

# Chapter Three/Four

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

The Canons of Dort consist of five chapters, with each chapter defending an aspect of Reformed doctrine over against the errors taught in the Five Articles of the Remonstrants (as the Arminians were known; see Page 22 for a copy of those Five Articles). In response to their first error, the fathers penned Chapter 1 of the Canons, and in response to their second error they penned Chapter 2. When they set out to answer Article 3 of the Arminian position, however, the fathers at the Synod of Dort realised that they could not answer it without first considering what the Remonstrants wrote in Article 4. For Article 3, read by itself, appears to be scripturally quite correct. But read with the error of Article 4 in mind, the fathers found that Article 3 rattled. To expose properly the error of both articles, the fathers combined their response to the material of Articles 3 and 4 of the Remonstrants into one chapter in the Canons of Dort, designated as “Chapter 3/4” (read: “three four”).

To refresh, Articles 3 and 4 of the Arminian remonstrant read as follows,

3. that man does not have saving faith of himself nor by the power of his own free will, since he in the state of apostasy and sin cannot of and through himself think, will or do any good which is truly good (such as is especially saving faith); but that it is necessary that he be regenerated by God, in Christ, through his Holy Spirit, and renewed in understanding, affections or will, and all powers, in order that he may rightly understand, meditate upon, will and perform that which is truly good, according to the word of Christ, John 15:5, “*Without me ye can do nothing.*”
4. that this grace of God is the commencement, progression and completion of all good, also in so far that regenerate man cannot, apart from this prevenient or assisting, awakening, consequent

and co-operating grace, think, will or do the good or resist any temptation to evil; so that all good works or activities which can be conceived must be ascribed to the grace of God in Christ. But with respect to the mode of this grace, it is not irresistible, since it is written concerning many that they resisted the Holy Spirit, Acts 7 and elsewhere in many places.

Note especially the concluding sentence of Article 4. There's even an appeal to Scripture: *“But with respect to the mode of this grace, it is not irresistible, since it is written concerning many that they resisted the Holy Spirit, in Acts 7 and elsewhere in many places.”* And that's indeed what Stephen said to the Jews in Acts 7:51: *“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit.”*

The difficulty is what the Arminians *meant*. In their system, God by his grace has given people a second chance (recall Figure 2.3), but people are free to reject that new option, and indeed are even able to resist its appeal so that God (in theory) could ultimately end up with no takers for his mercy. The reason people could (and actually do) resist the new option God made available in his grace is because people are not dead in sin; people are instead injured through the fall into sin, but quite alive. The fathers understood that they needed to address this underlying Arminian assumption if they were to expose the errors caught in the thinking of the Remonstrant Articles 3 and 4. So in Chapter 3/4 the fathers deal with “the corruption of man” first (as the heading over this combined article reads), then “his conversion to God,” and finally “the manner in which it occurs.” In the process this chapter evaluates whether it is indeed possible for man to refuse God and his grace.

Before proceeding further into the material of this chapter, I should perhaps mention that the topic now under discussion is anything but irrelevant in our contemporary Western context. Our culture celebrates *choice*, the freedom of the individual to choose to do what he wants, believe what he wants, and even be what he wants to be (provided, of course, that another is not harmed). The assumption behind this celebration of choice is that we'll naturally gravitate to making *good* choices. At the Synod of Dort the fathers learned from Holy Scripture that they needed to challenge the accuracy of that assumption.

## ARTICLE 1

### The Effect of the Fall

*In the beginning man was created in the image of God. He was adorned in his mind with true and wholesome knowledge of his Creator and of all spiritual things; his will and heart were upright, all his affections pure, and therefore man was completely holy.*

*But rebelling against God through the instigation of the devil and through his own free will, he deprived himself of these excellent gifts, and instead brought upon himself blindness, horrible darkness, futility, and perverseness of judgment in his mind; wickedness, rebelliousness, and stubbornness in his will and heart; and impurity in all his affections.*

As the fathers considered what the Arminians were saying about human depravity, they saw need to take the church members back to the Bible's record of man's beginnings in Paradise. What sort of creature was man when God made him? And what did he become as a result of the fall into sin?

### People as God Created Us

The Lord God fashioned the human race "*in our image, according to our likeness*" (Gen. 1:26). The concept of "image" does not mean that people look like God in the sense that we have eyes where God has eyes and arms where God has arms. The term "image of God" instead describes a function in which man represents God and so in his conduct acts as God would act. God's intent in making people in his image was that those who would observe the human race (be they animals or angels or fellow human beings) would then see in a person's conduct something of what God himself is actually like.

The conduct God envisages here comes to expression specifically in the way mankind acts in relation to the world in which man has a place. That's evident from the Lord's next words, for he went on to say, "*Let [people] have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth*" (Gen. 1:26). His manner of exercising dominion over the creatures was to image the way God would rule over the creatures he had made. As God was kind and generous in his care for

bees and beavers, so man was to be kind and generous in his care for bees and beavers. As God was righteous and holy in his governing, so people were to be righteous and holy in their ruling. As God would tolerate no evil in his world, so man was to tolerate no evil in God's world. Being his representatives and so reflecting the characteristics of the divine Ruler was obviously a most exalted and privileged position entrusted to people! Imagine: when other creatures saw Adam and Eve, they saw reflected in these two persons something of what God was like! No wonder David exulted as he did in Psalm 8 when he felt himself dwarfed by the stars of the sky: *"What is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?"* And he added, *"Yet Thou hast made him a little lower than God"* (as the NASB correctly translates). On a scale of 1–10, where God is 10, he's placed man as a 9! Truly, *"you have . . . crowned him with glory and honor"* (Ps. 8:4, 5).

In the world God created he also placed a garden in which the human race was to live. God instructed the man to work the garden and to guard it (Gen. 2:15)—and so it was there that Adam (and Eve with him) was to exercise dominion over God's world. God had equipped Adam and Eve for this task, so that mankind was fully "tuned in" to God and could reflect perfectly what God was really like. This, now, is what we confess in Article 1: *"In the beginning man was created in the image of God."* To enable him to carry out that exalted calling, man *"was adorned in his mind with true and wholesome knowledge of his Creator and of all spiritual things; his will and heart were upright, all his affections pure, and therefore man was completely holy."*

## What the Arminians Said about How God Created Us

The careful Bible reader will note that the Bible from time to time speaks of man's "mind," of man's "heart" and of man's "will" (see passages as Deut. 6:5; Matt. 22:37). The Arminians, now, suggested that these three distinguishable parts in man were loaded with

### *Rejection of Errors, 3/4.2*

**Error:** The spiritual gifts or the good qualities and virtues, such as goodness, holiness, righteousness, cannot have belonged to the will of man when he was first created, and therefore cannot have been separated from his will when he fell.

**Refutation:** This error is contrary to the description of the image of God which the apostle gives, when he connects it with righteousness and holiness, which undoubtedly belong to the will.

different ability and aptitude at man's creation (see sidebars, Error 2 & Error 3). They put it like this:

- In his **mind**, man in Paradise knew very well that if he obeyed God he would live, but if he did wrong he would die—for God had told him so. He had all the data at his fingertips to make the right decision.
- His **heart**, though, already had in Paradise a (little) *appetite* for sin. The argument went like this: God put Adam and Eve to a test by forbidding them to eat the fruit of one particular tree. For that test to be a true test, there had to be at a minimum a craving, be it small but nevertheless real, for that fruit; after all, to be forbidden something you're not interested in surely is not a true test. So it follows, said the Arminians, that God must have made people with at least a tiny desire to do wrong (see Figure 3/4.1).
- Man's **will**, the Arminians continued, was free to decide one way or the other. They held that God had created the will to be neutral, without a bias to the good or to the bad. So man's will could incline his heart to do what the mind knew it should do, namely, leave the forbidden tree alone. All Adam and Eve had to do was use their free will well, and they would never sin.

We need to notice that teaching that man's heart had some appetite for sin and that man's will was neutral did not agree with the Belgic Confession earlier adopted by the churches and loved by the people of the pew (see sidebar, Article 14).

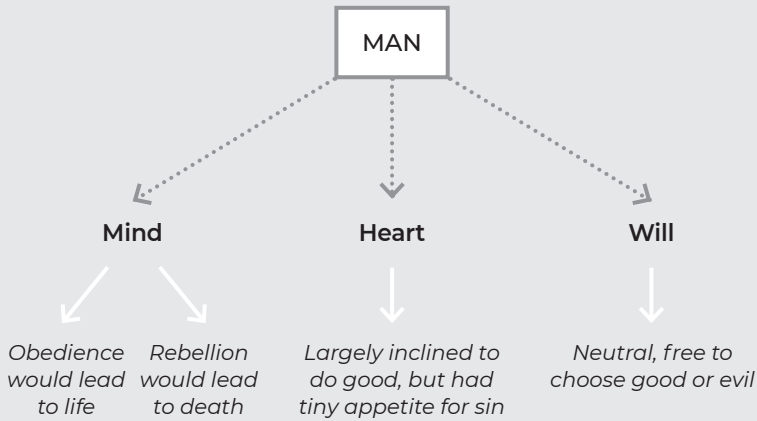
### *Rejection of Errors, 3/4.3*

**Error:** In spiritual death the spiritual gifts are not separate from the will of man, since the will as such has never been corrupted but only hampered by the darkness of the mind and the unruliness of the passions. If these hindrances have been removed, the will can exert its full innate power. The will is of itself able to will and to choose, or else not to will and not to choose, all manner of good which may be presented to it.

**Refutation:** This is an innovation and an error, and tends to extol the powers of the free will, contrary to what the prophet Jeremiah states, *The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick* (Jer 17:9). And the apostle Paul writes: *All of us also lived among them (the sons of disobedience) in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind* (Eph 2:3).

*Arminianism on Paradise*

FIGURE 3/4.1

*Belgic Confession, Article 14*

We believe that God created man of dust from the ground and he made and formed him after his own image and likeness, good, righteous, and holy. His will could conform to the will of God in every respect. But, when man was in this high position, he did not appreciate it nor did he value his excellency. He gave ear to the words of the devil and wilfully subjected himself to sin and consequently to death and the curse. For he transgressed the commandment of life which he had received; by his sin he broke away from God, who was his true life; he corrupted his whole nature. By all this he made himself liable to physical and spiritual death.

Since man became wicked and perverse, corrupt in all his ways, he has lost all his excellent gifts which he had once received from God. He has nothing left but some small traces, which are sufficient to make man inexcusable. For whatever light is in us has changed into darkness, as Scripture teaches us, *the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it* (Jn 1:5); where the apostle John calls mankind darkness.

**Synod's Response**

The fathers in response listed the three aspects of man's being that the Arminians mentioned (without thereby wanting to teach that man is somehow the sum of these three parts, as the Arminians suggested). Their purpose was to correct the Arminian position that any part of man was somehow less than perfect at creation, specifically that the heart had a tiny inclination to sin and that the will was

neutral. Note the very precise words with which Article 1 begins: “*His will and heart were upright.*” Those words leave no room for the thought that Adam or Eve had some appetite for sin on the day God created them.

This insistence is in step with God’s own words on the last day of creation; God “*saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good*” (Gen. 1:31). Solomon understood what that meant: “*God made man upright*” (Eccl. 7:29; see also 1 Tim. 4:4). The people God created had no appetite to sin. Rather, on the day of his creation mankind lived in close communion with God, directed all his inclinations to God, and he was fully and accurately “in tune” with his holy Maker.

## The Result of the Fall into Sin

The effect of the fall into sin was that man was no longer “tuned in” to God so that in turn he was no longer able to image or reflect what God was like. Scripture is emphatic that mankind has indeed lost all his excellent gifts. Consider a few select passages:

- Some ten generations after the fall into sin, holy God evaluated the behaviour of the people who populated his earth. His divine finding was this: “*The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually*” (Gen. 6:5). Please be careful to note that the Lord penetrates beyond outward behaviour to the heart expressed in the behaviour. In fact, the Lord piles up expression upon expression to describe that heart. Man’s heart is “*only evil*” and “*continually*” so; more, the “*thoughts*” driving man’s heart and even the “*intention*” behind the thoughts are only and continually evil. The Lord’s observation draws a very sorry picture of how depraved humanity has become through our fall into sin.
- Through the prophet Jeremiah the Lord gave an equally damning appraisal: “*The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?*” (Jer. 17:9). We understand that terms like “*above all*” and “*desperately*” are speaking to the totality of what the heart is.
- The Holy Spirit moved the apostle Paul to put the matter like this: “*And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our*

*flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind*" (Eph. 2:1–3).

It was passages as these that had prompted the church in the days before the Arminian controversy to adopt the sentiments of Article 14 of the Belgic Confession as scripturally accurate (see sidebar). Or, to put the matter in words we already used in relation to Chapter 1 of the Canons: with our fall into sin we have joined Satan's side and so image what Satan is like (see Chapter 1, Article 1).

The Arminians, though, found all this far too negative and condemning; they preferred terms more friendly to human tastes. Instead of such a judgmental term as "*corrupted*" they chose the more pleasant term "*hampered*"; instead of potent labels as "*wicked and perverse*" they preferred to speak of "*unruliness*" of the passions (see sidebar, Error 3). And I'll readily grant that I prefer those softer terms also. That the will didn't become totally bad, that the will was and remained neutral despite the fall into sin, that the result of the fall is that man is now "*hampered*" in exercising his free will—yes, that's more in line with what I prefer to think of myself. With a dose of will power and perhaps a little help from my friends, I can get it together. . . .

### **Synod's Response**

The fathers at the Synod of Dort, however, clung fervently to the evaluation God himself had given of the human race, and so expanded on the stated position of the church, formulated in Article 14 of the Belgic Confession, with the carefully chosen words of Article 1 of the present Head of Doctrine. Though God had created man to fill an exalted and honourable position in his world, man "*rebell[ed] against God through the instigation of the devil and through his own free will, . . . deprived himself of these excellent gifts, and instead brought upon himself blindness, horrible darkness, futility, and perverseness of judgment in his mind; wickedness, rebelliousness, and stubbornness in his will and heart; and impurity in all his affections.*"

With terms as these, the fathers left no room at all for any smugness or optimism about the condition or ability of the human being. God had created a perfect man, free of any blemish, 100 percent good, but through the fall into sin this "*very good*" creature (Gen. 1:31) became totally corrupt, 100 percent evil. They pointedly rejected the thought that the man God placed in Paradise was only (say) 95 percent good, with a (marginal) appetite to sin. They equally rejected the thought that man did not become



totally evil, but only, say, 95 percent inclined to sin (see Figure 3/4.3). So while the Arminians would use terms as “injured” or “sick” to describe man’s fallen condition, the fathers (and so the Canons) spoke of man as “*dead*” in sin.

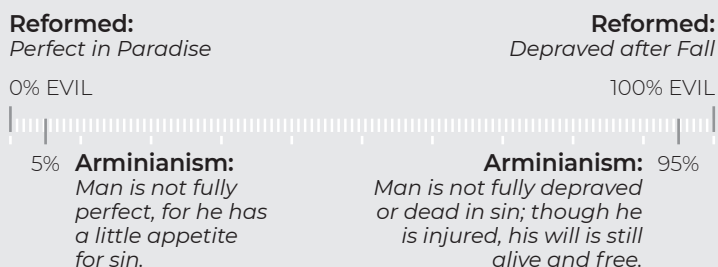
Consider the difference between a lad falling off the house roof and a chap falling off a seventy-three-storey tower (see Figure 3/4.2). The lad falling off a three-storey building will undoubtedly suffer some broken bones and perhaps a punctured lung, but the chap falling off the skyscraper is certain to be quite dead. The lad falling from the roof could call for help and even cooperate with the ambulance attendants in getting onto the stretcher. The chap that fell from the high rise, however, will make no sound and offer no help to the emergency crews; he needs an absolute miracle to go back to work. It’s the difference between injury and death. The fathers insisted that the fall into sin was as damaging in its effects as a fall from the tower, while the Arminians would describe the effect as more akin to a fall from the roof of your house.

We need to be very aware that today’s Western culture embraces—as did the Arminians—the thought that man is not dead in sin, but is instead injured. That understanding is the assumption behind the insistence repeatedly whispered to one and all that you need to listen to your inner voice to realize your true potential—for inside you’re quite alive, and so your inner voice is trustworthy. But the Lord (recall



*Perfection & Depravity*

FIGURE 3/4.3



the texts quoted above) instructs us that the voice within, inclined to wickedness as it is, cannot point us in the right direction. Similarly, we're told that the causes of the evils with which we struggle in our society are to be sought in circumstances outside of us, perhaps in poor education, or in a deprived home background, or in scars received from being bullied, etc. But the unspoken assumption is again that the underlying cause of our ills lies not in our hearts, but in circumstances outside of us. Given that analysis, it follows that our society does not see repentance and regeneration as the necessary solution to our problems (but sees instead better education, or better distribution of wealth, or better counselling, etc. as the needed solution). It's the old thinking of the Arminians dressed in a modern jacket (see sidebar, Error 4).

And that, of course, points up how relevant the Canons of Dort still are in today's climate.

*Rejection of Errors, 3/4.4*

**Error:** The unregenerate man is not really or totally dead in sins, or deprived of all powers unto spiritual good. He can yet hunger and thirst after righteousness and life, and offer the sacrifice of a contrite and broken spirit which is pleasing to God.

**Refutation:** These things are in conflict with the clear testimonies of Scripture: *You were dead in the trespasses and sins* (Eph 2:1; cf. 2:5). *And every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually* (Gen 6:5 and 8:21). Moreover, only the regenerate and those who are called blessed hunger and thirst after deliverance from misery and after life, and offer to God the sacrifice of a broken spirit.

## ARTICLE 2

### The Spread of Corruption

*Since after the fall man became corrupt, he as a corrupt father brought forth corrupt children. Thus the corruption has spread from Adam to all his descendants, with the exception of Christ alone, not by imitation, as the Pelagians of old maintained, but by the propagation of a perverted nature, according to the righteous judgment of God.*

In the years before the Synod of Dort, the people in the pews of the churches of the Netherlands heard from their pulpits that man is not totally dead in sin through the fall in Paradise, but injured (see Error 4 quoted in the sidebar above). Instead, they were taught that the reason people commit sin is simply because they follow the poor example of others.

