and very carefully from the Word of God what is the true Church, for all sects which are in the world today claim for themselves the name of Church." The fathers recognised the close link between the preaching of the Gospel and the Church. Around us we see many buildings with the name 'church' inscribed on a sign in front of the building. However, because God works

faith and regeneration by the preaching of His Word, I cannot frequent just any church. I need to be there where the Spirit works with God's Word, i.e. in Christ's Church. That is why it becomes important to discern where the true Church is, and I do so according to the three marks mentioned briefly in our Article and confessed more elaborately in the Belgic Confession, Article 29.

In LD 31.83 we confess, on the basis of Scripture, that the preaching of the gospel is one of the keys of the kingdom of heaven: "What are the keys of the kingdom of heaven? The preaching of the holy gospel and church discipline. By these two the kingdom of heaven is opened to believers and closed to unbelievers." Note how in LD 31 Q's 84 & 85 the words 'opened and closed' have been inverted. The point here is that the kingdom of heaven is made open primarily through the preaching. In order for the kingdom of heaven to be opened by the preaching, it must be preached "to each and every believer that God has really forgiven all their sins for the sake of Christ's merits, as often as they by true faith accept the promise of the gospel." I need to hear that I, a lost sinner, desperately need the grace of Christ and that all my sins are forgiven me when I believe that God in His Word promises and gives forgiveness to all who turn to Him in true repentance and faith.

If the preaching of the Word is the means the Spirit uses to work my regeneration, then I must place myself under the preaching whenever I can. But if I am lax in my Church attendance and only attend Church once a Sunday, the result will invariably be a weakening in faith. A soldier rationed to one meal a day cannot fight. And the life of the Christian is a battle. See the reference to LD 52.127 above. That is the tragedy of going to church once: the habit makes for an under-nourished -and hence ineffective- Christian in the battles of daily life. It goes without saying, of course, that filling my place in the pew is not enough, no more than sitting at the dinner table is enough. One needs to eat what is presented.

Further, although the quantity is important, the sustenance of my faith also depends on the quality of the preaching. Three meals a day of fish & chips plus coke will not provide adequate nourishment for ongoing physical work. So too when it comes to faith, spiritual growth and regeneration. If I don't eat, I will not survive in the battle of faith, but in order to be sure that what I eat will adequately nourish my soul, I also need to assess where it is I eat. Where I go to Church is of great importance for I need solid food, meat, which will provide me with adequate energy and strength in my daily battle against sin, the world and my own flesh. I can only get this through the true preaching of God's Word.

THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF BOTH THE GIVERS AND THE RECEIVERS OF INSTRUCTION

"So today those who give or receive instruction in the Church should not dare to tempt God by separating what He in His good pleasure has willed to be kept very close together."

Those who receive instruction: As a receiver of instruction I may not separate faith, spiritual growth, and regeneration from the means God is pleased to use: the faithful preaching of the Gospel. I must therefore be present where God is pleased to work, i.e. where I recognise the three marks of the true Church, for that is where I will hear faithful preaching.

Those who give instruction: To be allowed to be a preacher of the gospel is an enormous privilege, for it makes one a tool in God's hand to encourage spiritual growth in God's people. At the same time, however, the task carries with it an enormous responsibility. If growth is to

come through preaching, and a minister to whom the preaching has been entrusted fails to bring the Word of God faithfully, then he is responsible for hindering the spiritual growth of God's people. We learn from Ezekiel 33:6-8 that God takes this most seriously, requiring the blood of the congregation from the hand of His servant. "... When I say to the wicked, "O wicked man, you shall surely die!" and you (the watchman) do not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood I will require at your hand." For that reason it is so vitally necessary that the congregation, individually and collectively, prays for its minister, that he may receive from the Lord strength and wisdom to serve the congregation faithfully, to the benefit of the congregation's spiritual growth.

THE PLACE OF ADMONITIONS

"For grace is conferred through admonitions, and the more readily we do our duty, the more this favour of God, who works in us, usually manifests itself in its lustre and the more directly His works proceed."

Which child likes to be admonished by his father? Yet it remains a fact that admonitions play a vital part in one's upbringing. So too in the preaching. "God's grace is conferred through admonitions," said the fathers. God's Word contains so many admonitions (see for example the number of instructions and commands given in Ephesians 5), and these may not be traded for preaching filled with truisms, platitudes or whatever it is the people in the pew like to hear. Even though our culture is one in which independentism and emphasis on being tolerant and 'user friendly' is prevalent, we may not trade in the tone of God's Word. In His Word the Lord tells His people in no uncertain terms where and how they go wrong and how He demands to be served. The church is not a place where one is made to feel 'comfortable'; the church is a place where God's promises in Jesus Christ and obligations through the Holy Spirit are laid before sinners in the context of their daily struggles - to the comfort of the humble.

BE BUSY WITH THE WORD

Scripture speaks of faith and regeneration being done through the preaching of the gospel. In the days of the apostles, when printing presses were non-existent, copies of the Scripture were limited. The only way for the people to receive the Word in the days of the apostles was to listen to it being preached. Today the Lord continues to work through the preaching. However, by the providence of God, the printing press has been invented (and the computer too) and so copies of the Bible are widely available to us today. Not only does this bring with it many advantages, but also privileges and responsibilities.

It is for us to be daily busy with Scripture, to read it. Just as two meals of food per week would be insufficient to sustain our bodies, so only two sermons per week are insufficient spiritual nourishment for our souls. In addition to the sermons we hear on Sundays, we need to read Scripture and to study it and to reflect and meditate on it. To conclude each meal with Bible reading is a good habit to maintain. By being busy with God's Word one becomes familiar with it. However, one needs to be aware that in keeping up a good habit, there is always the danger of taking the life out of that habit. Just reading a passage from Scripture without giving any thought to what it is God says to me in that particular passage in order to strengthen me in the concrete circumstances of my life, can make it a worthless exercise. Here concentration is necessary, and discussion helpful too. Even commentaries or other study books have a place in one's personal (and family!) Bible study.

In being busy with God's Word, we have a good example in David. "Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day", said David in Psalm 119:97. David's Bible was not shut, for how then could he have said, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path"? (Psalm 119:105). If a light or a torch is to light up our path, it needs to be switched on. If the Bible is to give us direction and encouragement on a daily basis, it must be opened each day again. The Bible cannot be a lamp to our feet if we keep it closed on the shelf. We need food each day again to do another day's work. Being a Christian is a day's work. If I am not busy with God's Word then I need not be surprised if I don't have the wherewithal to fight sin and temptation.

TO GOD ALONE ALL GLORY

Man's conversion to God and the manner in which it occurs are to be ascribed to God alone. Regeneration is an incomprehensible gift of God's grace to undeserving sinners. "To God alone all glory, both for the means and for their saving fruit and efficacy, is due throughout eternity. Amen."

Chapter 5 - The Perseverance of the Saints : Articles 1-3

INTRODUCTION

Chapter five of the Canons of Dort defends the Reformed doctrine concerning the perseverance of the saints over against the Arminian heresy as taught in Article 5 of the Remonstrants. Their fifth article reads as follows (see page 6 of these Notes for the entirety of the Five Articles of the Remonstrants):

ARTICLE 5

WE believe that those who are incorporated into Jesus Christ and thereby become partakers of his life-giving Spirit have abundant strength to strive against Satan, sin, the world and their own flesh and to obtain the victory; it being well understood (that this is) through the assistance of the grace of the holy Spirit, and that Jesus Christ assists them through His Spirit in all temptations, extends the hand, and - if only they are prepared for warfare and desire His help and are not negligent - keeps them standing, so that by no cunning or power of Satan can they be led astray or plucked out of Christ's hands, according to the word of Christ, John 10, "no one shall pluck them out of my hands."

But whether they can through negligence fall away from the first principle of their life in Christ, again embrace the present world, depart from the pure doctrine once given to them, lose the good conscience, and neglect grace, must first be more carefully determined from the Holy Scripture before we shall be able to teach this with the full persuasion of our heart.

By means of the above article, the Arminians tried to answer this question: Can a person redeemed by Christ resist and triumph over the attacks of Satan, sin, the world and his own flesh? The Arminians believed that a person could withstand these attacks provided he work with the assistance given by God. Note well that according to Arminian reasoning the triumph over attack depends on what man does with the resources made available to him. See Figure 1.

The fathers sought to determine from Scripture whether it was indeed true that a redeemed person, using the assistance provided, is capable of withstanding attack. Scripture revealed to them the error of such reasoning and so the fathers set out to respond to this error of the Arminians in Chapter 5.

This error of the Arminians is echoed by the fathers in their list of Rejected Errors attached to Chapter V of the Canons of Dort (Book of Praise, p.570). The fathers summarised this error like this: "The perseverance of the true believer is not a fruit of election or a gift of God obtained by the death of Christ. It is a condition of the new covenant, which man before his so-called decisive election and justification must fulfil through his free will" (Rejection of Errors No 1.) Again: "God does indeed provide the believer with sufficient powers to persevere, and is ready to preserve these in him if he will do his duty. But though all these things have been established which are necessary to persevere in faith and which God will use to preserve faith, even then it still always depends on the decision of the will whether he will persevere or not" (Rejection of Errors No 2 - Error, Book of Praise, p.571). It all depends

on the believer, say the Arminians. Granted, God gives the strength and the means required, but it all depends on whether or not the believer "will do his duty." For the Arminian the free will of man is the hinge on which everything turns if one is to persevere in reaching the goal of perfection.

ARTICLE 1

THE REGENERATE NOT FREE FROM INDWELLING SIN

In response to the Arminians denying that the believer's perseverance is a fruit of election or a gift of God the fathers, by means of Article 1, pointed out how the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints actually builds on the doctrine of election, redemption and regeneration; i.e. the material of Chapters I, II, III/IV respectively. Therefore Article 1 commences with an appeal to each of these actions of God in the life of the believer. "Those whom God according to His purpose calls into the fellowship of His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and regenerates by His Holy Spirit" God applies to the elect, those called by Him from eternity, Christ's work of redemption and the Holy Spirit's work of regeneration. See Table 1.

<i>Table 1</i>		
Topic	Chapter	Wording
Election	I	God according to His purpose calls
Redemption	II	into the fellowship of His Son,
Regeneration	III/IV	regenerates by His Holy Spirit

Those elect "He certainly sets free...." Whereas the Arminians made man the focus, speaking of perseverance in terms of man accepting and working with the assistance God offers in the face of attack, the fathers put the emphasis on God; God is the driving force in the life of the believer. It is God who calls the believer from eternity, God who joins the believer to Christ in order that he may be saved by Christ's blood, and it is God who regenerates the believer by His Holy Spirit. But God's work does not stop there. He also sets the believer free "from the dominion and slavery of sin."

FREED FROM THE DOMINION AND SLAVERY OF SIN

To confess that God has set us free from the dominion and slavery of sin is to confess that one time we did live under the dominion of sin and so were slaves to sin. This is what Scripture teaches:

John 8:33.

Jesus had said to the Jews that the truth would set them free (vs 32). "They answered Him, "We are Abraham's descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How can you say, 'You will be made free'? Jesus answered them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin." One may say what one will of the Jews' failure to remember how their ancestors had once been in bondage to the Egyptians and the Babylonians, and how they were currently subjects of the Roman Empire. That aside, Jesus insists that every last

person on earth is in bondage and needs to be set free for all are sinners and so all are in bondage to sin.

When God created man, man served God freely. However, man fell into sin and so no longer served God, but the Devil. Man gave himself up to bondage to Satan; made himself a slave to sin. Therefore all men, by nature, are slaves to sin. God then came to man with His plan of redemption in order to redeem His elect. (Genesis 3:15). God sent His Son to set man free from sin, free from slavery.

John 8:36

Jesus continued by saying to the Jews, "Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed." That is exactly what we confess the Son to have done. With the words of the LD 13.34, we call the Son of God our Lord "because He has ransomed us, body and soul, from all our sins, not with silver or gold but with His precious blood, and has freed us from all the power of the devil to make us His own possession." Freed from the devil's power, we are no longer slaves to sin. See further I Peter 1:18,19; Col 1:13,14.

Romans 6:17,18

"But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness."

The apostle speaks here of believers who were changed from being slaves of sin to slaves of righteousness. Though the word 'slave' has negative connotations, to be a slave of righteousness means to be free in the biblical sense of the word. It means to be free to serve God once again according to the purpose for which we were created, and the believer can serve God again because he has been freed from slavery to Satan and sin. Therefore the apostle can say in verse 14, "For sin shall not have dominion over you" This is not a promise of what will happen in the future on the day of Christ's return, but it is a present reality in the life of the believer. The believer has been set free and so sin does not master or have dominion over the believer.

The words 'slaves' and 'deliverance' bring to mind Israel's position in and deliverance from Egypt. In Egypt the Israelites were slaves in every sense of the word, groaning under the burden of hard labour. However, the Lord took them out of Egypt, set them free, redeemed them. On the other side of the Red Sea, the Israelites were free; they experienced their deliverance from Egypt as something real. In Romans 6 the apostle speaks of our deliverance from bondage to sin as being equally real. Drowned in the Red Sea, Pharaoh no longer had dominion over Israel. Likewise, sin shall no more have dominion over us.

It remains true that the believer is still subject to the attacks of sin, but sin is no longer a powerful overlord or master over the believer. God has called the believer (election - Chapter I), joined him to Christ (redemption - Chapter II), and regenerated him by His Holy Spirit - Chapter III/IV. Therefore, the attacks of sin are no longer the believer's master for God has set the believer "free from the dominion and slavery of sin." Christ's triumph over sin and Satan are real. That is not to say that there is no sin any more, but sin is no longer my master. That means that sin, or giving into temptation, is not inevitable any more. Freed from Satan, the need to give in to sin has been removed.

