

**Commemorating the 400<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Synod of Dort**  
**Class Four: “The Implications of the Canons for Gospel Preaching”**

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1. **The first and most obvious form of the question** is whether or not the Scriptural teachings of unconditional election, definite atonement or particular redemption, radical depravity, effectual calling, and the perseverance of the saints, ought to be openly taught in the preaching of the gospel. Should those who preach include these doctrinal themes as explicit features of the content of their gospel proclamation? If these themes are essential to the biblical gospel of God’s gracious work in the salvation of his people, it seems clear that they ought to be openly set forth in the preaching of the Word of God. If they belong to the “whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27), then they surely must be addressed. Since the confessions of the church, including the Canons of Dort, summarize the teaching of Scripture, the preaching of the gospel should be regulated by them. The only issue is how these doctrines should be presented.

3. **The second form of the question is whether or not the doctrines of grace also have implications for the manner in which the gospel of Jesus Christ is proclaimed.** Before the adoption of the Canons of Dort in the early seventeenth-century, the sixteenth-century Reformers had already grappled with the question as to how the doctrine of election ought to be treated in the teaching of the church. Since the theme of election often raises a number of difficult theological questions, some argued (for example, Philip Melancthon) that it would be better to avoid the topic altogether or perhaps restrict the discussion of it to the narrow precincts of the Christian academy. Interestingly, John Calvin, whose name is frequently linked in popular imagination with the topic of predestination, directly addresses this question in his *Institutes*. Calvin observes that there are two kinds of persons who fail to do justice to this theme. On the one hand, there are those whose unbridled curiosity lands them in a labyrinth of their own making from which there is no escape. Rather than remain within the boundaries of what Scripture teaches us, they “unrestrainedly ... search out things that the Lord has willed to be hid in himself.”<sup>1</sup> Against this temptation, Calvin wisely counsels us to seek to know only what God in his wisdom has decided to reveal for our benefit. On the other hand, there are those who, fearful of rash presumption in the handling of the doctrine of election, avoid the subject altogether. Such persons think it best to avoid this topic the way sailors carefully avoid a reef at sea. In Calvin’s estimation, this timidity in handling the doctrine of election amounts to a kind of “anxious silence” that questions the wisdom of the Holy Spirit’s teaching in the school of the Scriptures.<sup>2</sup> Since the Holy Spirit teaches us about God’s gracious election, we would be remiss not to consider the usefulness of this teaching.

4. **The controversy regarding the doctrine of election in the Reformed churches in the Netherlands began in response to Arminius’ preaching through the book of Romans.** During the course of his preaching, Arminius took exception to the prevalent Reformed view of election. In Arminius’ estimation, the traditional formulation of the doctrine created serious pastoral

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<sup>1</sup> *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 3.21.2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 3.21.4.

problems, especially in regard to the assurance believers may have of their election and salvation.<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, the teaching of unconditional election encouraged what Arminius described as a “careless certainty” regarding God’s gracious purpose of election. Since the prevalent Reformed view emphasized the unconditionality of election, Arminius believed it invited believers to be assured of their salvation in a presumptuous fashion. Since God’s gracious election does not depend upon the sinner’s choice to persevere in the way of faith, it tempts preachers to diminish the seriousness of the gospel call to conversion. Moreover, when this teaching is joined to an Augustinian reading of Romans 7:14-25, believers are encouraged to rest their confidence in God’s gracious purpose of election, even though their lives exhibit little fruit in the way of good works.<sup>4</sup> The preaching of unconditional election, therefore, permits believers to be assured of their election and salvation even when their lives belie their profession. On the other hand, the Reformed view of God’s absolute, eternal and immutable will to elect some persons to salvation and at the same time to reprobate others, inevitably occasions doubt on the part of some believers regarding their election. According to Arminius, the preaching of the Reformed doctrine of election creates two insoluble pastoral problems: either an idle presumption regarding salvation or an anxious uncertainty regarding God’s gracious favor.