To set straight church members' thinking on the subject, the fathers saw a need to include the material contained in Article 2. It's one thing to say with Article 1 that Adam in Paradise fell into sin and so became corrupt. What, however, has that got to do with today's people? Why do today's people hurt one another? Article 2 addresses that question. Today's people do wrong, it confesses, because corrupt fathers bring forth corrupt children.

### Corrupt

That's biblical. "*When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. . . . When Adam had lived 130 years, he fathered a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth*" (Gen. 5:1, 3). It strikes us as we read the passage that father and son are both created in the likeness of another, Adam "*in the likeness of God*" and Seth in the likeness of his father Adam. As Adam reflected what God was like, so Seth reflected what Adam was like. Of course, between Adam's creation and Seth's birth was the fall into sin. Adam had been created "*very good*" (Gen. 1:31) so that he was able to image what holy God was like. As a result of his fall, however, he no longer imaged what God was like, but reflected instead what God's enemy the devil was like (see John 8:44; Eph. 2:2). So Adam's son Seth was not born "*very good*," but was born sinful. In his sinfulness he imaged his sinful father, and so reflected Adam's depravity and corruption and evil. Adam "*as a corrupt father brought forth corrupt children.*"

This pattern flowed from one generation to the next down through the centuries. Seth's son Enosh imaged the sinfulness of his father, and so on, all the way to us who are alive today; each of us images the sinfulness of our fathers, and the children we bear today possess our sinfulness in turn and image it. This is the tragedy of every birth: the newborn will invariably image the parents' sinfulness. It's something we can all observe; children need to be taught so much, but they need no instruction in how to do wrong. In fact, the Lord emphatically taught this sad reality to his people:

After the opening of the tabernacle in the desert, the Lord gave instruction about what a new mother was to do after she had given birth to a child. Said the Lord, "*When the days of her purifying are completed, whether for a son or for a daughter, she shall bring to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting a lamb a year old for a burnt offering, and a pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering*" (Lev. 12:6). The burnt offering was a pledge that she would as mother offer her whole being to the Lord's service in an effort to raise this newborn as a covenant child ought to be raised. But why the sin offering? The point is not that giving birth to a child was a sin, for the Lord had instructed the human race to "*be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth*" (Gen. 1:28)—so that in turn Solomon could explicitly say, "*Children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward*" (Ps. 127:3). Rather, the sad fact is that this mother brought another *sinful* child into the Father's creation. That needs atonement, and explains the sin offering. Yet it wasn't that the mother somehow had more guilt here than the father, for inasmuch as the mothers in Israel were invariably part of a family it was the father and husband who commonly contributed both the lamb for the burnt offering as well as the bird for the sin offering.

- David plainly confesses concerning himself, "*Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me*" (Ps. 51:5). David's point is not that his conception was itself sinful, but that sin was present *within him* right from the moment he began to exist.
- Job said in relation to people, "*Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean?*" (Job 14:4), and immediately supplies this answer: "*There is not one.*" Sinful man is unclean, and so his offspring is invariably sinful and unclean also.

This material is a far cry from what was doing the rounds in The Netherlands before the Synod of Dort. So the fathers summed up for the people of the pew what Scripture taught them to believe concerning their newborn child: every child born to you is corrupt from the start.

No, that message wasn't new. The *Form for the Baptism of Infants*, used in Reformed churches since 1568 (and unbrokenly since then), had put it plainly, "*We and our children are conceived and born in sin and are therefore by nature children of wrath.*"<sup>4</sup> In their Belgic Confession of 1561, the churches repeated after God in their own words what they learned from Scripture on the point: "*Original sin . . . is a corruption of the entire nature of man and a hereditary evil which infects even infants in their mother's womb*" (see sidebar, Article 15).

We might consider this a message bound to discourage parents from receiving children or investing in their upbringing. But even as the Lord tells us of the tragic results of our fall into sin, and so of the difficulties one generation encounters in the training of the next, he also tells us the good news of what he did about this problem. For in the birth of his only Son to the virgin Mary, the Lord in his grace sovereignly broke that tragic cycle of corrupt parents bringing forth corrupt children. Because of the unfathomable work of the Holy Spirit upon the virgin Mary, God's only Son, though born to a sinful mother, did not "inherit" her sinfulness. Article 2 puts it like this: "*Thus the corruption has spread from Adam to all his descendants, with the exception of Christ alone.*" The angel Gabriel told Mary, "*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be*

### *Belgic Confession, Article 15*

We believe that by the disobedience of Adam original sin has spread throughout the whole human race. It is a corruption of the entire nature of man and a hereditary evil which infects even infants in their mother's womb. As a root it produces in man all sorts of sin. It is, therefore, so vile and abominable in the sight of God that it is sufficient to condemn the human race. It is not abolished nor eradicated even by baptism, for sin continually streams forth like water welling up from this woeful source. Yet, in spite of all this, original sin is not imputed to the children of God to their condemnation but by his grace and mercy is forgiven them. This does not mean that the believers may sleep peacefully in their sin, but that the awareness of this corruption may make them often groan as they eagerly wait to be delivered from this body of death.

In this regard we reject the error of the Pelagians, who say that this sin is only a matter of imitation.

<sup>4</sup> On the history and content of this form, see my *The Privilege of Parenting: A Biblical Explanation of the Form for the Baptism of Infants*, Winnipeg: Premier Printing, 2011.

*born will be called holy—the Son of God*” (Luke 1:35). Note how the angel describes the promised child as “*holy*,” one separated from sin. Because Mary’s child was born without sin he was able one day to pay for sin, including the sin that the children we bring into God’s world are sinners (contrary to God’s design in the beginning), and including too the sins parents and children commit in their sin-filled interaction together. How wonderful God’s intervention in the cycle of a sinful generation bringing forth another sinful generation!

## Were We in Paradise?

The question arises whether it’s really fair that children are born corrupt and sinful. After all, our children (and it’s true for today’s adults as well) were not present in Paradise when Adam and Eve made their bad decision. Should we, then, suffer the tragic consequences of what they did?

Note, then, the concluding phrase of Article 2: “*The corruption has spread from Adam to all his descendants . . . by the propagation of a vicious nature, according to the righteous judgment of God.*” Specifically with the closing phrase of that sentence, the fathers at the Synod of Dort wanted to assure the parents of their day that God was in fact not at all unfair in letting children be sinful—though they are born centuries after Adam’s fall. For God says in Scripture, “*Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned*” (Rom. 5:12). Note particularly those last three words: “*because all sinned.*” Here the Holy Spirit teaches us that every person ever born already sinned in Paradise, including Adam, Jeremiah, Nathaniel, Oliver Cromwell, King George, . . . and me. If that’s so, the fact that I am corrupt is my own fault; through my rebellion in Paradise I brought depravity upon myself—“*according to the righteous judgment of God.*”

How does one explain that every person alive today—to say nothing of those who died over the centuries—already sinned so many thousand years ago in Paradise? A couple of possible explanations might assist us.

## The realist approach

The author to the Hebrews recalls for his readers’ instruction the episode of Genesis 14, when Abraham gave Melchizedek a tithe (that’s 10 percent) of the booty he had captured from the four kings in battle. He then goes on to argue that in effect the Levites paid tithes to Melchizedek through Abraham. “*One might even say that Levi himself, who receives*

*tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, for he was still in the loins of his ancestor when Melchizedek met him*" (Heb. 7:9, 10). The Realist explanation for every person's involvement in the fall in Paradise holds that as Levi paid tithes to Melchizedek through his being present in Abraham's loins (though born years later), so we were present in the loins of Adam when he sinned and so we partook in that act of sinning. Think what we will of that approach, but at a minimum it does provide a way to grasp how we actually sinned in Paradise so long ago.

## The federalist approach

We're familiar with the consequences of a head of state declaring war on another sovereign country. His declaration obviously does not put only the president (or king, or prime minister, as the case might be) at war with the neighbouring country, but puts the entire population of his country in a state of war with the neighbour—with every resident of his country as fair game to the enemy's weaponry. If we now see Adam as the head of the human race, it would follow that whatever decisions he made would affect not just himself personally but also all who would come after him. Again, this approach does not answer all questions on the topic, but it also helps us understand somewhat better that God would hold us all responsible for the fall into sin.

## All Sinned

We need not choose between these two suggested approaches (or any other, for that matter), for the Lord has not revealed to us specifically how we were present when the fall into sin occurred. It is enough for us to note that *God says* we all sinned—and leave it there.

Then again—and this is essential—the Holy Spirit does add in the chapter following his puzzling statement (that "*all sinned*," Rom. 5:12) that we were crucified when Christ was crucified on Calvary, we died when Christ died, and we arose when Christ arose (Rom. 6:3–6). But there's the same question again: how were we

### *Rejection of Errors, 3/4.1*

**Error:** Properly speaking, it cannot be said that original sin as such is sufficient to condemn the whole human race or to deserve temporal and eternal punishment.

**Refutation:** This contradicts the words of the apostle when he declares: *sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned* (Rom 5:12). And: *The judgement following one trespass brought condemnation* (Rom 5:16). Also: *For the wages of sin is death* (Rom 6:23).

actually present on Good Friday and on Easter Sunday? I don't know. And at the end of the day it doesn't really matter; it is enough that the Lord says that I was present and so—glorious gospel!—I share in Christ's victory. That's my salvation, and I praise him for it.

Whose responsibility is it, then, that I am corrupt? It will not do to blame Adam for my depravity. No, the Lord says that I am sinful because *I fell*. Every man is punished for his own transgressions. The Arminians may insist to the contrary (see sidebar, Error 1), but the Lord says that that's how it is. So, in humble recognition of my limited understanding and the Lord's vastly superior knowledge of the facts, I say with the fathers at the Synod of Dort, "*Thus the corruption has spread from Adam to all his descendants, with the exception of Christ alone, . . . according to the righteous judgment of God.*"

## ARTICLE 3

### Man's Total Inability

*Therefore all men are conceived in sin and are born as children of wrath, incapable of any saving good, inclined to evil, dead in sins, and slaves of sin. And without the grace of the regenerating Holy Spirit they neither will nor can return to God, reform their depraved nature, or prepare themselves for its reformation.*

As we saw above, the Arminians held that "*the unregenerate man is not really or totally dead in sins, or deprived of all powers unto spiritual good*" (see Error 4, quoted above). We've also already considered the biblical evidence insisting that people indeed are totally corrupt; recall the texts Genesis 6:5, Jeremiah 17:9, and Ephesians 2:1–3 in Article 1. That leads to the next question: Can a corrupt person contribute anything pleasing to God? Can, for example, a fallen person actually ask God for help, let alone do it in such a way that God is moved to respond positively?

Those who hold that people are not dead in sin but only (badly) injured would argue that people *can* do things that move God to a positive response. The Arminians held, for example, that fallen man can "*hunger and thirst after righteousness and life, and offer the sacrifice of a contrite and broken spirit which is pleasing to God*" (see again Error 4, quoted above). The texts just mentioned teach, however, that people are not simply injured through the fall (be it badly), but dead in sin. And the dead, of course, do nothing.

Jesus once used a graphic word picture to illustrate that fallen man can do nothing to move himself toward God or get himself into God's good



books. He told the Jews, “*No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him*” (John 6:44). The word “*draws*” in this passage means literally “to drag”—as the net full of fish in John 21:6 is “*hauled*” out of the water (the same word is used). We realize that the net full of fish did not cooperate with the disciples tugging at the net, but by its very weight in fact resisted the disciples’ work. That is the point of Jesus’ words; people do not cooperate with the Father in coming to Jesus, but only resist. In another place Jesus repeated the same word picture, this time concerning himself: “*And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself*” (John 12:32). Jesus’ point was that people will not come to Jesus or call out to the crucified and triumphant Christ to save them, but Christ Jesus will need to *drag* them to himself, without their cooperation or permission. A graphic example is the apostle Paul; while he was aggressively persecuting those who believed in Christ crucified, the ascended Saviour forcefully grabbed him by the scruff of his neck, so to speak, and compelled him to believe and become a preacher of the gospel (see Acts 9:1–6).

The inevitable lesson of that word picture is that we make no contribution whatsoever that somehow attracts God’s merciful attention. That’s why Article 3 ends with the statement, “*And without the grace of the regenerating Holy Spirit they neither will nor can return to God, reform their depraved nature, or prepare themselves for its reformation.*” It’s what the church had confessed for years in Lord’s Day 3 of the Heidelberg Catechism (see sidebar). In the words of the Dutch farmhand Klaas Kuipenga to his minister, Rev. deCock, before the Secession of 1834: “If I had to add even one sigh to my salvation, I would be forever lost.”

### Lord’s Day 3

#### **Did God, then, create man so wicked and perverse?**

No, on the contrary, God created man good and in his image, that is, in true righteousness and holiness, so that he might rightly know God his Creator, heartily love him, and live with him in eternal blessedness to praise and glorify him.

#### **From where, then, did man’s depraved nature come?**

From the fall and disobedience of our first parents, Adam and Eve, in Paradise, for there our nature became so corrupt that we are all conceived and born in sin.

#### **But are we so corrupt that we are totally unable to do any good and inclined to all evil?**

Yes, unless we are regenerated by the Spirit of God.

As to the details of the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, we shall come back to that in subsequent articles of Chapter 3/4.

## Who is God?

What kind of a God is my God? He chooses to eternal life persons who are dead in sin as a result of their own deliberate rebellion. So shattered and broken are they from their fall (as it were, from a seventy-three-storey high-rise) that they have no life in them, are far from attractive, cannot call out for help in any way, and cannot cooperate with any assistance God might provide. That he nevertheless has such mercy on such broken wretches as to redeem them and give them life forever—how revealing that is of his boundless mercy!

That in turn is why praise and glory are rightly his alone. In this world beset by folk who seek what's in it for themselves, wherein acts of kindness are motivated by what I can get out of it, this God has acted and still acts so differently; he has mercy on those who have nothing to offer. In truth, *“From him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen”* (Rom. 11:36).

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## Questions for Discussion:

1. The fall into sin had a profound effect on the human race.
  - a. What does the Bible mean with its phrase “image of God”? Is it correct to say that every person alive today is made in the image of God? Explain your answer.
  - b. While in Paradise, was there any sin in man's being? What's the biblical evidence? What did the Arminians teach on this point? Show how their teaching has echoes in today's modern Western thinking.
  - c. Article 1 makes reference to man's mind, heart, and will. Do you think it acceptable to divide people's “inner” into parts? Why did the fathers do it?
  - d. The Arminians preferred to speak of mankind (after the fall) being “injured” instead of being “dead.” Which of those two terms appeals most to you? Explain your answer.
  - e. How reliable do you think your emotions are as a gauge for what you ought to do? Consider this scenario: A young man told his father,

“I feel that God wants me to be a pilot.” Do you think this father ought to respect what his son feels and therefore support him in his venture? Explain your answer.

2. Many generations have been born after the fall into sin.
  - a. How come the generations after the fall (including today’s) are depraved? What was the Arminian explanation? Do you have sympathy for the Arminian position? Why?
  - b. Why is childbirth among Christians a joyful event? In relation to this topic, read Leviticus 12 and discuss what the Lord taught Israel in this chapter about a child’s sinfulness. Given that Jesus was born without sin, why was the sacrifice required by Leviticus 12 made in relation to him (Luke 2:22)?
  - c. How many children would you wish to have? Is over-population of our planet (or country) a concern to you? Should it be? Explain your answer.
  - d. The Lord uses both childbirth (Gen. 1:28) and mission work (Matt. 28:19, 20) in his church-gathering work. Which of the two, in your opinion, ought to have the stronger emphasis? Justify your answer scripturally.
3. Every person is dead in sin and so unable to do any good.
  - a. What does John 6:44 teach us about our ability to contribute to our salvation? Are you comfortable with this teaching? Why or why not?
  - b. If you can’t contribute to your salvation, how would you go about obtaining salvation?

## ARTICLE 4

**The Inadequacy of the Light of Nature**

*To be sure, there is left in man after the fall, some light of nature, whereby he retains some notions about God, about natural things, and about the difference between what is honourable and shameful, and shows some regard for virtue and outward order. But so far is he from arriving at the saving knowledge of God and true conversion through this light of nature that he does not even use it properly in natural and civil matters. Rather, whatever this light may be, man wholly pollutes it in various ways and suppresses it by his wickedness. In doing so, he renders himself without excuse before God.*

Can a jungle tribe that has never heard of Jesus Christ find their way to God? The Arminians answered the question with yes, for—they said—people were only injured through the fall into sin and did not become spiritually dead, and so were still able to call out for help. They added: in that injured condition people still have a certain *something* deep inside themselves (they called it the “light of nature”), which, if they used it well, would enable them to free themselves from the depths to which they have fallen and reach out to God. See Error 5, printed in the sidebar, for the Arminian position.

In Article 4, now, the fathers evaluate this “light of nature” about which the Arminians were speaking, and

*Rejection of Errors, 3/4.5*

**Error:** The corrupt and natural man can so well use the common grace (which for the Arminians is the light of nature), or the gifts still left him after the fall, that he can gradually gain by their good use a greater, that is, the evangelical or saving grace, and salvation itself. In this way God on his part shows himself ready to reveal Christ to all men, since he administers to all sufficiently and efficaciously the means necessary for the knowledge of Christ, for faith and repentance.

**Refutation:** Not only the experience of all ages but also Scripture testifies that this is untrue. *He declares his word to Jacob, his statutes and rules to Israel. He has not dealt thus with any other nation; they do not know his rules* (Ps 147:19, 20). *In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways* (Acts 14:16). And Paul and his companions were *forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them* (Acts 16:6, 7).

insist that this light is useless in finding God. We'll come in a moment to why this light is useless. It's first important to note that the fathers did not define what this light of nature actually might be. That's because the term is not used in the Bible at all, nor did it have a recognized place in Christian thinking throughout the centuries of church history. The fathers encountered the term in the writings of the Arminians, and simply used it as they received it. So they could write toward the end of the article, "*whatever this light may be.*" Article 4 does not want to argue for or against the existence of a light of nature, but wants to undercut the Arminians' insistence that there is something in nature that somehow *benefits* fallen man so that with its assistance people can "*arrive at the saving knowledge of God and true conversion.*"

## Useless

The fathers readily confessed that God in the beginning had created man in his image and so also given to man the ability to image God. With the fall into sin, the human race lost this privileged ability (though the mandate to image God remained). No longer could we be kind as God was kind, gracious as God was gracious, hate sin as God hated sin, execute justice as God executes justice, etc. Instead, fallen people reflected what Satan was like (Chap 3/4, Article 1).