FREED ... BUT NOT ENTIRELY

The elect "(God) certainly sets free from the dominion and slavery of sin, but not entirely in this life from the flesh and from the body of sin." We have not yet been made perfect, as we learn from the following Scripture passages:

Romans 7:14-25

Having said in chapter 6 that he and the saints of Rome had been set free from sin and were therefore no longer slaves to sin, the apostle nevertheless goes on to say in chapter 7 "... but I am carnal, sold under sin." 'Carnal' means flesh, and it applies to Paul, to the saints of Rome, and to me: we are sinful and weak. "For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do." The apostle gives voice to the frustration of the Christian freed from the dominion of sin; determined as one might be not to sin again, sin remains a reality. I cannot do what I will to do. "But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me." Sin remains an enemy for me to contend with, for I am not yet perfect. In verse 23 the apostle goes on to speak of the war which the Christian wages within himself: "But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members." Therefore Paul cries out, "O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" Thankful that deliverance from the dominion of this "body of death" has already been secured by Christ, Paul cries out, "I thank God - through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin" (vs 24).

1 John 1:8

"If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."
Although the power of sin is broken, we are by no means above sin.

James 3:2

"For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body."

These are the words of an apostle, a man we regard as a holy man, the Lord's mouth piece, inspired to write an epistle. He includes himself when he writes that we all stumble. James illustrates this by reminding us how prone we are to stumble by the things we say. "No man can tame the tongue" (vs 8).

This is the material confessed in the Heidelberg Catechism. "In this life even the holiest have only a small beginning of this obedience", we confess in LD 44.114. Sin remains in us. Therefore Jesus taught us to pray the sixth petition, "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one." By this petition we confess that "In ourselves we are so weak that we cannot stand even for a moment. Moreover, our sworn enemies - the devil, the world and our own flesh - do not cease to attack us" (LD 52.127). That Satan is defeated is a glorious gospel I may embrace. Yet, at the same time, I confess that sin remains in me and so I am weak, unable to handle Satan's attacks on my own. "I cannot stand even for a moment."

In the life of the believer there are two realities with regard to sin. God says in His Word that Christ has conquered Satan and so has also defeated sin, and God also teaches that in this life I remain weak and vulnerable in the face of sin. The Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper acknowledges this ongoing struggle against sin in the life of the believer. It exhorts those who are guilty of any of the sins listed, to refrain from coming to the Lord's table. These are sins which do not leave any Christian life untainted. However, the form continues,

"But all this, brothers and sisters, is not meant to discourage broken and contrite hearts, as if only those who are without sin may come to the table of the Lord. For we do not come to this supper to declare that we are perfect and righteous in ourselves. On the contrary, we seek our life outside of ourselves in Jesus Christ and, in doing so, we acknowledge that we are dead in ourselves. We also are aware of our many sins and shortcomings. We do not have perfect faith and we do not serve God with such zeal as He requires. Daily we have to contend with the weakness of our faith and with the evil desires of our flesh" (Book of Praise, p.596).

Both David, a man after God's own heart, and Peter, an apostle, were children of God: i.e. they had been set free from the dominion of Satan and sin. In spite of this reality, they both fell into sin. Though I am a child of God, I too experience the daily struggle against sin, for I am not yet "entirely in this life (set free) from the flesh and from the body of sin."

ARTICLE 2

DAILY SINS OF WEAKNESS

"Therefore daily sins of weakness spring up and defects cling to even the best works of the saints." Following on from Article 1, the fathers wrote this on the basis of the following Scripture texts:

Isaiah 64:6

The prophet Isaiah was moved by the Holy Spirit to say, "But we are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags; We all fade as a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away."

If even our "righteousnesses", our best works, are defiled by sin, then let alone all our other works! This is echoed by LD 24.62: "But why can our good works not be our righteousness before God, or at least a part of it? Because the righteousness which can stand before God's judgment must be absolutely perfect and in complete agreement with the law of God, whereas even our best works in this life are all imperfect and defiled with sin."

Philippians 3:12

"Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me."

Paul, that apostle of such stature, acknowledges that he is not yet perfected, for many weaknesses remain in him.

Beside the references to LD 44 and 52 mentioned above, we confess our continuing imperfection also in LD 21.56: "What do you believe concerning the forgiveness of sins? I believe that God, because of Christ's satisfaction, will no more remember my sins, nor my sinful nature, against which I have to struggle all my life" That is the life of the Christian: no triumph, but a daily struggle against my sinful nature. Although God freed me from my sinful nature, He left me with my sinful nature. Sin still remains in me, and so I must constantly battle to resist sin; constantly strive to do what the Lord wants rather than what I want. Not only does "my conscience accuse me that I have grievously sinned against all God's commandments, (and that I) have never kept any of them, (but it also accuses me that I) am still inclined to all evil." My inclination to evil is an ever present reality in my life. I am

weak, with many shortcomings remaining within me, and so I do not have the wherewithal within myself to resist Satan.

DAILY SINS: A CONSTANT REASON FOR HUMBLeness BEFORE GOD

If that is the life of the Christian, that even though God has freed me from the dominion of Satan I "am still inclined to all evil", then all reason for pride and boastfulness about what God has made me is removed. Although my sinful nature may incline me to feel proud, the fact that God has not yet perfected me gives much reason for me to remain humble. Therefore I must also steer clear of spiritual arrogance, by which I think myself capable of standing firm in the face of temptations to sin. As the fathers wrote in Article 2, daily sins are for the saints "a constant reason to humble themselves before God." Humbleness is the only attitude befitting the child of God. Although Satan has been defeated and although I have received much in Christ, my daily sins compel me to flee to Christ with a broken heart. In the face of my daily sins I need to cry out to the Lord to give me strength to resist sin, and to forgive me in mercy when I fall into sin.

Article 29 of the Belgic Confession, in speaking of the marks of the Christian, also portrays the Christian as a person who is conscious of his need to fight against the sin that remains within him and his dependence on Christ for forgiveness. "Those who are of the Church may be recognized by the marks of Christians. They believe in Jesus Christ the only Saviour, flee from sin and pursue righteousness, love the true God and their neighbour without turning to the right or left, and crucify their flesh and its works. Although great weakness remains in them, they fight against it by the Spirit all the days of their life. They appeal constantly to the blood, suffering, death, and obedience of Jesus Christ, in whom they have forgiveness of their sins through faith in Him." The Christian is not tall-in-himself and independent, but small and dependent. He looks to his Saviour in humility, acknowledging his sin and asking for mercy.

PRAYER AND THE STUDY OF GOD'S WORD: THE CHRISTIAN'S DEFENCE AGAINST HIS DAILY SINS

The Christian who knows himself dependent on his Saviour is propelled to "humble (himself) before God, to flee to the crucified Christ, to put the flesh to death more and more through the Spirit of prayer and by holy exercises of godliness." Prayer and exercises of godliness serve as apt descriptions for the conduct and practices of David. David was a godly man, a man after God's own heart, but he was also very much a sinner; weaknesses abounded in his life too. The Bible tells us of his conduct towards Bathsheba, Uriah, and his weakness in the face of his son Amnon having raped his sister Tamar. In Psalm 119 David expresses in words his determination to do the will of his God, the attacks he faces from evildoers, and his need for God to hold on to him so that he will not go astray: "I hate the double-minded, but I love Your law. You are my hiding place and my shield; I hope in Your word. Depart from me you evildoers, for I will keep the commandments of my God! ... Hold me up and I shall be safe, and I shall observe Your statutes continually" (Psalm 119:113-117). Here is a spirit of humility, an acknowledgment of dependence on God. David knows he cannot stand tall. For that very reason David busies himself with the law of God, expresses his love for the law of his God. "At midnight I will rise to give thanks to You, because of Your righteous judgments.... Teach me good judgment and knowledge, for I believe Your commandments.... Their heart is as fat as grease, but I delight in Your law.... The law of Your mouth is better to me than thousands of coins of gold and silver.... Oh how I love Your law! It is my meditation

all the day. You, through Your commandments, make me wiser than my enemies; for they are ever with me. I have more understanding than my teachers, for Your testimonies are my meditation.... How sweet are Your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! Through Your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way. Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." (Psalm 119:62-105).

God's Word is so very important to David. In the daily grind of his life as king David had to make decisions. However, knowing himself to be under constant attack from his three sworn enemies, the devil, the world and his flesh, and knowing himself to be so weak that he couldn't stand for even a moment, David engaged himself in prayer and holy exercises of godliness. David communed with God and was busy with the Word of His God. Prayer and the study of God's Word are the Christian's defence against the attacks of the Devil. See further Article 4.

DAILY SINS CAUSE THE CHRISTIAN TO LONG FOR PERFECTION

Daily sins of weakness are also a constant reason for the saints to "long for the goal of perfection until at last, delivered from this body of death, they reign with the Lamb of God in heaven." These words refer to the Church's plea for deliverance as expressed in Revelation 22:20, "Even so, come, Lord Jesus!" Paul too, in his letter to the Philippians, writes how he longs to be with Christ. "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.... For I am hard - pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better" (Philippians 1:21,23). To be delivered from this body of death means to be made perfect and therefore to sin no more.

ARTICLE 3

GOD PRESERVES HIS OWN

THE CHRISTIAN IS UNDER ATTACK FROM HIS THREE SWORN ENEMIES

In the face of attack from his three sworn enemies -the "remains of indwelling sin, ... the temptations of the world and of Satan"- the Christian is in need of God's preservation. Sufficient scriptural grounds for the constant presence of indwelling sin in the Christian have been given in Articles 1 and 2. The following Scripture texts speak of the attacks of the world and of Satan:

The attacks of the world:

John 15:18,19

"If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you."

Here the Saviour speaks of the world's hatred against me; the world is my enemy. It may well be that I do not feel hated by the world, but I cannot go my feelings since they are affected by the fall into sin, and therefore unreliable. Satan is most cunning, and he will certainly make it

seem as though the world is friendly towards me. But God in His Word presents me with the facts: "the world hates you."

1 John 2:15

Because the world hates me, God says, "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him."

To love that which hates us is foolish. The world hates me and I am to hate the world. Either I love God and hate the world, or I hate God and love the world; I cannot love both.

Romans 12:2

"And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God."

The seed of the woman lives in enmity with the seed of the Devil; hence no room for conformity with the world. It is the will of the Lord that we live as children of Him, different from those of the world.

The attacks of Satan:

1 Peter 5:8

"Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour."

Revelation 12:9-12

"So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him. Therefore rejoice, O heavens, and you who dwell in them! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and the sea! For the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, because he knows that he has a short time."

Satan was defeated by Christ and so he lost his dominion over the elect. Knowing that his time his short, Satan's attack on us, the inhabitants of the earth, is intense. Attacks of Satan are a reality for the Christian.

Luke 22:31,32

"And the Lord said, "Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me strengthen your brethren."

Satan knew that he would be defeated on the cross. Nevertheless, he asks for Peter and God grants his request. The Saviour then said to Peter, "when you have returned"; i.e. Peter, you are going to fall. Satan is a very real enemy. But not only would Peter fall; he would also return, because Christ prayed for him. Christ told Peter that He would hold on to him, even when he would fail.

BUT GOD IS FAITHFUL

Our three sworn enemies, the devil, the world, and our own flesh are very real enemies; so real in fact, that we cannot persevere in the face of their attacks by our own strength.

However, this gives us no reason to give up in despair, for didn't Jesus say to Peter, "I have prayed for you that your faith should not fail?" In His parable of the Good Shepherd, Christ promised his disciples this concerning the sheep which the Father gave to the Son, "And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand" (John 10:28,29). Jesus knows how weak the sheep are of themselves, and how strong the enemies are. Yet the sheep given to Him would not perish, said Jesus.

Why would the sheep not perish? Because "... the Lord is faithful, who will establish you and guard you from the evil one" (2 Thessalonians 3:3). Could it be possible for God, being the God He is, having elected us from eternity, having sent His Son to die for us, and having poured out His Spirit on us, to turn His back on us and leave us on our own in the face of Satan's attacks (cf Table 1, Article 1)? No, God does not leave us on our own, for having started His work of redemption in us, He also brings it to completion. "He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6). It does not depend on me, but on God. That is why I am so safe. Although I am so weak, my God holds on to me and leads me by the hand day by day to the goal of my perfection. That's my God!

Said David in Psalm 138:7,8, "Though I walk in the midst of trouble, You will revive me; You will stretch out Your hand against the wrath of my enemies, and Your right hand will save me. The Lord will perfect that which concerns me; Your mercy, O LORD, endures forever; do not forsake the works of Your hands." David speaks of walking in the midst of trouble; his enemies were ever so real. But David did not despair. David knew his God and knew himself to be dependent on his God. His prayer for God not to forsake the works of His hands was therefore not just an empty prayer, mere words, but it was a prayer of conviction: this is my God who will do what He said He would do. God will see me through to the end. "He will perfect that which concerns me."

What then are we to think of David's sins, or our own sins? Do our sins make us unworthy of God? Though that may well be the case, it is beside the present point, for even before God started His work with me, He knew that my sins would remain. In spite of my sins, God commenced His work!

"A bruised reed He will not break, and smoking flax He will not quench" (Isaiah 42:3). What does this text tell me about my God? Will He say of me in my weaknesses and sins that I am a reject to Him - in spite of Him having done so much for me? Will He say like one does of a bruised reed, that I am useless? No, God will not discard or reject me. My God is merciful, gracious to the broken-hearted, the weak, and He carries us farther. For God knows that "... those who have been converted could not persevere in that grace if left to their own strength. But God is faithful, who mercifully confirms them in the grace once conferred upon them and powerfully preserves them in that grace to the end."