**4. Unconditional Election: Preaching the Joyful Message of the Gospel with Confidence:** If there were any doubt about the importance of the doctrine of election for preaching, it is dispelled in the opening articles of the first main point of doctrine. These articles do not immediately take up the topic of unconditional election, but begin with a clear statement of the gospel that is to be joyfully announced to all people. Even though all people have sinned in Adam and lie under the judgment of God, the gospel announces God’s unmerited love in sending his Son into the world to save those who deserve condemnation and death. The aim of gospel preaching is to bring fallen sinners to faith in Jesus Christ. For this purpose, “God mercifully sends proclaimers of this very joyful message to the people he wishes and at the time he wishes” (Art. 3).

Accordingly, the theme of unconditional election arises in the first main point of doctrine as an answer to the question: how is it that some respond in faith to the gospel’s invitation to believe in Christ, whereas others remain willfully unbelieving in the face of the overtures of the gospel? How do we account for this twofold response to the preaching of the gospel, that some believe and are saved while others disbelieve and remain under condemnation and death? The Canons answer this question in two ways. On the one hand, they emphasize that the “cause or blame” for unbelief lies wholly with those who willfully reject the promise of salvation through Christ. On the other hand, the Canons insist that those who believe unto salvation do so by virtue of God’s gracious and eternal decision to grant them the gift of faith. According to the Canons, “[t]he fact that some receive from God the gift of faith within time, and that others do not, stems from his eternal decision. ... 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” (Art. 6).

The importance of this affirmation for the preaching of the gospel can scarcely be exaggerated. When God’s ambassadors call fallen sinners to faith in Jesus Christ, they do so in the

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<sup>3</sup> James Arminius, *The Works of James Arminius*, trans. James Nichols and William Nichols, 3 vols (Grand Rapids: Baker reprint, 1986), *Declaration of Sentiments*, 1.637-38. Keith D. Stanglin and Thomas H. McCall, *Jacob Arminius: Theologian of Grace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 182, describe the topic of assurance as a “point of departure” for Arminius’ formulation of an alternative doctrine of election to the prevalent Reformed view.

<sup>4</sup> *The Seventh Chapter of St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*, in *The Works of James Arminius*, 2.659.

confidence that God will unfailingly draw his chosen people to himself. What undergirds the gospel call to faith in Christ is the conviction that God will graciously grant the response that this call demands. Since God’s gracious election of his people in Christ takes place, not on the basis of foreseen faith, but “for the purpose of faith, of the obedience of faith, of holiness, and so on,” the preaching of the gospel does not depend for its fruitfulness upon anything fallen sinners are required to do in their own strength. Rather, God graciously communicates all the benefits of salvation to his own as the “fruits and effects” of election.

**5. Unconditional Election: Preaching the Joyful Message of the Gospel with Care and Discretion, without speculation or “inquisitive searching”:** In addition to the confidence that election grants to preachers in their proclamation of the gospel, the first main point of the Canons explicitly addresses the way the theme of election should be handled in preaching. In Article 14, which bears the title, “Teaching Election Properly,” preachers are encouraged to treat the doctrine of election “with a spirit of discretion,” and to do way in a way that simultaneously magnifies God’s glory and comforts believers:

Just as, by God's wise plan, this teaching concerning divine election has been proclaimed through the prophets, Christ himself, and the apostles, in Old and New Testament times, and has subsequently been 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 his people.

Since the teaching of divine election is proclaimed throughout the Scriptures, it should likewise be set forth by those who preach and teach the gospel in the church today. However, the doctrine of election should be presented wisely and discretely, at the proper time and place, and without any inappropriate searching out of the ways of God. The preaching of election must not mute the joyful message that all preachers are called to announce, namely, that God has sent his Son into the world to make atonement for the sins of his people, and that all who believe in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

In the two articles that precede Article 14, for example, the Canons address the way believers may cultivate the assurance of their election and salvation. Recognizing that some believers may struggle to obtain full assurance, the Canons encourage believers to be assured of their election, “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” (Art. 12). Rather than encouraging believers to an inappropriate searching out of the ways of God, preachers ought to call believers to “make their calling and election sure” (cf. 2 Pet. 1:10-11) by observing the fruits of God’s grace at work in them. Because those whom God elects are also those whom he brings to faith and repentance, such faith and repentance are like fruits that spring from a good tree. Such fruits of the work of God’s grace in believers are tell-tale marks of their calling and election. These articles (Art. 14-15) clearly aim to answer the Arminian accusation that the doctrine of election makes believers careless.