This loss did not mean, however, that people lost their humanity altogether, so that in our fallen state we became animals or that we always commit the worst of atrocities imaginable. There is a something—call it a "light of nature," if you will—"*whereby he retains some notions about God, about natural things, and about the difference between what is honourable and shameful, and shows some regard for virtue and outward order.*" The wreckage of a ship floating on the sea is convincing evidence that once there was a sea-worthy ship—though the wreckage implies it's certainly not a ship anymore. Similarly, some evidence remains in people of what mankind used to be. The question of the fathers was therefore: can we use this evidence—that people still look like people and not like animals, and that people still retain a measure of decency within themselves—to work our way into God's favour again, to come to faith? Does the wreckage of our ship still incline God to hire us to carry cargo to yonder port? Whereas the Arminians said this was possible, the fathers insisted it was not so. That's because they learned from Scripture that our ship is not just damaged by the fall (and so still somehow useable), but our ship has been totally blown to bits. In biblical language, man is dead, totally depraved (see Articles 1-3)—and God will not use the dead to do the work of the living.

To change the analogy: a blind man sitting in a totally dark room can see nothing. If one were to turn the lights on in that room (call it the light of nature, if you wish), the man in question would still not see anything—because he is blind. To benefit from the light, he needs his eyes repaired. So it is with fallen humanity. Until his eyes are repaired (we'll speak about this regeneration later), all the light in the world is useless to him.

A number of passages from Holy Scripture taught the fathers the point they made in Article 4. Consider this sampling:

- Paul reminds the Christians of Rome that God's "*invisible attributes, namely his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made.*" This reality, he continues, leaves his readers' fellow Romans (and indeed all people) "*without excuse.*" To stay with our analogy: the lights are certainly on. Yet Paul continues: "*Although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened*" (Rom. 1:20, 21). Notice: people did not respond to the evidence written clearly in creation because of internal darkness. People are blind, and so do not read the evidence staring at them in such a way as to arrive at some saving knowledge of God. Instead, people "*suppress the truth*" (1:18), deny or ignore or interpret away the evidence, and deny him.
- Elsewhere the apostle explains that "*the natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned*" (1 Cor. 2:14). Again, irrespective of whether a light of nature is real or not, Paul's point is that people-by-themselves do not tune in to the things of God.
- Peter spent many months under Jesus' instruction, and witnessed his many signs and miracles. You'd think that all this instruction would surely sharpen whatever light of nature there might be in Peter so that he would think and speak in step with Jesus' instruction. But when Jesus told his disciples that he would soon be arrested, scorned, rejected, and crucified (and arise on the third day), "*Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you!'*" Jesus' response is telling: he "*turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan!'*" (Matt. 16:22, 23). Surely, if there were within humanity a certain something by which we can

reach out to God, Peter of all people—advantaged as he was with his time with Jesus—would have used it. But he didn't. That he spoke as a follower of Satan surely makes clear that no light of nature could incline Peter to a saving knowledge of God and true conversion.

## Conclusion

On the basis of texts as these, the fathers saw need to point out to the people of the pew that what the Arminians taught—there's something left in you that helps you find your way to God—does not work in real life. Fallen people are blind, and so cannot use a light of nature—*“whatever this light may be”*—to find their way back to God. It's a sharp and harsh criticism of any people or culture that embraces the thought that your inner compass is reliable.

## Civil Matters?

The fathers added to their rejection of the Arminian optimism about a person's inner compass this further statement: *“But so far is he from arriving at the saving knowledge of God and true conversion through this light of nature that he does not even use it properly in natural and civil matters.”* The reference to natural and civil matters raises eyebrows. Are people not able to organize a decently civil society? Are there not ample examples among pagan peoples where those who did not know God nevertheless operate(d) an enviable civilization complete with mutual care and fairness? Conversely, does rot not linger in every Christian context, even among those who by faith do not suppress the evidence of God's reality?

This publication is not the place to comb through the various civilizations that have existed or still do exist in this world. Instead, let me mention that the fathers at the Synod of Dort some four hundred years ago already recognized—as they put it in the opening line of Article 4—that *“there is left in man after the fall some light of nature whereby he retains some notions about . . . the difference between what is honourable and shameful, and shows some regard for virtue and outward order.”* Sinful Christians, then, can most certainly learn things from pagan cultures. But the question of *why* a particular behaviour is honourable or shameful cannot receive an ultimate answer without knowing the God who ordained that some specific behaviour is praiseworthy or disgraceful. Why may I not kill my neighbour or assault a child? Why may I not steal his possessions or speak falsely? Why does life exist and what's my purpose in life? Why should I care for the creatures who share the acreage upon which I live?

Whatever light of nature there is would point us to the Creator and Upholder (and hence Redeemer) of life, the God who makes sense of why things are as they are, who explains how things ought to be and why. Without the mighty working of this God in their hearts, even the peoples of decent civilizations cannot find ultimate answers to such vexing questions. And inasmuch as cultural habits are the outward expression of a society's inner convictions, a failure to know God leads to practices inconsistent with God's holy intent. Hence the father's statement in Article 4: fallen man "*does not use [this light of nature] properly in natural and civil matters.*"

## ARTICLE 5

### The Inadequacy of the Law

*What holds for the light of nature also applies to the Ten Commandments, given by God through Moses particularly to the Jews. For though it reveals the greatness of sin, and more and more convicts man of his guilt, yet it neither points out a remedy nor gives him power to rise out of this misery. Rather, weakened by the flesh, it leaves the transgressor under the curse. Man cannot, therefore, through the law obtain saving grace.*

If, then, as Article 4 had insisted, you cannot use the light of nature to somehow reach out to God and bridge the distance between him and us, can you use obedience to the Ten Commandments to reach God? The Arminians answered that question with a clear "yes" (see sidebar, Error 3). With their insistence that the will of man was not "*corrupted*" through the fall into sin, but "*only hampered*

#### *Rejection of Errors, 3/4.3*

**Error:** In spiritual death the spiritual gifts are not separate from the will of man, since the will as such has never been corrupted but only hampered by the darkness of the mind and the unruliness of the passions. If these hindrances have been removed, the will can exert its full innate power. The will is of itself able to will and to choose, or else not to will and not to choose, all manner of good which may be presented to it.

**Refutation:** This is an innovation and an error, and tends to extol the powers of the free will, contrary to what the prophet Jeremiah states, *The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick* (Jer 17:9). And the apostle Paul writes: *All of us also lived among them (the sons of disobedience) in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and mind* (Eph 2:3).



by the darkness of the mind and the unruliness of the passions,” it is clear that they would be sympathetic to those who held that giving a person the right training and education would make him able to do what’s right in such a way as to please God. That would include instruction in the Ten Commandments and encouragement to obey them.

The question is whether the Bible supports this view. Given today’s emphasis on education and training, the question is distinctly relevant. Reflect, then, on what these passages teach on this point:

- Paul reminds the Christians of Rome about the kind of life he and they alike had lived before they had come to know Christ. He says, “*For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death*” (Rom. 7:5). Paul himself certainly knew the law of God, and the pagans of Rome could know too what was right and wrong. Yet the law did not end up goading the Romans to reach out to God, to do good or to please him—and did not stimulate Paul to do it rightly either. In fact, in his zeal to obey the law Paul ended up persecuting Jesus Christ himself (see Acts 9:4).
- Some verses later Paul writes, “*What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin.*” Instead of driving us to God, says Paul, the law makes plain to us what sin is. How so? Paul continues, “*For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet.’”* “*When the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me*” (Rom. 7:7, 9–11). “Deceived,” “killed”: those are strong words! The law is not our friend leading us gently to God; the law is our enemy exposing our corruption. Well did the fathers say in Article 5 that the law “*reveals the greatness of sin, and more and more convicts man of his guilt,*” and later, “*it leaves the transgressor under the curse.*” In truth, the law is no solution for our total depravity, and our best effort to obey the law provides us with no hope of salvation.
- Paul hasn’t yet completed his argument. A chapter later he writes, “*God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh*” (Rom. 8:3). Paul’s point is not that the law was itself imperfect or somehow unable to accomplish its divine

purpose; his point is rather that humanity by the fall into sin lost their God-given ability to obey the law, so that in turn the law is of no advantage to him in working his way back into God's favour. That's why the fathers wrote that the law does not give man "power to rise out of this misery. Rather, weakened by the flesh, it leaves the transgressor under the curse. Man cannot, therefore, through the law obtain saving grace."

- Paul said something similar to the Galatians. "For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them'" (Gal. 3:10). If one would seek access to God via the law, he must obey it *perfectly*, and Paul insists that sinful man cannot do that.

Obviously, then, no person can use his obedience to the law, or his doing the right thing, to reach out successfully to God. No matter how well trained we are in the finer points of life's etiquette, and no matter how much we try to please the Almighty, any such effort is bound to fail. Instead of helping us find the way to God, the Ten Commandments serve only to convict us of our sin and guilt. This is not new; this is the position the church had earlier embraced in Lord's Day 2 of the Heidelberg Catechism (see sidebar).

It follows, of course, that *any* method we happen upon as a means to bridge the distance between ourselves and God—be it ritual or meditation or sacrifices or effort of whatever sort—is invariably doomed to fail. "With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall

### Lord's Day 2

#### **From where do you know your sins and misery?**

From the law of God.

#### **What does God's law require of us?**

Christ teaches us this in a summary in Matthew 22: *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.*

This is the great and first commandment.

And a second is like it: *You shall love your neighbour as yourself.*

On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.

#### **Can you keep all this perfectly?**

No, I am inclined by nature to hate God and my neighbour.

*I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" (Micah 6:6, 7).*

## ARTICLE 6

### The Need for the Gospel

*What, therefore, neither the light of nature nor the law can do, God performs by the power of the Holy Spirit through the word or ministry of reconciliation, which is the gospel of the Messiah, by which it has pleased God to save men who believe, both under the old and under the new dispensation.*

Human depravity is so great that using a so-called “*light of nature*” cannot bring us to God in any way, and obedience to the Ten Commandments cannot either. How, then, can the folk of today’s population centres connect with God, let alone be reconciled to him? In Article 6 the fathers point to *God’s* work. God reaches out to broken people with his gospel, proclaiming how he has redeemed sinners from the perdition into which each person had thrown himself. “*What, therefore, neither the light of nature nor the law can do, God performs.*”

### The Source of Faith

What does God do? God graciously works in human hearts the *faith* needed to be righteous before God. Yet he does not work faith through making people do push-ups or having them visit a sacred tree or making them eat Doritos. Instead, God works this faith “*by the power of the Holy Spirit.*” That’s to say that people do not so much make a point of believing as it is the Lord through his Spirit who causes a person to believe. The Holy Spirit in turn uses a specific tool to generate faith, and his tool of choice is “*the word or ministry of reconciliation, which is the gospel of the Messiah.*” As we use a hammer to place a nail in a plank, so the Holy Spirit uses the ministry of the Word to work faith in our dead hearts.

The fathers gained this conviction from what the Holy Spirit had himself revealed in the Bible. They drew from passages as these:

- Paul told the Christians of Rome that no one can escape the righteous judgment of God unless he believes the gospel of Jesus Christ. That observation led him to ask these questions: “*And how*

*are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?”* Then he comes to this conclusion: *“So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ”* (Rom. 10:14, 17).

- The Holy Spirit, though, does not simply bring the Word to a particular hearer, and then leave the hearer to receive or absorb the Word as he would. Fallen people are dead (in sin), and we know well that dead people do not respond to talk, even if it’s preaching. That’s why Paul reminded the Thessalonian Christians that *“our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit”* (1 Thess. 1:5). Elsewhere Paul speaks about *“the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God”* (Eph. 6:17). A sword on a table is harmless, but in the hands of a trained soldier it becomes deadly effective. Similarly, the Word of God on its own accomplishes nothing, but when the Spirit of God manages the Word it becomes effective to accomplish surprising things. A person dead in sin can, through the sword of the Word, come to believe the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This material was not new to the godly addressed by the fathers at the Synod of Dort. As is clear from the sidebar, the Heidelberg Catechism had already made this same confession in Lord’s Days 7 and 25. Had the Arminians but stayed with the historic confessions of the church, they would have spared the congregations much unhappiness.

*Lord’s Day 7.21*

**What is true faith?**

True faith is a sure knowledge whereby I accept as true all that God has revealed to us in his Word.

At the same time it is a firm confidence that not only to others, but also to me, God has granted forgiveness of sins, everlasting righteousness, and salvation, out of mere grace, only for the sake of Christ’s merits.

This faith the Holy Spirit works in my heart by the gospel.

*Lord’s Day 25.65*

**Since then faith alone makes us share in Christ and all his benefits, where does this faith come from?**

From the Holy Spirit, who works it in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel, and strengthens it by the use of the sacraments.

## No Change Here

At the end of Article 6 the fathers yet add that God's way of saving sinners is the same today as it was in the Old Testament. Abraham, Moses, Jeremiah, and all the other people of God in the Old Testament dispensation could be reconciled to God only by faith. Similarly, their faith came only through the Word of God as the Holy Spirit worked with it in their Old Testament hearts. That, of course, is the same for the saints of the New Testament dispensation, be they Paul or Peter, Augustine or Calvin, you or me. The reason why the fathers mentioned this matter yet is because the Arminians insisted that the saints of the Old Testament could be saved through obedience to the law (while we of the New are saved by faith)—and that's an impression that still does its rounds today. It's simply not what the Scriptures teach, though. When God, for example, promised Abram descendants as numerous as the stars in heaven, he did so through *speaking*. Scripture records Abram's response: "*He believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness*" (Gen. 15:6). Paul appeals to this very passage in Romans 4 to drive home that his (New Testament) readers in Rome are justified *by faith*. Always this faith is God's gift: "*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God*" (Eph. 2:8).

What the fathers wished to make clear so many years ago to those who heard Arminian preaching week by week was that salvation is not an achievement of man, but a sovereign deed of God. Despite today's inflated evaluations of human ability, we remain dependent on God's gracious and mighty work alone to come to faith.

## ARTICLE 7

### Why the Gospel Is Sent to Some and Not to Others

*Under the old dispensation God revealed this mystery of his will to few. Under the new dispensation, however, he took the distinction between the peoples away and revealed it to a larger number. The cause of this very distribution of the gospel is not to be ascribed to the worthiness of one people above another, nor to the better use of the light of nature, but to the sovereign good pleasure and undeserved love of God. Therefore we to whom so great a grace is granted, beyond and contrary to all we deserve, ought to acknowledge it with a humble and grateful heart. But as*

*regards others to whom this grace is not given, we ought with the apostle to adore the severity and righteousness of the judgments of God but by no means inquisitively to pry into them.*

If God works the faith that is needed for salvation by means of his Word, then why doesn't he cause his Word to go to all people everywhere? Good question indeed, and one on our minds too!

The Arminians agreed that in the Old Testament God revealed himself only to the single nation of Israel. That's clear from the fact that the Old Testament is exclusively about the people of Israel. Psalm 147:19, 20 even says, "*He declares his word to Jacob, his statutes and his rules to Israel. He has not dealt thus with any other nation; they do not know his rules. Praise the LORD!*"

In the New Testament the circle was broadened. Before his ascension into heaven Jesus told his disciples to "*go therefore and make disciples of all nations*" (Matt. 28:19). As a result, the apostles were Jesus' "*witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth*" (Acts 1:8). Yes, God sends his gospel to many peoples.

But not to everybody. Paul and his companions "*went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia,*" but they were "*forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia*" (Acts 16:6). Similarly, "*when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them*" (Acts 16:7). Why, we wonder, did God not permit his Word to be preached in Asia or in Bithynia (both in northern present-day Turkey)? The Arminians explained that this was because some people are better than others, and are hence more worthy of receiving the gospel (see sidebar, Error 1.9). That would

### *Rejection of Errors, 1.9*

**Error:** God sends the gospel to one people rather than to another not merely and solely because of the good pleasure of his will, but because one people is better and worthier than another to which the gospel is not preached.

**Refutation:** Moses denies this when he addresses the people of Israel as follows: *Behold, to the Lord your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it. Yet the Lord set his heart in love on your fathers and chose their offspring after them, you above all peoples, as you are this day* (Deut 10:14, 15). And Christ says, *Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes* (Mt 11:21).

mean that the folk of Macedonia (where Paul ended up) were somehow more deserving of the gospel than the people of Asia and Bithynia. It would also mean that the inhabitants of the Netherlands in the days of the Arminians rated better before God than the people, say, of inland North America—for those tribes had at the time not yet heard the gospel, though God Almighty certainly knew of their existence.

## Why?

But the thought that God sends his Word to one race or tribe or people and not to another on grounds that the one race or tribe or people might be more worthy than another is simply contrary to the plain instruction of God's own Word. Consider:

- Moses told the people of Israel that “*the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.*” Then Moses went on to explain why God chose Israel above, say, the Moabites or the Egyptians or the Mycenaeans: “*It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you*” (Deut. 7:6–8). Notice Moses’ inspired argument: to God there was nothing attractive about Israel; this people was in fact a destitute band of abused slaves in Egypt. But God was pleased to love them because, well, he was pleased to love them. That argument suffices—for why does a young man love a particular young woman? His reasons are thoroughly subjective, and ultimately will not help another man love that same woman.
- Jesus’ words to the Jews of his day make abundantly clear that the inhabitants of Chorazin and Bethsaida were harder of heart than the heathens of Tyre and Sidon. “*Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes*” (Matt. 11:21). Yet Jesus did not bring the gospel to Tyre or Sidon (with one exception; see Matt. 15:21–28), but spent his earthly ministry among the Jews, including the region of Galilee where Chorazin and Bethsaida were located.
- Paul wrote to the saints of Ephesus, “*In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will*” (Eph. 1:4, 5). Those closing words are telling; God caused his

Word to come to certain persons in Ephesus (so that they might believe) for reasons found only within himself, and not for reasons to be found within those people.

These and so many other passages of Scripture make clear that the Lord God was certainly not motivated to send his Word to a particular people because that people was somehow more deserving or worthy than another people. Hence the candid wording in Article 7: “*The cause of this very distribution of the gospel is not to be ascribed to the worthiness of one people above another, nor to the better use of the light of nature, but to the sovereign good pleasure and undeserved love of God.*” We’ll never understand why the Lord was pleased to love one people above another.