The apostle Paul knew so well the sufferings of this life and the attacks these could make on the faith of the Christian. Yet Paul asks, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:35-39). The apostle

expressed his confidence in the ways of the Lord, that He holds on to His own in all circumstances.

The Arminians put man in the centre; man perseveres by making use -through an exercise of his free will- of the resources that God has (graciously) supplied. The Bible on the other hand puts our God in the centre. It is because God is in the centre, and not me, that I can feel safe always.

Chapter 5 - The Perseverance of the Saints : Articles 4-6

In Articles 1-3 the fathers confessed that the believer in this life is and remains so weak that he is unable to stand on his own for a moment in the face of temptatio. However, this weak believer remains under attack from the Devil, the world and his own flesh. Left to himself, the believer invariably collapses in the face of these attacks. However, this gives no reason for despair, since God remains faithful to His promises and holds on to His own right to the end.

ARTICLE 4

SAINTS MAY FALL INTO SERIOUS SINS

"The power of God whereby He confirms and preserves true believers in grace is so great that it cannot be conquered by the flesh...." So great is God's power that His own are always safe in His hands. However, that does not mean that the converted can never fall into sin. Article 4 continues, "... yet the converted are not always so led and moved by God that they cannot in certain particular actions turn aside through their own fault from the guidance of grace and be seduced by and yield to the lusts of the flesh." The believer is able to fall. God in His wisdom may be pleased to withdraw His preserving hand, so that the believer is left to his own devices in the face of the attacks that be. Invariably, the believer falls into sin, falls for the attacks of the Devil the world or his own flesh.

Who is the believer of whom Article 4 speaks? It is me. What is written here is my confession. I am able to fall into awful sin. If God does not preserve me, if He does not uphold me by His hand day by day and moment by moment, I will invariably fall. Article 77 of the Australian Church Order stipulates,

"As serious and gross sins which are grounds for the suspension or deposition of office-bearers the following are to be mentioned particularly: false doctrine or heresy, public schisms, blasphemy, simony, faithless desertion of office or intrusion upon that of another, perjury, adultery, fornication, theft, acts of violence, habitual drunkenness, brawling, unjustly enriching oneself; and further all such sins and serious misdemeanours that rate as ground for excommunication with respect to other members of the Church."

Office-bearers are men who have been tested against the requirements of Scripture, and found acceptable. Consequently, we tend to regard these brothers as being above the sort of sins mentioned in this article of the Church Order. Yet the very fact that an article as this is included in the Church Order is in itself a confession that not even office-bearers are above blasphemy, perjury, adultery, fornication, etc. I may, then, not think that I for my part am above such sins. Article 4 speaks of saints: that includes me! No-one is to think in terms of "I would never do that." Although it is true that the heart of the believer has been changed by the Spirit of God, it is also true that the believer has not yet been perfected. In the words of the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord Day 44.114, "In this life even the holiest have only a small beginning of this obedience."

If the believer is not supported by God moment by moment, he will collapse in the face of ongoing attacks from the devil, the world and his own flesh. There is therefore no room for pride in the heart of the believer; there is room only for humility. It is exactly because we depend so much on God's preserving grace that Christ taught us to pray the sixth petition, "And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from the evil one." The Church has echoed the teaching of our Lord in this petition with these words: "That is: In ourselves we are so weak that we cannot stand even for a moment. Moreover, our sworn enemies - the devil, the world, and our own flesh - do not cease to attack us. Wilt Thou, therefore, uphold and strengthen us by the power of Thy Holy Spirit, so that in this spiritual war we may not go down to defeat, but always firmly resist our enemies, until we finally obtain the complete victory" (Lord Day 52.127). Here we confess our own inability to stand on own strength in the face of Satan's attack. As such, it is a confession of total dependance on God's grace.

MY SIN IS ALWAYS MY RESPONSIBILITY

In Scripture we read examples of saints who did succumb to Satan's attacks and fell into sin. For example, we read of David's sin with regard to taking a count of the people of Israel, thereby placing his trust in his army rather than in his God. "Again the anger of the LORD was aroused against Israel, and He moved David against them to say, "Go, number Israel and Judah" (2 Samuel 24:1). How did God move David? In 1 Chronicles 21:1 we read, "Now Satan stood up against Israel, and moved David to number Israel." Here Satan is said to have done it. This passage gives the answer to how God moved David to number the people. That is: God withdrew His support from David so that David was vulnerable to Satan's attack. As a result, David fell. This sin of David illustrates what we confess in Article 4, that God doesn't always preserve in such a way so that believers do not fall into deep sin.

This does not mean, though, that David could blame God for his fall, in the sense that: "You, Lord, let go of me." In the beginning God made us able to resist the attacks of the devil. That we became dead in sin is our own doing, and so the fact that we are unable to resist Satan's attacks on own strength is also our own doing. God is in no way obliged to hold on to us in the face of Satan's attacks. We cannot, therefore, blame God when we do succumb to Satan's temptations. The saints remain always responsible for their sins. Therefore David acknowledged responsibility for his transgression and asked God for forgiveness: "And David's heart condemned him after he had numbered the people. So David said to the LORD, "I have sinned greatly in what I have done; but now, I pray, O LORD, take away the iniquity of Your servant, for I have done very foolishly" (2 Samuel 24:10). I can never say that I could not help sinning.

THE SAINTS MUST CONSTANTLY WATCH AND PRAY

The believer remains weak, ever dependent on God's grace. "They must therefore constantly watch and pray that they may not be led into temptation." This is an explicit instruction from Scripture. In Matthew 26 we read how Jesus, on the night of His betrayal, accompanied by His disciples, went to Gethsemane to pray to His Father. Three times Jesus had requested His disciples to "stay and watch with Me." But three times Jesus returned to His disciples to find them asleep. Said Jesus to His disciples, "The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matthew 26:41). The believer wants to do what is right, but does not have the inner where-with-all to accomplish it.

I must, therefore, watch and remain on the alert for the attacks of the Devil who goes around like a roaring lion, and I must watch for the attacks of the world and my own flesh. I pray to God and tell Him of my weaknesses. I ask God to hold on to me, for if He were to let me stand on my own for even a moment, I would collapse. The need to watch and to pray is a constant reality for the Christian - lest he fall.

In Luke 22:31,32 Jesus tells Peter that Satan had demanded of God to let him sift Peter. Peter did not know this and therefore he could not pray for protection against this particular attack. But Jesus said to Peter, "But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail." In His wisdom, God permitted Satan to have Peter so that he might sift Peter as wheat. Jesus knew that Peter was going to fall; he was going to deny the Lord. However, Jesus prayed that his faith would not fail. Here is an illustration of the importance of prayer; every believer is under constant attack, and so each must "... pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). If God were to remove His hand for a moment, not a single believer could stand in the face of such attacks. At the same time Jesus showed Peter the value of such prayer, for He added straightaway, "when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren." Here is a promise that, though Peter would fall, God would restore him.

Jesus taught us to pray daily for food; "Give us this day our daily bread." In like manner, we need to pray constantly, "lead us not into temptation." This prayer we direct to God. God.... Who is this God? This is the God of whom we say, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Peter 1:3-5). To whom do we pray? To whom do we come with our petitions concerning our inability to stand on our own, pleading for support? It is to the God of great and abundant mercy that we pray this; our God who caused us to be born again, who made us a believer in the first place and who brings to completion His work in us. This God keeps His own "by the power of God." So I may be confident that even if I fall my God, who is strong, will hold on to me.

The believer who has a keen sense of his own depravity and weakness and a deep awareness of his total dependence on God will therefore adopt an attitude of humility also before his neighbour. Knowing how prone I am to succumbing to the attacks of the Devil, the world and my own flesh, I in turn will be understanding and gentle to someone who has fallen into sin. For example, society knows the scourge of AIDS. There may come a time that a brother or sister in this congregation contracts AIDS through sin on his/her part. Then no matter how repulsive I may find the practice of homosexuality, I at the same time confess that if God does not hold on to me, I too could fall into such sin. Therefore I cannot look down on another who has fallen into such sin. There is only room for me to be humble, and to offer my brother or sister the support and encouragement needed in the face of such a trial.

ARTICLE 5

THE EFFECTS OF SUCH SERIOUS SINS

Falling into serious sins has results; neither the believer nor God remain unaffected by them. Says Article 5, believers, "By such gross sins, ... greatly offend God, incur deadly guilt,

grieve the Holy Spirit, suspend the exercise of faith, very grievously wound their consciences, and sometimes for a while lose the sense of God's favour"

SIN OFFENDS GOD AND INCURS DEADLY GUILT

God hates sin. God had explicitly commanded the Israelites not to make a graven image. Yet, this is exactly what the Israelites did while God spoke with Moses on Mount Sinai. They had made for themselves a golden calf to worship. In response God wanted to destroy Israel. Said God to Moses, "...I have seen this people, and indeed it is a stiff-necked people! Now therefore, let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them" (Exodus 32:10). On another occasion the Israelites complained to God about having to eat manna all the time and asked Him for meat. This displeased the Lord. He did send quails into the camp of Israel "but while the meat was still between their teeth, before it was chewed, the wrath of the LORD was aroused against the people, and the LORD struck the people with a very great plague" (Numbers 11:33). God does not appreciate sin; He hates sin. It was because of their sins that the Israelites ended up in exile, that they were taken away from their homes, that they were cut into pieces, and that babies were torn away from their mothers.

Does it matter if I fall into sin? Most certainly, for it is against no one less than God that I sin. And this God "is a consuming fire" (Hebrews 12:29). And: "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10:31). God hates sin. If I fall into sin I greatly offend God and I incur His wrath. This God has not changed from the days of the Old Testament! One need but recall the plagues mentioned in the book of Revelation.

SIN GRIEVES THE HOLY SPIRIT

Our article adds that "such gross sins" also "grieve the Holy Spirit." I read in 1 Corinthians 3:16 that I am the temple of God and that the Spirit dwells in me. Shall I then use my body, my mind, my hands or my tongue to sin? If I do, I grieve the Holy Spirit. It is as Paul put it: "put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness, ... putting away lying Let him who stole steal no longer ... Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth ... do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, ... Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamour, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice" (Ephesians 4:24-31). That is: to lie, to steal, to use foul language, etc, is to "grieve the Holy Spirit of God." This was a truth David knew. That is why, after David's repentance of his adultery with Bethsheba in Ps 51 David does more than acknowledge the fact of his sin and repent of it; he also recognises that there is a price to pay for sin, namely, that the Holy Spirit departs. From Psalm 51:11 it is clear that to fall into sin, to embrace sin, to live and harden in sin comes at an exceedingly high cost: God then takes His Spirit away. In realisation of this cost, David prays, "Do not cast me away from Your presence, and do not take Your Holy Spirit from me."

SIN SUSPENDS THE EXERCISE OF FAITH

Falling into sin also "suspends the exercise of faith." Faith is not just believing that Jesus died on the cross for sin. Faith is action, is believing the Gospel and therefore living the Gospel. In the face of my sin, I may find it exceedingly hard to be gentle and loving to my wife (as per Ephesians 5), or may rebell against the notion of being submissive to my husband, or may loathe the need to be obedient to my parents. But if God says in His Word that that is what I must do, then I do it - that is faith. But the presence of sin makes the exercise of faith -the doing what I know God wants- so extremely difficult.

SIN WOUNDS THE CONSCIENCE AND CAN MAKE ONE LOSE THE SENSE OF GOD'S FAVOUR

In Psalm 32 we read of the effects of sin in the personal life of the believer. Life's vitality is sapped, the fun is out of life, the believer feels restless, his conscience is bothered with guilt. This is how David felt the effects of living with his unconfessed sin of adultery with Bathsheba. "My bones grew old through my groaning all the day long ... my vitality was turned into the drought of summer" (Psalm 32:3,4).

When the believer lives in friction with God he finds no desire to read the Bible, maybe even an inability to read the Bible. He finds it difficult to pray, feels that heaven is closed to him, feels he is unable to pray. He experiences no joy in attending Church or attending Holy Supper. For sin gets between the sinner and his God, and so God seems so far away. The effects of falling into sin are not pleasant and the discomfort of God's heavy hand continues to be felt until the moment of confession and repentance. It wasn't until David owned up to his sin before God that he could again experience God's blessing. Said David, "I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I have not hidden. I said, "I will confess my transgression to the LORD, and You forgave the iniquity of my sin" (verse 5). Only after confession of sin could David say, "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit" (Verse 1,2). Only after confession of sin and the subsequent assurance of God's forgiveness and redemption can the believer live in peace and joy again, assured once again of God's favour.

ARTICLE 6

GOD WILL NOT PERMIT HIS ELECT TO BE LOST

THE REFORMED: BELIEVERS CAN AND DO FALL BUT NOT TO THEIR ETERNAL RUIN

To have fallen deeply away from God's presence, feeling the weight of His heavy hand pressed upon him, is a most unpleasant experience for the believer. To what purpose though must the believer experience this? It is all for the purpose of restoring the sinner to the place where he belongs. If it wasn't for God holding on to me, I would fall for sure. In Article 6 I confess that God does not forsake me in my sin. "But God, who is rich in mercy, according to the unchangeable purpose of His election, does not completely withdraw His Holy Spirit from His own even in their deplorable fall." Notice how the accent is laid here on God.

