

“Though many Reformed Christians talk about TULIP, too often they neglect the rich soil from which that flower springs: the Canons of Dort. Yet this historic statement of faith abounds with biblical truth wisely designed to encourage love for the triune God and evangelism of the lost. DeYoung’s brief exposition of the canons is ideal for personal study, doctrine classes, and small groups that aim to better understand the controversy over Arminianism and why the Reformed doctrine of salvation by grace alone leads us to live for the glory of God alone.”

Joel R. Beeke, President and Professor of Systematic Theology and Homiletics, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary; Pastor, Heritage Reformed Congregation, Grand Rapids, Michigan; author, *Reformed Preaching*

“Why would a finger-on-the-pulse, contemporary pastor-theologian like Kevin DeYoung take us on a journey four hundred years into the past to a place few of us could locate on a map to meet people whose names we are unable to pronounce? And why should we join him? I can think of at least three reasons. As twenty-first-century Christians we need to (1) remember that ‘those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it’; (2) meet believers who thought deeply and cared passionately about the glory of God in the gospel; and (3) put roots into nourishing theological soil that will give clarity to our thinking, create stability in our living, and put doxology into our serving. *Grace Defined and Defended* helps us to do all three.”

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“DeYoung manages to bring an event from four hundred years ago right back into the present needs of the church and of theology, with clear style, solid theological insights, pastoral tone, and helpful clarification of difficult but biblical notions. This is a book that helps us understand that Dort certainly is not just history and we must keep working with its message.”

Herman Selderhuis, Professor of Church History, Theological University Apeldoorn; Director, Refo500

“I am so encouraged to see a book on the Canons of Dort—not only because it explores the finely tuned confession of Reformed thinking but also because it highlights the precision of biblical fidelity. DeYoung’s concise summary of this catechism’s emphasis on the doctrines of grace is so vitally needed in our late-modern culture, which tends to prioritize emotional reasoning over thoughtful reflection. This book is a clarion call for all Christians to avoid cognitive distortions and to root their lives in a historic, confessional faith that is both biblically and theologically faithful to the Scriptures.”

Stephen T. Um, Senior Minister, Citylife Presbyterian Church of Boston; author, *Micah For You*

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GRACE DEFINED AND DEFENDED

*What a 400-Year-Old Confession Teaches Us about
Sin, Salvation, and the Sovereignty of God*

Kevin DeYoung

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Grace Defined and Defended: What a 400-Year-Old Confession Teaches Us about Sin, Salvation, and the Sovereignty of God

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To my home church,
Hager Park Reformed Church (Jenison, MI),
where I first learned TULIP and the doctrines of grace

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Introduction

In Praise of Precision

The first car I owned was a 1995 Dodge Neon, and it was a lemon. Besides being a girly car (as my eventual wife told me when I picked her up for one of our first dates), the cute little white powder puff (the car, not my wife!) never worked properly. It had alignment problems and electrical problems and transmission problems, of the problems I can remember.

The worst problem was that it would sometimes, for no discernible reason, just stop. Like at a traffic light, or turning a corner, or when sneezed upon by hummingbirds. The car would shut down completely. The dashboard would go dark and the vehicle would slow to a halt.

Being an auto repair genius, I learned that the only thing to do in this situation was to pop the hood (if I could find that lever), walk around to the front, locate a silver-looking thingy, and bang on it five or six times with a ratchet. Sure enough, the car revved up again. Once married, I was able to pass along this valuable expertise to Trisha. She too would know the joys of hammering away at a deceased car while motioning a line of cars to pass by our Neon roadkill.

It wasn't long before my wife found this method of "dealing with the problem" to be less than satisfactory. Calling into question my mechanical acumen, she had the gall to suggest that a trip to a certified auto mechanic was in order. The mechanic was able to ascertain that the silver thingy we kept banging was actually the alternator, the invaluable piece of machinery that supplies power to the electrical system while the engine is running. It turns out that the whack-a-mole approach to auto repair is neither a long-term solution nor a particularly sophisticated diagnosis. Hitting things with a ratchet can work for a time, but after a while you need to take care of your car with a little more precision.

Caring Enough to Be Careful

I'm glad there are people in the world—most people in the world, it turns out—who know more about cars than I do. I don't want good-natured well-wishers to replace my alternator. I want someone who has paid careful attention to the intricacies of auto repair. I want someone who cares about precision. I want someone who knows what he's doing. I want an expert.

To act as if no one knows more than anyone else is not only silly; it's also a serious mistake. In his book *The Death of Expertise*, Tom Nichols cites a survey from a few years ago in which enthusiasm for military intervention in Ukraine was directly proportional to the person's *lack of knowledge* about Ukraine. It seems that the dumber we are, the more confident we are in our own intellectual achievements. Nichols relays an incident where someone on Twitter was trying to do research about sarin gas. When the world's expert on sarin gas offered to help, the original tweeter (a world-class "twit" we might say) proceeded to angrily lecture the expert for acting like a know-it-all. The expert may not have known it all, but in this case, he knew exponentially more than someone crowdsourcing his research online. And when it

comes to chemical warfare, I'd like my experts to have as much expertise as possible.

We've swallowed the lie that says that if we believe in equal rights, we must believe that all opinions have equal merit. Nichols also tells the story of an undergraduate student arguing with a renowned astrophysicist who was on campus to give a lecture about missile defense. After seeing that the famous scientist was not going to change his mind after hearing the arguments from a college sophomore, the student concluded in a harrumph, "Well, your guess is as good as mine." At which point the astrophysicist quickly interjected, "No, no, no. My guesses are much, *much* better than yours."¹ There was nothing wrong with the student asking hard questions, or even getting into an argument. The problem was in assuming he had as much to offer on the subject after a few minutes of reflection as the scientist did after decades of training and research.

We live in an age where passion is often considered an adequate substitute for precision. Charles Spurgeon once advised young ministers that when drawn into controversy, they should "use very hard arguments and very soft words."² It's a good thing Spurgeon never used social media! Too many tweets and posts specialize in overly hard words and especially soft arguments. Many of us, even Christians, have little patience for rigorous thinking and little interest in careful definition. We emote better than we reason, and we describe our feelings better than we define our words, which is one reason we need to study old confessions written by dead people. Whatever errors of harshness or exaggerated rhetoric may have existed in earlier centuries of theological discourse, this much is wonderfully and refreshingly true: they were relentlessly

1. Tom Nichols, *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017), 82–83.

2. C. H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students, Complete and Unabridged* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1979), 173.

passionate about doctrinal truth. They cared about biblical fidelity. They cared about definitions. And they cared about precision. Praise God, they cared enough to be careful.

And in no Reformation-era confession or catechism do we see this so clearly as in the Canons of Dort.

