

**Commemorating the 400<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Synod of Dort (1618-19)**  
**Second Class: “But for the Grace of God: The Five Main Points of Doctrine”**

Cornelis P. Venema

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1. The main purpose and achievement of the Synod of Dort was its formulation and adoption of five main points of doctrine, which answer the five opinions of the Remonstrants or Arminians. The Synod was convened in order to settle the ongoing controversy in the Dutch churches regarding the teaching of Arminius and his followers on the topic of election. The confession produced by the Synod, the Canons of Dort, affirmed five main points of doctrine in response to the errors of the Arminians. These five points are often described today as the “doctrines of grace.” They are also frequently associated with the acronym, TULIP (Total Depravity, Unconditional Election; Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace, Perseverance of the Saints), even though this acronym alters the sequence of the points adopted and in some cases may offer a misleading impression of the Canons’ teaching.

2. **The “Five Points” of the Remonstrants:** In my summary of the five points, I will follow the sequence of the Canons. Though it is often forgotten, this sequence was already established by the time the Synod of Dort convened in 1618. Prior to the meeting of the Synod, the Arminians had presented their teaching in the form of five opinions. The five points of the Canons of Dort were written, therefore, as a direct reply to the errors of Arminius and his followers. They were not written to offer a complete statement of the Reformed faith, but to settle the controversy regarding the doctrines of grace provoked by the teaching of Arminius.

*The First Point: Conditional Election.* Following Arminius, the Remonstrants taught that God elected before the foundation of the world to save those whom he foresaw would respond in faith to the gospel call. God does not give faith to those whom he chooses to save. Rather, God elects those whom he foresees will believe and repent of their own free will. Therefore, God’s election is neither sovereign nor unmerited in the proper sense of these terms.

*The Second Point: Universal Atonement.* According to the Remonstrants, Christ “died for all men and for every man,” although only those who believe in him will be saved. The atoning work of Christ made it possible for everyone to be saved, without actually securing the salvation of anyone.

*The Third Point: Human Depravity.* In the opinion of the Remonstrants, fallen sinners do not have the freedom to will any saving good without a prior (prevenient) work of God’s grace through the Word and Spirit of Christ. On this point, there was no substantial disagreement between the Remonstrants and the authors of the Canons. However, consistent with the Arminian insistence that election is based upon foreseen faith, and that Christ’s atoning work becomes effective only through the free choice of some to believe the gospel, the Arminian/Remonstrant position also maintained that human depravity is mitigated through the grace that comes to all who are called to faith through the gospel. There is a common gracious working of God in the hearts of sinners, short of granting salvation, which enables them to repent and believe. This common grace is sufficient to enable all sinners to cooperate or not cooperate with the gospel call to faith and repentance.

*The Fourth Point: Resistible Grace.* In the fourth article the Arminian party taught that the Holy Spirit does all that is necessary to enable fallen sinners to be saved. But the ministry of the Spirit may always be successfully resisted. Because fallen sinners can always choose to frustrate the work of the Spirit, they must first believe before the Spirit regenerates and converts them. Accordingly, the Spirit's application of the benefits of Christ's atoning death is only effectual in the case of those sinners who choose not to resist the Spirit, and persevere in the way of faith. Accordingly, God's grace alone is not effectual to the salvation of any sinner. God's grace is always vincible, never invincible.

*The Fifth Point: The Non-Perseverance of the Saints.* The last article of the Arminian party was addressed to the question whether believers are preserved in the state of grace by the Holy Spirit. Though there was some uncertainty on this question in the early period of the controversy, by the time the Synod of Dort met in 1618 the Arminian party had repudiated the teaching that believers may be assured that they will persevere in a state of grace by the work of the Spirit.