The Israelites had fallen so deplorably. They were camped at the foot of Mount Sinai and only a few days prior God had said to them that He was their God, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself any carved image or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow to them or serve them." Yet the people blatantly transgressed God's command, and built for themselves a golden calf. How did God respond? Did he reject the Israelites, throw them away in favour of another people? No, on the contrary, God reveals to them who He is, namely, "The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, long-

suffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin..." (Exodus 34:6). God then renewed His covenant with His people. He had said of Israel in the past "you are mine", and therefore even after their deplorable fall He restores them to Himself again. This God does not change.

The prophet Jeremiah went through a difficult time when Jerusalem was besieged by Nebuchadnessar, king of Babylon. 'The Book of Lamentations' is Jeremiah's book of grief in which he laments Jerusalem's destruction. Feeling downcast and dejected, rejected by God, Jeremiah writes, "I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of His wrath. He has led me and made me walk in darkness and not in light. Surely He has turned His hand against me time and time again throughout the day. He has aged my flesh and my skin, and broken my bones. He has besieged me and surrounded me with bitterness and woe. He has set me in dark places like the dead of long ago. He has hedged me in so that I cannot get out; He has made my chain heavy. Even when I cry and shout, He shuts out my prayer" (Lamentations 3:1-8). How similar these experiences are to those described in Article 5! Where is God's goodness, God's care? To Jeremiah heaven seemed closed. How come? At bottom the cause of Jeremiah's dejection was Israel's sin. Jeremiah realised this and therefore in spite of his misery He does not forget Who his God is. Jeremiah knows his God, Israel's God, to be the God of compassion and mercy. So he confesses the words of verses 22f: "Through the LORD's mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; Great is your faithfulness." God is compassionate and each morning again He showers new mercies on His people.

It was thanks to God's mercy therefore that David's adultery did not mean the end of him. Although David and the Israelites deserved to perish, and we no less, God does not deal with His own according to His children's transgressions. Why not? "For I am the LORD, I do not change; therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob" (Malachi 3:6). That we don't perish on account of our sins is thanks to Who our God is. Our God remains a God of great compassion, a God of infinite mercy. This God of ours forgives. His compassion is endless. To use the words of Psalm 103:11,12, "For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His mercy toward those who fear Him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us." God has compassion and therefore He holds on to me, even when I fall into the most horrid of sins!

In His compassion God holds on to me "according to the unchangeable purpose of His election." God determined to save His elect and therefore they shall be saved, even if they fall into the worst possible sins. In his letter to the Philippians Paul thanked God, "being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6). What a wonderful Gospel this is! When I fall, I can depend on my God, confident that He will pick me up again. What a security there is for us in a God of such compassion. To fall into sin is no enjoyable experience for the child of God. Weak as I am, with only a small beginning of the obedience God requires of me, and under constant attack from the Devil, the world and my own flesh, I should not be surprised when I do fall into sin. But I should not despair, as if all is now lost. By no means! To use the words of the Form for the Baptism of Infants, "And if we sometimes through weakness fall into sins, we must not despair of God's mercy nor continue in sin, for baptism is a seal and trustworthy testimony that we have an eternal covenant with God" (Book of Praise, p.585). I need never despair in the face of my sin because I know Who my God is: a God of endless compassion, faithful to His promises. What a rich and delightful comfort I have in knowing this! To Him be all praise!!

ARMINIANS: BELIEVERS CAN AND DO FALL AND ARE ETERNALLY LOST

The richness of believing God's boundless compassion becomes all the more apparent when it is compared to what the Arminians at the Synod of Dort believed. The fathers summarised their teaching like this: "True regenerate believers not only can fall completely and definitely from justifying faith and also from grace and salvation, but indeed they often do fall from them and are lost forever" (Rejection of Errors No 3 - Error, Book of Praise, p.571). In other words, believers -people who live by the wonderful promises of God's forgiving grace, who are justified by the blood of Christ and are sanctified by the Holy Spirit- if they fall, they lose all of this, forever. Then they are justified no more, and sanctified no more. To have to believe this in the face of constant attack from the Devil, the world and my own flesh is so void of comfort. What blessed comfort it is then for the believer to recall what God says in His Word, "(My) compassions fail not. They are new every morning."

In their refutation of the above heresy of the Arminians, the fathers drew attention to Romans 5:8 where we read, "But God demonstrates His own love towards us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Before God began His work of salvation for us and in us, God knew what we were: sinful. Yet in spite of this He gave up His Son to death for us. When Christ died for us He knew we were sinners, sinful, and inclined to every evil. If God saved me when I was a sinner, if it is not my goodness which makes me acceptable, shall I then despair in the face of succumbing to sin? No, for He saved me when I was a sinner. In 1 John 3:9 we read, "Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God." God's seed abides in the believer and it shall not be taken out of him. Where the Lord has worked faith, that seed cannot be removed. This does not mean that we become perfect but rather, being born of God, we do not live in sin. John 10:28,29 gives a similar assurance concerning the believer not being able to fall to his eternal destruction. There Christ, the Good Shepherd, says, "And I give (My sheep) eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand." No, I need never to despair. The mercy of my God is always there for me.

SIN AGAINST THE HOLY SPIRIT

The fathers also saw need to point out that it is because the mercy of God is so abundant and rich that God does not permit His own "to sink so deep that they fall away from the grace of adoption and the state of justification, or commit the sin unto death or the sin against the Holy Spirit and, totally deserted by Him, plunge themselves into eternal ruin." The fathers confessed this in order to let Scripture speak against the Arminian error that "True regenerate believers can commit the sin unto death or the sin against the Holy Spirit." (Rejection of Errors No 4 - Error, Book of Praise, p. 572).

What is the sin against the Holy Spirit? In Matthew 12:31,32 we read that this is the one sin which cannot be forgiven. Said Christ, "Therefore I say to you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven men. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come." To the believer who finds that he has fallen into sin, finds himself conscious of having incurred God's wrath, that the exercising of his faith is stifled, and that heaven appears closed to him, it may appear that he has committed the sin against the Holy Spirit, for which there is no forgiveness. Consequently he concludes that he must be lost after all. However, the fathers

say in Article 6 that God does not allow a child of His to fall that far. God holds on to his own and this knowledge is reassuring for the believer.

What then is the sin against the Holy Spirit? Contrary to what some believe, it is neither adultery nor blasphemy. In Matthew 12:22-30 the Pharisees claimed that Jesus cast out demons because he was filled with the devil. Said the Pharisees, "This fellow does not cast out demons except by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons." The Old Testament is clear as to what the deeds of the devil are, and this does not include the casting out of demons. The Old Testament is equally clear as to what it is the Son of God would do when He came to earth, and that included removing the consequences of sin. For years the Pharisees had heard, and busied themselves with, Scripture and they also heard Jesus' teaching. In spite of all this their response to Jesus' casting out of demons was to claim that 'He is of the Devil'. This was a blatant rejection of the Word of God and its promises; a rejection of the God who has revealed Himself through the Gospel. To know God but yet to say "I don't want Him" - for that sin there is no forgiveness.

"For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put him to an open shame" (Hebrews 6:4-6). Although there is no direct mention in these verses of the sin against the Holy Spirit, it is a reference to it. These words were addressed to covenant people who had tasted God's covenant blessings. It is not people outside the Church who commit the sin against the Holy Spirit, but people in the Church. These are the hypocrites spoken of in Article 29, Belgic Confession, i.e. those "who are mixed in the Church along with the good and yet are not part of the Church, although they are outwardly in it." Knowing that I can fall, I am warned against falling so that I do not put myself at the risk of falling that far. To fall into sin is one thing; God offers forgiveness to the repentant sinner. However, to consciously choose to continue in sin and to turn one's back on God - for that there is no forgiveness. To have known God but then to harden one's heart and reject God is the sin against the Holy Spirit.

How far does God let us, His elect, fall? Does God let us fall to the point where we say, "I don't want the Gospel anymore?" Does God permit us to turn our back on Him, to reject Him totally? No, for the Lord holds on to His own. That a believer may at times wonder where God is, feel as though God doesn't care about him, find himself unwilling or unable to pray, is something different than a blatant rejection of God.

What great comfort and encouragement I derive then from knowing and believing that God does not let His own fall down to that point. It puts all the emphasis on God and what He does. The Arminians say, "I'll do it on my own", but the Reformed believe what God says: it all depends on Him. Therefore I am always safe.

Chapter 5 - The Perseverance of the Saints : Articles 7-9

In the preceding articles, the fathers confessed that believers in this life remain weak and prone to falling into sin (Article 2,4,5), but that God holds on to His own irrespective of what sins they fall into (Article 3,6). In Article 7 the fathers underline that it is God who holds on to the saints so that they do not fall away eternally.

ARTICLE 7

GOD WILL AGAIN RENEW HIS ELECT TO REPENTANCE

GOD PRESERVES IN THE SAINTS HIS IMPERISHABLE SEED OF REGENERATION

In Article 6 confession was made of the "God, who is rich in mercy." This God, said that article, "according to the unchangeable purpose of His election, does not completely withdraw His Holy Spirit from His own even in their deplorable fall. Neither does He permit them to ... plunge themselves into eternal ruin." Article 7 draws out why this might be. Said the fathers in Article 7, "For in the first place, in their fall, He preserves in them His imperishable seed of regeneration so that it does not perish and is not cast out." The fathers derived the word 'seed' from the following texts in Scripture:

1 John 3:9

"Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God."

John does not say here that the believer never falls or never commits sin, but rather that the believer does not fall and remain in his sin forever. The believer does not continue living in sin because God's seed remains in him. The believer is born of God. God has worked in the heart of the believer, put His seed in his heart.

1 Peter 1:22,23

"Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart, having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides for ever."

A corruptible seed is perishable, like the seed of the bean, the potato or wheat. From the planted seed grows a plant, but the seed itself perishes. However, with reference to the believer the apostle writes of a seed which grows into a plant and bears fruit without the seed perishing. This incorruptible seed, the seed of regeneration, being born again, is what God has worked in the believer. This incorruptible seed marks the beginning of a new life. In the event that the believer falls, the believer does not die in his fall, does not perish eternally, because he is born of an imperishable seed. Though the work of the Lord may remain hidden in the life of the believer, God, who has begun His work in the believer, holds on and completes His work. The seed planted by God never perishes.

This is not what the Arminians teach. Said they, "It is not absurd that one, having lost his first regeneration, is again and even often born anew" (Rejection of Errors, No 8 - Error, Book of Praise, p. 574). According to the Arminians the believer, though born again, can fall away from God so totally that the seed of regeneration God worked in his heart perishes. This, they add, can happen repeatedly. For that reason the fathers saw the need for Article 7, pointing out from Scripture that though the believer falls in this life, God's work of rebirth in the believer always remains and so never needs to be repeated.

BY HIS WORD AND SPIRIT GOD RENEWS HIS SAINTS TO REPENTANCE

God does not let the believer who has fallen into sin remain in his sin. In His time, God picks him up and restores him. God's Word remains effective, bearing fruit in the life of the believer so that he is brought back to repentance. This effective work of the Word was evident in David's life. In 2 Samuel 11 Scripture records David's sin of adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah. In 2 Samuel 12 we read of Nathan being sent to David and of the parable he tells David concerning a poor man who owned only one little lamb, and of a rich man who owned "exceedingly many flocks and herds" but stole and killed the poor man's lamb. In verse 7 we read how God's Word came to David in his specific situation, cutting into David's heart: "You are the man!" God acted upon David at His appointed time. As a result of Nathan's words God brought David to repentance and confession, causing David to say to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD" (vs 13). To use the words of the fathers in Article 7, God "through His Word and Spirit ... effectually renewed (David) to repentance."

Lord's Day 33.88-90 explains what repentance is and how the believer demonstrates repentance. "True repentance or conversion of man ... is the dying of the old nature and the coming to life of the new.... (The dying of the old nature) is to grieve with a heartfelt sorrow that we have offended God by our sin, and more and more to hate it and flee from it. (The coming to life of the new nature) is a heartfelt joy in God through Christ, and a love and delight to live according to the will of God in all good works." God's work of renewal to repentance in the heart of believers has this result, say the fathers: "they grieve from the heart with a godly sorrow for the sins they have committed." A godly sorrow on the part of the believer is a keen sense of having hurt God by sin and feeling heartfelt grief on account of this. The following Scripture texts illustrate such godly sorrow in repentant believers:

Psalm 51:8,17

"Make me to hear joy and gladness, that the bones which you have broken may rejoice.... The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart."

Psalm 51 records David's repentance of his sin with Bathsheba. The psalm makes clear that David's repentance was not just a general confession of sinfulness, but a brokenness on account of hurting God by the adultery and murder he had committed. In speaking of broken bones David does not mean that his bones were physically broken on account of his sin, but that the specific sins he committed against God and his neighbour bothered him to the core of his being. David was not just sorry; he felt broken inside.

Matthew 27:74,75

"Then (Peter) began to curse and swear, saying, "I do not know the man!" And immediately a cock crowed. And Peter remembered he word of Jesus who had said to him, "Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times." Then he went out and wept bitterly."

Peter fell into sin, but God preserved him in his fall and brought him to repentance very soon after his fall. As soon as the cock crowed Peter recalled his master's words. His depth of his grief in the face of his sin is pointed up not just by the fact that he "wept", but by the fact that he wept "bitterly". This was not a shallow repentance!

THE SORROW OF THE WORLD PRODUCES DEATH

In 2 Corinthians 7:9,10 we read that on account of a transgression amongst the saints in the Church at Corinth, there were two kinds of sorrow possible: a "godly sorrow", such as that of David and Peter, and a 'sorrow of the world' which produces death. Paul says, "Now I rejoice, not that you were made sorry, but that your sorrow led to repentance. For you were made sorry in a godly manner, that you might suffer loss from us in nothing. For godly sorrow produces repentance to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death."