In the articles following Article 14 of the first main point, similar illustrations are provided of a non-speculative, pastorally-comforting, and God-glorifying approach to the preaching of election. When believers struggle with doubts and temptations, even the temptation to “count themselves among the reprobate,” they should be urged to continue to use the means of grace and to wait upon God’s mercy (Art. 16).<sup>5</sup> When they do not find themselves making much progress in holiness, they must be reminded of God’s gracious promise that “he will not snuff out a smoldering wick and that he will not break a bruised reed.” At the same time, the biblical teaching of reprobation engenders a spirit of soberness, even fear, on the part of those who “do not seriously turn to God” or respond as they ought to the gracious overtures of the gospel. The Canons’ pastoral emphasis upon preaching the comfort of the gospel comes to particularly powerful expression in Article 17, which affirms the assurance godly parents may have regarding the election and salvation of their children whom God calls to himself in their infancy.

**6. Particular Redemption or Definite Atonement: Preaching Christ’s Work of Atonement and its Sure Promise:** Perhaps the most significant reason some demure from the teaching of particular redemption is the fear that this teaching “limits” the scope of Christ’s atoning sacrifice, and thereby imperils the church’s ability to herald to all sinners the joyful message of the gospel. If Christ’s atoning death was designed only to procure the salvation of the elect, the universal and gracious invitation of the gospel is undermined. Indeed, some allege that the teaching of particular redemption must inevitably discourage preachers from issuing the gospel invitation to all with the promise that whoever comes to Christ in faith will assuredly be saved.

In remarkable contrast to these concerns, the second main point begins in a way that mimics the opening articles of the first point. After noting that God’s justice requires that satisfaction be made for the sins we have committed “against his infinite majesty,” the Canons declare that God in his boundless mercy has provided the necessary satisfaction through the death of his Son upon the cross (Art. 1-2). In the following articles, the Canons emphasize the infinite value and worth of Christ’s atoning sacrifice. Utilizing traditional language, the Canons affirm that Christ’s atoning death was “more than *sufficient* to atone for the sins of the whole world” (emphasis mine, Art. 3). Even though Christ’s work of atonement is *efficient* unto the salvation of the elect alone, this does not imply that his sacrifice was insufficient to the need of all lost sinners. Accordingly, in the preaching of the gospel by Christ’s ambassadors, the promise of salvation through faith in Christ must be presented to all.

Moreover, it is the promise of the gospel that whoever believes in Christ crucified shall not perish but have eternal life. This promise, together with the command to repent and believe, ought to be announced and declared without differentiation or discrimination to all nations and people, to whom God in his good pleasure sends the gospel. (Art. 5)

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<sup>5</sup> The Canons’ treatment of how the topic of reprobation is to be handled in the preaching of the gospel is reminiscent of the sentiment expressed earlier in the Second Helvetic Confession, chap. 10: “And although God knows who are his, and here and there mention is made of the small number of elect, yet we must hope well of all, and not rashly judge any man to be a reprobate. For Paul says to the Philippians, ‘I thank my God for you all’ (now he speaks of the whole Church in Philippi), ‘because of your fellowship in the Gospel, being persuaded that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. It is also right that I have this opinion of you all’ (Phil. 1:3 ff.). ... And when the Lord was asked whether there were few that should be saved, he does not answer and tell them that few or many should be saved or damned, but rather he exhorts every man to “strive to enter by the narrow door” (Luke 13:24): as if he should say, It is not for you curiously to inquire about these matters, but rather to endeavor that you may enter into heaven by the straight way.”