A Flower by Any Other Name

If the Canons of Dort are known at all, they are usually known as the progenitor of TULIP—that catchy acronym that summarizes the “Five Points of Calvinism.” Growing up in a Dutch Reformed church, I remember learning as a child that we believed in *Total Depravity*, *Unconditional Election*, *Limited Atonement*, *Irresistible Grace*, and *Perseverance of the Saints*. I’m thankful for this handy summary of key soteriological themes. Like any good Dutchman, I’ve been in many Tulip Time parades and have no desire to banish the TULIP from our theological vocabulary.

And yet for all that TULIP gets right in terms of biblical truth, there are several things that the acronym—or at least the use of it—can get wrong.

First, TULIP is not an adequate summary of Calvinism. Calvinism was never limited to predestination. In fact, it’s not even fair to say predestination was at the heart of Calvin’s theology. Clearly, we know from Dort itself that the doctrine is important to Reformed theology, but we should not limit Calvinism to soteriological concerns alone. Reformed theology is not less than the doctrine of salvation and the so-called doctrines of grace, but it is much more.³

3. Although the term *Calvinism* is not, from the historian’s perspective, the best short-hand description for a broad movement of theologians and centuries of theological development, it has become virtually synonymous with the Reformed confessional tradition and thus will be used in this work interchangeably with the word *Reformed*. Whether those who affirm Dort’s soteriology but reject important parts of the Reformed tradition can still be called Calvinists is an issue that continues to divide both academic historians and contemporary practitioners.

Second, TULIP is not a historic summary of Calvinism. Although the Canons of Dort have five points, like TULIP has five points, the latter was not used to summarize the former until the twentieth century. The acronym was popularized by David Steele and Curtis Thomas in their 1963 book *The Five Points of Calvinism: Defined, Defended, Documented*.⁴ Fifty years earlier, we have the earliest known use of TULIP in a 1913 periodical called *The Outlook*. This doesn't mean we shouldn't talk about the doctrines contained in TULIP, but it does mean we shouldn't oversell the acronym as the best or the only way to talk about the Canons of Dort, let alone talk about Calvinism as a whole.⁵

Third, TULIP is not an entirely accurate summary of the canons themselves. As we will see in the chapters ahead, the Canons of Dort, even with five points, cannot be reduced to only five theological truths. The canons are more detailed, more comprehensive, and more nuanced than can be captured in TULIP. In short, although we don't have to get rid of the acronym, we should appreciate that there are many more flowers in the Dort garden than just the TULIP.

What Arminius Hath Wrought

Before we explore *what* the canons say, we have to understand *why* they say what they do. In other words, we need some history before we get to theology.⁶ And that means we have to know how people who once thought of themselves as Calvinists

4. David N. Steele and Curtis C. Thomas, *The Five Points of Calvinism: Defined, Defended, Documented* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1963).

5. See Kenneth J. Stewart, *Ten Myths about Calvinism: Recovering the Breadth of the Reformed Tradition* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 75–95.

6. My historical summary is a distillation of three works: *Crisis in the Reformed Churches: Essays in Commemoration of the Great Synod of Dort, 1618–1619*, ed. Peter Y. De Jong (repr. Grandville, MI: Reformed Fellowship, 2008), 17–71; Matthew Barrett, *The Grace of Godliness: An Introduction to Doctrine and Piety in the Canons of Dort* (Kitchener, Ontario: Joshua Press, 2013), 9–22; Cornelis P. Venema, *But for the Grace of God: An Exposition of the Canons of Dort* (repr. Grandville, MI: Reformed Fellowship, 2016), 10–19.

came to be known as Arminians. The history can seem a little dense, what with strange Dutch places and stranger Dutch names (even though my parents always taught me “if you ain’t Dutch, you ain’t much!”). Some people get tripped up from the very beginning, misplacing the *i* in Arminian for an *e* (trust me, the historical debate has nothing to do with Armenians from Western Asia). So before setting out on this brief historical journey, perhaps it would be helpful to get a rundown of both teams. The traditional Calvinists (Reformed) are on the left and the Arminians are on the right.

Reformed: The Christians and churches in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe that held to one or more of the Reformed confessions. In the Netherlands this meant the Belgic Confession (1561) and the Heidelberg Catechism (1563). The Canons of Dort were later added to these two documents and together became known as the Three Forms of Unity. I sometimes refer to the Reformed in this book as traditional Calvinists.

Counter Remonstrants: The Reformed party in the Netherlands opposed to the Arminians.

John Calvin (1509–1564): Genevan Reformer and one of the most important pastors and theologians in the development of the Reformed tradition.

Theodore Beza (1519–1605): Scholar, Reformer, and successor to Calvin in Geneva.

Arminians: Initially, these were the followers of Jacob Arminius, but Arminian theology continued to develop after his death in 1609. Later Arminians like John and Charles Wesley (or your Methodist or Free Will Baptist friend next door) probably bear some theological resemblance to the Arminians at Dort, but we should not assume a one-to-one correspondence. As Arminianism developed in Europe in the seventeenth century, it became more and more heterodox.

Remonstrants: The Arminian party in the Netherlands, so called because of the protest document they issued called the *Remonstrance of 1610*.

Jacobus Arminius (1560–1609): Pastor and later professor at the University of Leiden who came to reject traditional Reformed doctrines.

Dirk Volkertszoon Coornhert (1522–1590): Dutch theologian who opposed the teachings of Theodore Beza.

Francis Gomarus (1563–1641): Professor at the University of Leiden who opposed Arminius. The Counter Remonstrants were sometimes called Gomarists.

Prince Maurice (1567–1625): Son of William of Orange; organized successful Dutch rebellion against Spain; national leader in the Netherlands who sided with the Gomarists.

Gisbertus Voetius (1589–1676): Studied theology under Gomarus; delegate at Dort; later professor at the University of Utrecht for forty-two years; leading Dutch theologian of the seventeenth century.

Johannes Bogerman (1576–1637): Pastor and scholar who served as president of the Synod of Dort and helped translate the Scriptures into Dutch.

Canons of Dort (1619): The doctrinal pronouncements from the Synod of Dort, organized under five main points of doctrine.

Johannes Uytenbogaert (1557–1644): Preacher at The Hague; assumed leadership of the Remonstrants after Arminius's death.

Johan van Oldenbarneveldt (1547–1619): Longtime political leader in the Netherlands who sided with the Remonstrants; was executed on May 13, 1619.

Conrad Vorstius (1569–1622): Professor at the University of Leiden whose Arminian views veered off into heterodoxy; was banished from the Netherlands when he refused to recant.