Yet the fact is that we—of all people!—have received the gospel of God. That the Lord would send his Word our way, and through his Spirit cause that Word to spark faith in our hearts, can only prompt marvellous delight in our hearts; what mercy that holy God would actually save any sinner from his eternal judgment—and what greater mercy that he would even save me! As the fathers put it in this article, “*Therefore we to whom so great a grace is granted, beyond and contrary to all we deserve, ought to acknowledge it with a humble and grateful heart.*”

And as to those whom God for reasons of his own did not send the gospel, “*we ought,*” the fathers concluded, “*with the apostle to adore the severity and righteousness of the judgments of God but by no means inquisitively to pry into them.*” God’s ways are infinitely higher than our minds can ever comprehend (see Isa. 55:8). And, aware of our own finiteness and unworthiness, we dare not criticize God for what he does.

## ARTICLE 8

### **The Earnest Call by the Gospel**

*But as many as are called by the gospel are earnestly called, for God earnestly and most sincerely reveals in his Word what is pleasing to him, namely, that those who are called should come to him. He also earnestly promises rest for their souls and eternal life to all who come to him and believe.*

The previous article had confessed that the Lord God sends the gospel to whichever people he wishes, and he does so for reasons ultimately known only to him. Back in Chapter 1 we had confessed that God had chosen particular persons to salvation and passed others by—and it is those



persons chosen to salvation who will ultimately believe the gospel they hear while those passed by will not believe it. But if that's so, a problem arises for any attentive reader, and it's this: if God has passed certain persons by so that they are not chosen to salvation through Jesus Christ, is God *sincere* when he calls those people to believe the gospel? If they can't believe it anyway, isn't his call to believe a farce? We can feel along with those who have this question.

In answer we need to note first that God is so much *God* that we finite people can never understand him. To say it differently, we are so much *man* that we can never comprehend God. I choose the word "man" here deliberately because the Hebrew word for "man" (*'adam*) is connected to the Hebrew word for ground—and that is precisely what we are: "*The LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life*" (Gen. 2:7). If we are but dust from the ground, and God the Almighty Creator able to fashion a man from ground, how shall this man ever comprehend God? Job thought he could ask God some man-size questions (in his case about his suffering), but once he grasped something of the majesty and dignity and glory and splendour of this awesome God he despised himself and repented in dust and ashes (Job 42:6).

Further, we need to remember that this glorious God created man-of-dust to be *responsible*. He was meant to image God, rule over God's world, marry and have children, and even guard the garden of Eden from potential invaders as Satan (Gen. 1:26, 28; 2:15). This man, then, was created to make decisions, and do so within the parameters of the instructions God gave. The fall into sin certainly complicated that obligation, but it did not change what God required of mankind or how God treated mankind. So when God, in step with how he created man in the beginning, came to fallen man with an instruction to repent and believe, he fully required people to respond in obedience. This intent-of-the-beginning forms the fundamental context in which the Lord continues to deal with people.

That God maintains the original responsibility with which he had created the human race in the beginning is clear from the expectation and demand caught in numerous passages of Scripture. Consider these:

- The prophet Ezekiel called rebellious Israel to repentance with these God-given words: "*As I live, declares the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and*

*live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?*” (Ezek. 33:11). Note that in this passage God’s emotionally laden call to Israel to repent is obviously fully genuine.

- Through the prophet Isaiah God’s call goes out to every hearer: “*Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat!*” (Isa. 55:1). There is simply no indication here that God’s general call is meant for only some of his hearers. In fact, in the following verses the Lord repeats the call to anyone who would listen to Isaiah: “*Listen diligently to me. . . . Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live*” (55:2, 3). The Lord adds that “*my word shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose*” (55:11). That purpose is not to confuse a hearer, or to bounce back as an echo, but is to call upon people to act in step with the responsibility with which God created us in the beginning.
- Luke gives us a glimpse into Jesus’ sense of hurt about Jerusalem’s response to his preaching. “*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!*” (Luke 13:34). Who can read this emotional appeal to the people of the city and still maintain that Jesus is not sincere in this appeal to every hearer?
- Paul writes to people struggling with weaknesses, “*We are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God*” (2 Cor. 5:20).

These and so many other texts led the fathers to pen the words of Article 8. The Lord our God is indeed sincere when he calls sinners to believe his gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ. “*As many as are called by the gospel are earnestly called*”—note those last two words—“*for God earnestly and most sincerely reveals in his Word what is pleasing to him, namely, that those who are called should come to him.*”

And that, of course, also means those who do respond to God’s call and believe the gospel actually receive rest for their souls and eternal life. For this God will not go back on his Word; what he promises in the gospel he gives to those who believe.

## Questions for Discussion:

4. The Arminians had argued that there was a “light of nature” people could use to find their way to God.
  - a. Can the folk of the world’s inner cities find their own way to God and become converted? Explain why you answer as you do.
  - b. Do you think there is some light of nature that could help a person find God? If so, what might this light of nature be? What do you think of using common grace to come to know God?
5. The Arminians had also suggested that one could use the Ten Commandments to get to God.
  - a. Do you think your obedience to any or all of the commandments could help you in your relation to God? Why or why not?
  - b. What are the (three) functions of the law? How does Jesus summarize the demands of the law? What does the Heidelberg Catechism say about your ability to obey the law?
6. God is pleased to use the gospel.
  - a. What does God work in sinners’ hearts through the gospel? How? How often?
  - b. Is faithful church attendance important for the converted or for the unconverted? Explain your answer.
  - c. Suppose, as the Arminians said, that you were only injured through the fall into sin. How would that impact the need to attend church faithfully?
7. The gospel does not go to every person or nation at the same time.
  - a. Why does one person (or nation) hear the gospel and not the next? What was the Arminian answer?
  - b. Are you (or your family) more deserving of the gospel than the folk who operated the Auschwitz death camp? Explain your answer.
  - c. Would you welcome a derelict or street bum into your church this Sunday? Would you be eager to be a tool in God’s hand to help such a person? Why or why not?
8. The question arises whether God is genuine when he calls a non-elect person to repentance.
  - a. Do you think God is genuine in such a call? Why do you answer as you do?
  - b. Would God have us call just anyone/everyone to repentance? Explain your answer, with an eye to one of today’s social outcasts.

## ARTICLE 9

**Why Some Who Are Called Do Not Come**

*It is not the fault of the gospel, nor of the Christ offered by the gospel, nor of God, who calls through the gospel and who even confers various gifts upon them, that many who are called through the ministry of the gospel do not come and are not converted. The fault lies in themselves. Some of them do not care and do not accept the word of life. Others do indeed receive it, but they do not accept it into their hearts, and therefore, after the joy of a temporary faith has vanished, they turn away. Still others choke the seed of the word by the thorns of the cares and the pleasures of this world, and bring forth no fruit. This our Saviour teaches in the Parable of the Sower.*

As we acknowledged in Article 8, God's call for repentance to all people is an earnest call. Not all who hear this call, however, respond positively; in fact, many reject the gospel. Article 9 addresses the question why many hearers reject the gospel they hear.

Various options come to mind as to who could be blamed. Perhaps the problem lies somehow with the gospel itself, or with the Christ offered in the gospel. Perhaps the problem lies with God, inasmuch as he did not call loudly enough or clearly enough, or perhaps failed to give someone ears to hear the call or gave insufficient powers to respond. Perhaps one could add to the list barriers generated by poverty or lack of education or abuse. Though the article lists some of these possibilities, it does not spend time considering what impact any of these options might have. Instead, the article zeroes in on the root cause of unbelief, and that cause lies within the hearer himself. As the articles says, "*The fault lies in themselves.*"

We need to recall that the Lord God created people without sin, so that each person was able to respond positively to God in every way. Through our fall into sin we made ourselves dead in sin (as we confessed in Article 1 of this Chapter), so that we are no longer able to respond to God as we were made to. Not surprisingly, God our Maker continues to hold each of us responsible to respond to him in a fashion consistent with the gifts he gave us in the beginning. We don't expect a teacher to let us off the hook from writing our exams just because we threw our notes out the bus window. That sense of what is right reflects God's refusal to let our rebellion in Paradise

alter his expectations for us. So, when God causes his Word to come to particular hearers and through that Word calls those hearers to repentance, he is fully serious, and expects each person to respond in obedience and believe the gospel.

That some hearers, then, do not respond positively to God's call is not because God doesn't speak loudly enough or because God is not sincere enough. The reason for that lack of positive response lies fully and only with the hearers, and is rooted in humanity's self-inflicted deadness in sin. When Paul preached the gospel of redemption to the Jews of Asia, and many of the Jews rejected what he had to say, the apostle laid the blame for this rejection fully and solely on these Jews. *"Since you thrust [the Word of God] aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles"* (Acts 13:46).

## Parable of the Sower

In his parable of the sower, our Lord Jesus Christ drove this point home (see sidebar). A sower scatters seed upon a given field with its multiple soil conditions. Some hearers have hearts as hard as the footpath that snakes through the Israelite field, other hearers have hearts comparable to soil spread thinly over the rocks under yonder knoll in the field, still other hearers have hearts akin to soil on which weeds have dropped their seed, while still others can be compared to good soil. The sower (that's Jesus himself, and after his ascension it's the apostles and the preachers who follow them) distributes the seed freely across the entire field. Some who hear leave themselves open to Satan plucking the Word from them. Others respond to the preaching with enthusiasm ("Good sermon, sir!"), but with the first disappointment or adversity on Monday morning they forget the gospel they heard. A third group digests the Word, lets it sprout in their hearts, but permits the weeds of daily cares and responsibilities to choke out the Word of life. A fourth group lets the Word grow richly in

### *Matthew 13:3-9*

<sup>3</sup>A sower went out to sow. <sup>4</sup>And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. <sup>5</sup>Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, <sup>6</sup>but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. <sup>7</sup>Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. <sup>8</sup>Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. <sup>9</sup>He who has ears, let him hear.

*Matthew 13:18–23*

<sup>18</sup> Hear then the parable of the sower: <sup>19</sup> When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path. <sup>20</sup> As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, <sup>21</sup> yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away. <sup>22</sup> As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. <sup>23</sup> As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.

their hearts so that they bear rich godly fruit in their daily activities, be it in differing abundance according to local circumstances. Each of these groups, we need to know, is found in the church among those who hear the preaching.

In each case, the same seed is sown, and that's to say that the same call to repentance and faith comes to every hearer. Yet people respond differently. Obviously, the reason for the different response is not in the seed that was sown; rather, in the parable the reason for the different responses lies in the soil into which the seed fell. God created us all as good soil, always open to whatever

word he would speak. But with the fall into sin we corrupted the soil of our hearts so that the one person remains cold and indifferent to the preaching he hears; like the seed that falls on the path he lets the devil snatch it away. Another person hears the Word with much initial enthusiasm, but the shallowness he's permitted in his heart prevents this Word from gaining root; like the seed that falls in stony soil, this Word soon withers and dies. The person has let his heart be full of the weeds of life, be it his busyness or his addictions or his toys; soon enough those weeds choke the Word. In none of these cases is his heart in the condition God created it—and that's the hearer's own responsibility.

An important consequence follows. God holds us always responsible for how we respond to the preaching of the gospel. Never can we say that the circumstances of our lives justify a negative response to the gospel. To say it in terms borrowed from the parable of the sower: before God we are always responsible for the condition of the soil of our hearts. He made us “*very good*” (Gen. 1:31). Whenever the soil of our hearts is hard or shallow or weed-infested, *we* are responsible for the resulting lack of fruit. That

means in turn that we do well to give considered thought to what kind of soil characterizes our hearts. Though I'm tempted to say that by God's grace good and fertile soil characterizes my heart, I do wisely to ask another's opinion of what they actually see in me.

## ARTICLE 10

### Why Others Who Are Called Do Come

*Others who are called by the ministry of the gospel do come and are converted. This is not to be ascribed to man. He does not distinguish himself by his free will above others who are furnished with equal or sufficient grace for faith or conversion (as the proud heresy of Pelagius maintains). It is to be ascribed to God. He has chosen his own in Christ from eternity and calls them effectually within time. He gives them faith and repentance; he delivers them from the power of darkness and transfers them to the kingdom of his Son. All this he does that they may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called them out of darkness into his marvellous light, and may boast not of themselves but of the Lord, according to the testimony of the apostles in various places.*

Article 9 had confessed that it is each person's own fault if he does not respond with repentance when called through the ministry of the gospel. That raises the interesting question: then who should receive the credit when someone *does* repent and believe? Could that person take the credit himself? That strikes us as logical and fair. But Article 10 says no; "*This is not to be ascribed to man. . . . It is to be ascribed to God.*"

You'll recall what the Arminians taught. They pictured the fall into sin as not coming off a seventy-three-storey building but off a three-storey building—and as a result the damage is nothing more than a broken leg and a few broken ribs; fallen man still has the capacity to cry out for help and even make the decision to receive help or not (see Figure 3/4.2). In fact, some who fell off the house roof may choose to welcome offers of help while others might not want help. Those who accept help, said the Arminians, simply use their free will in a smarter way than those who decline help. In other words, those who respond positively to God's sincere call to repentance are smarter, more prudent, and better people; they're using their heads and figuring out that God's offer of salvation is too good to pass by. They ought, then, to be complimented for their shrewdness.

The fathers at the Synod of Dort rejected this notion as unbiblical. That's based on passages as these:

- Paul reminds the Romans of God's word to Moses, that he would have mercy on whomever he wishes to have mercy, and then adds this application, "*So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy*" (Rom. 9:16).
- Paul says something similar to the Ephesians: "*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God*" (Eph. 2:8).

The fathers had earlier considered (Chapter 2) what the Scriptures had taught about human depravity. Adding passages as the above to that earlier material convinced the fathers that no one may pat himself on the back when he responds to God's call with repentance and faith—as if the response were his own doing. Rather, since man has fallen, as it were, off a seventy-three-storey building, he cannot respond to God's call; the dead don't listen. So, when a person does respond to God's call and believes the gospel, the credit is fully for the Lord. It's like Lazarus lying dead in his grave for four days already; when Jesus told him to "*come out*," he could not give Jesus' call some thought and finally decide to obey and come alive again. The praise by definition had to be for Jesus alone (John 11:43). So it is with those who come to faith. As the fathers put it in this article, "*it is to be ascribed to God.*"

## Who?

But another question arises. Which persons does God raise from their spiritual death? That is, in which hearts does God work the response of repentance and faith? The answer to this question recalls the discussion of Chapter 1, namely, that before he created the world the Lord had chosen particular persons to life eternal, while others he had passed by. He works faith in those specific persons—every one of them—whom he had earlier chosen to life eternal. As Luke put, "*As many as were appointed to eternal life believed*" (Acts 13:48). On the other hand, God does not work faith and repentance in the hearts of any whom he has passed by in his eternal election.

Since this positive response to God's call is God's work alone, it follows that everyone who believes the gospel obviously owes God much praise for the faith he finds in his heart. That's why Article 10 ends with these stirring words: "*All this [God] does that [people] may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called them out of darkness into his marvellous*



*light, and may boast not of themselves but of the Lord, according to the testimony of the apostles in various places.”* As to this testimony of the apostles, we may think of Paul’s words, “*Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord*” (1 Cor. 1:31), and “*For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory for ever*” (Rom. 11:36).

To give God all the glory is exactly what fallen human nature does not want to do. That is why this material from the Canons of Dort remains so relevant for us today. Due to our depravity we are dependent on God’s grace alone for salvation—and he grants it abundantly. To the Lord alone be praise for the gift of faith in our hearts! He’s indeed a God like none other!

## ARTICLE 11

### How God Brings About Conversion

*God carries out his good pleasure in the elect and works in them true conversion in the following manner. He takes care that the gospel is preached to them, and powerfully enlightens their minds by the Holy Spirit, so that they may rightly understand and discern the things of the Spirit of God. By the efficacious working of the same regenerating Spirit he also penetrates into the innermost recesses of man. He opens the closed and softens the hard heart, circumcises that which was uncircumcised, and instils new qualities into the will. He makes the will, which was dead, alive; which was bad, good; which was unwilling, willing; and which was stubborn, obedient. He moves and strengthens it so that, like a good tree, it may be able to produce the fruit of good works.*

You’ll recall that the Arminians—and they put into words what our fallen, default way of thinking is—were confident that people have within themselves what it takes to respond the right way to God’s call to faith. God, they said, doesn’t need to add anything new into man’s heart in order to bring about the response of faith, for people by nature have within themselves all they need to respond fittingly to God’s call (see sidebar, Error 6). This position, of course, is consistent with their teaching that man did not become totally dead in sin after the fall, but was injured—and so is still capable of making decisions and able to ask for help (recall Figure 3/4.3).

But Scripture had taught something very different. As Paul reminded the Christians of Ephesus: “*You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked*” (Eph. 2:1, 2). Dead people simply do not have within

*Rejection of Errors, 3/4.6*

**Error:** In the true conversion of man no new qualities, powers, or gifts can be infused by God into the will. Therefore faith, through which we are first converted and because of which we are called believers, is not a quality or gift infused by God but only an act of man. It cannot be called a gift except with respect to the power to attain to this faith.

**Refutation:** This teaching contradicts the Holy Scriptures, which declare that God infuses new qualities of faith, of obedience, and of the consciousness of his love into our hearts: *I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts (Jer 31:33).* And: *I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground (Is 44:3).* And: *God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us (Rom 5:5).* This also conflicts with the constant practice of the church, which prays by the mouth of the prophet: *bring me back that I may be restored, for you are the Lord my God (Jer 31:18).*

themselves what it takes to rise from their deadness on their own strength. With Article 11 the fathers acknowledge that God himself raises the dead from their spiritual graves, and then they zero in on *how* God does that.

**God's Work**

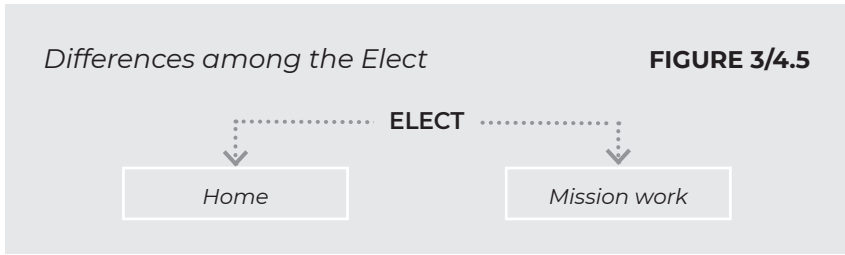
God had sovereignly chosen specific persons to salvation (recall Chapter 1). These persons need faith to receive the salvation God has prepared for them. Faith comes through the preaching of the gospel. So God in his time sends a preacher to them and ensures that they hear the preaching. God in turn sees to it that they respond with faith to the preaching they hear. That sequence can be schematized as in Figure 3/4.4.