In this striking declaration, the Canons affirm the propriety of preaching the gospel universally and indiscriminately to all sinners. Through the preaching of the gospel, the promise of salvation in Christ is presented to sinners who are urged to respond in faith. Since Christ's work of atonement is sufficient for the salvation of all, the gospel invitation may extend the promise of salvation to all, summoning them to respond properly in faith and repentance. That some refuse to do so is not owing to any deficiency in the sacrifice of Christ. Rather, those who remain unbelieving have only themselves to blame for their willful refusal to embrace the gospel's promise (Art. 6). On the other hand, those who genuinely believe in Christ unto salvation receive this favor from God's grace alone "given them in Christ from eternity" (Art. 7).

Thus, the teaching of definite atonement in no way prevents preachers from declaring the gospel promise to all lost sinners. But it does more than this. It fortifies Christ's ambassadors to preach out of the conviction that Christ will surely draw all those for whom he died through the ministry of his Spirit. Moreover, it provides a sure *warrant* for the gospel promise itself. The gospel promise amounts to more than preaching, "if you believe, you will be saved." The promise may not be reduced to the simple declaration: "Christ has made it possible for you to be saved, though your actual salvation depends upon your independent determination to believe and to continue to do so." No, when believers are called to trust in Christ, they are called to believe that he has *fully satisfied for all their sins*. They do not embrace a gospel promise that is simply conditional and provisional, as though Christ were not the one whose work of atonement ensures the salvation of those who entrust themselves to him in faith. They are called to embrace Christ, trusting that he has not only procured their right to be saved but will also ensure that every benefit belonging to salvation is imparted to them. To use the language of the author of Hebrews, believers trust the gospel promise that Christ is able to save them to the uttermost (Heb. 7:25). Christ's work promises those who believe in him all that is necessary to enjoy full and final salvation. As John Murray so concisely and eloquently puts it,

He [Christ] could not be offered as Savior and as the one who embodies in himself salvation full and free if he had simply made the salvation of all men possible or merely had made provision for the salvation of all. It is the very doctrine that Christ procured and secured redemption that invests the free offer of the gospel with richness and power. It is that doctrine alone that allows for a presentation of Christ that will be worthy of the glory of his accomplishment and of his person. It is because Christ procured and secured redemption that he is an all-sufficient and suitable Savior.<sup>6</sup>

**7. Radical Depravity and the Effectual Call: Preaching the Gospel to All with Compassion and Sincerity:** Some of the most important statements regarding the doctrines of grace in relation to preaching are found in the third and fourth main points of the Canons. These points, which treat the topics of the radical depravity of fallen sinners and the effectual ministry of Christ's Spirit in their conversion, are of special relevance to preaching and preachers. They remind preachers that those whom they address with the call of the gospel are spiritually dead, incapable and unwilling to perform any saving good. The ministry of the gospel does not presume that fallen sinners are able to do anything in their own power to save themselves. They also emphasize that the gospel call must be extended to all sinners, seriously, urgently, and compassionately. And, consistent with what we have already found in the earlier points of doctrine, the fourth point encourages preachers

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<sup>6</sup> *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015 [1955]), 63-64.

to preach with the expectation that the Holy Spirit will work in regeneration and conversion to draw lost sinners to faith in Christ. Because preaching is the means the Spirit uses as the “seed of regeneration,” the ministry of the gospel is powerful to save those whom God has chosen in Christ.

Before describing the way the Spirit effectually calls those whom God has chosen in Christ, the third main point emphasizes that the gospel alone is able to grant salvation to fallen sinners. Due to the fall into sin, “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” (Art. 3). Neither the “light of nature” remaining in sinners after the fall nor the law of God is adequate as a means of restoring them to favor with God (Arts. 4-5). Thus, the only hope of salvation for fallen sinners lies in the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Since fallen sinners are incapable of doing any saving good upon the basis of the light of nature or the law of God, the gospel of Jesus Christ offers the exclusive remedy for them to be reconciled and restored to fellowship with God. The gospel of Jesus Christ—the announcement of his saving work of atonement and the call to faith and repentance—is the means God has appointed to grant salvation to his people.