Simon Episcopius (1583–1643): Professor at the University of Leiden; chief spokesman for the Remonstrants; argued that Christianity was more a life than a doctrine.

Opinions of the Remonstrants (1618): The opinions (sometimes called the *Sententia*) offered by the Arminians at the Synod of Dort.

Those are some of the most important names in the story. So how exactly did the story unfold?

Jacobus Arminius lived from 1560–1609, just barely overlapping with John Calvin, who died in 1564. Arminius began his teaching career thoroughly Calvinistic. After studying for a time in Geneva (1582–1587) under Calvin's successor, Theodore Beza, Arminius moved to Amsterdam to pastor a prominent church. As a pastor, Arminius was called upon to defend the views of his former teacher against the attacks of a Dutch theologian named Dirk Volkertszoon Coornhert (1522–1590). In preparing

his defense of traditional Calvinist doctrine, Arminius became convinced of his opponent's teaching. Later, Arminius preached a series of sermons on Romans in which he emphasized free will and stressed the government's authority in ecclesiastical and religious matters. Many began to doubt whether Arminius was really in line with the doctrinal standards of the Dutch church: the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession (especially Article 16 on the doctrine of election).

In 1603 Arminius was appointed professor of theology at the University of Leiden, where he was strongly opposed by his colleague Francis Gomarus. Both Arminius and Gomarus believed in predestination, but they differed over the meaning of the word. At the heart of the disagreement was whether predestination is based solely on the will of God (traditional Calvinism) or on foreseen knowledge of belief. In 1608 Arminius and Gomarus met for a public debate, but the issue was no closer to being settled. Both men thought of themselves as Reformed, but they were not saying the same thing.

Following Arminius's death in 1609, the movement continued under the leadership of Johannes Uytenbogaert, a court preacher at The Hague. In 1610, the Arminians met at Gouda (sort of a cheesy place for a theological convocation) and issued a document called the *Remonstrance*, setting forth "The Five Arminian Articles."⁷ A remonstrance is a protestation, or the reasons given for a statement of opposition. Because of this document, and because the Arminians disagreed with Reformed theology as it was understood and practiced in the Netherlands, they became known as the Remonstrants. The only reason we have the five points of Calvinism is that the Arminians first had their five points. Because the points are at times deliberately ambiguous, and other times

7. I will be using the Remonstrance of 1610 as found in De Jong, *Crisis in the Reformed Churches*, 243–45.

highly nuanced, it can be difficult to see what the fuss was all about. In fact, most people reading the Remonstrance of 1610 today would be hard pressed to spot the subtle but important distinctions between the Arminians and the traditional Calvinists.

- Point 1 affirms that God “determined before the foundation of the world to save out of the fallen sinful 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.” That sounds like Ephesians 1, except that it’s not clear on what basis God determines the elect. Does God choose the elect so that they might believe in Jesus Christ, or does he choose the elect based on foreseen knowledge that they shall believe in Jesus Christ? We know from the arguments at the Synod of Dort that the Arminians clearly meant the latter.
- According to point 2, Jesus Christ “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 this forgiveness of sins except the believer.” Here we can see the conflict with what Dort would teach concerning “limited atonement.” The Arminians believed that Christ merited forgiveness for every human being, but that this procured salvation is only effective in those who believe.
- At first glance, point 3 sounds a lot like total depravity, with the Arminians affirming that “man does not have saving faith of himself nor by the power of his own free will.” Moreover, they teach that we cannot do anything truly good without first being regenerated through the Holy Spirit and renewed in all powers. The rub is that the Remonstrance does not make clear whether this spiritual

inability is a death or a sickness and whether the remedy is a monergistic (one-work-working) resurrection or a grace-filled, cooperative empowerment.

- We see in point 4 that Arminian grace was not sovereign grace as traditional Reformed theology had understood it, but rather a “prevenient or assisting, awakening, consequent and cooperating grace.” The Remonstrants certainly believed in grace. They affirmed that all our good works must be “ascribed to the grace of God in Christ.” But this was a coming-alongside grace instead of a unilaterally-bring-you-back-from-the-dead grace. Prevenient grace is the grace that comes before human decision and makes it possible (but not certain) for men and women to choose God. For this reason, the Arminians denied that saving grace is “irresistible.”
- Point 5 teaches that “those who are incorporated into Jesus Christ” have “abundant strength to strive against Satan, sin, and the world,” and that in this struggle the believers are helped by Christ and by “the assistance of the grace of the Holy Spirit.” But there is an “if” to this perseverance. Jesus Christ assists believers through his Spirit “if only they are prepared for warfare and desire his help and are not negligent.” In the end, the *Remonstrance of 1610* left the door open that believers might “through negligence fall away from the principle of their life in Christ” and “again embrace the present world.”

In response to the *Remonstrance of 1610*, Gomarus and others formed a Counter Remonstrant party (sometimes called the Gomarists) to oppose the Arminians. Representatives from both sides met in the spring of that year to see if their differences could be resolved. With the publication of the *Counter Remonstrance*

in 1611, it was increasingly clear to everyone involved that the two sides were only getting farther apart. The controversy further escalated when the University of Leiden appointed Arminius's successor—a man by the name of Conrad Vorstius, who was not only an Arminian but practically a Socinian. When the Arminian Simon Episcopius was named as Gomarus's replacement at Leiden, and the Arminians garnered further support from the statesman Johan van Oldenbarneveldt and the jurist-theologian Hugo Grotius, it looked like the tide had turned in favor of the Remonstrants.

As with many theological controversies throughout history, the disputing factions were disputing about more than just theology. The Netherlands had recently won independence from Spain. Some were still leery of the Spanish, while others welcomed a closer relationship. In general, the merchant class, for economic and trading reasons, desired improved relations with Spain. The clergy, on the other hand, feared that more contact with Catholic Spain would taint the theology of their churches. The lower class sided with the clergy for theological reasons, for national reasons (anti-Spain), and for class reasons (anti-merchants). Thus, the merchants saw Arminianism as favorable to their desire for improved relations with Spain, while the clergy and lower class sided with Gomarus.

In 1617 Oldenbarneveldt and the States General issued the "Sharp Resolution," rejecting the call for a national synod. Oldenbarneveldt was heralded by some as a champion of toleration, but the party of the Counter Remonstrant worried that without a national synod and with States General exercising control over ecclesiastical matters (including the authorization of soldiers to defend the Remonstrants) the conflict was only going to get worse.

That same year, the Reformed Prince Maurice, the son and heir of the beloved William of Orange, refused to worship in the church because Uytenbogaert was preaching. Oldenbarneveldt

threatened civil war, which led to his arrest by Maurice. In response, a number of the Remonstrants fled the country, and with Maurice now in charge, the States General finally approved the calling of a national assembly to address the conflict.