Among those chosen to salvation one can distinguish two groups (see Figure 3/4.5). All the elect hear the Word, but some hear it first from their parents in the home, while others hear it first

*Chain of Coming to Faith*

**FIGURE 3/4.4**





through a missionary. In fact, over the centuries most of the elect first heard the Word from their godly parents in the home. These elect persons are children of God by covenant, eternally claimed by him to be his. In his care for them he entrusted them to believing parents, and in turn mandated these parents to teach their children—they being his children!—all about what their Father in heaven had done for them (cf. Gen. 18:19; Deut. 6:1–9; Ps. 78). Over the years these children hear and normally respond with faith to the call to repent and believe. So you have a chain of Christian generations within the family. As I said, most of the elect through the centuries belong to this group.

But there are also people whom God has chosen to life but whom he has not entrusted to the care of believing parents. To reach these elect with the life-giving gospel, God commanded the church to send out missionaries to the ends of the earth (cf. Matt. 28:19). As these elect hear and come to faith, God may entrust children to their care. As Christian parents they would need to know that the children the Lord entrusts to their care are his children by covenant, and they would be obliged to teach their little ones the way of the Lord. They become, then, the first Christians in a generational chain of believers. In subsequent generations, then, this family would fit in the “home” column of Figure 3/4.5.

## How Conversion Happens

The Word does not work by itself, but works together with the Holy Spirit. Better put, the Holy Spirit works in the heart of the elect through the Word he hears. The Holy Spirit needs to be involved because the human heart is so dead in sin that it does not and cannot respond positively to the Word.

Consider Bill and Bob. If Bob cannot understand Bill, the problem could be that Bill is not speaking clearly. The problem could also be that Bob is deaf. As it is, there is no problem with the Word of God, as if it might in some way be unclear or insincere (see above, Article 9). Rather, the problem is

with the hearer, for the fallen human race is dead, spiritually dead (Eph. 2:1), and therefore very deaf. Lazarus in the grave, dead as he was, could not hear the weeping of those who came to his tomb (John 11:31), let alone grasp Jesus' instruction to the mourners to take away the stone from the mouth of the tomb (v. 39). Yet the dead Lazarus heard Jesus' command to "*come out*" (v. 43). That was because this command was divine, and so God the Spirit worked mightily here as he had when God created the world (Gen. 1:2; Job 33:4). The delightful result was that "*the man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth*" (John 11:44).

The preaching of the gospel is a word from God intended for human ears. Those ears, though, cannot grasp the Word because the human heart is dead in sin. So the Holy Spirit needs to work with the Word to cause man to hear. That is, the Spirit uses the Word to reach into the heart of man so that this dead heart is made able to hear what the Lord says. This close working relationship between the Spirit and the Word in the heart of the sinner is pointed out by a number of passages from Scripture:

- As Paul told the Ephesians to "*put on the whole armor of God*" he mentioned also the need to "*take . . . the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God*" (Eph. 6:11, 17).
- The apostle tells the Hebrews that "*the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow*" (Heb. 4:12).

Notice that in these passages the sword the Spirit uses is the Word of God. A sword lying on a table is ineffective, but in the hands of a trained soldier it accomplishes things. In fact, in the hands of the Holy Spirit, the Word becomes a powerful two-edged sword that pierces the heart petrified by sin so that this heart is compelled to respond to the Word reaching into it. By the power of that life-giving Spirit, the dead heart is made alive—and so compelled to respond to the gospel.

Consider a couple other texts that speak of what the Spirit does with sin-hardened hearts.

- "*And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh*" (Ezek. 11:19).
- "*And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you*

*a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules” (Ezek. 36:26, 27).*

These passages would have us understand that the Holy Spirit removes the petrified heart, and replaces it with a heart of flesh. The Spirit, then, makes the person dead in sin undergo, as it were, a heart transplant so that the person with a heart dead in sin receives a heart of flesh so that he is made able to respond to the Word. Article 11 puts it like this: God “*powerfully enlightens [the minds of the elect] by the Holy Spirit, so that they may rightly understand and discern the things of the Spirit of God.*” And: “*By the efficacious [= effective] working of the same regenerating Spirit he also penetrates into the innermost recesses of man. He opens the closed and softens the hard heart, circumcises that which was uncircumcised, and instils new qualities into the will.*”

Please note carefully that this is very much the opposite to what the Arminians were saying (see sidebar, Error 8). The fathers were insistent that people do not have within themselves what it takes to respond properly to the God we offended in Paradise. God the Creator must instill “*new qualities*” into sinners’ hearts if they are ever to respond positively to the Lord’s call, repent of their sins, and embrace the salvation God has prepared in Jesus Christ.

## Pentecost

It will help us much to explore the work of the Holy Spirit somewhat further. Jesus Christ spent three years preaching the gospel throughout Palestine, and in the course of his ministry attracted large crowds of

### *Rejection of Errors, 3/4.8*

**Error:** In regenerating man God does not use the powers of his omnipotence so as to forcefully and unfailingly bend man’s will to faith and conversion. Even if all the works of grace have been accomplished which God employs to convert man and even if God intends his regeneration and wills to regenerate him, man may yet so resist God and the Holy Spirit, and indeed often does so resist, that he entirely prevents his regeneration. It therefore remains in man’s power to be regenerated or not.

**Refutation:** This is nothing less than the denial of all the efficacy of God’s grace in our conversion, and the subjecting of the working of Almighty God to the will of man. It is contrary to the apostles, who teach *what is the immeasurable greatness of his power towards us who believe* (Eph 1:19); who pray that *our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfil every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power* (2 Thess 1:11), and who declare that *his divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness* (2 Pet 1:3).

followers. After these three years, however, the crowds in Herod's courtyard cried out their rejection of Jesus of Nazareth in their calls to "*Crucify him*" (Mark 15:13, 14). Of Jesus' twelve disciples, one betrayed him, another denied him, and the rest fled. All that was left of Jesus' following was some women who came to the cross. Given such dismal numbers, it's obvious to us that Jesus' ministry was a failure.

Yet on Pentecost Day we read of 3,000 people being converted in one hit (Acts 2:41). How is that possible? Here the Lord illustrates for us the powerful working of the Holy Spirit. In keeping with his promise, he put his Spirit within some from the very crowd who seven weeks earlier had demanded Jesus' crucifixion, so as to remove from them on Pentecost day their heart of stone and give them instead a heart of flesh. As a result, they would "*walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules*" (Ezek. 36:27), and so be transformed from Calvary's murderers to Pentecost's grateful believers.

## Radical

Article 11 adds that those who come to faith through the mighty working of the Holy Spirit are also radically changed. The Spirit "*makes the will, which was dead, alive; which was bad, good; which was unwilling, willing; and which was stubborn, obedient.*" These sharp contrasts—dead/alive; bad/good; unwilling/willing; stubborn/obedient—put into plain words how Scripture itself speaks. Consider some examples:

- The crowds on Pentecost day renewed by the Holy Spirit behaved so very differently after their renewal than they had before. Seven weeks earlier some from this very same crowd had cried out their hatred: "*Crucify him!*" (Mark 15:13, 14). Now they "*had all things in common,*" even "*selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need*" (Acts 2:44, 45).
- Paul reminded the Christians of Corinth to whom he wrote his letter that persons of specific conduct will not enter heaven. "*Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.*" Then he added these highly telling words: "*And such were some of you.*" We understand the implication: these Christians included people who used to be idolaters, homosexuals, thieves, and drunkards. But the word "*were*" means it's past; "*by the Spirit of our God*" they were changed (1 Cor. 6:9–11). And that's no

small change! They were dead, and are now alive; they were bad, and are now good. . . .

- Paul himself is a clear example of how radically the Holy Spirit changes a person. In blind rage against Jesus Christ, Paul used to imprison Christians, tried to make them blaspheme, and consented to their deaths (Acts 26:10, 11). But once the ascended Christ through his Holy Spirit took hold of him, this persecutor became a preacher of the gospel to the Gentiles (Rom. 11:13), and even dared to confess that *“I have the desire to do what is right”* (Rom. 7:18). That radically changed desire was the Spirit’s mighty work in Paul’s heart. Certainly, it was not a total change, as if Paul could from now on carry out God’s will perfectly. In his older age he admitted to an ongoing struggle: *“I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate”* (Rom. 7:15). Even so, the desire to do right was itself a mighty work of the Holy Spirit.

## Implication

How marvellous the mighty work of the Spirit! I who am by nature dead in sin, with a heart determined to do what is against God’s holy will, am *changed* so that I want to do what’s right in his sight. That’s as remarkable a work as creation itself was, or Lazarus’ rising from the dead was!

Of course, I’m deeply aware that I’m not at all *perfectly* changed. Even so, by God’s grace the change is real and profound, and so I join the angels of heaven in ever praising this God who has worked so marvellously and mightily in my dead heart. And in the Spirit’s strength I shall in gratitude for his mighty work make it my business to live in humble and eager obedience, striving to do God’s will for me in the many challenges of this broken life.

## ARTICLE 12

### **Regeneration Is the Work of God Alone**

*This conversion is the regeneration, the new creation, the raising from the dead, the making alive, so highly spoken of in the Scriptures, which God works in us without us. But this regeneration is by no means brought about only by outward teaching, by moral persuasion, or by such a mode of operation that, after God has done his part, it remains in the power of*

*man to be regenerated or not regenerated, converted or not converted. It is, however, clearly a supernatural, most powerful, and at the same time most delightful, marvellous, mysterious, and inexpressible work. According to Scripture, inspired by the Author of this work, regeneration is not inferior in power to creation or the raising of the dead. Hence all those in whose hearts God works in this amazing way are certainly, unfailingly, and effectually regenerated and do actually believe. And then the will so renewed is not only acted upon and moved by God but, acted upon by God, the will itself also acts. Therefore man himself is rightly said to believe and repent through the grace he has received.*

Article 11 had focused on the role of the Holy Spirit in the work of conversion. Article 12 now turns our attention to conversion itself. In its opening line it reflects the fact that Scripture itself uses various terms for the concept of conversion, as the following table illustrates.

<b>Term</b>	<b>Scripture Passages</b>
Conversion	Acts 15:3
Regeneration	Titus 3:5
New Creation	2 Cor. 5:17, Gal. 6:15
Resurrection from the Dead	Rom. 6:4
Making Alive	Eph. 2:5, Col. 2:13

One can add other terms to this list; for example, being “*born again*” (John 3:3; 1 Peter 1:23). Each term obviously has its own nuance, yet it would be distinctly incorrect to set these terms over against each other as if they mean different things. With their specific colours and nuances, these various terms get at the same thing, and that’s why the Canons of Dort sets them beside each other as equivalents.

## **Conversion is the Work of God**

In his conversation with Nicodemus the Lord Jesus Christ described “conversion” with the term “*born again*” (John 3:3). The term is telling. We well understand that no person is actively involved in his own birth; birth happens to you. Similarly, no person is actively involved in his rebirth, his conversion. As man cannot generate himself, so no person can re-generate



himself. As Adam did not contribute at all to his creation (he didn't, for example, collect dust from the ground for God to assemble him), so Adam after the fall could not contribute to his re-creation. As Lazarus could contribute nothing to his physical resurrection from the dead, so he could contribute nothing to his spiritual resurrection from the dead. Scripture's use of the term "*born again*" rules out any involvement from man himself in his conversion; his contribution is nil. Our conversion is exclusively God's work "*in us without us*."

This emphasis in the first part of Article 12 gives the scriptural correction to the teaching of the Arminians. As the sidebar makes clear (Error 9), they taught that God's grace and man's free will both contribute to conversion, with both being necessary for conversion to happen. The result, of course, is that people end up being able to take the credit for their rebirth—for they can decide whether to be born again or not. But the Scriptures speak so differently. Consider, for example, these passages:

- "*So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy*" (Rom. 9:16).
- "*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God*" (Eph. 2:8).

## Nothing?

Is it really true that people in fact contribute *nothing* to coming to faith? Perhaps you have heard the thought that God is the perfect gentleman who'd never force his religion down anyone's throat; he respects people far too much to do that. Truth be told, that's an attractive way to put things—surely more attractive than picturing ourselves as helpless victims of God's grace; what if

### *Rejection of Errors, 3/4.9*

**Error:** Grace and free will are partial causes which together work the beginning of conversion. In the order of these causes grace does not precede the working of the will. God does not effectually help the will of man to come to conversion until the will of man moves itself and determines to do this.

**Refutation:** The early church long ago condemned this doctrine of the Pelagians according to the words of the apostle: *So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy* (Rom 9:16). Also: *For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive?* (1 Cor 4:7). And: *for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good purpose* (Phil 2:13).

we don't even want that grace? Actually, that puts into words precisely what the Arminians held, as the sidebar (Error 7) makes clear. Note their thought: *"The grace whereby we are converted to God is only a gentle advising."* Ah, yes: God the perfect gentleman. . . .

Wrong, said the fathers in our article as they listened to texts as those quoted above. *"This regeneration is by no means brought about only by outward preaching, by moral persuasion, or by such a mode of operation that, after God has done his part, it remains in the power of man to be regenerated or not regenerated, converted or not converted."* It's simply not true that God does nothing more than give us some advice and leave us free to make a decision this way or that way. We're dead in sin, and the dead make no decisions—nor does God give the dead freedom to make decisions or patiently wait for the dead to act. God is so much more realistic, and loving, than that.

The fathers, then, refused to accept the Arminian view that God does no more than gently advise people of his offer of salvation. They learned from Scripture that regeneration is God's supernatural work in which a heart dead in sin is actually made alive. Conversion *"is . . . clearly a supernatural, most powerful, and at the same time most delightful, marvellous, mysterious, and inexpressible work. According to Scripture, inspired by the Author of this work, regeneration is not inferior in power to creation or the resurrection of the dead."* As God needed no cooperation on Adam's part to create the world, and as Lazarus did not contribute anything to his resurrection, so too the fallen sinner does not and cannot participate

### *Rejection of Errors, 3/4.7*

**Error:** The grace whereby we are converted to God is only a gentle advising. This manner of working which consists in advising is the most noble manner in the conversion of man and is most in harmony with man's nature. There is no reason why this advising grace alone should not be sufficient to make the natural man spiritual. Indeed, God does not bring about the consent of the will except through this moral persuasion. The power of the divine working surpasses the working of Satan, in that God promises eternal while Satan promises only temporal goods.

**Refutation:** This is entirely Pelagian and contrary to the whole Scripture, which teaches beyond this moral persuasion yet another, far more powerful and divine manner of the working of the Holy Spirit in the conversion of man: *I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh* (Ezek 36:26).

in any way to his resurrection from his spiritual deadness. As the Heidelberg Catechism had put it, “*We have been delivered from our misery by grace alone through Christ*” (Lord’s Day 32). The fathers at the Synod of Dort were zealous to defend the honour and glory of sovereign, gracious God.

## Do I Need to Be Born Again?

From the above material it’s certainly clear that the pagan needs to be born again (or converted, or regenerated, or raised from his spiritual deadness—take your pick of terms). But would that also be true of the person raised in a Christian home? Do children of God by covenant (recall Figure 3/4.5 above) need to be born again? Do I?

Jesus spoke one day to “*a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews*” (John 3:1). This man’s identity made it absolutely clear that he was a child of God by covenant, and carried in his flesh the Old Testament sign and seal of that covenant. To him Jesus spoke these very categorical words: “*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God*” (3:3). Jesus’ emphatic statement makes clear: every member of the church, no matter how long he’s been a member of the church or what status he’s had over the years in the church, *must* be born again; there are no exceptions. (We’re speaking here of adults, obviously; concerning children please recall the discussion at Chapter 1, Article 17.)

That raises, of course, the pressing question: am I born again? Perhaps another question follows: when did I get born again? And maybe another question: should I have an experience to recount about my conversion, as Paul had concerning his encounter on the road to Damascus (Acts 9)?

To start with the last question: experiences as Paul had are not the norm for how conversion takes place in people’s lives. Adam came into

### *Lord’s Day 32.86*

**Since we have been delivered from our misery by grace alone through Christ, without any merit of our own, why must we yet do good works?**

Because Christ, having redeemed us by his blood, also renews us by his Holy Spirit to be his image, so that with our whole life we may show ourselves thankful to God for his benefits, and he may be praised by us.

Further, that we ourselves may be assured of our faith by its fruits, and that by our godly walk of life we may win our neighbours for Christ.

being as a mature adult, for God called him into existence in a moment. Yet none of us expects the rest of the human race to come into existence in the same way. We all understand that people come into existence through a process involving conception (but who can tell when precisely that occurs, or even how?), a period of hidden growth in the womb, an eventual birth, and more growth before one becomes the adult Adam was. That's the norm.

The same is true when it comes to recreation. Paul was converted instantly on the road to Damascus, and years later he could recall the details of his conversion. But what happened to Paul is not what happens to most of us—no more than Adam's experience is what happens to most of us. Conversion, and even becoming an adult in God's service, is a process, a growth that takes years. As none of us can recall the moment of our conception or birth—and yet we're convinced it happened—so most of us cannot recall the moment we began to believe or were born again—though we may be convinced it happened.

### **Evidence?**

What, then, is the evidence of conversion, of regeneration, of being spiritually alive, of being raised from the dead, of being reborn? For the apostle Paul, the evidence of his conversion, being alive, regenerated, raised from the dead lay in the fact that he no longer persecuted the church, imprisoned the believers, and consented to their death, but instead he delighted in God's grace in Jesus Christ, lived the Christian life, and even proclaimed the gospel of redemption to all who would hear. We'll come back to the matter with Article 16, but for now it's sufficient to refer to the fruits of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5. Instead of being characterized by the works of the flesh—they're listed as "*sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these*" (the common denominator of which is *selfishness*)—the behaviour of the reborn is in step with the fruits of the Spirit: "*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control*" (Gal. 5:19–23)—the common denominator of which is service to the neighbour. Just as much as I don't need a creation experience as Adam had to know whether I am physically alive, so I don't need a re-creation experience as Paul had to know whether I am spiritually alive. As I can see from my breathing and my talking and my eating that I'm quite alive physically, so I can see from the love and the joy and the patience and the kindness illustrated in my conduct whether I am alive spiritually.