Within the setting of this emphasis upon the saving power of the gospel, the Canons make a remarkable statement regarding the seriousness and sincerity of the call of the gospel that is extended indiscriminately to all lost sinners. They respond directly to the Remonstrant claim that the Reformed view militates against the genuineness of the gracious call of the gospel. According to the Remonstrants, if God unconditionally elects to save some lost sinners but not others, the gospel call becomes disingenuous. Neither God nor preachers who issue the call of the gospel in his name can genuinely express a desire that all would believe in Christ unto salvation. In their judgment, the doctrine of unconditional election calls into question the sincerity of the gospel call with respect to those whom God has not chosen. How can God express a gracious disposition toward all in the call of the gospel, when he does not will to save all? Contrary to the Arminian charge that the Reformed view undermines the ability of preachers to call all lost sinners to salvation through faith in Christ, the Canons insist that

all who are called through the gospel are called seriously [*serio vocantur*]. For seriously and most genuinely [*Serio enim et verissime*] God makes known in his Word what is pleasing to him [*quid sibi gratum sit*]: 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)

By using language almost identical to that of Remonstrants in their description of the gospel call, the Canons expressly aim to rebut the claim that the Reformed view of unconditional election is incompatible with a compassionate presentation of the gospel to all.<sup>7</sup>

There are several observations that may be made regarding the Canons’ affirmation of the sincerity of the gospel offer. First, though the authors of the Canons were convinced that the sincerity of the gospel offer does not contradict the Scriptural teaching of unconditional election, they do not attempt to provide a theological explanation as to how this is so. Second, it should be noted that the Arminian view does not avoid the problem that is often alleged against the Reformed

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<sup>7</sup> *The Opinions of the Remonstrants* declare that “Whomever God calls to salvation, he calls seriously, that is, with a sincere and completely unhyprocritical intention and will to save” (as quoted in De Jong, *Crisis in the Reformed Church*, 265). The subtle difference in viewpoint between this opinion and the Canons lies in the phrase, “intention and will.” Though the Canons speak of what God declares in his Word to be pleasing to him, they do not say that he “intends” to draw all whom he calls to himself.

view, namely, that it represents God's will as it is expressed in the call of the gospel in a way that is out of harmony with his particular purpose of election. According to the Arminian view, God wills (absolutely and antecedently) to save all fallen sinners upon the basis of Christ's work of atonement, to be sure. This allegedly undergirds the genuineness of the gospel's call to all sinners to believe in Jesus Christ and be saved. However, the Arminian view also declares that God simultaneously wills (conditionally and consequently) to save only those specific sinners who independently choose to embrace the gospel promise by faith. Remarkably, God's will as it relates to the specific persons he elects does not comport with his absolute will to save all fallen sinners. And third, when the Canons affirm the sincerity of the gospel call to all lost sinners, they do so in the light of what the Scriptures teach regarding God's gracious disposition toward all lost sinners. The sincere gospel offer focuses upon *what God reveals concerning what would be genuinely pleasing to him*, not upon *what God has particularly willed to effect* in the salvation of his chosen people. According to the teaching of the Canons, we must distinguish between two aspects of the will of God. On the one hand, the gracious call of the gospel reveals that God genuinely desires that all fallen sinners should respond in faith to the gospel call and so be saved. On the other hand, God's purpose of election expresses his gracious intention to save those toward whom he chooses to be merciful.