The Synod

Although the controversy had national and political overtones, at heart it was an earnest theological disagreement. The differences centered on the doctrine of predestination, but confessional subscription was also a major part of the dispute, with the Remonstrants arguing for full doctrinal freedom and the Counter Remonstrants insisting that the Dutch church was a confessional church that ought to preserve theological unity and purity in the pulpit. So for the first time since 1586, the Dutch government called for a national synod, this time in the city of Dordrecht.⁸

The synod met from November 13, 1618, until May 29, 1619. Of the eighty-four members present, twenty-six were from Britain, Switzerland, and Germany, while the rest were Dutch.⁹ The Dutch contingent was comprised of roughly an equal number of ministers, professors, laymen, and members of the States General. On Friday morning, November 16, the synod voted to call the Remonstrants to appear before the assembly within two weeks. On December 13 and 17, the Arminians presented *The Opinions of the Remonstrants* (also called the *Sententia*), which are crucial

8. Of personal interest to me (and perhaps to no one else) is that my family descends from Dordrecht. I'd like to think I had a family member in attendance at the synod (hopefully on the right side!). The earliest ancestor that has been traced in my family tree is Pieter DeJong, who was born in Dordrecht in 1695 and married Neeltje Liesveld of neighboring Zwijndrecht on August 23, 1716. The first of my family to emigrate to America was Teunis P. DeJong, who was born in Holland in 1839, died in Edgerton, Minnesota, in 1925, and was married to Cornelia VanDeursen in Keokuk, Iowa, in 1861. According to family tradition, "DeJong" became "DeYoung" when Teunis (or one of his relatives?) registered to fight for the Union in the Civil War and his name was recorded with the Anglicized spelling.

9. Two delegates, Johannes Bergius and Christoph Storch from Brandenburg, were unable to come because of Lutheran opposition. An additional four delegates from France were never granted permission to leave the country. Their four seats were left open during the synod in their honor.

for understanding what Dort was aiming to criticize and correct (see Appendix 3).

By January, the Arminians were dismissed from the synod by president Johannes Bogerman for their failure to cooperate with the proceedings. Around the same time, the States General granted the synod official status as an ecclesiastical court, and by the end of March all the written opinions of the delegates had been reviewed. On April 22, 1619, the synod adopted the canons and settled, for the Netherlands and for all subsequent churches that would adopt the canons as their own, what constituted authentic Reformed faith on the points of disputed theology. The Canons of Dort were published in an official Latin edition on May 6, 1619, with approved translations into Dutch and French. In addition to the Canons, the synod also approved an official edition of the Belgic Confession, adopted a church order, and commissioned a new Dutch translation of the Bible.

The Canons of Dort, in rejecting the five points of Arminianism, outlined five points of their own. The first concerned divine election and reprobation; the second was on Christ's death and human redemption through it; the third and fourth points were on human corruption and how we convert to God; and a final point focused on the perseverance of the saints. The canons do not pretend to explain everything about Reformed theology, let alone about the entire Bible. Dort simply sought to declare what was "in agreement with the Word of God and accepted till now in the Reformed churches" concerning "Divine Predestination." And in this they are worthy to be commemorated and (more importantly) deserving of careful study and consideration.

Letting Grace Be Grace

It's easy to think that the two sides in the Netherlands should have found a way to work out their differences. Oldenbarneveldt was

ready to go to civil war over the religious dispute, while Maurice, sadly, ended up condemning Oldenbarneveldt to death and had some Arminian pastors imprisoned. We cringe to see political meddling in the name of theology, not to mention the threat of violence and imprisonment that marked both sides as people of their time. But if we don't care about theological precision and definition, it's not because we are so wonderfully inclusive and loving, as much as it is that we too are people of our own time. We settle for generalities and ambiguities and wonder why anyone should demand anything more.

The stereotype of old confessions like the Canons of Dort is that they take the theology of God's Word and make it shrink-wrapped, freeze-dried, and boxed-up. Or, if we can mix our metaphors, theologizing becomes nothing more than dissecting a dead frog.

But what if another analogy is more appropriate? What if the truth we are talking about is not cold and dead, but very much alive? What if, instead of thinking about dissecting a frog, you think about defining or defending your child? If someone mistook your child for someone else, or if someone ran off with your child, you would care very much about definitions. You would want people to know the name of your child. It wouldn't be enough to just say, "I'm looking for a cute kid out there. Just bring me one." You would be precise about her name, her height, her hair, her eyes, and her voice. You would provide a careful definition of your child. Likewise, if someone misunderstood your child or attacked your child, wouldn't you do everything in your power to defend him? Of course you would, because your child is *precious*.

And so it is with the truth of God's Word. Before the Synod of Dort conducted its business, each member took a solemn oath saying that "I will only aim at the glory of God, the peace of the Church, and especially the preservation of the purity of doctrine."

They ended with a prayer: “So help me, my Savior, Jesus Christ! I beseech him to assist me by his Holy Spirit.”¹⁰ The delegates at Dort were joyfully serious about the doctrine of the church.

Do we care as much about defining and defending grace?

In Romans 11, Paul argues that there is a “remnant, chosen by grace” (v. 5). He then moves to defend and define this grace, maintaining that “if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace” (v. 6). Words mattered to Paul. He was never content to casually speak the same vocabulary as his opponents, if he knew they were using different dictionaries. He understood that people can champion grace, laud grace, and celebrate grace, while still losing all that makes grace grace.

At their very heart, the Canons of Dort are about the nature of grace—supernatural, unilateral, sovereign, effecting, redeeming, resurrecting grace, with all of its angularity, all of its offense to human pride, and all of its comfort for the weary soul. That’s what Dort wanted to settle. That’s what they were jealous to protect. Some words are worth the most careful definitions, just as some truths are too precious not to defend.

10. Quoted by Fred Klooster, “Doctrinal Deliverances of Dort,” in DeJong, *Crisis in the Reformed Churches*, 79. In the rest of the oath, the members of the synod promise before God to settle the dispute over the five points using only the Bible.

God's Purpose and Good Pleasure in Predestination

The First Main Point of Doctrine

I took AP Western Civilization when I was in high school. I've forgotten a lot since then, but I vividly remember the class where we talked about the Reformation. Even though it was a public high school, my teacher found a way to get us talking about Luther and Calvin. In discussing Calvin, we couldn't avoid a heated conversation about predestination.

The class uniformly thought the idea of God choosing people for salvation was ghastly. But I remembered my mom telling me that "we like John Calvin," so I felt duty bound to put in a good word for the Genevan Reformer. I raised my hand and, once called upon, explained to my classmates that predestination simply meant that God looked into the future to see who would believe, and then God elected those people for salvation. To my delight, the class seemed quite satisfied with my explanation. To

think that God chose those whom he knew would choose him was a much easier pill to swallow. Only years later did I realize that I had magnificently defended Calvinism with Arminianism!