### 3. The Composition and Arrangement of the Canons:

- The work of the Synod: The Synod met from November 13, 1618, concluding six and a half months later on May 28, 1619 with its 180<sup>th</sup> session! There are four distinguishable periods in the chronology of the Synod's meetings: 1) the *Pro Acta* sessions held from November 13 to December 5, 1618; 2) the procedural debates with the Remonstrants held from December 6 to January 14, 1619; 3) the preparation of a response to the Remonstrants held from January 15 to May 9; and 4) the *Post Acta* sessions held from May 13 to May 29.
- Procedures of the Synod: From January 15 through March 24, the delegations composed their respective "opinions (*iudicia*) on each of the five points of the Remonstrants. Thereafter a nine member Drafting Committee was appointed to draw up the Canons. While this Committee did its work, no sessions were held. When the Drafting Committee completed its work, the Synod met in plenary session to approve what was written.
- In response to a recommendation of the Palatinate delegation, the Synod decided to write the Canons in a pastoral style (not technical or scholastic in form). Each of the five points is presented with the following pattern: 1) written in a popular rather than scholastic style; 2) presents each head of doctrine as complete in itself; 3) begins with a commonly accepted Christian doctrine; 4) develops the head of doctrine from the point of catholic agreement to the point of Reformed distinctive; 5) has one article that gives the basic point of the specific head of doctrine; 6) gives some specific elaborations and applications; 7) addresses the matter of fault and God's justice; 8) examines the effects of the doctrine on Christian living; 9) examines assurance as a recurring concern; 10) shows the importance of the means of grace; 11) shapes several articles and many rejections of errors against specific Arminian teachings and formulations; and 12) quotes more Scripture in the rejection of errors than in the positive articles.

#### 4. The First Main Point of Doctrine: Unconditional Election

In the opening articles of the first main point of doctrine, the Canons summarize the most important aspects of the biblical gospel. These include the fact that “all people have sinned in Adam and have come under the sentence of the curse and eternal death” (Art 1), that God has manifested his love in the sending of his only-begotten Son (Art. 2), and that God’s anger continues to rest upon those who do not believe the gospel of Jesus Christ (Art.3). Within the framework of these truths, the Canons address the fundamental question to which the biblical doctrine of election is addressed: why do some believe and repent at the preaching of the gospel, but others remain in their sins and under the just condemnation of God? The answer to this question at its deepest level is God’s unconditional election in Christ of some persons to salvation:

The fact that some receive from God the gift of faith within time, and that others do not, stems from [God’s] eternal decision. For *all his works are known to God from eternity* (Acts 15:18; Eph. 1:11). In accordance with this decision he graciously softens the hearts, however hard, of his chosen ones and inclines them to believe, but by his just judgment he leaves in their wickedness and hardness of heart those who have not been chosen. And in this especially is disclosed to us his act—unfathomable, and as merciful as it is just—of distinguishing between people equally lost. (Art. 6)

Because God’s sovereign and gracious purpose of election is the source of faith, the Canons go on to assert that it cannot therefore be based upon faith. God does not elect to save anyone “*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” (Art. 8). Faith is not a meritorious work, but itself a gracious gift that God grants to those whom he calls according to his purpose (Eph. 2:8-9; Phil. 1:29; Acts 13:48).

After articulating the Scriptural teaching of unconditional election, the *Canons* further affirm that this sovereign and gracious election of a particular number of persons unto salvation means that some sinners have been “passed by” and “left” in their sins (Art. 15). The formulation of this article is expressly “infralapsarian.” Those whom God does not elect to save in Christ belong to the company of all fallen sinners who “by their own fault” have willfully plunged themselves into a “common misery.” In the case of the elect, God mercifully and graciously elects to grant them salvation in and through the work of Christ (Eph. 1:3-7). In the case of the reprobate, God demonstrates his justice by choosing to withhold his grace and to finally condemn them for their sins and unbelief (Rom. 9:22-24).

#### 5. The Second Main Point of Doctrine: Definite Atonement or Particular Redemption

Of the five points of doctrine summarized in the Canons, the second is given the briefest treatment. In the opening articles of this second point, the Canons affirm that the only possible way for sinful human beings to escape the condemnation and death that their sins deserve, lies in the atoning work of Jesus Christ on their behalf (Art. 2). Christ’s substitutionary work of atonement is the only way in which God’s justice can be satisfied and fallen sinners be restored to favor with him. After emphasizing the need for Christ’s atoning work on the cross, the Canons affirm the infinite value and worth of Christ’s satisfaction. Christ’s atoning sacrifice “is the only and entirely complete

sacrifice and satisfaction for sins,” and “is of infinite value and worth, more than sufficient to atone for the sins of the whole world.” Therefore, the church must proclaim the gospel of salvation through Christ to “all nations and peoples, to whom God in his good pleasure sends the gospel.” The church is called to proclaim “indiscriminately” that all who believe in Christ crucified and turn from their sins shall not perish but have eternal life.