The Canons' affirmation of the sincere gospel offer is of the greatest importance for the preaching of the gospel. When the gospel is preached and sinners are called to faith and repentance, Christ's ambassadors are not only permitted but also obliged to extend this call with heartfelt compassion. The Word of the gospel is to be ministered as a joyful message to all its recipients. Even as the apostle Paul expressed his "heartfelt desire" that his kinsmen according to the flesh would be saved (Rom. 10:1), so the gospel preacher ought to minister the gospel with a similar desire. Those who are privileged to herald the gospel should do with a heart that is compassionate toward all. The preaching of the gospel is nothing, if not an earnest and sincere entreaty to all to believe in Jesus Christ and so be saved.

**8. Radical Depravity and the Effectual Call: Confidence in the Spirit's Ministry With the Word:** After this strong affirmation of the sincerity of the gospel call, the fourth main point of the Canons describes the way in which the Holy Spirit accompanies the preaching of the gospel by effectually persuading those whom God elects to respond to the gospel in faith and repentance. Contrary to the Arminian view, which insists that God's grace is always resistible and ineffectual so long as sinners choose to reject the gospel call, the Canons maintain that God "effectively calls" the elect to himself in time, granting them faith and repentance by the ministry of the Spirit. The work of the Spirit in conversion is powerful, inexpressible, and supernatural. When the Spirit grants new birth to spiritually dead sinners, he "penetrates into the inmost being of man, opens the closed heart, softens the hard heart, and circumcises the heart that is uncircumcised" (Art. 164).

Perhaps the most important statement regarding the relation between election and preaching in the fourth point is Article 17. In this Article, the Canons link God's purpose of election directly to his use of means in effectually calling believers through the ministry of the gospel. In the ordinary realization of his saving purpose in time, God is pleased to use the preaching of the gospel as the "seed of regeneration":

Just as the almighty work of God by which he brings forth and sustains our natural life does not rule out but requires the use of means, by which God, according to his infinite wisdom and goodness, has wished to exercise his power, so also the aforementioned supernatural

work of God by which he regenerates us in no way rules out or cancels the use of the gospel, which God in his great wisdom has appointed to be the seed of regeneration and the food of the soul. For this reason, the apostles and the teachers who followed them taught the people in a godly manner about this grace of God, to give him the glory and to humble all pride, and yet did not neglect meanwhile to keep the people, by means of the holy admonitions of the gospel, under the administration of the Word, the sacraments, and discipline. (Art. 17)

The Spirit's work in conversion is not immediate, since it is ordinarily effected through the ministry of the means of grace, principally the preaching of the gospel with its earnest call to faith and repentance.

Accordingly, even though the doctrine of election is often alleged to encourage passivity on the part of the church's ministers in carrying out the work of missions and evangelism, the Canons offer no encouragement to such passivity. Since the Spirit works through the means of gospel preaching to grant salvation to those whom God elects, the church and her ministers are obliged to proclaim the good news to all lost sinners. Failure to preach the gospel with compassion, urgency, and relentlessness, exhibits a failure to recognize that such gospel preaching is the ordinary means by which God grants his grace to those whom he has chosen. When the ordinary means of grace are not ministered energetically, with the prayer that the Holy Spirit cause these means to be effectual to the salvation of lost sinners, the church presumes "to test God by separating what he in his good pleasure has wished to be closely joined together" (Art. 17).

**9. The Perseverance of the Saints: Preaching as a Means of Preservation:** The fifth and last point of doctrine in the Canons, which affirms God's gracious preservation of those whom he elects to save, emphasizes the role of preaching in a way that echoes the fourth point. Just as God is pleased to use the ordinary means of grace, especially preaching, to grant regeneration and conversion by the effectual work of the Holy Spirit with the Word, so he is pleased by means of preaching to enable believers to persevere to the end in faith and repentance.

In the opening articles of the fifth main point, the Canons acknowledge that believers struggle throughout their lives with "daily sins of weakness" (Art. 2). In some instances, believers fall into serious sins, as is witnessed in Scripture by the grievous cases of David in the Old Testament and Peter in the New Testament. Such sins grieve the Holy Spirit and may even entail the suspense of the exercise of faith for a season (Art. 5). However, God in his boundless mercy does not take his Holy Spirit from those whom he calls according to his unchangeable purpose of election. Believers may be assured that God will preserve his chosen ones in the way of faith and repentance to the end. Though believers, were they left to their own resources, would undoubtedly fail to persevere to the end, God graciously preserves them in the way of salvation. Believers may be sure 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 nor wiped out" (Art. 8).