Scripture texts which illustrate the sorrow of the world:

Matthew 27:3

"Then Judas, his betrayer, seeing that he had been condemned, was remorseful and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood", and they said, "What is that to us? You see to it!" Then he threw down the pieces of silver in the temple and departed, and went and hanged himself."

Judas' remorse on account of his sin of betrayal and his subsequent suicide provide an example of the sorrow of the world. It was not a repentance in the sense of sorrow that God was hurt and hence not a godly sorrow. If anything, one may rather speak here of self pity.

Hebrews 12:16,17

... "lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright. For you know that afterwards, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought it diligently with tears."

Esau shed tears, but they were not tears of repentance for his repentance was not a sorrow driven by the fact that he had hurt his God. Hence his sorrow led to death.

REPENTANCE WORKED BY GOD PRODUCES FIRST GODLY SORROW, FOLLOWED BY A HEARTFELT JOY

The repentance God works in the hearts of believers produces first a godly sorrow on account of having offended God by sin, but it also produces "a heartfelt joy in God through Christ, and a love and delight to live according to the will of God in all good works" (LD 33.90). This we learn from David's life. In Psalm 32 David says that he felt God's heavy hand pressing down on him, so that he was driven to the point of repentance. As a result of God working this repentance in him, David says in verses 1 and 11, "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.... Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, you righteous; and shout for joy, all you upright in heart!" David expresses the joy God worked in his life by driving him to repentance from sin. Though the believer falls, God preserves him, leads him to a repentance which produces godly grief and sorrow, after which God allows him to again experience His favour. Returned to God's favour, the believer experiences the

heartfelt joy expressed in Psalm 32. As a result, the repentant believer desires to be busy with God's Word.

To use the words of Article 7, believers, having grieved from the heart with a godly sorrow on account of their sins and having sought forgiveness in the blood of Christ, "again experience the favour of a reconciled God and adore His mercies and faithfulness and ... they more diligently work out their own salvation with fear and trembling."

ARTICLE 8

THE GRACE OF THE TRIUNE GOD PRESERVES

The Arminian stressed that perseverance of the believer depends not on election, nor on what Christ obtained through His death, but only on man's free will, on whether or not man believes. To take away any confusion on the point, the fathers made it their business to devote another article to defend the doctrine of Scripture that the preservation of the believer, even in his fall, is all God's doing alone, apart from any input of man.

Said the Arminians,

"The perseverance of the true believers is not a fruit of election or a gift of God obtained by the death of Christ. It is a condition of the new covenant, which man before his so-called decisive election and justification must fulfil through his free will."

(Rejection of Errors No 1 - Error, Book of Praise, p. 570).

"God does indeed provide the believer with sufficient powers to persevere, and is ready to preserve these in him if he will do his duty. But though all these things have been established which are necessary to persevere in faith and which God will use to preserve faith, even then it still always depends on the decision of the will whether he will persevere or not."

(Rejection of Errors No 2 - Error, Book of Praise, p. 571).

The Arminians lay all the accent on the believer. According to them, the fallen believer can only be restored if he so chooses. God may extend a helping hand to the fallen believer, they say, but the believer's restoration and perseverance depends ultimately on the believer availing himself of the help God offers; man must "do his duty."

The fathers therefore commence Article 8 by restating what has already been confessed in Articles 1-7 concerning the weakness of the believer and his total dependence on God for preservation: "So it is not through their own merits or strength but through the undeserved mercy of God that they neither totally fall back from faith and grace nor persist in their backslidings and are finally lost." The fathers give God alone all the credit for the believer's preservation. The humbling truth of this is pointed up all the more by the next revealing statement, that "As far as (the believers) are concerned, this (falling back from faith and grace, persisting in their backslidings and being eternally lost) could not only easily happen but would undoubtedly happen." With the words of LD 52.127, we confess that "In ourselves we are so weak that we cannot stand even for a moment." If God didn't hold on to me, I

would most definitely fall. It is a humbling reality: if my preservation depended on me, I would be eternally lost. This reality makes the following words so wonderfully rich: "But as far as God is concerned, this cannot possibly happen...." The wealth of this statement is what the fathers worked out in the rest of the article by means of confession of the work of the triune God with respect to the preservation of the believer.

THE WORK OF GOD THE FATHER

The believer is preserved in his fall, for, "as far as God is concerned ... His counsel cannot be changed, His promise cannot fail, the calling according to His purpose cannot be revoked"

1) God's counsel cannot be changed

The Arminians said that the perseverance of the saints does not depend on God having elected anybody. However, Scripture speaks differently. There God teaches that before the beginning of the world, God decided that some men shall be saved and receive the crown of glory; no-one would be able to pluck them out of His hand for, "The counsel of the LORD stands for ever" (Psalm 33:11). With reference to the "election of grace", Paul writes in Romans 11:7 that "the elect have obtained it." It is solely God's doing that the elect (not some but all of them) have obtained the election of grace. God's counsel stands. God has elected and so we are safe.

2) God's promise cannot fail

"But the Lord is faithful, who will establish you and guard you from the evil one" (2 Thessalonians 3:3). In the face of attacks from "unreasonable and wicked men" (vs 2), the Lord remains faithful. His promise that I am His stands firm: "For the mountains shall depart and the hills be removed, but my kindness shall not depart from you, nor shall my covenant of peace be removed, says the LORD who has mercy on you." (Isaiah 54:10). Though Satan may try his utmost to snatch me out of God's hand, I may trust that God's promise in John 10:28-30 cannot fail. There Jesus says, "And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and my Father are one."

3) The calling according to God's purpose cannot be revoked

"... whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified" (Romans 8:30). God has elected a certain number. These specific persons are all called to faith, with as result that they all believe and so are justified. These particular ones, though, cannot fall away for "these He also glorified." Paul is so certain that the elect (= the called = the justified) will all be glorified (on the day of Christ's return) that he uses the past tense: "these He also glorified." Here is the unbreakable chain of predestination, justification and glorification of His elect. The number of the elect = the number of the justified = the number of the glorified. None will be missing, simply because the calling according to God's purpose cannot be revoked. As Jesus said: No one is able to snatch them out of my Father's hand." And Paul said it elsewhere too: "For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (Romans 11:29). When the children of God fall into sin, they cannot be lost. Rather, they shall certainly reach their goal because God is who He is.

THE WORK OF GOD THE SON

The believer is preserved in his fall, for, "... the merit, intercession, and preservation of Christ cannot be nullified...."

1) The merit of Christ

The merit of Christ is a reference to His work on the cross by which He obtained for the elect the forgiveness of sins, righteousness and eternal life. There is forgiveness for my sins through the blood the Saviour shed for me on Calvary. So when I fall into sin, I need not despair that all is now lost; there remains forgiveness in the blood of Christ. His work on the cross covered all my sin for "Christ came as high priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption" (Hebrews 9:11,12). With His own blood Christ came into the presence of God. No matter how gross the sin I commit, be it the adultery or murder David committed, or Peter's blasphemy and denial, Christ's redemptive work adequately covers it. God the Father has chosen me for life eternal, and so no sin of mine can nullify the merit of Christ's work.

2) The intercession of Christ

From 1 John 2:1 we learn that Christ intercedes for us before the Father in Heaven. "My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." In heaven today Christ is busy pleading with the Father for the sake of those for whom He died. As it were, He reminds the Father, in the face of our sins, that He died for us, and so God has already accepted us as righteous before Him (see Zechariah 3:1-5). Paul, in Romans 8:34, jubilates that there is no one in all creation -not even God Himself!- who will condemn us any more. He gives this explanation for his certainty: "It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us." The same Saviour who gave up His life for our sins is today at the right hand of God - doing for our benefit the work of a lawyer! Truly, "Christ has ... entered ... into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us" (Hebrews 9:24; cf LD 18.49a). Today we benefit so enormously from Christ's presence in heaven! No sin today can turn the Father's favour away from His own! It is as we confess in the Belgic Confession, Article 26: "If, therefore, we had to look for another intercessor, could we find one who loves us more than He who laid down His life for us, even while we were His enemies? If we had to look for one who has authority and power, who has more than He who is seated at the right hand of the Father and who has all authority in heaven and on earth? Moreover, who will be heard more readily than God's own well-beloved Son?" Though I in my weakness may fall into sin, I need not despair, for Christ's intercessory work cannot be nullified.

From Luke 22:31,32 I learn how effective Christ's intercessory work is. Said the Lord to Peter, "Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to me, strengthen your brethren." In God's presence Christ prayed for Peter. Peter most certainly fell, blaspheming and denying His Saviour, but so effective was Christ's intercessory work for Peter, that as soon as the cock crowed, Peter remembered what Jesus had said to him and he went out and wept bitterly. (See Matthew 26:74,75).

Christ's intercessory work is effective for every believer. Says Paul in Romans 8:1, "There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit." In verse 34 (as already just quoted) Paul gives the reason, "Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us." So convinced is Paul that Christ's work in heaven on his behalf is effective that he breaks out in song in the verses 38,39: "For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." God loves me in Christ and therefore nothing will separate me from God or God from me.

3) The preservation of Christ

In John 10:28 Christ assures us that He holds on to us eternally so that we shall never perish. "And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of my hand." This knowledge is a source of rich comfort for the believer. Therefore with the words of LD 1 I confess that my only comfort in life and death is this, "That I am not my own, but belong with body and soul, both in life and death, to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with His precious blood, and has set me free from all the power of the devil." No matter the circumstance of my life, whether I stand strong in faith or fall into sin, my comfort is that I belong to Christ my Saviour who has paid for all my sins, even my sins of adultery, murder, blasphemy or denial of Him. I cannot even fall into sin without the will of my heavenly Father. Indeed, even my fall into sin -and I sin daily- works together for my salvation. As LD 1 continues: my comfort in the face of my sin is that my Saviour Jesus Christ "also preserves me in such a way that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head; indeed all things must work together for my salvation."

THE WORK OF GOD THE HOLY SPIRIT

Article 8 speaks also of the 'the sealing of the Holy Spirit.' These words we find in Ephesians 1:13,14: "In him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of his glory." Just as certificates or other official documents bear a seal as a guarantee of their authenticity, so the sealing of the Holy Spirit guarantees that the promises God directed to us are real for us (cf LD 18.49c). This sealing of the Holy Spirit, said the fathers, "can neither be frustrated nor destroyed." Though the believer may fall, the sealing of the Holy Spirit remains.

Triune God -Father, Son and Holy Spirit- holds on to His people so that they shall not perish. Let the Arminians believe that true regenerate believers can and often do fall to their eternal destruction unless "they do their duty", but we shall stand by what God tells us in His Word and seals by His Spirit: we are always safe with Him, no matter what may happen in our lives and no matter how deeply we may fall. Fall we may, even often, but never to our eternal ruin, for our God will never let go of us. Our preservation is His doing alone. To Him therefore be all our thanks and glory.

ARTICLE 9

THE ASSURANCE OF THIS PRESERVATION

Articles 1-8 spoke of the believer's vulnerability to sin, and insisted that even in the face of repeated fall into sin, God holds on to His own, always. These articles pointed up the weakness of the believer, the strength of God, and therefore the safety and security of the believer in God's hand. This reality does not and can not change because God is GOD. With Article 9 the fathers move on to a new topic, focusing on how the believer experiences this delightful Gospel.

The believer may know that God's elect are always safe, but he may not always experience it that way. Human as we are, we have our doubts and questions. Should we in turn feel bad because we doubt? In Articles 9-13 the fathers shift their focus to our human reactions and responses to the wealth of the contents of Articles 1-8.

What gave rise to the mention of this element of the believer's assurance of his preservation was the following error of the Arminians: "Without a special revelation we can have no certainty of future perseverance in this life" (Rejection of Errors, No 5 - Error, Book of Praise, p.572). In their refutation of this error, the fathers made reference to "the followers of the pope," for the Arminians were re-introducing the Roman Catholic teaching that one can never be certain of his perseverance unless he receives some sort of special revelation. Although Article 9 does not elaborate on the grounds of the believer's assurance (this is the material of Article 10), the fathers simply state in Article 9 that the believer can be sure: "Believers themselves can be certain and are certain of this preservation of the elect to salvation and the perseverance of true believers in the faith."

The certainty of God's promises does not depend on how we feel. Whether or not I feel God's promises to be true is irrelevant to the fact that they are true. By the grace of God we are allowed to be sure that God is faithful to His Word and promises. In John 10:28 Jesus gave the assurance that His own shall never perish for they are eternally safe in His hand and in Romans 8:39 Paul writes that there is absolutely nothing which can separate us from the love of God. So sure is Paul of attaining the goal God has set for him, that he writes in 2 Timothy 4:7,8,18 "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved His appearing... And the Lord will deliver me from every evil work and preserve me for His heavenly kingdom." Here Paul speaks with conviction. He has not a single doubt that he will get there because he has learned from Scripture that God holds on to His own.

"This assurance is according to the measure of their faith...." The one person, like Paul for example, is strong in the Lord without any doubts, but another person may feel certain the one day, but not be so sure the next. Isn't that the reality of the Christian life? In Ephesians 4 we read how the Lord gave office-bearers "for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ", with this goal: "till we all come to the unity of the faith and knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness by which

they lie in wait to deceive, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into him who is the head - Christ - from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love" (Ephesians 4:12-16). Here Paul characterises the Ephesians as children who need to grow; grow in the Lord. Officebearers have been given so that the children of God may grow from childhood to manhood, from small-in-assurance to strong-in-assurance, convinced that the work of God in Jesus Christ has been done not just for the benefit of others but also for my benefit.