The First Main Point of Doctrine in Dort is the longest and the most theologically complicated. But at the heart of the debate is a straightforward question: Did God choose the elect *because* they would believe, or did God choose the elect *so that* they might believe? Or to put it another way, is divine election based on foreseen faith or according to sheer grace and God's free good pleasure? That's what Dort's first point means to answer.

Two Quick Notes

Before we turn to the canons themselves, I need to make two brief introductory remarks.

1. This book is not a biblical defense of the five points of Calvinism, nor is it a theological exposition of Reformed soteriology. There are a number of good books that set out to do one or both of those tasks.¹ While I trust this book will also be biblical and theological (see Appendix 4 for all of Dort's Scripture proofs), my first goal is to explain the Canons of Dort. Think of this not as a mini systematic theology or as an exegetical exploration of key salvation texts, but as a brief, accessible commentary on the background and theology of Dort itself. Of course, in explaining Dort, I hope to say something valuable about the theology of the Bible as well. But you can be the judge of that.

2. When referencing or quoting from the canons, I will put the article in parentheses. Since each of these references will be for the main point of doctrine under consideration, I'll note the

1. R. C. Sproul, *What Is Reformed Theology: Understanding the Basics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997); David N. Steele, Curtis C. Thomas, S. Lance Quinn, *The Five Points of Calvinism: Defined, Defended, Documented* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004); Michael Horton, *For Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011); John Piper, *Five Points: Towards a Deeper Experience of God's Grace* (Ross-Shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2013).

article number only. Besides the articles provided in the text of each chapter, the canons also include a section called “Rejection of Errors” after each main point of doctrine. These rejections can be found in Appendix 1. I will cite these parenthetically, so that (Rejection III) refers to the third rejection for the main point under discussion. There is a concluding section entitled “Rejection of False Accusations” included in Appendix 2. Finally, *The Opinions of the Remonstrants* can be found in Appendix 3. These will be referenced as (*Opinions* C.3) or (*Opinions* A.9) and so on.²

Framing the Debate (Articles 1–5)

Article 1: God’s Right to Condemn All People

Since all people have sinned in Adam and have come under the sentence of the curse and eternal death, God would have done no one an injustice if it had been his will to leave the entire human race in sin and under the curse, and to condemn them on account of their sin. As the apostle says: “The whole world is liable to the condemnation of God” (Rom. 3:19), “All have sinned and are deprived of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23), and “The wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23).

Article 2: The Manifestation of God’s Love

But this is how God showed his love: he sent his only begotten Son into the world, so that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life (1 John 4:9; John 3:16).

Article 3: The Preaching of the Gospel

In order that people may be brought to faith, God mercifully sends messengers of this very joyful message to the people and

2. The *Opinions* are taken from *Crisis in the Reformed Churches: Essays in Commemoration of the Great Synod of Dort, 1618–1619*, ed. Peter Y. De Jong (repr. Grandville, MI: Reformed Fellowship, 2008), 261–68. The text for the Canons of Dort, including the Rejection of Errors and the Rejection of False Accusations, is the translation approved by the Christian Reformed Church.

at the time he wills. By this ministry people are called to repentance and faith in Christ crucified. For “how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without someone preaching? And how shall they preach unless they have been sent?” (Rom. 10:14–15).

Article 4: A Twofold Response to the Gospel

God’s wrath remains on those who do not believe this gospel. But those who do accept it and embrace Jesus the Savior with a true and living faith are delivered through him from God’s wrath and from destruction, and receive the gift of eternal life.

Article 5: The Sources of Unbelief and of Faith

The cause or blame for this unbelief, as well as for all other sins, is not at all in God, but in humanity. Faith in Jesus Christ, however, and salvation through him is a free gift of God. As Scripture says, “It is by grace you have been saved, through faith, and this not from yourselves; it is a gift of God” (Eph. 2:8). Likewise: “It has been freely given to you to believe in Christ” (Phil. 1:29).



These first five articles are essential for understanding the rest of this First Main Point and for putting all of the canons in a proper biblical framework.

At the outset, before even talking about election unto salvation, we have to accept that “God would have done no one an injustice if it had been his will to leave the entire human race in sin and under the curse, and to condemn them on account of their sin” (Article 1). The question is not simply, “Why do *some* people get passed over?” but, “Why should *anyone* be saved?” We are all

deserving of punishment and death. It is only by God's grace that any of us receive eternal life.

Because God loves us, he sent two great gifts into the world. The supreme gift was the sending of his Son so that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life (Article 2). The other gift mentioned here by Dort is the sending of messengers to proclaim this good news (Article 3). As we'll see again, the doctrine of predestination does not eliminate the need for faithful preachers and evangelists. God normally works through means, which means he saves his people through the preaching of the gospel (Acts 18:9–11; 2 Thess. 2:13–14).

Most Christians would agree with everything in Articles 1–3. There is nothing too controversial (for orthodox believers) about sinners deserving death, God showing love, and preachers proclaiming the gospel. And among Bible-believing Christians, there is nothing much to debate when it comes to Article 4: whoever believes in Christ is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already (John 3:18).

By the time we get to Article 5, however, Dort is setting us up for the crux of the matter. Some people believe, and some people do not. That much is self-evident. We can all see this. Further, as Christians, we probably all agree that unbelief is our fault, while salvation is the free gift of God. Following the Bible, Dort has divided humanity into two classes: those who are lost (because of sin) and those who are found (because of grace). This much we can all (for the most part) agree on.

Election Defined (Articles 6–11)

Article 6: God's Eternal Decree

The fact that some receive from God the gift of faith within time, and that others do not, stems from his eternal decree. For “all his works are known to God from eternity” (Acts 15:18;

Eph. 1:11). In accordance with this decree God graciously softens the hearts, however hard, of the elect and inclines them to believe, but by a just judgment God leaves in their wickedness and hardness of heart those who have not been chosen. And in this especially is disclosed to us God's act—unfathomable, and as merciful as it is just—of distinguishing between people equally lost. This is the well-known decree of election and reprobation revealed in God's Word. The wicked, impure, and unstable distort this decree to their own ruin, but it provides holy and godly souls with comfort beyond words.

Article 7: Election

Election is God's unchangeable purpose by which he did the following:

Before the foundation of the world, by sheer grace, according to the free good pleasure of his will, God chose in Christ to salvation a definite number of particular people out of the entire human race, which had fallen by its own fault from its original innocence into sin and ruin. Those chosen were neither better nor more deserving than the others, but lay with them in the common misery. God did this in Christ, whom he also appointed from eternity to be the Mediator, the head of all those chosen, and the foundation of their salvation.