Need I be perfect in my love and joy and patience and kindness before I can conclude that I am spiritually alive? We'll discuss this matter in more detail later on (see pg. 212), but for now it's sufficient to remind ourselves that we do not need to be perfect in our breathing or seeing or eating or talking to be certain whether we are in fact alive.

Each of us, then, needs to confront very honestly the question of whether we are born again. I simply may not presume on my regeneration. The subject requires honest self-examination.

## ARTICLE 13

### Regeneration Is Incomprehensible

*In this life believers cannot fully understand the way in which God does this work. Meanwhile, however, it is enough for them to know and experience that by this grace of God they believe with the heart and love their Saviour.*

Articles 11 and 12 have certainly not answered all our questions concerning our conversion. In Article 13 the fathers wish to point out that believers in this life “cannot fully understand the way in which God does this work.” Can you wrap your head around God’s work of Genesis 1, how he called into being the light, plants, and animals? Can you fathom how Christ was able to raise Lazarus to life after he had lain dead in the tomb for four days? I for one cannot. How God created the world and raised the dead is beyond my comprehension, for the simple reason that I am a creature and so cannot fathom the workings of the Creator. God’s ways are higher than our ways (Isa. 55:8, 9). A little child may ask how a motor runs, and his father may explain in detail exactly how it happens, but the child will not understand—not because the concept is too difficult but because the child is but *a child*. I do not understand how my rebirth came about, not because it’s illogical or mystical or contradictory, but because I’m a finite human being, and a sinful one at that. It’s for me simply to accept what God Almighty has revealed, and believe it humbly.

That reality is in fact so very comforting. If I could understand how the Creator fashioned this world or raised Lazarus from the dead, or even how he raises sinners as me from our spiritual graves, I would have less reason to praise this God or entrust myself to his care, let alone worship him—for he would be my size of being. As it is, precisely because he’s so much *God*, it is for me to believe what he says, delight in the privilege of belonging to him, know myself safe with him, and praise him eagerly day by day. He’s worthy of *worship!*

And the remarkable thing is that when I believe his revelation about conversion, I also *see* the effect of his work of regeneration in my life. And that confirms my faith in him.

## Questions for Discussion:

9. The gospel itself is glorious, but some people reject it.
  - a. Why do some of those who hear the gospel not respond with faith?
  - b. What kind of soil would you think you are? Explain why you answer as you do.
  - c. In your estimation, could your soil-type degenerate? How are you ensuring that your soil-type is optimum?
10. Other hearers delight in the gospel they hear.
  - a. Why do other hearers believe the gospel?
  - b. Do you think it fair to answer that question differently than the first question of #9 above requires?
11. Conversion is a mysterious event.
  - a. How does conversion happen?
  - b. Can even the most hardened sinners be converted? Explain why you answer as you do.
  - c. How radical is the change the Holy Spirit works? What must you conclude if a person claims to be regenerated but in fact permits the works of the flesh in his life?
12. The Bible uses a variety of words to describe the concept of conversion.
  - a. Show by use of terms that conversion by definition is exclusively God's work.
  - b. Is "conversion" something that must happen to covenant people, or only to those of non-Christian upbringing? Explain why that's so.
  - c. Do you think *you* are born again? What evidence can you bring up to support your answer?
  - d. Explain why you do or do not need a "conversion story."
13. Regeneration is incomprehensible.
  - a. Why are we not able to understand how we were converted?
  - b. If we can't understand the process, how can you actually know whether you are converted (or born again, or regenerated . . .)?

## ARTICLE 14

### How Faith Is a Gift of God

*Faith is therefore a gift of God, not because it is merely offered by God to the free will of man, but because it is actually conferred on man, instilled and infused into him. Nor is it a gift in the sense that God confers only the power to believe and then awaits from man's free will the consent to believe or the act of believing. It is, however, a gift in the sense that he who works both to will and to work, and indeed all things in all, brings about in man both the will to believe and the act of believing.*

Conversion (or regeneration, as it can also be called) is a mighty work of God, not less amazing than his creating the world or raising a person from the dead—as the fathers had put it in Article 12. That being so, it follows (says Article 14) that “*faith is therefore a gift of God.*” That conclusion *must* follow because one can no more separate faith and regeneration than one can separate the two sides of one coin. One can *distinguish* between heads and tails, but one cannot *separate* them—and if you try you have no coin left. The person who has faith has been regenerated and the person who has been regenerated has faith. If the one side of the coin, say regeneration, is a gift of God (and that’s what Article 12 had confessed), it surely follows that the other side of the coin, faith, is also a gift of God.

*Lord's Day 25.65*

**Since then faith alone makes us share in Christ and all his benefits, where does this faith come from?**

From the Holy Spirit, who works it in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel, and strengthens it by the use of the sacraments.

But do the Scriptures in fact teach that faith is the gift of God? Judge for yourself:

- Paul writes to the saints of Ephesus, “*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God*” (Eph. 2:8). That would seem clear. If salvation is God’s gift, so is the faith by which one receives salvation.
- Elsewhere he writes, “*For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake*” (Phil. 1:29).

Text references as these (and there are more) prompted the church over the centuries to confess that faith comes from God. The sidebar reproduces Lord’s Day 25.65, with its historic insistence that God the Holy Spirit works faith, be it through preaching as his chosen means.

Let’s detail this a bit further. God does not simply offer man the gift of faith, and then wait to see what man will do with his offer. That’s typical of the two steps involved when someone gives another a gift; Rob may give a rose, but Jane gets to decide whether she’ll accept the rose. The Arminian position (see Error 6) held the same two-step process in relation to God’s gift of faith (see Figure 3/4.6)—and that, of course, is consistent with their position that man was not dead in sin (fallen, say, from a seventy-three-storey building), but injured (fallen, say, from a three-storey building) and so able to accept or reject God’s offer of redemption. But the biblical picture is instead that God takes the offer of faith a step further so as in fact to take man’s hand, as it were, and make him accept the gift he presents (see Figure 3/4.7). As a dead person is in no

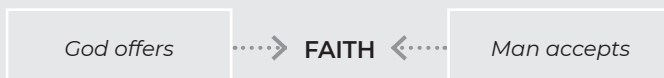
*Rejection of Errors, 3/4.6*

**Error:** In the true conversion of man no new qualities, powers, or gifts can be infused by God into the will. Therefore faith, through which we are first converted and because of which we are called believers, is not a quality or gift infused by God but only an act of man. It cannot be called a gift except with respect to the power to attain to this faith.

**Refutation:** This teaching contradicts the Holy Scriptures, which declare that God infuses new qualities of faith, of obedience, and of the consciousness of his love into our hearts: *I will put My law within them, and I will write it on their hearts* (Jer 31:33). And: *I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground* (Is 44:3). And: *God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us* (Rom 5:5). This also conflicts with the constant practice of the church, which prays by the mouth of the prophet: *bring me back that I may be restored, for you are the Lord my God* (Jer 31:18).

*Arminianism on the Origin of Faith*

**FIGURE 3/4.6**





*Scripture on the Origin of Faith***FIGURE 3/4.7**

position to accept whatever someone might present him, so people dead in sin cannot accept God's gift of faith; they need first to be raised from their spiritual deadness and made alive—and that's something only God can do. So the apostle Paul tells the saints of Ephesus, "*And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked. . . . But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved*" (Eph. 2:1, 4, 5). To maintain that God and man are equals in the transaction of faith (God gives, man receives) is in fact the sin of pride. That's why Article 14 can phrase the truth of the matter this way: "*Faith is therefore a gift of God, not because it is merely offered by God to the free will of man, but because it is actually conferred on man, instilled and infused in him.*" More, "*it is a gift in the sense that he . . . brings about in man both the will to believe and the act of believing.*" The humility generated by the Holy Spirit in recreated hearts will cheerfully acknowledge the point.

## Responsibility?

Does this mean that we are no longer responsible before God to stretch out the hand of the soul and make a point of believing the gospel of redemption? The Lord is very empathic in his Word: we remain completely responsible to believe the gospel. Imagine the servant who received from his master the instruction to dig a ditch, but in protest to the command went and cut off his own hand. Would that absolve the servant from needing to obey his master's instruction? True enough, with one hand missing he is no longer able to dig that ditch. But the master is still fully entitled to hold his servant responsible for carrying out his command.

The Lord God in the beginning created the human race able to obey his every instruction. That we jumped off that seventy-three-storey building so as to render ourselves unable to carry out God's commands does not absolve us of the responsibility to obey our Creator. We

experience this responsibility as burdensome, because we cannot succeed in following through on those responsibilities—and God will punish our failure. And that’s precisely why God’s mercy is so delightful. Even as he instructs us to stretch out the hand of the soul and accept the gospel he gives (that’s faith), he himself picks up our hand and extends it to receive his gift of the gospel. I’m responsible to obey, but when I obey it’s for me never to pat myself on the shoulder for a well-made decision, but for me instead to thank the Lord sincerely for his work of grace in my heart compelling me to make the right decision. He raises the spiritually dead, and in mercy works faith in the powerless—how delightful this God is!

## The Act of Believing

The closing words of Article 14 refer to the “*act of believing*.” What, we wonder, does this “*act of believing*” look like? That question is, of course, exceedingly important, if only because we want—and need—to identify whether we actually believe.

It needs to be said first that believing is not a *thing*. A *thing*, like a vase, I can put on the shelf to admire or ignore or use when I wish. Believing is an *action*, just like running is an action, and breathing is an action. That’s why the Canons speak of the “*act of believing*.”

I know what breathing looks like, and I know what running looks like too. But what does *believing* look like? Can we describe that activity?

As I’d mentioned earlier, the English language uses two unrelated words to translate various forms of the Greek word *pisteuein*. When the Greek term appears as a verb, we use the English word “believe”; when it appears as a noun, we use the word “faith.” This tidbit demonstrates that the terms *believing* and *faith* actually describe the same thing. Believing is having faith; the person who has faith believes.

Hebrews 11 contains the names and actions of several brothers and sisters of long ago who were characterized by their faith. What is striking is that the faith of each person in turn showed itself through their actions. “*By faith Abel offered*,” “*By faith Noah . . . constructed an ark*,” “*By faith Abraham obeyed*,” “*By faith Moses . . . refused*,” “*By faith the people crossed the Red Sea as on dry land*” (vv. 4, 7, 8, 23, 29). At face value their actions made no sense, but the fact was that each of these persons entrusted themselves to God’s care, knew themselves safe with him, and so obeyed the command he gave whether it made logical human sense or not. By way of analogy: consider a footbridge, one foot wide, without rails, stretched over the

canyon you need to cross. Common sense would say that you'd be mad to try to cross that bridge. But stretched a few feet above the footbridge is a cable. That cable makes crossing that bridge no longer suicidal, for you can carefully hold onto that cable as you work your way across the bridge. Holding onto that cable gives a picture of what's meant by the phrase "by faith" in Hebrews 11. By holding onto God's hand, as it were, Abel could offer that sacrifice, and Noah could build that ark, and Abraham could sacrifice his son, and the people of Israel could cross the Red Sea. Faith, believing, is the action of holding onto God's hand and consequently doing whatever it is that the Lord has instructed.

Is God reliable? He has given his Son to make me, by nature dead in sin and subject to his wrath, a child of God and so heir to life eternal. Faith includes that I embrace that glorious reality as fact. But faith is more than simply accepting as true the good news of forgiveness of sins through Jesus' blood; faith is that I *therefore* entrust myself to God's care, trust his every command to be good, and so *do* what he wants in the confidence that he will care for me no matter how the pieces will fall. Faith is the action of trusting and obeying. That's why the apostle James says categorically that "faith apart from works is dead" (James 2:26).

As I've worked out above, each one of us is responsible to believe what God has revealed in his Word, and responsible to obey God's commands. Yet when we do hold onto God's hand as we cross the canyons of life, it's not ourselves we get to applaud, but it's God we are to thank and praise. For, as the Canons say, the act of believing is the gift God works in the hearts of people by nature dead in sin.

## ARTICLE 15

### **The Proper Attitude with Respect to God's Undeserved Grace**

*This grace God owes to no one. For what could he owe to man? Who has given him first that he might be repaid? What could God owe to one who has nothing of his own but sin and falsehood? He, therefore, who receives this grace owes and renders eternal thanks to God alone. He who does not receive this grace, however, either does not care at all for these spiritual things and is pleased with what he has, or in false security vainly boasts that he has what he does not have. Further, about those*

*who outwardly profess their faith and amend their lives we are to judge and speak in the most favourable way, according to the example of the apostles, for the inner recesses of the heart are unknown to us. As for those who have not yet been called, we should pray for them to God, who calls into existence the things that do not exist. But we must by no means act haughtily, as if we had distinguished ourselves from them.*

If faith, and the salvation that comes through faith, are fully and totally God's gracious gift, how ought we to respond to this reality? With Article 15 the fathers introduced a number of possible responses for the instruction of the folks in the pew. They list:

1. Those who receive this grace,
2. Those who do not receive this grace,
3. Those who say they've received this faith, and finally,
4. Those who have not yet been called.

These four are introduced by an explanation for *why* God owes this grace to no one.

## God Is under No Obligation

We live in a culture that thinks in terms of entitlements; we people have a *right* to life, to freedom, to medicine, to prosperity, etc. It is indeed true that no person may take another's life, another's freedom, another's medicine, etc. We acknowledge with gratitude that the laws of our land prohibit that sort of conduct.

What holds true in relations between people, however, does not automatically hold true in the relation between people and the Lord God. That's because the Lord has existed from all eternity, with no people (or angels) around him, until the day that he created heaven and earth. God at that time collected on earth the dirt he needed to fashion Adam, shaped him into the form of a man, and breathed into Adam's nostrils the breath of life (Gen. 2:7). It's clear, then, that from the get-go Adam was dependent on God for "*life and breath and everything*" (Acts 17:25). His home, his wife, and his privileged position over other creatures were all God's gracious gifts to him. Adam, then, had no right to demand more things or different things from his Maker; in relation to God there was no place for Adam to think in terms of entitlements.

The same is true in the weeks and years that followed Adam's creation. Whatever he may have accumulated in the Garden was, strictly speaking, not the result of his own ingenuity or hard labour, but always the gift of the God upon whom he depended. The fall into sin did not change that reality either. If anything, mankind's rebellion made the fact that God "*makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust*" (Matt. 5:45) just that much more marvellous; fallen humanity is even less deserving of God's good gifts than Adam was in Paradise. The apostle Paul can say to sinners of Corinth: "*What do you have that you did not receive?*" (1 Cor. 4:7). And to the folk of Athens he says: "*In him we live and move and have our being*" (Acts 17:28). God is under no obligation to give his creatures anything; yet in mercy he gives abundantly to the just and the unjust alike. All people, then, are deeply indebted to him. That is why Article 15 opens up with these plain words, "*This grace God owes to no one. For what could he owe to man? Who has given him first that he might be repaid? What could God owe to one who has nothing of his own but sin and falsehood?*" I am fully in his debt, not he in mine. I may not, then, think that I am entitled to any good gift, as if God owes me anything positive.

Yet—and how marvellous this is!—God *freely gives an abundance to the undeserving*—even life eternal with him. How do hearers respond to this grace?

## Responses to This Grace

As mentioned above, the Canons list four responses. We'll consider each response separately.

### 1. The believer's response

The fathers captured the believer's fitting response with these words: "*He . . . who receives this grace owes and renders eternal thanks to God alone.*" A biblical example of this response is found in Paul's words to Timothy. So deeply touched was Paul by the marvel of God's grace toward him that he wrote this:

*I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love*

*that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost (1 Tim. 1:12–15).*

Notice that the apostle does not hesitate to describe his past life in most unflattering terms. We'd expect him to cover up his past as an embarrassment he doesn't want to speak about. But so taken is Paul by the wonders of God's mercy to him that he's happy to paint himself in very black colours so as in turn to highlight the delightful grace of God. In so doing the apostle demonstrates his heartfelt thanksgiving for the mercy God granted to a hardened sinner as he was.

The Psalms repeatedly capture the same sense of gratitude. So many have opening words that enjoin the reader to "*bless the LORD*," and conclude again with the same encouragement to "*bless the LORD*"—while in between the psalmist lists the glorious work of God toward sinners, and perhaps lists specific personal failures too (cf. Pss. 103–106). Overwhelming gratitude for God's grace prompts the psalmist to repeatedly highlight how undeserved God's grace really is.

That's not to say that every word of seeming thanksgiving is in fact a sincere word of thanks. In Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, the Pharisee indeed expressed gratitude, but it was not the kind of gratitude the psalmist encouraged or Paul illustrated, nor was it the sort of gratitude the fathers intended in the present article. Listen to the Pharisee: "*God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get*" (Luke 18:11, 12). So Jesus faulted him for his false gratitude: "*Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted*" (v. 14). The humble sound like the tax collector: "*Standing far off, [he] would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'*" (v. 13).

For our part, we acknowledge with Lord's Day 23 (see sidebar) that "*my conscience accuses me that I have grievously sinned against all God's commandments, have never kept any of them, and am still inclined to all evil.*" That I nevertheless receive abundant grace from my Maker cannot but fill me with deepest gratitude. So in the sorrows of this broken life I'll adopt a posture of humility, and make it my business to express heartfelt gratitude for the abundance of mercy I've received from my God through Jesus Christ my Saviour. John Newton put it so well in his memorable song, *Amazing Grace*:

*Amazing grace!  
How sweet the sound  
That saved a wretch like me.  
I once was lost,  
but now am found,  
Was blind but now I see.*

## **2. The unbeliever's response**

Predictably, those who have not tasted the marvels of God's grace do not respond in the same way as those who have tasted them. The fathers described their response like this: *"He who does not receive this grace, however, either does not care at all for these spiritual things and is pleased with what he has, or in false security vainly boasts that he has what he does not have."*

As we read that sentence, our thoughts perhaps go to people around us who do not go to church, or perhaps to people on the mission fields. The fathers' intent, though, was to describe people who actually go to church. We need to realize that the Lord has made clear in his Word that not every churchgoer has in fact received the grace of God he hears about in church. Consider passages as these:

- *"Woe to those who are at ease in Zion,"* Amos had to say to people comfortable in the temple of Jerusalem (Amos 6:1). Given that foreigners were not allowed in the temple, this is obviously a reference to covenant people. In New Testament terms, they would be known as church people.
- Jeremiah had to stand *"in the gate of the LORD's house"* and proclaim this warning to those who entered to worship: *"Amend your ways and your deeds. . . . Do not trust in these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD'"* (Jer. 7:2–4).
- Jesus condemned the pious scribes and Pharisees, and called them *"hypocrites"* to their faces (Matt. 23:13).