Lest there be the thought in my mind that I doubt too much and therefore do not have true faith after all, I need to be mindful of the fact that I remain touched by the brokenness of this life and therefore my faith will go up and down. I need to grow in faith and hence in assurance, but I will never reach full maturity in this respect in this life. Many of the Psalms give evidence of saints whose assurance fluctuated. See for example Psalm 13. David, a man after God's heart, a man who loved the Lord, begins this Psalm feeling downcast: "How long, O LORD? Will you forget me for ever? How long will You hid Your face from me?" (vs 1). There certainly is no expression of joy here. Rather, David is plagued by doubt, feels distant from God, is ready to despair: "Consider and hear me, O LORD my God; enlighten my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death; lest my enemy say, "I have prevailed against him"; lest those who trouble me rejoice when I am moved" (vs 3,4). Yet, David immediately proceeds on a much more positive note: "But I have trusted in Your mercy; my heart shall rejoice in Your salvation" (vs 5). God Himself holds on to David in his down moments, and carries him forward again to greater assurance. So doubt is replaced by joy: "I will sing to the LORD, because He has dealt bountifully with me" (vs 6). Notice how doubt and certainty lie close together. Isn't that a normal experience for the Christian?

I can be assured that God holds on to me, but the certainty will nevertheless go up and down according to the measure of my faith - and that can vary from day to day and from circumstance to circumstance. In order to be encouraged, therefore, I must keep the promises of God before my eyes. God wants me to cling to the promise that He holds on to me, no matter what. The certainty of God's promises depends not on my feelings, but on the Giver of the promise. God is always faithful and therefore His Word of promise is my most trustworthy assurance that He will hold on to me always, even when I fall into sin, and He will preserve me for His heavenly kingdom where I will wear the crown of righteousness which He today already has laid up for me.

Chapter 5 - The Perseverance of the Saints : Articles 10-12

In Article 9 the fathers confessed that believers in this life can be certain and are certain that God preserves them to the end. The believer need not be in doubt that he will receive eternal salvation. Rather, he can be assured today already that he shall live with the Lord in glory on the new earth. This assurance is a reality for the Christian. Article 10 gives the grounds for making this confession.

ARTICLE 10

THE GROUND OF THIS ASSURANCE

The Arminians taught that "without a special revelation we can have no certainty of future perseverance in this life" (Rejection of Errors, No 5 - Error, Book of Praise, p. 572).

According to them, if you want to know today that you will persevere tomorrow, then you need a special revelation from God to this effect. By special revelation then is meant an event or occurrence by which you become convinced that you will be saved, be it via a dream, someone telling you so, or opening your Bible at a particular text.

This heresy has surfaced repeatedly in the history of the church, and it was confessed in very categorical terms by the Church of Rome. In the 16th century, in an attempt to stem the tide of the Reformation, the Roman Catholic Council of Trent (1545-1562) issued a curse over the person who said he could be sure he'd be saved even if he doesn't have a special revelation. This heresy surfaced again during the 19th century with Mysticism. Inherent in this heresy is the notion that what the Bible says is not sufficient. The Mystics appealed to a passage as 2 Corinthians 3:6, where the apostle writes, "(God) also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." Mystics interpreted this to mean that the Bible (the letter) is dead; therefore man needs the Spirit, without the Spirit one can't be certain of any thing. This is a poor interpretation of the passage. We do not read here that the letter is dead, but that the letter kills. To be able to kill, one needs to be alive to begin with! The Bible is very much 'alive', its contents authoritative.

NO SPECIAL REVELATION BUT GOD'S WORD ALONE

The Arminians said that believers need a special revelation in order to be assured. Were they correct? Do I need a special revelation from God apart from what is contained in the Bible itself? The Bible itself is very categorical in this respect. "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path", we read in Psalm 119:105. "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16,17). All the revelation I require I can find in the Bible. From the Bible alone I learn that I will go to Heaven. This is what the fathers confessed in Article 10 when they wrote, "This assurance is not produced by a certain private revelation besides or outside the Word"

THREE MEANS BY WHICH ONE RECEIVES THE ASSURANCE CONTAINED IN GOD'S WORD

The fathers list three means by which one receives this assurance contained in God's Word. "This assurance is not produced by a certain private revelation besides or outside the Word, but by faith in the promises of God, which He has most abundantly revealed in His Word for our comfort; by the testimony of the Holy Spirit, witnessing with our spirit that we are children and heirs of God; and, finally, by the serious and holy pursuit of a good conscience and of good works."

1) By Faith

What is it that God promises in His Word concerning perseverance? With much confidence the apostle Paul writes in Philippians 1:6, "being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ." This is your God, says the apostle. If He has begun a work in you then He will also bring it to completion. A similar assurance is given in Romans 8:38,39. Paul is convinced that nothing in all the world will be able to break God's love for us. "For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Nothing shall separate us from God's love says Paul: this holds true for himself, for the saints at Rome, and for me too. It is the promise of God that He will never stop loving me.

How will I know that I will persevere? It is the promise of God. He has established a covenant of grace with me, and confirmed this covenant with granting the gift of faith. He has begun a work-to-salvation in my heart, and He does not quit where He has begun to work. His characteristic as God Unchanging demands that I be assured that He will hold on to me, no matter what may happen along the pathway of life.

At bottom, faith and assurance cannot be separated. Assurance is part and parcel of faith. To 'have faith', to 'believe' is to cling to all that God has said, including His revelation about Himself. Because of Who God is, the believer can and may be assured that he shall reach the goal of perfection on the last day. The assurance of faith is working with what God has said in the Bible, and believing and accepting it. Accepting what God says is to be sure that what God says is true. He will hold on to me. He is faithful to the end. Assurance comes not by special revelation but by believing what God has said in His Word.

2) By the testimony of the Holy Spirit

This is a direct reference to Romans 8:14-17

For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs - heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with him, that we may also be glorified together."

The point which the apostle wishes to make here is that the Holy Spirit teaches us to call God 'Father'. As a child grows up, a mother teaches her child that her husband is 'Daddy' and also

teaches the child to say Daddy to him. As a result of this training, the child one day welcomes Dad home with the endearing cry: "Daddy!" The child as it were acknowledges, or makes a 'confession', that this man is Daddy. The Spirit does likewise with us. He has taught us that God is our Father, but He also works this confession on our lips so that we address God in prayer as 'Our Father in Heaven'. By calling God 'Father' I make a confession that I am His child. This confession comes not from my own heart but the Spirit has worked it in me to cry out "Abba, Father." "The Spirit himself bears witness that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs."

3) The serious and holy pursuit of a good conscience and of good works

Why is it that I want to do what the Lord wants of me? In Galatians 5 I read of two kinds of works which I can do: works of the flesh or works of the Spirit. Works of the flesh include adultery, uncleanness, hatred, contentions, heresies, envy, etc. (See vss 19-21). "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (vss 22-23). What do I see in my life? Do I see works of the flesh or fruits of the Spirit? "For a tree is known by its fruit", said Jesus to the Pharisees in Matthew 12:33. This is true of everyone. I can know what I am by looking at the works that I do. Are my works evidence of belonging to God? In LD 32.86 I confess that I must do good works so that I "may be assured of (my) faith by its fruits." My lifestyle confirms for me the confession that the Spirit has worked within me, that I belong to God, that He has saved me and that I am on the road to heaven.

ASSURANCE HINGES ON FAITH IN GOD'S PROMISES

Faith is the crux of the matter, but when I also receive the testimony of the Holy Spirit that I am God's child and when I can see in my life that I do the works of a child of God, then I can indeed be certain today that tomorrow I shall be with the Lord on the new earth. Then the matter is no longer a doubt in my mind or a relentless pursuit in case I do not reach the goal. God has begun a work in my life and He will complete it. So I can relax. God has allowed me the privilege of being convinced today that I will live with Him in eternity. This makes for a sense of peace and contentment beyond description. I can be sure of my salvation because God is so faithful. Therefore the fathers concluded the article by writing, "And if the elect of God did not have in this world the solid comfort of obtaining the victory and this unailing pledge of eternal glory, they would be of all men the most miserable." I am not left hoping for something I may not get. God has made me rich beyond compare because today I know with certainty where I shall be tomorrow: with Him.

ARTICLE 11

THIS ASSURANCE NOT ALWAYS FELT

With Article 10 we confessed how rich we are allowed to be: God would have us be sure that we shall persevere. As it is, though, in the brokenness of this life the Christian does not always feel so certain of persevering. Time and again he is filled with doubt. This doubt forms the topic of Article 11. By mentioning this doubt, the fathers were being both Scriptural and realistic; they stood with 'both feet on the ground' and so should we. Scripture

itself tells us that God will hold on to us, but Scripture also tells us that certainty concerning this truth is not always present in the life of the Christian.

DOUBT: SCRIPTURAL AND REALISTIC

Psalm 73 is a Psalm of Asaph, a brother in the faith. He worked in the Temple day by day, and so he daily saw and heard the preaching of the Gospel of salvation. We would say: if there was anyone who should have been filled with assurance all the time, it should have been Asaph. But he wasn't. As he says in vs 2: "As for me, my feet had almost stumbled; My steps had nearly slipped." Why? "For I was envious when I saw the prosperity of the wicked ... They are not in trouble as other men ... their eyes bulge with abundance; they have more than heart could wish.... Behold, these are the ungodly, who are always at ease; they increase in riches. Surely I have cleansed my heart in vain, and washed my hands in innocence.... Thus my heart was grieved, and I was vexed in my mind." What he say in real life around him took away his sense of confidence in the Lord. It's something we can relate to so well. We observe what goes on in the world around us, and see so much that to our minds does not add up at all. It shakes us in our faith....

Again, in Psalm 77:7-9 Asaph says, "Will the Lord cast off for ever? And will He be favourable no more? Has His mercy ceased for ever? Has His promise failed for evermore? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has He in anger shut up His tender mercies?" One reads many such cries of doubt and despair throughout the Psalms.

Job: a man so strong in faith, blessed by the Lord with riches and prosperity. Then one day he lost everything. His wife even advised him to curse God and die. Be sure of it, Job was sorely tempted. He certainly did not stay on a 'spiritual high'. On the contrary, he too got down. Job's life too is an illustration of Christian realism.

The fathers knew this and therefore they wrote in Article 11, "Scripture meanwhile testifies that believers in this life have to struggle with various doubts of the flesh and, placed under severe temptation, do not always feel this assurance of faith and certainty of persevering." Doubt and uncertainty were experienced so real by Asaph and Job, and similar feelings equally plague the Christian today.

Doubt: how real it is. The Arminians said "it is praiseworthy to doubt" (Rejection of Errors No 6 - Error, Book of Praise, p. 573). According to the Arminians it was praiseworthy to wallow in uncertainty in terms of God's faithfulness and it was over against this that the fathers wrote Article 11. Doubt: it's so realistic. The Christian has to struggle with various doubts at different times in life, and to doubt is a struggle. But is doubt a good thing? The answer is no. Doubt is sin.

DOUBT IS SIN

In his letter to the Hebrews the apostle seeks to encourage the Hebrew Christians in their faith in the face of opposition, pointing them to Jesus Christ and what He had attained for them in His sacrifice on the cross. In chapter 10:19,22 he writes, "Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holy Place by the blood of Jesus ... let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith...." In other words, we do not have to approach God with trembling knees, unsure whether or not God will hear us. We are to look to Christ. He has triumphed and is now seated in Heaven at God's right hand. Therefore we can pray in the full assurance

of faith. God has said that Christ has died for us and that He intercedes for us. Therefore we need not pray with doubt, but we can pray confidently.

Who is God? He is the Almighty Creator. He made me. When I fell into sin He came to me, mortal and sinful as I was, and said, "My child, I gave up My Son to pay for your sins." How then, in view of who God is, must I respond to this Gospel? Is it right for me to say, "I don't know Lord if I can take your word at face value"? God's very Godness makes my doubt wrong. Who am I to challenge or question what God says to me? Therefore the only fitting response on my part is to accept what God says. (See Philippians 1:6, Romans 8:38,39).

Shall I then doubt? I know that I do doubt, for sin continues to cling to me. "For I know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin.... For the good that I will to do, I do not do, but the evil I will not to do, that I practise" (Romans 7:14, 19). Doubt is so real, so true, but that does not mean it is acceptable. If God is God, then it is for me to accept what He says. We may be weak, and Satan so strong, and we certainly experience Satan's attacks in our lives. However, that does not make doubt acceptable. Doubt is part of our lives in this vale of tears, indeed, but we are to know that doubt is not praiseworthy. God's Word is sure, and to that Word I may cling resolutely.

THE GOD OF ALL COMFORT PROVIDES ME WITH THE WAY OF ESCAPE IN THE FACE OF TEMPTATIONS

From Scripture I also learn what God does in the face of my doubts and uncertainties. As Article 11 confesses: in the face of my doubt, God remains my God. What kind of a God is this? From 2 Corinthians 1:3,4 I know that He is "the Father of mercies and ... of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God." Note here the repeated usage of the word comfort. God is the God of all comfort. When I am in tribulation, beset by doubt, conscious of so many weaknesses in myself, unsure whether I really belong to God after all today, unsure whether I will really be with God on the last day, then (say the fathers), "God, the Father of all comfort, will not let (me) tempted beyond (my) strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape." This is a direct quote from 1 Corinthians 10:13. The situation of the Corinthians was one of trial, trouble. There was a reason why Paul, in the verses 7-10, warned the Corinthian saints not to "become idolaters", not to "commit sexual immorality", not to "tempt Christ", not to "complain". The Corinthians needed this instruction because they were faced with temptation to give themselves to idolatry, immorality, complaining. In the face of concrete attacks from Satan, the apostle warned the Corinthian saints not to seek their strength from within themselves. "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (vs 12). Then Paul reached out with a word of immense comfort: "No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it" (vs 13). The people of Israel are an example to us; just read the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers to read how often they doubted God and gave in to temptation. We are no different from them. Yet 1 Corinthians 10:13 assures us of the certainty of escape in the face of temptation. Every Christian is faced with temptations, but God is faithful.