And so God decreed to give to Christ those chosen for salvation, and to call and draw them effectively into Christ's fellowship through the Word and Spirit. In other words, God decreed to grant them true faith in Christ, to justify them, to sanctify them, and finally, after powerfully preserving them in the fellowship of the Son, to glorify them.

God did all this in order to demonstrate his mercy, to the praise of the riches of God's glorious grace. As Scripture says,

“God chose us in Christ, before the foundation of the world, so that we should be holy and blameless before him with love; he predestined us whom he adopted as his children through Jesus Christ, in himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, by which he freely made us pleasing to himself in his beloved” (Eph. 1:4–6). And elsewhere, “Those whom he predestined, he also called; and those whom he called, he also justified; and those whom he justified, he also glorified” (Rom. 8:30).

Article 8: A Single Decree of Election

This election is not of many kinds, but one and the same for all who were to be saved in the Old and the New Testament. For Scripture declares that there is a single good pleasure, purpose, and plan of God’s will, by which he chose us from eternity both to grace and to glory, both to salvation and to the way of salvation, which God prepared in advance for us to walk in.

Article 9: Election Not Based on Foreseen Faith

This same election took place, not on the basis of foreseen faith, of the obedience of faith, of holiness, or of any other good quality and disposition, as though it were based on a prerequisite cause or condition in the person to be chosen, but rather for the purpose of faith, of the obedience of faith, of holiness, and so on. Accordingly, election is the source of every saving good. Faith, holiness, and the other saving gifts, and at last eternal life itself, flow forth from election as its fruits and effects. As the apostle says, “He chose us” [not because we were [holy], but] “so that we should be holy and blameless before him in love” (Eph. 1:4).

Article 10: Election Based on God’s Good Pleasure

But the cause of this undeserved election is exclusively the good pleasure of God. This does not involve God’s choosing

certain human qualities or actions from among all those possible as a condition of salvation, but rather involves adopting certain particular persons from among the common mass of sinners as God's own possession. As Scripture says, "When the children were not yet born, and had done nothing either good or bad . . . she [Rebecca] was told, 'The older will serve the younger.' As it is written, 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated'" (Rom. 9:11–13). Also, "All who were appointed for eternal life believed" (Acts 13:48).

Article 11: Election Unchangeable

Just as God is most wise, unchangeable, all-knowing, and almighty, so the election made by him can neither be suspended nor altered, revoked, or annulled; neither can God's chosen ones be cast off, nor their number reduced.



After explaining the *what* of judgment, gospel, and grace, Dort now brings us to the *why*. We can all see that some people believe in Christ and others do not. But why? What is the ultimate reason that some exercise faith, while others remain in unbelief? There are really only two possible answers: God or man. After we talk about proximate causes like families of origin and cultural factors and all the rest, the *ultimate* reason why some believe (and others do not) must rest with either man's determination or God's divine plan.

The answer, according to Article 6, is on the side of divine decision. "The fact that some receive from God the gift of faith within time, and that others do not, stems from his eternal decree." As this decree is executed in time, God softens the hearts of the elect and inclines them to believe, while he leaves the reprobate in their wickedness. Notice that for Dort, the decree of election and repro-

bation concerns “people equally lost.” Out of this mass (and mess) of human sinners, God freely chose some for salvation and freely passed by others to leave them in their deserved misery.

That is the doctrine of election in summary form, but we must pay attention to several other important definitions and distinctions in Articles 7–11.

First, election is not based on foreseen faith (see Rejection V). God chose us in Christ not *because* he saw that we would be holy and blameless, but *so that* we should be holy and blameless (Eph. 1:4–6). God’s decision to choose some for salvation is not based upon any prerequisite cause or condition (Article 9), but only upon sheer grace, according to the good pleasure of his will (Article 7). This is in direct opposition to Arminian position, which stated that the “election of particular persons” is out of “consideration of faith in Jesus Christ and of perseverance” as a “condition prerequisite for electing” (*Opinions* A.7).

Second, election is an unchangeable decree. This may seem self-evident. How could an immutable God decree one thing and then decree the opposite? But the Arminians believed that God could decree certain contingent effects without issuing “a decree of the end absolutely intended” (*Opinions* A.2). In other words, God could will certain ends that may or may not come to pass because his decree did not also include the means to those ends. Against this view, Dort affirms that the election made by an unchangeable God “can neither be suspended nor altered, revoked, or annulled” (Article 11). This is good news: God’s elect can never be lost, and their number can never be lessened.

Third, election is a single decree. This is related to the last point. The Arminians believed that election functioned in different ways and on different levels. God might elect some for blessings that are incomplete, revocable, and contingent, while decreeing that other blessings are particular and definite (Rejection II, IV). For example, it

was common to speak of God having an antecedent will (what God decreed before he saw who would believe) and a consequent will (what God decreed after he saw who would believe). So according to his antecedent will, God can choose all persons for primordial benevolence, but according to his consequent will, God chooses those who will believe for special benevolence. On the Arminian scheme, then, those who are chosen for salvation based on God's consequent will are not predestinated so much as they are postdestined.

In this way, the Arminians could affirm unconditional election (of a kind) *and* conditional election. Dort wanted to make clear that this is not what the Reformed churches meant by "predestination." In God's "single good pleasure, purpose, and plan," God chose us "from eternity both to grace and to glory, both to salvation and to the way of salvation" (Article 8). That is to say, God didn't decree that believers would be saved unconditionally, while at the same time making the election of those believers conditional upon foreseen faith. The divine decree is single, and the choice of the elect unconditional from start to finish. God does not plan the ends without planning the means.

Fourth, election involves "certain particular persons" (Article 10). This may seem like a strange point to make, but again, it is in distinction to the Arminian notion that election involves God's choosing of certain human qualities or actions that he will bless, rather than God's choosing of certain particular persons to be his treasured possession. Divine election is not just an act of sovereignty; it's an act of grace. God knew us before the foundation of the world. God sets his affection upon us. In love he predestinated us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:4–5). Election is about God choosing *specific* people to save, not about God choosing the *kinds* of people he will save.

Fifth, we must say something about Dort's recurring insistence that God chooses "between people equally lost" (Article 6) or

from “among the common mass of sinners” (Article 10). Keep in mind that election takes place in eternity past, from before the foundation of the world. So the distinction “between people equally lost” is made in the will of God, not first in history. This gets us into one of the most intricate debates in Reformed theology: the debate between supralapsarianism and infralapsarianism.