### *Lord's Day 23.60*

#### **How are you righteous before God?**

Only by true faith in Jesus Christ.

Although my conscience accuses me that I have grievously sinned against all God's commandments, have never kept any of them, and am still inclined to all evil, yet God, without any merit of my own, out of mere grace, imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ.

He grants these to me as if I had never had nor committed any sin, and as if I myself had accomplished all the obedience which Christ has rendered for me, if only I accept this gift with a believing heart.

It is because of passages as these that the Belgic Confession admits that there are “*hypocrites . . . mixed in the church along with the good and yet are not part of the church, although they are outwardly in it*” (Article 29).

In the sidebar printed elsewhere on this page I have copied Jesus’ letter to his church in Laodicea as found in Revelation 3. One can imagine the minister of that congregation getting on the pulpit one Sunday morning, and telling his flock that he received a letter concerning his congregation from none less than Jesus Christ himself, and that he’s now going to read this letter to the assembled congregation. I would imagine that a dead hush falls over the church as the minister begins to read: “*I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm . . . I will spit you out of my mouth*” (Rev. 3:15, 16). On a hot day I enjoy an iced coffee, and on a cold day I appreciate a hot coffee. A coffee at room temperature, though, is always *yuk*. That’s the picture Jesus uses.

It’s a disturbing charge. Jesus speaks of *church* people, folk who sing along readily in the church services, who read along in their Bibles, who listen to the preaching, who give their money in the collections, who join in prayer and use the sacraments. Though they’ve heard of the grace of God in Jesus Christ, they are not excited by that grace, do not burst into songs of praise for God’s goodness to them, do not make it their business to shine

*Revelation 3:14–22,  
To the Church in Laodicea*

<sup>14</sup> “And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: ‘The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God’s creation.

<sup>15</sup> “I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! <sup>16</sup> So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. <sup>17</sup> For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. <sup>18</sup> I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see. <sup>19</sup> Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. <sup>20</sup> Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. <sup>21</sup> The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. <sup>22</sup> He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”



in his service. They're instead apathetic, along for the ride, assuming they're heirs to life eternal while in fact they have not reached out the hand of the soul—that's faith—to receive the grace God has set before them. So Jesus tells them plainly, "*You say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked*" (v. 17). The reference, of course, is not to financial wealth, but to spiritual treasures. These Christians considered themselves rich in that they took Christ's gospel of forgiveness and life eternal as true for themselves, while in fact they had not made the promises of the gospel their own. Jesus' instruction was that as long as they were not hot for the gospel, as long as they were not excited and thankful for the Lord's mercy, they could not rightly consider the wealth of the gospel their own. That's why he told them to "*buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself*" (v. 18). Or to put it in terms of our article: they needed to "*believe*" the gospel. The alternative is that "*I will spit you out of my mouth*" (Rev. 3:16).

This instruction is included in the Bible in order to prompt self-examination on our part. The fact that I go to church does not automatically make me a Christian in the sense that I am united by faith to Christ and therefore truly receive the forgiveness of sins promised in God's covenant of love. Satan is quite okay with our being religious and going to church, as long as we're not excited and thankful for what the Lord has done for us in the gospel. So it remains our ongoing responsibility to ensure that we're not sitting on the wagon of the church simply for the ride.

How do we ensure that we're not just going along for the ride? That is a matter to which we'll return shortly with Article 17.

### **3. What about the person in the next pew?**

Passages demanding repentance as those quoted above could send our thoughts to the person in the next pew, with the wish (and maybe the prayer) that he would make work of his need to be born again. The fathers, however, caution us in that wish. It's the next sentence of our article: "*Further, about those who outwardly profess their faith and amend their lives we are to judge and speak in the most favourable way, according to the example of the apostles, for the inner recesses of the heart are unknown to us.*"

The apostle Paul spoke some very harsh words to the members of the church in Corinth, with the urgent insistence that they repent of sin (see, for example, 1 Cor. 5). Yet he began his letter with this very positive statement: "*To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus,*

called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:2, 3). He did not write off the persons of the pew because of the sins he saw in the congregation, but was charitable, speaking of them in a most favourable way.

There are, of course, good reasons to be charitable. Consider these thoughts:

1. I remain a sinner myself, very far from the goal of perfection. I have, then, no right to look down on yonder brother in his struggles with his weaknesses.
2. Whatever spiritual health or strength I may have is not my achievement but God’s gracious gift. That awareness should make me strongly allergic to any sense of presenting myself as superior to another.
3. I would not appreciate that someone in the next pew looks critically at me, questioning my conversion or writing me off on the basis of my failures. As I’m to do to others as I would have them do to me (Matt. 7:12), I’ll make it my business to think and speak of another as charitably as possible.

If the person in the next pew would testify that he’s redeemed through Jesus’ blood, and accompanies his words with Christian behaviour (be it in weakness—I can relate to that!), then I shall accept him as a fellow believer. I’ll “*judge and speak*” of him “*in a most favourable way.*” It is simply not a Christian spirit to be condemning of the other. Instead, I’ll support him in his struggles with love and prayer.

#### **4. What about my neighbour next door?**

Finally, the fathers mention those of our communities whom the Lord has not (yet) called to faith. The reference is to those in our neighbourhoods who are obviously unbelievers, with no evidence of conversion. In the closing words of Article 15, the fathers describe what our approach to them should be: “*As for those who have not yet been called, we should pray for them to God, who calls into existence the things that do not exist. But we must by no means act haughtily towards them, as if we had distinguished ourselves.*”

The last part of that sentence, about not acting as if we’re better than they, follows from the material confessed in Chapter 1 of the Canons. God has chosen particular people to salvation on grounds simply of his

good pleasure. That he has chosen me, and then given me the gift of faith, does not make me superior to another. Yes, I am richer than those to whom God has not given this gift, but the cause for this wealth does not lie in me. So it's not acceptable to think or speak or act as if I'm somehow better than the neighbour. Such arrogance simply needs repentance.

In fact, I do not know today whether or not my neighbour is among those whom God has chosen to life; his refusal to believe today does not mean God can't break his hard heart tomorrow. Awareness of that possibility, combined with love for the neighbour, gives reason to pray for his conversion, and then to continue to act in his presence in a fashion that attracts him to the gospel. God, after all, remains mighty to call into existence the things that do not exist—including faith in my neighbour's (hard) heart.

The Scriptures actually instruct us to pray for our neighbours. Says Paul to Timothy, leader in the church of Ephesus, "*First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgiving be made for all people*" (1 Tim. 2:1). The reason Timothy was to pray for "*all people*"—that includes every neighbour—is this: "*This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth*" (vv. 3, 4). God continues to have no pleasure in the (spiritual) death of anyone (see Ezek. 18:32), and so wants each person on our street to come to the knowledge of the truth. The first step to that goal is that we *pray* for those around us.

#### *Lord's Day 32.86*

**Since we have been delivered from our misery by grace alone through Christ, without any merit of our own, why must we yet do good works?**

Because Christ, having redeemed us by his blood, also renews us by his Holy Spirit to be his image, so that with our whole life we may show ourselves thankful to God for his benefits, and he may be praised by us.

Further, that we ourselves may be assured of our faith by its fruits, and that by our godly walk of life we may win our neighbours for Christ.

But it doesn't stop with prayer. Jesus put it like this: "*Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven*" (Matt. 5:16). Peter echoed that instruction with this word: "*Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honourable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation*" (1 Peter 2:12). That's why the church

has learned to say in Lord's Day 32 of the Heidelberg Catechism that we do good works in order that "*by our godly walk of life we may win our neighbours for Christ.*"

## Questions for Discussion:

14. Faith is very much a gift from God.
  - a. Is the fact that you believe the gospel of Jesus Christ your doing or God's doing—or a bit of both? Explain your answer.
  - b. Is *believing* an action or a thing? Describe what *believing* looks like.
  - c. An observer can see you *breathing* or *running*. Can an observer see you *believing*? Why or why not? Is your answer encouraging to yourself or discouraging?
15. God need give grace to no one.
  - a. We hear around us that people have "human rights." Explain what is meant by this term, and then evaluate whether Scripture supports or rejects the notion of human rights.
  - b. Does God owe you anything? Does society? Do your parents or your church? Explain how a "yes" answer affects how you live. Similarly, explain how a "no" answer affects how you live.
  - c. The Bible insists that all we receive from God's hand is *grace*. How does the Christian respond to God's grace? Why? Do all who are known as Christians respond in this way? What does this reality prompt us to do?
  - d. Presumably we would say that we do not look down on the person in the next pew on account of his weaknesses or background or struggles. Would that person in the next pew agree that you do not look down on him? How could you find out?
  - e. Do you pray for the unbelievers of your community? Does your church? If the Lord were to answer your prayer by placing an unbelieving but interested neighbour on your path, would you be ready to help him? How could you better prepare yourself for such a privileged task?

## ARTICLE 16

### Man's Will Not Taken Away but Made Alive

*Man through his fall did not cease to be man, endowed with intellect and will; and sin, which has pervaded the whole human race, did not deprive man of his human nature, but brought upon him depravity and spiritual death. So also this divine grace of regeneration does not act upon men as if they were blocks and stones and does not take away the will and its properties, or violently coerce it, but makes the will spiritually alive, heals it, corrects it, pleasantly and at the same time powerfully bends it. As a result, where formerly the rebellion and resistance of the flesh fully dominated, now a prompt and sincere obedience of the Spirit begins to prevail, in which the true, spiritual renewal and freedom of our will consists. And if the wonderful Maker of all good did not deal with us in this way, man would have no hope of rising from his fall through this free will, by which he, when he was still standing, plunged himself into ruin.*

Scripture teaches, we confessed in the preceding articles, that regeneration is a gracious gift from God that “*he works in us without us*” (Article 12). The present article considers what that work of regeneration actually looks like. Is a regenerated person a totally new person? If not (and he isn’t), in what way is a regenerated person changed?

To answer the question well, we need to start at the beginning. The human race after the fall into sin remained—could you guess it—human; we did not become animals. We kept a brain with which to think and



analyze in a way no animal can do. More, we retained our will also—be it that with the fall our will became twisted. Though God had created the human race with a will fully inclined *toward* him—so that in all our actions, words, and thoughts we pleased God—after the fall into sin our will is turned *against* God (see Figure 3/4.8). As our article puts it, “*Man through his fall did not cease to be man, endowed with intellect and will; and sin, which has pervaded the whole human race, did not deprive man of his human nature.*”

The fact that our will is now bent *away* from God does not in any way diminish our responsibility to still serve and obey God. Our rebellion against his command in the beginning, and our ongoing refusal to act in step with the privileged obligations he placed upon us (we discussed these matters in previous articles), now brings God’s just judgment upon us.

## God’s Work

Well now, the marvel of the Christian faith is that despite people having a will bent distinctly *against* God—and wrapped in hostility at that—God actually performs a work of regeneration in these hostile sinners so that our wills are redirected *toward* him again. That it’s God who bends the will of man back to himself is clear from passages as these:

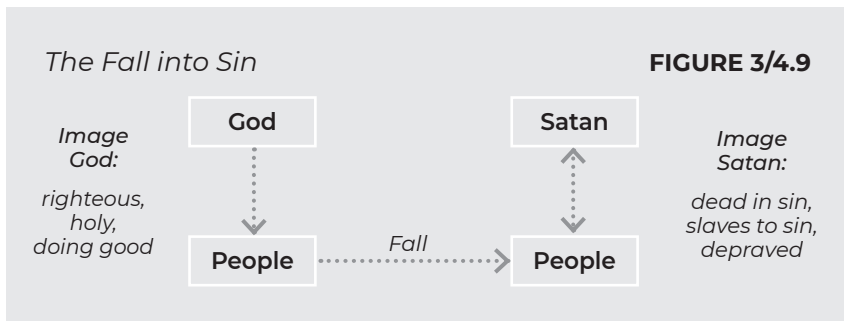
- To the exiles in Babylon Ezekiel must pass on God’s promise, “*I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules*” (Ezek. 36:26). Notice the repeated use of the pronoun “I.” God insists it is he, not people, who does the action.
- After his lapse into sin with Bathsheba, David asks God to change him: “*Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not take your Holy Spirit from me*” (Ps. 51:10, 11). Those words are an implicit confession that David cannot turn himself around (from being *against* God to being *for* God), and another can’t do it for him either; he needs God to work that change in him.
- Accordingly, Paul in the New Testament writes, “*For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure*” (Phil. 2:13). And: “*But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved*” (Eph. 2:4, 5).

Fallen humanity wants to think—and the Arminians put it into words—that each person has a will sufficiently free from sin that he is able to change the bent of his heart so that he can incline himself toward God. Scripture, however, insists that any change occurring in human hearts is God’s work alone. That instruction, of course, is very much in step with the earlier confession that fallen humanity is dead in sin. The dead, after all, can’t turn themselves over, let alone turn themselves toward God.

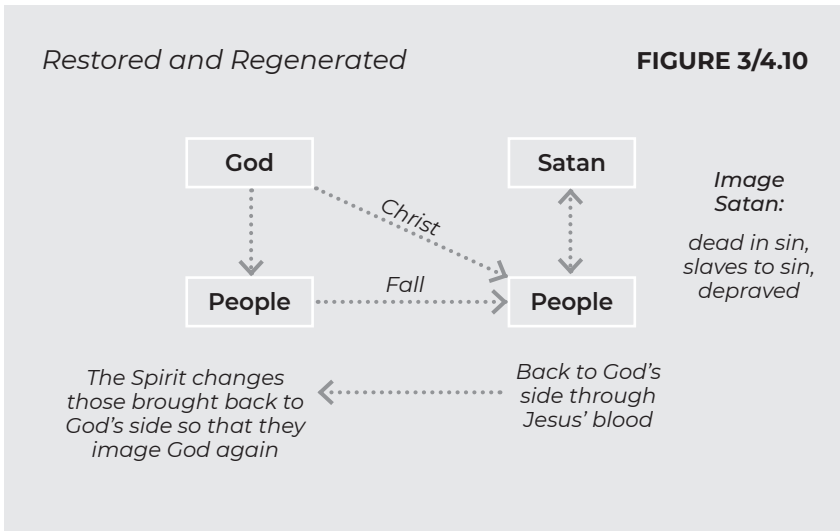
## Change

What actually is the work God does in sinners’ hearts so that we’re bent back to him? Article 16 words it like this: “*Where formerly the rebellion and resistance of the flesh fully dominated, now a prompt and sincere obedience of the Spirit begins to prevail.*” Notice two aspects in this description, “*formerly*” and “*now,*” before and after.

1. Before the change happened (it’s known as regeneration, or conversion, or recreation, and similar such words), “*rebellion and resistance of the flesh fully dominated.*” God had created people to be righteous, so that each might image him. As a result of our fall into sin every person joined Satan’s camp, and so imaged what Satan is like. As sin dominates and characterizes Satan, so sin dominates and characterizes those who belong to Satan. In fact, sin dominates them so much that they image the evil one. This is what the Bible means when it says we were “*slaves of sin*” (Rom. 6:17) and so lived as children of Satan—see Figure 3/4.9. In Article 1 of this chapter we confessed what this sinfulness looked like. In our present article we repeat that material with the words “*rebellion and resistance of the flesh fully dominated.*”
2. Regeneration so radically changes the person that he is no longer dead in sin, is no longer a slave to sin, and so no longer images Satan.



God in his grace has sent his Son into this world so that through his shed blood God's people might be set free from bondage to sin and Satan, and restored to God's side (see Figure 3/4.10). Yet the Lord does more than deliver particular persons from Satan's bondage through his *blood*; he also renews these people through his *Holy Spirit* so that they no longer image Satan. Both the cross of Calvary as well as the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost are essential for our salvation; through the first he redeemed us, through the second he renews us. It's the latter work of the Saviour that has our attention as we speak about the change he works in human hearts. This change is what God promised long ago: "*I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses. . . . And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules*" (Ezek. 36:25–27).



It needs to be clear to us that being washed of sin is a different thing than receiving a new heart. To use big words, the first is properly known as *justification*, the second is properly known as *sanctification*. Yet these two cannot be separated any more than two sides of a coin can be separated. To have the head of the coin is to have the tail; to have the benefits of Jesus'



blood is also to have the benefits of Jesus' Spirit. And the blessed fruit of the second aspect is that "*a prompt and sincere obedience of the Spirit begins to prevail.*" The regenerated person is changed, really and truly.

## Pleasantly and Powerfully

How does God work the change, so as to bend hostile hearts toward himself? Does he do it violently, as with the blow of a sledgehammer on an iron stake, so that we're forcefully bent into another direction? No, he does not. The prophet Zechariah told the exiles returned from Babylon how the Lord would change their hearts. It would happen "*not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts*" (Zech. 4:6). Accordingly, Article 16 describes God's work of regeneration like this: "*This divine grace of regeneration does not act upon men as if they were blocks and stones*"; for blocks and stones one needs a sledgehammer. No, the Lord God "*does not take away the will and its properties, or violently coerce it, but makes the will spiritually alive, heals it, corrects it, pleasantly and at the same time powerfully bends it.*"

## Process

The Lord works the change by his Spirit. The tool the Spirit uses is the preaching of the gospel (we'll say more about this in Article 17 below). The hearer of the preaching (presumably on Sunday) has invariably experienced the brokenness of this fallen life through the entire preceding week. He's had to contend with his crop failure, the sickness of a loved one, tensions at work, strain in his marriage, and so many other expressions of the "*thorns and thistles*" that characterize this fallen world (Gen. 3:18). The same God who put these challenges on his path in the course of the week also calls him to church on Sunday so that he might instruct him there how to respond Christianly to those trials. Through the preaching the Lord would comfort and admonish and rebuke and encourage his people in their specific circumstances. That is why no biblical sermon is dry theory detached from your circumstances; each sermon is instead a concrete reminder of what God's will for you might be, what his promises are, how God is faithful in adversity, what it looks like to be safe in God's hands. The Lord puts this instruction on the path of the struggling Christian so that God might bend the Christian's will, under the pressure of his circumstances, to conform increasingly to his divine will. So the Lord instructs the Christian to repent of his wrong responses to his pressures, teaches him what the right responses are, draws out what it means to

entrust himself the more to the Lord's care. In the process the Christian slowly, steadily learns better Christian habits. Gradually, progressively, as the child of God humbly keeps listening to the Word of the Lord in the school of life, he changes, grows, learns increasingly to image his Maker ever more accurately. It's awareness of how God works that leads David to say: "*It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes*" (Ps. 119:71).