Satan's attacks are so real. We experience temptations and doubts repeatedly, but need I despair in the face of these? No, says the apostle, for when temptation comes my way, it comes because God allows it. Satan wanted to tempt Job, but he couldn't do so without God's

permission. In Luke 22 we read how Satan demanded to have Peter (vs 31). However, he could not sift Peter unless God consented. No temptation will come upon me unless God permits it. When God does permit Satan to tempt me, then Satan cannot tempt me beyond the limits God has set. God sets limits for both the intensity and the duration of Satan's temptations, and God also gives the strength to be able to bear these temptations. In the face of the doubts and uncertainties that beset me in this life of sorrows, God would have me know that I am always safe in His hands.

What an enormous security this gives to the child of God! Jeremiah experienced such security when he felt weighed down by the pressures of the ministry God had placed upon his shoulders. In chapter 20:7-10 Jeremiah utters his complaint: "O LORD, You induced me, and I was persuaded; You are stronger than I, and have prevailed" so that Jeremiah took up the call to be a prophet (cf Jeremiah 1:4ff). But Israel was not responsive to Jeremiah's ministry. They were not interested in hearing what he had to say. They derided him: "I am in derision daily; everyone mocks me. For when I spoke, I cried out; I shouted, "Violence and plunder!" because the word of the LORD was made to me a reproach and a derision daily." In the face of this opposition Jeremiah is sorely tempted to refrain from saying what God has instructed him to say. But he can't do this: "I said, "I will not make mention of Him, nor speak any more in His Name. But His Word was in my heart like a burning fire, shut up in my bones; I was weary of holding it back, and I could not." So he faced more mockery, and more revenge; even his friends were against him. Jeremiah was under considerable duress, pressure. Note then what he goes on to say to the Lord. He does not say, "Lord, it's all too much." Instead he is confident that because God had begun a work in him, God would also deliver him from the temptations around him. Therefore Jeremiah moves on to confess his faith and trust in the Lord in the verses 11-13. "The Lord is with me as a mighty, awesome one. Therefore my persecutors will stumble, and will not prevail.... Sing to the LORD! Praise the LORD! For He has delivered the life of the poor from the hand of evil-doers." Jeremiah knew himself safe in God's hands. Though the pressures may be enormous, the security of the Christian may be greater yet!

What do I confess in LD 16.44 concerning the benefits of Christ having descended into hell? "In my greatest sorrows and temptations I may be assured and comforted that my Lord Jesus Christ, by His unspeakable anguish, pain, terror, and agony, which He endured throughout all His sufferings but especially on the cross, has delivered me from the anguish and torment of hell." Christ was rejected so that I might never be rejected. Then Yes, I may from time to time feel deserted by God, and doubt also the promises of God about His abiding care. But I may know: no matter the temptation, no matter the loneliness, no matter the pressures, I am safe in the hands of my God. Can I be sure that I will reach the goal of perfection? Yes, because God is faithful. How I feel is not the important thing. What is important is who my God is.

ARTICLE 12

THIS ASSURANCE DOES NOT LEAD TO COMPLACENCY

When the fathers insisted that believers can be sure of salvation, the Arminians replied that this doctrine prompts the believer simply to live it up and enjoy the sins of this life, for 'I'm saved anyway'. Said the Arminians, "By its very nature the doctrine of the certainty of

perseverance and salvation causes false security and is harmful to godliness, good morals, prayers, and other holy exercises" (Rejection of Errors No 6 - Error, Book of Praise, p. 573). In other words, if you are going to heaven anyway, why bother to live a godly life? One must work for it, earn it, said the Arminians; such a doctrine will compel a holy life-style.

The fathers rejected this the notion that having assurance of salvation leads to a complacent life style. In fact, in the Heidelberg Catechism the same sort of error is also rejected. In LD 23.60 I confess that I am saved by grace alone; salvation is God's free gift. Therefore in LD 24 I confess that my good works are not helpful to me in attaining salvation. That leads to this question: "Does this teaching not make people careless and wicked?" The Catechism summarises Scripture's answer to this question like this: "No. It is impossible that those grafted into Christ by true faith should not bring forth fruits of thankfulness" (LD 24.64). This is exactly what the fathers wrote in Article 12: "So far, however, is this certainty of perseverance from making true believers proud and complacent that, on the contrary, it is the true root of humility, childlike reverence, genuine godliness, patience in every conflict, fervent prayers, constancy in the cross and in the confession of the truth, and lasting joy in God."

THE ASSURANCE OF PERSEVERANCE IS AN INCENTIVE TO GRATITUDE AND GOOD WORKS

If God has saved me, freely given me salvation, what will my response be? Will it be one of godlessness? It cannot be so. The Bible says that the child of God will not respond that way, but rather will fight sin and bear fruits of faith. "A good tree cannot bear bad fruit" (Matthew 7:18). If we are grafted into Christ, then we are going to bear the fruits of Christ. Said Christ, "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). Christ made a statement of fact that the child of God will bear fruit. Therefore the fathers wrote, "Further, the consideration of this benefit is for them an incentive to the serious and constant practice of gratitude and good works, as is evident from the testimonies of Scripture and the examples of the saints."

Contrary to what the Arminians believe, the one who has his hope in Christ is not proud, does not live it up, but on the contrary, he purifies himself. "Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when he is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure" (1 John 3:2,3). This passage does not teach that holiness leads to salvation; it teaches instead that salvation leads to holiness.

Psalm 116 too, illustrates the typical response of the Christian who is thankful for God's free gift of salvation. Speaking of this salvation the Psalmist writes, "For you have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, and my feet from falling. I will walk before the LORD in the land of the living" (vs 8,9). The Psalmist then asks how he should respond to the Lord's deliverance. "What shall I render to the LORD for all His benefits towards me?" (vs 12). God has freely given me salvation. How can I thank Him? "I will take up the cup of salvation, and call upon the name of the LORD. I will pay my vows to the LORD now in the presence of all His people" (vs 13,14). Here is no complacency, no carelessness, no sense of living it up, pride. Rather, here is a spirit of humility and gratefulness - a spirit of "Lord, I thank You." This reaction is totally different from what the Arminians said. The redeemed child of God is keen to live for the Lord. "(Jesus Christ) gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from

every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works" (Titus 2:14).

No, the assurance of perseverance does not lead to complacency, as the Arminians said, but to humility. In Matthew 11:28,29 Jesus invites us to learn from Him. "Come to me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." One thing the Christian can most certainly learn from the Saviour is humility. Lord, that You have saved me, is humbling.

Such knowledge also incites me too to reverence, godliness, patience, prayerfulness, faithfulness to the truth, joy. These attitudes listed by the fathers are the attitudes that arise in the hearts of God's redeemed in response to what God has freely given. If I recognise such attitudes within me toward God, then I can see evidence in my life that I am assured of the salvation which God has worked for me.

Chapter 5 - The Perseverance of the Saints : Articles 13-15

CONCLUSION

ARTICLE 13

THIS ASSURANCE DOES NOT LEAD TO CARELESSNESS

In Article 4 the fathers confessed the fact that an elect child of God is able to fall into serious sins. In Article 6 the fathers furthered confessed God to be a God of mercy who continues to hold on to His elect saints, even in their fall, so that He picks up His fallen saints and restores them to grace. God preserves the believer unto eternity. Article 13 addresses the reaction of the Arminians to this teaching.

THE CHILD OF GOD DOES NOT FLIRT WITH SIN

The Arminians insisted that the Reformed doctrine of preservation of the saints can only encourage carelessness and loose living on the part of the child of God. Said the Arminians: if God has elected a person to life so that He definitely restores this person each time he falls, this elect person is nor going to try hard to fight sin since God will always restore him again anyway. According to the Arminians, a doctrine of God preserving the elect is only going to promote licentiousness.

In response to that sentiment, the fathers wrote Article 13, "This renewed confidence does not produce carelessness or neglect of godliness in those who have been restored after their fall; rather, it renders them more careful and diligent to discern the ways of the Lord so that by walking in them they may retain the certainty of persevering." In other words, the child of God exercises greater caution, being more careful to do what the Lord wants of him.

One could compare this to a person who has fallen off the top of a high-rise building but was saved and dragged back up to safety; would he then place himself perilously close to the edge again in the conviction that his fall will be broken a second time before he hits the street? Of course not. The lesson this would have taught him is to that the edge presents a danger, and so he keeps a distance from the edge. Likewise, the child of God who has fallen into sin but who has been picked up by God and restored again will not walk on the edge of danger again either. The restored Christian will exercise greater caution and stay away from sin. He knows his vulnerability to sin and will all the more earnestly pray, "(Father), lead me not into temptation but deliver (me) from the evil one." The restored child of God will take upon his lips the words of LD 52.127: "In (myself I am) so weak that (I) cannot stand even for a moment. Moreover, (my) sworn enemies –the devil, the world, and (my own) flesh– do not cease to attack (me). Wilt Thou, therefore, uphold and strengthen (me) by the power of Thy Holy Spirit, so that in this spiritual war (I) may not go down in defeat, but always firmly resist (my) enemies, until (I) finally obtain the complete victory."

This is also what the Bible teaches. In Psalm 32:3,4 we read in what state David found himself after he had fallen into sin and refused to acknowledge his sin: "When I kept silent, my bones grew old through my groaning all the day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; my vitality was turned into the drought of summer." God did not let David go. It was God who pressed His heavy hand upon David in order to bring him to a confession of guilt so that He might again restore David. "I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I have not hidden. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD", and You forgave the iniquity of my sin" (vs 5). What was the result? That David felt free to give himself to new sin because God would rescue him again anyway? Listen to David's advice to his fellow Israelites: "I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will guide you with my eye. Do not be like the horse or like the mule, which have no understanding, which must be harnessed with bit and bridle, else they will not come near you." If that is David's advice to the others of Israel, will he himself then go back to the edge again, in the belief that God will pick him up and restore him anyways? Surely, he is not about to do that! Not as he gives this advice!

That those whom God has rescued from their sins will not readily give themselves to a life of licentiousness is pointed up to in a passage as 2 Corinthians 7:10. There we read, "For godly sorrow produces repentance to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death." Repentance leads not to carelessness, says the apostle, but to salvation. God will pick us up and restore us when we fall, but what motivates us to stay away from sin is the godly sorrow God works in us on account of our fall. Contrast that to the sorrow of the world which merely results in a falling into sin and death again. Scripture teaches that those who have been restored will be careful in how they live.

THE RESTORED CHILD OF GOD IS FEARFUL OF GOD TURNING AWAY HIS FACE

The second part of our article mentions fear. Those who have been restored carefully and diligently discern the ways of the Lord and walk in them "lest, because of their abuse of His fatherly goodness, the reconciled God should again turn away His face from them (the contemplation of which is to the godly sweeter than life, and the withdrawal of it more bitter than death), and they should fall into more severe torments of soul." The fear of the consequence of falling away is that God should turn His face away.

The notion of having God's face turned towards you implies God's blessing. Aaron and his sons were instructed to bless the children of Israel by saying to them: "The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make His face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace" (Numbers 6:22-26). God connected His blessing with having His face turned towards His people. Scripture also teaches the reverse: God's face being turned away meant that God withheld His blessing. In Psalm 80:3,7 & 19 Asaph implores of God, "Restore us, O God; cause Your face to shine, and we shall be saved!" This refrain was uttered in the context of problems as a result of God having turned His face away. "O LORD God of hosts, how long will You be angry against the prayer of Your people? You have fed them with the bread of tears, and given them tears to drink in great measure. You have made us a strife to our neighbours, and our enemies laugh among themselves" (vss 4-6). Asaph acknowledges that they can only be saved, blessed, if God turns His face towards His people.

If God would turn His face away then whatever one does is doomed to fail. In Deuteronomy 28:15-68 we read of God's curses on disobedience. The curses pronounced here pervade every sphere of life: "But it shall come to pass, if you do not obey the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all His commandments and His statutes which I (Moses) command you today, that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you: Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the country. Cursed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl (i.e. the kitchen). Cursed shall be the fruit of your body (i.e. one's children) and the produce of your land, the increase of your cattle and the offspring of your flocks. Cursed shall you be when you come in and cursed shall you be when you go out. The LORD will send on you cursing, confusion, and rebuke in all that you set your hand to do, until you are destroyed and until you perish quickly, because of the wickedness of your doings in which you have forsaken me." (Verses 15-20).

Then follows in the verses 21-68 the details of how these curses will be felt and experienced: "The LORD will make the plague cling to you Your carcasses shall be food for all the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth ... you shall grope at noonday, as a blind man gropes in darkness; you shall not prosper in your ways; you shall be only oppressed and plundered continually, and no one shall save you. You shall betroth a wife, but another man shall lie with her; you shall build a house, but you shall not dwell in it; you shall plant a vineyard, but shall not gather its grapes...." The list of curses go on and on, with this as the last, "And the LORD will take you back to Egypt in ships... And there you shall be offered for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves, but no one will buy you."