Theologians have often argued about the order in which God decreed certain things to happen. The debate is not over the *temporal* order of the decrees. After all, we are talking about what God has determined in eternity, before he created the world with time (which is why, strictly speaking, eternity *past* is not quite the right phrase). Time is not the issue. In fact, time as a sequential ordering of events cannot even be predicated of God. Instead, the debate is about the *logical* order of the decrees. In the mind of God, what is the object of God’s decree: man with the potential to fall (*homo labilis*) or man as fallen (*homo lapsus*)?

Or to put it another way, which is logically prior: the decree of election and reprobation, or the decree to create the world and permit the fall? Supralapsarianism—*supra* meaning “above” or “before” and *lapsus* meaning “fall”—is the position that holds that God’s decree to save is logically *prior* to his decree to create the world and permit the fall. Infralapsarianism, on the other hand, insists that God’s decree to save is logically *after* his decrees related to creation and fall (*infra* meaning “below” or “after”). Both positions are well attested in Reformed theology, though infralapsarianism would probably be more common.

The Canons of Dort work from infralapsarian principles, arguing several times that God’s decree of election is logically below or after (*infra*) the fall. Hence, election is God’s choice to save fallen sinners from destruction, and reprobation is God’s choice to leave fallen sinners in their plight. Of course, the theologians at Dort would also have affirmed that the fall too was part of God’s plan. But according

to Dort's logic, divine election was a choice to save sinners, not a choice to save people who need to sin first in order to be saved. After all, Romans 9:14 describes election as God having *mercy* on whom he will have mercy. God's decree to save, therefore, must follow his decree to permit the fall, or how else would mercy be mercy?

Assurance Found (Articles 12–13)

Article 12: The Assurance of Election

Assurance of their eternal and unchangeable election to salvation is given to the chosen in due time, though by various stages and in differing measure. Such assurance comes not by inquisitive searching into the hidden and deep things of God, but by noticing within themselves, with spiritual joy and holy delight, the unmistakable fruits of election pointed out in God's Word—such as a true faith in Christ, a childlike fear of God, a godly sorrow for their sins, a hunger and thirst for righteousness, and so on.

Article 13: The Fruit of This Assurance

In their awareness and assurance of this election, God's children daily find greater cause to humble themselves before God, to adore the fathomless depth of God's mercies, to cleanse themselves, and to give fervent love in return to the One who first so greatly loved them. This is far from saying that this teaching concerning election, and reflection upon it, make God's children lax in observing his commandments or carnally self-assured. By God's just judgment, this does usually happen to those who casually take for granted the grace of election or engage in idle and brazen talk about it but are unwilling to walk in the ways of the chosen.



Although the Canons of Dort are rigorously careful and theologically precise, this does not mean they are pastorally irrelevant. In fact, the driving force behind all their definition and all their defending was a desire to help struggling Christians. Thus, the doctrine of election was for assurance, not for anxiety. Dort rejected those who taught “that in this life there is no fruit, no awareness, and no assurance of one’s unchangeable election to glory” (Rejection VII). The members of the synod understood that, wrongly understood, predestination can make people nervous about their eternal state. That’s why they warned against “inquisitive searching into the hidden and deep things of God” (Article 12). Confidence in our election is not found by rummaging around the decrees from eternity past. Instead, we ought to look for “the unmistakable fruits of this election”—true faith, childlike fear, godly sorrow for sin, and a hunger and thirst for righteousness (Article 12).

Similarly, Dort is careful to guard against the sinful appropriation of election and reprobation. Election does not mean we are better and worthier people (see Rejection IX). The doctrine is for humility, not for haughtiness. If God chose us, out of the sinful mass of humanity, apart from anything good we had done or any foreknowledge of good we would do, how can we be proud? Likewise, how can we be “lax” or “carnally self-assured” (Article 13)? When we really understand the grace of God in election it makes us humble before God, confident in the face of trials, fervent in love for one another, and steadfast in obedience to the divine law. There should be no such thing as Reformed jerks and proud Calvinists.

Handling Holy Things (Articles 14–18)

Article 14: Teaching Election Properly

By God’s wise plan, this teaching concerning divine election was proclaimed through the prophets, Christ himself, and

the apostles, in Old and New Testament times. It was subsequently committed to writing in the Holy Scriptures. So also today in God's church, for which it was specifically intended, this teaching must be set forth with a spirit of discretion, in a godly and holy manner, at the appropriate time and place, without inquisitive searching into the ways of the Most High. This must be done for the glory of God's most holy name, and for the lively comfort of God's people.

Article 15: Reprobation

Moreover, Holy Scripture most especially highlights this eternal and underserved grace of our election and brings it out more clearly for us, in that it further bears witness that not all people have been chosen but that some have not been chosen or have been passed by in God's eternal election—those, that is, concerning whom God, on the basis of his entirely free, most just, irreproachable, and unchangeable good pleasure, made the following decree: to leave them in the common misery into which, by their own fault, they have plunged themselves; not to grant them saving faith and the grace of conversion; but finally to condemn and eternally punish those who have been left in their own ways and under God's just judgment, not only for their unbelief but also for all their other sins, in order to display his justice.

And this is the decree of reprobation, which does not at all make God the author of sin (a blasphemous thought!) but rather its fearful, irreproachable, just judge, and avenger.

Article 16: Responses to the Teaching of Reprobation

Those who do not yet actively experience within themselves a living faith in Christ or an assured confidence of heart, peace of conscience, a zeal for childlike obedience, and a glorying

in God through Christ, but who nevertheless use the means by which God has promised to work these things in us—such people ought not to be alarmed at the mention of reprobation, nor to count themselves among the reprobate; rather they ought to continue diligently in the use of the means, to desire fervently a time of more abundant grace, and to wait for it in reverence and humility. On the other hand, those who seriously desire to turn to God, to be pleasing to God alone, and to be delivered from the body of death, but are not yet able to make such progress along the way of godliness and faith as they would like—such people ought much less to stand in fear of the teaching concerning reprobation, since our merciful God has promised not to snuff out a smoldering wick or break a bruised reed (Isa. 42:3). However, those who have forgotten God and their Savior Jesus Christ and have abandoned themselves wholly to the cares of the world and the pleasures of the flesh—such people have every reason to stand in fear of this teaching, as long as they do not seriously turn to God.

Article 17: The Salvation of the Infants of Believers

Since we must make judgments about God’s will from his Word, which testifies that the children of believers are holy, not by nature but by virtue of the gracious covenant in which they together with their parents are included, godly parents ought not to doubt the election and salvation of their children whom God calls out of this life in infancy.