After establishing the need for Christ’s atoning work and affirming its infinite value and sufficiency, the authors of the Canons set forth the central thesis of the second point of doctrine. The atoning work of Christ was by God’s design and intention provided for the elect in particular:

For it was the entirely free plan and very gracious will and intention of God the Father that the enlivening and saving effectiveness of his Son’s costly death should work itself out in all his chosen ones, in order that he might grant justifying faith to them only and thereby lead them without fail to salvation. In other words, it was God’s will that Christ through the blood of the cross (by which he confirmed the new covenant) should effectively redeem from every people, tribe, nation, and language all those and only those who were chosen from eternity to salvation and given to him by the Father; that he should grant them faith (which, like the Holy Spirit’s other saving gifts, he acquired for them by his death); that he should cleanse them by his blood from all their sins, both original and actual .... (Art. 8).

## **6. The Third and Fourth Main Points of Doctrine: Radical Depravity and Effectual Grace**

In the Third and Fourth Main Points of Doctrine, the Canons set forth the Scriptural teaching regarding the radical depravity of fallen sinners and the effectual work of Christ’s Spirit in regeneration and conversion.

The position of the Canons on the plight of sinful man is starkly portrayed in the first five articles of this section of the confession. In the first and third articles, a sharp contrast is drawn between man’s original state of integrity, as he was created by God, and his sinful state or radical depravity after the fall.

Man was originally created in the image of God and was furnished in his mind with a true and salutary knowledge of his Creator and things spiritual, in his will and heart with righteousness, and in all his emotions with purity; indeed, the whole man was holy. However, rebelling against God at the devil’s instigation and by his own free will, he deprived himself of these outstanding gifts. Rather, in their place he brought upon himself blindness, terrible darkness, futility, and distortion of judgment in his mind; perversity, defiance, and hardness in his heart and will; and finally impurity in all his emotions (Art. 1).

Therefore, all people are conceived in sin and are born children of wrath, unfit for any saving good, inclined to evil, dead in their sins, and slaves to sin; without the grace of the regenerating Holy Spirit they are neither willing nor able to return to God, to reform their distorted nature, or even to dispose themselves to such reform [Ps. 51:5; John 3:5-7; Eph. 2:1-3; Rom. 8:7, 8; 1 Cor. 2:14]. (Art. 3).

The Canons begin their treatment of the work of the Spirit in the application of redemption by stressing that the gospel must be published to all the nations. In this publication of the gospel,

God “seriously and most genuinely . . . makes known in his Word what is pleasing to him: that those who are called should come to him. Seriously he also promises rest for their souls and eternal life to all who come to him and believe” (Art. 8). This means that the blame does not belong with Christ or the gospel, when sinners refuse to believe and repent when called to do so through the gospel. God sincerely calls everyone through the Word of the gospel to believe, promising salvation to all without distinction who answer this call through faith and repentance. The fault for the unbelief and impenitence of many is, therefore, entirely their own.

But what about those who do believe and repent, who are converted, at the preaching of the gospel? Are they to be credited for their faith and repentance, as though these were their own accomplishment? The authors of the Canons answer this question, first, by denying that such faith and repentance are to be credited to the believer, and second, by affirming that they are the fruit of the Spirit’s working through the gospel. The conversion of those who are called through the ministry of the gospel must not be credited to them, “as though one distinguishes himself by free choice from others who are furnished with equal or sufficient grace for faith and conversion (as the proud heresy of Pelagius maintains)” (Art. 10). Not at all. For just as God from eternity chose his own in Christ, “so within time he effectively calls them, grants them faith and repentance . . . in order that they may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called them out of darkness into this marvelous light, and may boast not in themselves, but in the Lord, as apostolic words frequently testify in Scripture.”

