

Election: the Fountain of Every Saving Good

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The synod of Dordt met during 1618–19 to settle the controversy about the doctrines of grace that had erupted around the person and teaching of the pestilential James Arminius. As a minister he underhandedly spread his lies from 1590 until his death in 1609. He made predestination the particular object of his attacks. The hope of many that his death would end the controversy did not happen. By devious methods Arminius had succeeded in infecting a large following of ministers and former students with his heresy. From him the false doctrine gained the name Arminianism.

The Arminians' hatred of predestination knew no bounds, but they reserved their most vile attacks for the doctrine of reprobation. The conclusion to the Canons of Dordt give examples of the Arminians' slanders: "Predestination...leads off the minds of men from all piety and religion...is an opiate administered by the flesh and the devil, [is] the stronghold of Satan...[and] makes God the author of sin, unjust, tyrannical, hypocritical...it renders men carnally secure" and lets them "live as they please."¹ With these and many other evil accusations the Arminians vilified the Reformed doctrine of predestination.

The Arminians' heretical doctrine of predestination had three pillars: First, God's universal love for and desire that all men be saved. Second, out of his universal love God offers salvation to all men in the preaching. Third, sinful man has a free will—the ability to choose or not to choose God's offer of salvation.

The result of these three positions was a doctrine of predestination based on foreseen faith. God chose faith in Jesus Christ as the condition man must fulfill to be saved, and God elected those whom he saw "would believe...and persevere in faith and in the obedience of faith" unto the end (1, error 1). The Arminians also taught "that...faith, the obedience of faith, holiness, godliness, and perseverance are not fruits of...election...but are conditions...required beforehand...by those who will be fully elected, and are causes without which...election to glory does not occur" (1, error 5). Thus Arminian election is God's choice of *conditions* that man must fulfill and God's choice of those whom he saw would fulfill those conditions. Election, therefore, depends on man. God's choice is based on man's choice. Man's choice determines who will be saved.

The first head of the Canons set down the Reformed truth about predestination, which refers to God's decree, eternally determining the final destinies of all men. Predestination has two parts, election and reprobation. Together they make up the Reformed confession of sovereign, double predestination.

Article 7 gives the Reformed truth about election: Election is God's "sovereign," "unchangeable," and eternal "purpose," or will. Election is based on God's decision alone, not on any worth or worthiness in those chosen. Election is God's choice of certain individuals—God chooses *persons* not *conditions*. Election is gracious, undeserved and unmerited by those chosen.

¹ This and subsequent quotations from the Canons of Dordt are taken from *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Protestant Reformed Churches of America, 2005), 155-162, 179.

Election is eternal, “before the foundation of the world.” Election is unto salvation, which includes all the blessings of salvation, especially faith. Election is “in Christ,” the mediator and head of the elect, and the foundation of salvation.

The other side of predestination is reprobation, which is God’s eternal *rejection* of some: “Not all, but some only are elected while others are passed by.” These “God...decreed to leave in the common misery into which they...willfully plunged themselves...leaving them...to follow their own ways,” and at last to be condemned and punished forever, “not only on account of their unbelief, but also for all their other sins.” The synod warned that this decree “by no means makes God the author of sin...but declares him to be an awful, irreprehensible, and righteous judge and avenger thereof” (1.15). In reprobation God passes men by with “the grace of election” and appoints them to damnation. Reprobation is not the cause of sin in the same way that election is the cause of faith. Man sins of himself. God does not reprobate man because of his sin, but out of his sovereign will.

Of special importance over against the Arminian corruption of the truth is the Canon’s teaching that election is the cause of faith. Faith in Jesus Christ is necessary for salvation. Where does faith come from? “That some receive the gift of faith from God and others do not...proceeds from God’s eternal decree,” according to which “he graciously softens the hearts of the elect...and inclines them to believe” (1.6). “Election was not founded upon foreseen faith, and the obedience of faith, holiness, or any other good quality or disposition in man, as the prerequisite, cause, or condition on which it depended” as the Arminians taught. Rather, God elects men “to faith and to the obedience of faith, holiness, etc.” For this reason the Canons call election “the fountain of every saving good” (1.9). All the blessings of salvation, especially faith, and finally eternal life come to the elect from election like water from a fountain.

What is the ultimate explanation, then, why some do not believe? This also “proceeds from God’s eternal decree” according to which he “leaves the non-elect in his just judgment to their own wickedness and obduracy” (1.6). In God’s reprobation of some, he decreed “not to bestow upon them saving faith and the grace of conversion” (1.15).

Both election and reprobation glorify God as God alone. In the “decree of election and reprobation” is “especially displayed the profound, the merciful, and...the righteous discrimination between men equally involved in ruin” (1.6). All men deserve to perish in their sin. God’s choice, not man’s decision, determines who is saved and who is not. In election is displayed the profound mercy of God toward his people in his will to deliver them from their misery. Reprobation declares that he is just. Reprobation also serves “to illustrate and recommend...the eternal and unmerited grace of election” since God does not desire the salvation of all, but his elect alone (1.15).

Election “is clearly revealed in the Scriptures,” and “is still to be published” in the preaching “for the glory of God,” and the “enlivening and comforting his people” (1.14). The doctrine does not make men careless and profane, but “the sense and certainty of this election” gives the children of God reason for humility, praise, and “rendering grateful returns of ardent love,” to God (1.13). It also comforts the elect in the unchangeableness of God’s love for them and the certainty of their salvation because his election cannot be “interrupted nor changed, recalled or annulled” (1.11).

The Canons include an appropriate warning: “To those who murmur at the free grace of election and just severity of reprobation, we answer...*Nay, but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God?* (Rom. 9:20) and quote the language of our Savior: *Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own?* (Matt. 20:15)” (1.18).

Head one on predestination ends the only way a believer can when he contemplates “these mysteries” regarding God’s awesome decree—with a doxology! “With holy adoration...we exclaim...*O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counselor? or who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen* (Rom. 11:33–36).”

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