Article 18: The Proper Attitude Toward Election and Reprobation

To those who complain about this grace of an undeserved election and about the severity of a just reprobation, we reply with the words of the apostle, “Who are you, O man, to talk back to God?” (Rom. 9:20), and with the words of our Savior, “Have

I no right to do what I want with my own?" (Matt. 20:15). We, however, with reverent adoration of these secret things, cry out with the apostle: "Oh, the depths of the riches both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways beyond tracing out! For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? Or who has first given to God, that God should repay him? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen" (Rom. 11:33–36).



The doctrine of election, especially when combined with its counterpart, reprobation, has always been a difficult doctrine for some Christians to accept. It strikes at assumed notions of human freedom. It undermines presumed ideas of human determination. And it removes from human willing the final decisiveness in our salvation. Consequently, there is usually an apologetic angle when talking about predestination, not in apologizing for what the Bible teaches, but in making sure the common misunderstandings about election are explained and the uncommon benefits celebrated. That's what we have in these final articles: an answer to the charges wrongly levied against the Reformed doctrine of predestination.

With that in mind, let's look at three big themes in these final articles.

First, Dort clarifies what is meant by reprobation. In one sense, reprobation is simply the implied inverse of election. On any view of election (even the Arminian view), some people are singled out for favor. That's what election entails. If God chooses some (and not others), then his decree must concern both the elect and the nonelect. You cannot have one without the other. If your theology has election (of particular persons, in the way Dort understands

it), then you must also have reprobation. This is not just logical, but biblical. The potter has the right to make from the same lump of clay some vessels for honorable use and some for dishonorable (Rom. 9:21–23). Some people have been destined to stumble (1 Pet. 2:8) and designated for condemnation (Jude 4). God is sovereign over all people and over all things.

No doubt, reprobation is a difficult doctrine, which is why we must be extra careful to understand what Reformed theologians have (and have not) meant by the doctrine. The caricature is that Calvinists believe that God capriciously chooses to create innocent people so that he might damn them for his glory. If this what Arminians think that Calvinists believe, they should be embarrassed. And if this is what Calvinists think they ought to believe, they should be ashamed. We do not believe that God makes play things just to zap them in the microwave of his judgment.

Dort's doctrine of reprobation is much more nuanced than the caricature allows. Remember that from Dort's perspective we are dealing with people already fallen—not fallen in the unfolding of time (we are dealing with the will of God in eternity past), but fallen in the logical unfolding of the decrees. So reprobation is not the decree to punish innocent people. Reprobation is the divine decision whereby “some have not been chosen or have been passed by in God's eternal election” (Article 15). All of that means that reprobation, as the concluding section on false accusations notes, is not “the cause of unbelief and ungodliness” in the same way that “election is the source and cause of faith and good works.”

Traditional Reformed theology distinguishes between two elements in reprobation. First there is preterition (the determination to leave fallen sinners in their wickedness), and then there is condemnation (the determination to punish those who are passed by). This distinction is clearly in view when Dort explains that God leaves people in their common misery—not granting them faith

and not granting them the grace of conversion—and then finally sentences them to eternal punishment (Article 15). In other words, God doesn't condemn people for being reprobate. He condemns people for sin and unbelief, from which God, according to his good pleasure and sovereign grace, has purposed to rescue only the elect.

The second theme to note in this last section is Dort's approach to those who die in infancy. From the *Rejection of False Accusations*, we can infer that some charged Reformed theology with a cruelly pessimistic view of deceased children, suggesting that those who die in infancy must be cast into hell as reprobates. But this is not Dort's view. Likely owing to 2 Samuel 12:23–24 where David says he will go to be with his dead son (and then comforted his wife), Dort affirms that “godly parents ought not to doubt the election and salvation of their children whom God calls out of this life in infancy” (Article 17). While Dort is silent on the question of noncovenant children, the canons argue that since the children of at least one believing parent are covenantally holy and set apart (1 Cor. 7:14), we can be confident that God will be their God in death just as he was their covenant God in life.

The third theme concerns the teaching of election and reprobation and our response to it. Dort understands that teaching these doctrines requires “a spirit of discretion” (Article 14). Calvinists in the midst of their “cage stage” who beat people up about election (been there) and try to make people cry with reprobation (done that) are acting not only as immature Christians but as poor Calvinists. Dort acknowledges that these things must be taught “at the appropriate time and place,” in a way that promotes God's glory and comforts God's people (Article 14).

Of particular concern is the danger that people hearing of reprobation will wonder if they themselves are reprobate. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Max Weber argued that behind the famed Protestant work ethic were anxious Calvinists striving

with all their might to prove they were elect. Weber's thesis has been largely discredited in academic circles, but his theological caricature—Reformed people fearing their reprobation—can live on. But nowhere does Dort, or the Bible for that matter, encourage us to plumb the depths of God's eternal decree. Instead, the logic from Jesus in John 6:37 is: "All that the Father gives me will come to me" (election), *and* "whoever comes to me I will never cast out" (the free offer of the gospel). The doctrine of predestination should never be taught so that people conclude, in despair, that they *cannot* come; the doctrine must be articulated so people conclude that by God's grace they *can* come.

Conclusion

As a precise statement of doctrinal convictions, Dort goes to great lengths to make positive affirmations of the truth and negative rejections of error. This includes errors in their opponents (which they wanted to correct) and errors charged to their account (which they wanted to clarify). In other words, if you want to understand the pastoral heartbeat behind the canons, you have to understand what Dort wanted to defend *and* what Dort wanted to deny.

Here are some of the "false accusations" Dort tries to set straight in its concluding paragraphs:

- The Reformed doctrine of election and reprobation does *not* draw "the minds of people away from all godliness and religion."
- It does *not* make "God the author of sin."
- It does *not* make "people carnally self-assured."
- It does *not* mean "that God predestined and created, by the bare and unqualified choice of his will, without the least regard or consideration of any sin, the greatest part of the world to eternal condemnation."

- It does *not* teach “that many infant children of believers are snatched in their innocence from their mothers’ breasts and cruelly cast into hell.”

All of these are false inferences from, or false accusations against, the Reformed doctrine of predestination.

So, on the one hand, we must be especially careful in handling such hot (and holy!) doctrines. We do not want people despondent in fatalistic resignation (Article 16). And yet we must not go to the other extreme and bury these truths in hypercautious oblivion. Let’s not pretend we are smarter than the Bible. If God revealed these things to us, he did so for our good. He wants to warn those who have forgotten their Maker that they will prove themselves to be reprobate if they do not turn to Christ (Article 16), while at the same time leading the believer to receive these “secret things” with “reverent adoration” (Article 18). When face-to-face with the “grace of an undeserved election and the severity of a just reprobation” we ought to bow in humble submission to the will of God, tell of his unsearchable judgments, and worship the one to whom belongs glory forever and ever (Rom. 11:33–36).