In the case of disobedience God promises that He will turn His face away and cause His heavy hand to press upon His people. To be deprived of God's blessing is the most horrible experience a child of God can contemplate. The child of God who has fallen, and so also has felt what it is like to have God's face turned away from him, is thankful to God for restoration and never again wants to feel forsaken by God.

Psalm 22 was written by a man from whom God had turned His face – a man forsaken by the Lord. Said David, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me? Why are You so far from helping me, and from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry in the daytime, but You do not hear; and in the night season, and am not silent." David got no reply from God and in the verses 14 and 15 he describes how this felt: "I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it has melted within me. My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue clings to my jaws; You have brought me to the dust of death." The reason for this is found in verse 19: God was far away: "But you O LORD, do not be far from me; O my Strength, hasten to help me!" To David's experience, God had deserted him totally, had turned His face away from David.

The forsakenness mentioned in this psalm was fulfilled in Jesus Christ. God turned His face away from Him when He hung on the cross so that He was surrounded by darkness. In His anguish He cried out, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46). The elect can think of nothing worse than for God to turn His face away.

What a difference then between what David wrote in Psalm 22 and what he wrote in Psalm 4! "There are many who say, "Who will show us any good?" LORD, lift up the light of Your countenance upon us. You have put gladness in my heart, more than in the season that their grain and wine increased. I will both lie down in peace, and sleep; For You alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety." What makes for the difference? Here David experiences God's

face turned towards him; he experiences God's blessing. Blessings from God, we learn from Deuteronomy 28:1-14, can only be expected when one obeys God. "Now it shall come to pass, if you diligently obey the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all His commandments which I command you today, that the LORD your God will set you high above all nations of the earth.... And the LORD will make you the head and not the tail; you shall be above only, and not beneath, if you heed the commandments of the LORD your God...."

ARTICLE 14

THE USE OF MEANS INCLUDED

THE MEANS OF GOD'S WORD

Chapter I, Article 3 made confession of the fact that God sends heralds of the Gospel of salvation to those whom He has elected to salvation in Jesus Christ. He does so since no one is able to come to faith in Jesus Christ without the preaching. This confession was made on the basis of Romans 10:14,15 where Paul writes, "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 unless they are sent?" Chapter III/IV, Article 17 made a similar confession, namely that the gospel is the means God is pleased to use in order to work regeneration.

This element is picked up again in Chapter V, Article 14. In this article, though, there is more than a mere repetition of what has already been confessed. In Article 14 the fathers confess God's use of means in the context of the perseverance of the saints. The elect can fall, but God preserves them in their fall. As was confessed in Article 9, the elect can be certain of their salvation and election. They can be assured today that they shall live with the Lord and the rest of the elect, in glory on the new earth. Although this assurance is not always felt by the elect (Article 11), one can be certain of persevering (Article 9). How one becomes the more certain of persevering? That is by making use of the means that God has given. And the means God is pleased to use is His Word.

"As it has pleased God to begin this work of grace in us by the preaching of the gospel, so He maintains, continues, and perfects it by the hearing and reading of His Word" God makes sure that the work of grace He has begun in us by His Word also stays in us and is completed in us by His Word. To ensure that assurance of faith and growth in faith happen, God uses means. When we were born our mothers ensured growth in our little bodies by means of the food they gave to us; by means of feeding us, we grew. Likewise, God lets there be spiritual life in His children and He also lets it grow. God causes growth in His 'spiritual infants' by feeding them with His Word. God has ordained that His Word is the source of spiritual growth: "So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Romans 10:17).

The need for God's children to feed on His Word is expressed repeatedly in Scripture. Whilst waiting on the banks of the Jordan River before they crossed over into the Promised Land, Moses said to the people of Israel, "Now this is the commandment, and these are the statutes and judgments which the LORD your God has commanded to teach you, that you may observe them in the land which you are crossing over to possess, that you may fear the LORD

your God, to keep all His statutes and His commandments which I command you, you and your son and your grandson, all the days of your life, and that your days may be prolonged" (Deuteronomy 6:1,2). Moses was referring to the commandments, laws and ordinances that had been given earlier in Numbers, Leviticus, Exodus and Genesis; i.e. the Bible which Israel had in those days. But not only did these commandments have to be taught to the people; these commandments also had to be in the people's hearts: "And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart; you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up" (Verses 6,7). Not the shelf, but the people's hearts was the place for these commandments. The parents had to be busy with the Scriptures. They had to talk about God's commandments and statutes to their children from the beginning of the day until day's end. Why? So that the children would come to know their God and come to believe in God's promises of election. Not only did they have to believe, have faith, but they also had to grow in faith. Growth comes not by one meal but by successive meals.

David loved God's law so much that it was his "meditation all the day" (Psalm 119:97). David busied himself with God's commandments. It is in that light that we must read Romans 10:14-17, where the need for hearing God's Word is stressed in order for there to be faith. Therefore Paul charged Timothy to "Preach the word!" (2 Timothy 4:2). Faith and growth in faith comes by the preaching. "Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it" (Revelation 1:3). To be busy with the Word, be it by hearing it or reading it, results in becoming more sure of God's promises and consequently becoming more assured in faith. Hence the exhortation in Hebrews 10:24,25 to attend Church and to urge each other on in the faith: "And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching." Therefore Article 14 confesses that God is pleased to use the means of His Word, so that by our hearing it and reading it we may grow all the more in Him.

GOD'S WORD IS TO BE THE SUBJECT OF OUR MEDITATION

Not only must we hear and read God's Word, but we must also meditate upon it, write the fathers. Our meditation must be done in the way we read that Mary meditated in Luke 2:19. "Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart." We are to busy with God's Word in our minds, thinking about and thinking through what God says, contemplating it and trying to come to grips with what it is God is saying in His Word.

The fathers also wrote that God perfects His work of grace in us by the "exhortations and threatenings" of His Word. In God's Word we read of His promises of blessing AND His promises of curse. We may not just read those pleasant, soothing parts of Scripture that 'stroke' us, for God, knowing that we need them, has also given us His sharp words of warning and threat. It is by both God's promises of blessing and God's promises of curse that faith is worked in us and made to grow in us.

THE MEANS OF THE SACRAMENTS

Nor must we be negligent in the use of the sacraments which God in His grace has given us to illustrate the text of His Word. The content of the sacraments are identical to the content of God's Word for they serve to spell out to sinners the benefits of Christ crucified. In using the

sacraments we are edified by what they symbolise. God has given us both the audible and the visible Word, and so we are to use both.

ARTICLE 15

THIS DOCTRINE HATED BY SATAN BUT LOVED BY THE CHURCH

THIS DOCTRINE HATED AND ATTACKED BY SATAN

This concluding article of the Canons of Dort is a song of praise to God, albeit in a context of much hatred towards God on Satan's part. The fact that God chooses particular persons to life and that they invariably reach the goal of perfection, the fact that a sinner can know himself safe in God's hands and be certain that no matter what might happen today he shall be with his Lord tomorrow, is a gospel which Satan hates with a passion. He hates this gospel because it directs all praise to God. It is God who elects, it is God who saves in Christ, it is God who works faith in His elect, and it is God who holds on to His elect no matter what. This gospel is totally GOD-CENTRED. For God to receive all the glory is what Satan hates.

In Paradise, mankind's fall into sin marked a triumph for Satan. Since the fall into sin though, God has scored victory upon victory against Satan. Satan knows this, hates this and makes it his constant business to detract from the glory of God. God warns us in His Word, "be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour" (1 Peter 5:8). Likewise in Revelation 12:12 we are warned, "Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and the sea! For the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, because he knows that he has a short time." Satan is angry, knowing full well that he is fighting a lost battle. Therefore he does what he can to detract from the glory God receives and he does what he can to detract from the comfort God's people have in the knowledge and assurance of God's victory over him.

Satan hates the contents of the Canons of Dort. He hates the doctrine of election and the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. Therefore, in the course of church history, there have been preachers of the Gospel who have proclaimed that it's up to you to choose for God; it's up to you to open your heart to God. (i.e. Arminians). At the Synod of Dort churches from all over Europe were represented. Today however we see that many churches which call themselves Reformed, professing to be followers of Calvin, are in deed followers of Arminius. The heresy of Arminius is widely embraced today, and Satan's hatred against the doctrine of the Canons of Dort plays no minor role in that.

One of the characteristics of evangelicalism is the dual detraction from the 'Godness' of God and the man-ness' of man. The distance between God and man is shrunk. That leaves the door wide open for believing that God doesn't do everything in the salvation of the believer; man also has a contribution to make. That is the doctrine Satan loves. As far as the contents of the Canons of Dort are concerned, the fathers write, "Satan hates it, the world ridicules it, the ignorant and hypocrites abuse it, and the heretics oppose it." Church history is full of examples of the demonstration of this hatred, ridicule, abuse and opposition levelled against the doctrine confessed in the Canons of Dort. Hence the time we and our children invest in studying the Canons of Dort in order to stay familiar with what it is God has revealed in His Word and what we believe, is time well invested.

THIS DOCTRINE TENDERLY LOVED AND CONSTANTLY DEFENDED BY THE CHURCH

The Church on the other hand loves and defends the doctrine confessed in the Canons of Dort. The Church finds her comfort in it. What we confess in the Canons is the same as what we confess in LD 1.1: "What is your only comfort in life and death? That I am not my own, but belong with body and soul, both in life and death, to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ." God has elected me and has given me to Christ. "He has fully paid for all my sins with His precious blood, and has set me free from all the power of the devil." I didn't have to do a thing; Christ did it all. "He also preserves me in such a way that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, all things must work together for my salvation." Here is total security, the confidence of the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. "Therefore, by His Holy Spirit He also assures me of eternal life and makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for Him." So grateful am I that I belong to Christ that I in response live for Him.

The contents of the Canons is something which "the Bride of Christ ... has always most tenderly loved and constantly defended ... as a treasure of inestimable value" God has caused the Church to hold on to this confession and He has seen to it that the doctrine contained in it has been preserved through the centuries, from generation to generation. Thanks to God, this gospel of free salvation will always stand. "God, against whom no counsel can avail and no strength can prevail, will see to it that (the Church) continues to (tenderly love and constantly defend this gospel) to the end." The gates of hell cannot prevail against the Church of God.

Peter, having warned in his letter that the "devil walks about like a roaring lion" urges us to "resist him, steadfast in the faith." To this he adds the prayer, more, the promise, "But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you" (1 Peter 5:9,10). We, God's elect, called by God, have this promise of God: "...whom he predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom he justified, these He also glorified" (Romans 8:30). It is God's promise that we will persevere. No matter how fierce the attacks of the Devil, and though we may have to suffer on account of his attacks, God will perfect us and complete the work of grace He has begun in us.

"To God alone, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be honour and glory forever. Amen."

CONCLUSION

After the fathers had completed their response to the errors of the Arminians, they adopted a conclusion to accompany the Canons of Dort. This conclusion is largely a summary of what is recorded in the Articles of the Canons. For that reason, not much needs to be said about this Conclusion. Two points only need our attention, relating specifically to the first paragraph and the last.

THE CANONS OF DORT ARE TAKEN FROM THE WORD OF GOD AND ARE IN AGREEMENT WITH THE CONFESSIONS OF THE REFORMED CHURCHES

In conclusion, the fathers prefaced the summary list of the heresies taught by the Arminians with this sentence, "The Synod judges this declaration and rejection to be taken from the

Word of God and to be in agreement with the Confessions of the Reformed Churches." Doesn't it sound a trifle arrogant, one might ask, to write a number of articles and then to make such a bold statement that these articles are categorically in harmony with the Word of God?

What is arrogance? Arrogance is not that one speaks plain and straight-forward language. Arrogance is that one sets oneself above the Word of God. The fathers listened carefully to the Word of God, and wrote down what they heard in relation to the questions of their day. By so doing, they consciously placed their Confession under the Word of God. As we have worked our way through the Canons of Dort, we frequently took up our Bibles to read in them what it is that God has revealed about the doctrine of election and reprobation, the death of Christ and man's redemption, the corruption of man, his conversion to God, the manner of man's conversion, and the perseverance of the saints. Our study of the Canons of Dort was really a study of God's Word. As a result, we too can summarise God's Word on these topics with the words of the Canons of Dort. It is arrogance to formulate answers to the questions of Arminianism in terms that differ from the Word of God (even if what God says in His Word is difficult to accept and harmful to one's pride). It is humility to echo precisely what God has revealed to us. What the fathers stated in their conclusion to the Canons of Dort is simply that they accept as true what God has written in His Word and that the articles they have written simply serve to echo and summarise God's Word accurately. The fathers placed the Canons of Dort under God's Word. So this statement of the fathers is not an exercise in haughtiness but a demonstration of humility of faith. This is the perspective we must cling to for otherwise we will lose our grip on the Confessions as a whole.

A PRAYER TO GOD FOR THE DEFENCE OF THE TRUTH OF HIS WORD

Article 15 was said to be a song of praise to God for a gospel which is GOD-CENTRED. Throughout the Canons God's greatness was pointed up: it is sovereign God who freely saves dead sinners. To God therefore be all praise. How then do I resist those who attack and resist the doctrine confessed in the Canons? How do I resist those who teach contrary to God's Word (e.g. the Arminians) and those who slander the truth of His Word, persisting in their refusal to repent? The weapon of the Christian against Satanic attack on the truth of God's Word is PRAYER and so the fathers so aptly concluded the Canons with this prayer:

"May Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who is seated at the Father's right hand and gives gifts to men, sanctify us in the truth, bring to the truth those who err, shut the mouths of the slanderers of the sound doctrine, and equip the faithful ministers of His Word with the Spirit of wisdom and discretion, that whatever they say may tend to the glory of God and the edification of those who hear them. Amen."