In the following articles of the third and fourth points, the Canons provide a biblical account of the manner of the Spirit’s working in the heart and life of the believer. Speaking of the Spirit’s work in applying the gospel, the Canons affirm that God by the Spirit powerfully enlightens the mind of the believer “so that they may rightly understand and discern the things of the Spirit of God” (Art. 11). Furthermore, by “the effective operation of the same regenerating Spirit,” God also “penetrates into the inmost being of man, opens the closed heart, softens the hard heart, and circumcises the heart that is uncircumcised.” This work of the Spirit includes: giving to the sinner’s will, otherwise captive to sin, the readiness to do good; making the will, otherwise dead and lifeless to the things of God, begin to live and become receptive to the gospel’s call; making the will, otherwise unwilling because unable, begin to desire the right; and activating and enlivening the will, otherwise inactive and lifeless, to produce the good fruits that come from a tree that has been made good. In so doing, the Spirit of God effectively enables the sinner, by nature spiritually dead and in bondage to sin, to turn willingly in repentance and faith to God: “As a result, all those in whose hearts God works in this marvelous way are certainly, unfailingly, and effectively reborn and do actually believe. And then the will, now renewed, is not only activated and motivated by God but in being activated by God is also itself active. For this reason, man himself, by that grace which he has received is also rightly said to believe and to repent” (Art. 12).

## **7. The Fifth Main Point of Doctrine: The Perseverance of the Saints**

The opening articles of the Fifth Main Point acknowledge that believers continually struggle with sin and temptation, and even on occasion fall into grievous sin (cf. Peter’s denial). Within the setting of this biblically realistic view of the ongoing struggle with remaining sin, the Canons affirm the Triune God’s gracious preservation of true believers. If left to their own resources, believers “could not remain standing in this grace” for a moment (Art. 3). Only as God, being faithful and merciful, strengthens and enables them, are believers able to continue in that state into which God has brought them through fellowship with Christ. The good news of the gospel is not only that God has provided an atonement through Christ and brought us by the Spirit through the gospel into

fellowship with Christ. The gospel also promises that God will prove faithful and merciful by preserving his people within that fellowship. “For God, who is rich in mercy, according to his unchangeable purpose of election does not take his Holy Spirit from his own completely, even when they fall grievously. Neither does he let them fall down so far that they forfeit the grace of adoption and the state of justification, or commit the sin which leads to death (the sin against the Holy Spirit), and plunge themselves, entirely forsaken by him, into eternal ruin” [John 10:27-30; 17:11-12; Rom. 8:35-39; Phil. 1:6] (Art. 6).

### **8. The Burden of the Five Points: God’s glory and the believer’s comfort**

A number of years ago J. I. Packer memorably summarized these five points, the “doctrines of grace,” in a pithy statement—“God saves sinners.” The biblical teaching of election preserves the truth that salvation is God’s work from first to last. Contrary to the Arminian view, which ultimately rests the salvation of sinners upon their choice to believe and to persevere in faith, the Bible teaches that the Triune God saves by granting to believers whatever is required for their salvation. In accordance with his purpose of election, the Father gives the Son whose atoning sacrifice effectively procures the salvation of those for whom he died. Through the effectual ministry of the Holy Spirit, believers are unfailingly granted the gift of faith and repentance by which they are united to Christ and become beneficiaries of his work on their behalf. For this reason, those whom God sovereignly and graciously saves can echo the words of the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 4:7: “What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?”

Because God alone saves sinners, all whom he saves may properly ascribe all praise to God for their salvation. And at the same time, they may confidently believe that Christ will save them to the uttermost (Heb. 7:25). In the stirring words of the Canons, they can confess that God’s “plan cannot be changed, his promise cannot fail, the calling according to his purpose cannot be revoked, the merit of Christ as well as his interceding and preserving cannot be nullified, and the sealing of the Holy Spirit can neither be invalidated or wiped out” (Art. V/8).