Within the setting of this robust emphasis upon the assurance believers may have of God's preserving grace, the Canons also maintain that such assurance should not be confused with a careless and lackadaisical presumption. Far from inducing believers to a careless disregard for godliness, God has appointed the use of the means of grace, especially preaching, to ensure their perseverance: "[J]ust as it has pleased God to begin this work of grace in us by the proclamation of the gospel, so he perseveres, continues, and completes his work by the hearing and reading of the gospel, by meditation on it, by its exhortations, threats, and promises, and also by the use of the



sacraments” (Art. 14). The role of preaching in the perseverance of believers has implications for preachers and believers alike. For preachers, it serves to remind them of the urgency and seriousness of their calling to preach the Word in season and out of season (2 Tim. 4:2). Such preaching must comfort believers with the assurance of God’s preserving grace, and at the same time warn and admonish the unbelieving and disobedient to turn in repentance and faith to God. For believers, the Canons’ emphasis upon the role of preaching in perseverance serves as a reminder to them to make diligent use of the means of grace. God only preserves his chosen people as they make appropriate use of the preaching of the gospel and the reception of the sacraments. Contrary to the common Arminian complaint that the Reformed view of election is an inducement to carelessness in the Christian life, the Canons accent the responsibility of believers to be disciplined throughout their lives by the ministry of the gospel.

**10. Summary:** My review of the five main points of the Canons provides ample evidence that the authors were particularly anxious to address the implications of these doctrines for the preaching of the gospel. Contrary to the way these doctrines are often handled, the authors of the Canons’ demonstrate throughout that they were motivated by a profound pastoral interest in the way the gospel of Jesus Christ should be joyfully and confidently proclaimed to all lost sinners. This is evident in respect to both forms of the question regarding preaching these doctrines that I identified in the introduction to this essay.

First, when preachers announce the joyful message of the gospel—that God so loved the world that he gave his Son so that whosoever believes in him may not perish but have eternal life—they may do so, *confident* that God will unfailingly draw his chosen people to faith in Christ according to his purpose of election.

Second, the promise of the gospel of Jesus Christ, which must be indiscriminately proclaimed to all lost sinners, does not declare merely that Christ’s work of atonement makes it possible to be saved—if you would only do something to make it effectual to your salvation. No, the gospel promise in Christ is that he is a perfect Savior, whose atoning sacrifice procures and secures the salvation of all those who trust in him. Christ is a Savior who “saves to the uttermost” all who come to him (Heb. 7:25), trusting that he will grant them every spiritual blessing through the ministry of his Spirit.

Third, those who preach the gospel may declare seriously and compassionately to all lost sinners what would please God, namely, that they come to him through faith in Christ. The urgent and sincere summons of God should be extended through preaching that is born of a heartfelt desire and prayer that all lost sinners be saved (Rom. 10:1).

Fourth, gospel preachers may uncompromisingly summon lost sinners to faith and repentance out of the conviction that God is pleased by the ministry of the Spirit of Christ to grant what the gospel call requires to all whom he chooses to save. Even though lost sinners are spiritually dead, incapable of performing any saving good, the preaching of the gospel will be accompanied by a powerful working of the Spirit, who with the Word effectually regenerates and converts lost sinners.

And fifth, contrary to the Arminian accusation that the doctrine of election encourages carelessness or undermines the assurance of salvation, the preaching of the gospel in the power of the Spirit is the means God is pleased to use to preserve his people in a lively faith to the end. In short, gospel preaching, when undergirded by the doctrines of grace, should with joyful confidence call all lost sinners to embrace the sure promise of the gospel. Such preaching is enervated by the conviction that God will unfailingly cause this means to accomplish his saving purposes in Christ.