When the going gets rough, it's very tempting to look for escape. If the boss is unreasonable, it's enticing to look for a new job; when the marriage is tense, it's appealing to move out; when a parent is aged and infirm, it's freeing to move her into a seniors' home. We ought to be aware that the Lord himself deliberately puts awkward circumstances as these on our path so that he might mold us through them for greater holiness. The Lord our God sees us as we really are, including those very rough parts of us that need some aggressive sandpapering to make us more Christ-like. Being on the receiving end of God's polishing activity may not strike us as pleasant (that's why we're tempted to flee the pain of our circumstances), but the change and growth we're needing may very well—in God's sovereign judgment—require precisely the difficulties we're experiencing. Instead of fleeing from the discomfort, it may be far more beneficial for us to submit to what the Lord puts on our path. We do well to believe that as we work with the preaching in the pressures of our moment, the Lord our God is slowly molding us to become more and more the sort of Christian he wants us to be—to his glory and our neighbour's benefit.

Recall how the Canons carefully worded the change God brings about: God's work of regeneration "*makes the will spiritually alive, heals it, corrects it, pleasantly and at the same time powerfully bends it.*" Each descriptive term has embedded within it the element of *growth*. And growth, like healing, is typically slow, so that you don't notice the change unless you revisit after some weeks, months, or perhaps even years.

## Struggle?

Might this mean that the process of conversion is peaceful, without struggle on the part of the sinner? No, not at all. Article 16 draws out *God's* manner of working; he does not crush people, but bends—and he does so pleasantly yet powerfully. The sinner, though, notices change happening in his heart and life, a change so deep-seated that entire patterns of living get turned upside down. The dishonest businessman develops new ethical

patterns, and that change can cost him particular customers and friends. That businessman's unbelieving spouse notices greater sensitivity and care toward the family, and that change can generate antagonism so that the marriage becomes tense. We well realize that such changes bring about struggle. The fact that God works "*pleasantly*" does not mean that the change comes without pain and struggle on our side.

## Perfect?

Does this regenerating work of the Holy Spirit mean that we eventually become perfect? No, it does not. Article 16 summarizes the teaching of the Bible like this: "*A prompt and sincere obedience of the Spirit begins to prevail.*" Notice the word "*begins*"; it represents a start. Similarly, the word "*prevail*" captures imagery from a warzone of the victory that finally followed on a long struggle. That's what the life of the Christian is: a protracted struggle. Scripture teaches us that "*we . . . wrestle against . . . the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places*" (Eph. 6:12). Given the strength of the forces of evil, it's obvious that this wrestling is not and cannot be done on our own strength; as finite creatures of dust we are no match for the prince of darkness. It is the Lord who through his Holy Spirit equips us for that battle. That's not to say, though, that the Lord gives his people his Holy Spirit in such measure that we are so renewed as to be able to resist every temptation the devil puts upon us; that fullness of renewal will not happen until the last day. Meanwhile, we receive enough strength from the Spirit to be able to actually fight the battle, and by God's grace make some progress. That's why the fathers so aptly wrote that we only "*begin*" to prevail. There is no triumphalism here.

That those whom the Holy Spirit regenerates are not at all made perfect in this life is the clear teaching of Scripture:

- If anyone had reached the goal of perfection, we would expect it to have been the apostle Paul. But he wrote concerning himself, "*For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing*" (Rom. 7:19). That he wants to do good is clearly the result of the renewing work of the Holy Spirit; one dead in sin, in bondage to Satan, does not desire to do the sort of good that Paul wanted to do. "*For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of*

*death?*” (7:22–24). Every sincere Christian can relate to Paul’s frustration. We’d love to be perfect, but we are not.

- Elsewhere Paul writes of the ongoing development in the life of the Christian. “*And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit*” (2 Cor. 3:18). The phrase “*are being transformed*” describes present progressive action.
- Paul tells the Ephesians, “*But that is not the way you learned Christ!—assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness*” (Eph. 4:20–24). Paul wrote these words not to unregenerate people, but “*to the saints who are in Ephesus*” (1:1). Paul’s addressees, then, had already been washed in the blood of Christ and had already been renewed by his Spirit. Yet Paul instructs these saints to put off the old nature and to put on the new man. The *putting off* and the *putting on* are, then, not tasks which a Christian does once and then considers completed, but are an ongoing activity for every child of God.
- Paul also adds how one is to keep on putting off the old self and putting on the new self. Directly following the passage quoted above, Paul continues to speak in imperatives: “*Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor. . . . Be angry and do not sin. . . . Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor. . . . Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths. . . . Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you*” (Eph. 4:25–32). Notice that all the action words Paul mentions are not intended to be done once with the assumption that then you’ve mastered it, but all are things one needs to keep on doing. Putting off the old self and putting on the new is a process, and so by definition no one can expect to become perfect in this life. The battle is ongoing.

That’s why the church in Lord’s Day 33 (see sidebar) describes repentance (or conversion) as a process one does not finish in this life.

*Lord's Day 33.88–90***What is the true repentance or conversion of man?**

It is the dying of the old nature and the coming to life of the new.

**What is the dying of the old nature?**

It is to grieve with heartfelt sorrow that we have offended God by our sin, and more and more to hate it and flee from it.

**What is the coming to life of the new nature?**

It is a heartfelt joy in God through Christ, and a love and delight to live according to the will of God in all good works.

“*Dying*” (unlike “killing”) describes a process; dying of cancer can take months. Notice how the Lord’s Day echoes Scripture’s teaching that we “*more and more*” hate sin; that too describes an ongoing process. Similarly, “*coming to life*” describes a process. The result of the process is not that one has arrived, but the result is “*a love and delight to live according to the will of God in all good works*”—and “*to live*” too describes an ongoing activity.

**Progress**

That being said, it needs to be clear to us that progress is very real. The apostle puts it like this: “*No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God’s seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God. By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother*” (1 John 3:9, 10). And elsewhere: “*Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day*” (2 Cor. 4:16). When our Lord returns in glory, we shall be perfected as he is perfect.

**Conclusion**

The Arminians believed that by his own free will man can accept salvation and grow in faith in the Lord. But in Article 16 the fathers confessed the teaching of Scripture that if faith and salvation had to be the accomplishment of man, we would get nowhere; we would remain slaves to the sin into which we had plunged ourselves. But God, before we’re even aware of it, gradually molds us and changes us, gently bends our will toward him, and so brings us to the goal he has set for us. Regeneration is God’s work alone.

Again, then, to him all the glory!

## ARTICLE 17

**The Use of Means**

*The almighty working of God whereby he brings forth and sustains this our natural life does not exclude but requires the use of means, by which he according to his infinite wisdom and goodness has willed to exercise his power. So also the aforementioned supernatural working of God whereby he regenerates us, in no way excludes or cancels the use of the gospel, which the most wise God has ordained to be the seed of regeneration and the food of the soul. For this reason the apostles and the teachers who succeeded them, reverently instructed the people concerning this grace of God, to his glory and to the abasement of all pride. In the meantime, however, they did not neglect to keep them, by the holy admonitions of the gospel, under the administration of the Word, the sacraments, and discipline. So today those who give or receive instruction in the church should not dare to tempt God by separating what he in his good pleasure has willed to be closely joined together. For grace is conferred through admonitions, and the more readily we do our duty, the more this favour of God, who works in us, usually manifests itself in its lustre, and so his work best proceeds. To God alone, both for the means and for their saving fruit and efficacy, all glory is due throughout eternity. Amen*

Regeneration, we had confessed in Article 16, involves the work of God. That confession leads to the question examined in detail in the next article: *how* does the Lord God bring about this regeneration? Does he make it happen in an instant, say, through snapping his fingers, or does God use certain tools to bring it about?

To answer that question, Article 17 draws attention to how God makes things happen in our daily, natural life. We are well aware that God uses the means of rain and sunshine to make a crop grow, and equally uses our eating nutritious food to keep us healthy. In fact, his hand is involved in all the processes of our lives (as we acknowledge in Lord's Day 10; see sidebar). That's the opening reference in Article 17: "*The almighty working of God . . . does not exclude but requires the use of means by which he according to his infinite wisdom and goodness has willed to exercise his power.*" The point here

*Lord's Day 10.27***What do you understand by the providence of God?**

God's providence is his almighty and ever present power, whereby, as with his hand, he still upholds heaven and earth and all creatures, and so governs them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, indeed, all things, come to us not by chance but by his fatherly hand.

is that the Lord uses particular means in order to accomplish his mighty work in us.

**Means of Regeneration**

Well now, this principle is true also with regard to our inner selves, the soul. Say the fathers in Article 17, "*So also the aforementioned supernatural working of God whereby he regenerates us, in no way excludes or overthrows the use of the*

*gospel, which the most wise God has ordained to be the seed of regeneration and the food of the soul.*" God would use the gospel to work regeneration. He doesn't have to use this means, for God—Almighty as he is—can do without. But in Scripture the Lord has revealed to us that he is pleased to regenerate by a particular means, and the tool he uses is the gospel. Consider these passages:

- "*How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? . . . But they have not all obeyed the gospel.*" Paul then concludes, "*So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ*" (Rom. 10:14–17). The preaching of the Word is the tool God uses to work faith.
- Peter writes the same: "*You have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God*" (1 Peter 1:23).
- James repeats it too: "*Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures*" (James 1:18).

The Lord, then, has told us how he brings about the regeneration we need in order to enter the kingdom of heaven. The Lord does not regenerate sinners by having them stand in the sunshine or eat green peas; the Lord works the needed regeneration through the hearing of his Word. That's why the church has confessed with the Heidelberg Catechism that

faith comes “*from the Holy Spirit who works it in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel*” (Lord’s Day 25.65).

Since that’s how God works faith, the apostles made it their business to preach; for the sake of others’ salvation they did not dare disobey Jesus’ command to “*go therefore and make disciples of all the nations . . . teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you*” (Matt. 28:19, 20).

## Effectiveness

Preaching, though, seems so lame; just a man talking—how is that going to bring about a change in people’s hearts? Wouldn’t a jaw-dropping miracle, we feel, accomplish more? Scripture tells us, though, that God’s chosen means of working faith is in fact highly effective.

- “*And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed* (Acts 13:48). Clearly, the Word was powerful to accomplish wonderful things in the hearts of the elect.
- Paul outlined the process of folk in Corinth coming to know the Lord. “*I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth*” (1 Cor. 3:6). God did not give the increase spontaneously, but only after Paul and Apollos preached the gospel—for preaching was Paul’s job.
- Paul’s instruction to Timothy was emphatic: “*I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus . . . : preach the word*” (2 Tim. 4:1, 2). For all we know, Timothy may have had his moments when he thought preaching the Word a senseless effort in the unbelief of his community. But Paul allows him no space to cast about for other ways to reach the hearts of his community. We now understand why: it’s because preaching is the means the Spirit uses to work faith, for the salvation of persons dead in sin.

So the Canons say in our article: “*For this reason the apostles and the teachers who succeeded them, in the fear of the Lord instructed the people concerning this grace of God, to his glory and to the abasement of all pride.*”

## Pure Preaching

A consequence obviously follows. Just as the fact that the Lord God is pleased to use my eating food to sustain my physical health means that I must eat, so the fact that he is pleased to use the preaching of his Word for our growth in him means that I must take in that Word. Of course, not



*Belgic Confession,  
Article 29*

We believe that we ought to discern diligently and very carefully from the Word of God what is the true church, for all sects which are in the world today claim for themselves the name of church. We are not speaking here of the hypocrites, who are mixed in the church along with the good and yet are not part of the church, although they are outwardly in it. We are speaking of the body and the communion of the true church which must be distinguished from all sects that call themselves the church.

The true church is to be recognized by the following marks: It practices the pure preaching of the gospel. It maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them. It exercises church discipline for correcting and punishing sins. In short, it governs itself according to the pure Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it and regarding Jesus Christ as the only Head. Hereby the true church can certainly be known and no one has the right to separate from it.

all food is good for my physical health; for optimum health I need a healthy diet. Similarly, not all spiritual food is good for my spiritual wellbeing. I need the word of the gospel, pure and undiluted, with a plain and full emphasis on Jesus' horrid crucifixion in place of sinners whose lot would otherwise be that same level of eternal suffering.

It has pleased God to entrust that preaching of the gospel of grace to the church. In our towns are numerous buildings commonly known as "churches." However, because God alone works faith and regeneration, and he does it through the preaching of his word, I need to ensure that I frequent *that* church where the Spirit works with God's Word, that is, in *Christ's* church. That is why it becomes important to discern which of these many churches in town is in fact the legitimate church in God's eyes, and not some counterfeit. Article 17 briefly mentions the three marks

worked out in more detail in Article 29 of the Belgic Confession (see sidebar), when it lists "*the administration of the Word, the sacraments, and discipline.*"

The Heidelberg Catechism similarly confesses in Lord's Day 31.83 that the preaching of the gospel is so essential that it is one of the keys of the kingdom of heaven (see sidebar). A subsequent question & answer elaborates on how this works, and acknowledges that the kingdom of heaven is *opened* primarily through the preaching—and that's why it must be preached "*to each and every believer that God has really forgiven all their sins for the sake of Christ's merits, as often as they by true faith accept the promise of the gospel.*" In the midst of my daily failings I need to

hear repeatedly of the grace of Christ, and I need to hear again and again the glorious news that all my sins are forgiven me every time I embrace anew the promises of redemption that God has given in his Word.

So it follows that I'm under obligation before God—for my salvation and his glory—to place myself under the preaching whenever I can. But if I am lax in my church attendance, the result will invariably be a weakening in faith. A soldier rationed to one meal a day cannot endure in the battle. And the life of the Christian is a battle. The tragic consequence of skimping on church attendance is that one becomes undernourished and anemic, too weak for the battles of daily life. It goes without saying, of course, that filling my place in the pew is not enough, no more than sitting at the dinner table is enough. One needs to eat what is presented.

*Lord's Day 31.83, 84*

**What are the keys of the kingdom of heaven?**

The preaching of the holy gospel and church discipline.

By these two the kingdom of heaven is opened to believers and closed to unbelievers.

**How is the kingdom of heaven opened and closed by the preaching of the gospel?**

According to the command of Christ, the kingdom of heaven is opened when it is proclaimed and publicly testified to each and every believer that God has really forgiven all their sins for the sake of Christ's merits, as often as they by true faith accept the promise of the gospel.

The kingdom of heaven is closed when it is proclaimed and testified to all unbelievers and hypocrites that the wrath of God and eternal condemnation rest on them as long as they do not repent.

According to this testimony of the gospel, God will judge both in this life and in the life to come.

## Responsibilities of Givers and Receivers of Instruction

In light of this conclusion, the Canons dare to say, "*So today those who give or receive instruction in the church should not dare to tempt God by separating what he in his good pleasure has willed to be kept very close together.*" Here's a word to those who receive instruction, and a word to those who give it.

### **Those who give instruction:**

To be allowed to be a preacher of the gospel is an enormous privilege. Think on it: you become the mouthpiece for God's Word, a tool in God's

hand through whom he works spiritual growth in his people. There is no task so privileged in God's wide world! And let it be known: one does not need to be faultless before one can consider the ministry. The Lord God called Paul to be an apostle, though Paul had been a ruthless persecutor (Acts 26:9–11), and through the years of his ministry remained a man of weak speech (1 Cor. 2:1, 3, 4) and of lapses in conduct (Rom. 7:18, 23).

Those called to preach the Word, however, need also to know that this privileged task carries with it an enormous responsibility. If growth is to come through preaching, and a minister to whom the preaching has been entrusted fails to bring the Word of God faithfully, then he is responsible for hindering the spiritual growth of God's people. God takes this failure most seriously, to the point of requiring the blood of the congregation from the hand of his slack servant. *"If I say to the wicked, O wicked one, you shall surely die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked person shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand"* (Ezek. 33:8). Well do the Canons of Dort say that the preacher *"should not dare to tempt God"* through less than excellent preaching. Yet since the preacher is human, and the Word he must bring is divine, it is so vitally necessary that the congregation members, individually and collectively, pray fervently for their minister that God may give him the strength and wisdom and humility needed to bring God's Word faithfully, to the benefit of the congregation's spiritual growth.

### **Those who receive instruction:**

The person who receives God's instruction through the preaching must also not dare to separate growth in the Lord from the preaching. Since God uses the preaching of the word to prompt spiritual growth and regeneration, I am obligated to do all in my power to be present where God is pleased to work and be eager to hear what the Lord would say to me today through his servant. As Article 17 puts it for us, *"The more readily we do our duty, the more this favour of God, who works in us, usually manifests itself in its lustre, and so his work best proceeds."* Sloppiness in attendance or in concentration is at bottom arrogance, as if I don't need God's Word as much as he says I do.

## **Admonitions**

In its discussion of the need for the preaching, our article makes a striking statement. *"Grace,"* it says, *"is conferred through admonitions."* We're not readily inclined to agree, for few of us actually appreciate

admonitions. We prefer the positive emphasis, and not (as we see it) the critical.

The Arminians felt the same (see sidebar, Error 7). Their preference for gentleness in the preaching was the obvious consequence of their insistence that man is not totally depraved (dead in sin), but able to make responsible decisions—especially if the arguments for and against a given course of action are clearly set out. But the fathers learned from Scripture that God most certainly uses straight talk, including in-your-face admonitions, to prompt people to act in step with the responsibility with which God has created us.

For that reason we do well not to develop an aversion to powerful, in-your-face preaching, including admonitions. As white is never so white as against a background of black, so the grace of the gospel is never so glorious as against the background of our sins and failures. It's specifically "*admonitions*" that compel us to see those sins and failures for what they are, so that in turn we are driven to the mercy of God in Jesus Christ. The church is not a place where the worshipper is to be made to feel comfortable concerning himself, but is a place where the sinner is made to feel distinctly uncomfortable with the sin that remains and at the same time very comfortable in the redeeming grace of the Saviour.

## Busy

Scripture speaks of faith and regeneration being done through the preaching of the gospel. In the days of the apostles, when printing presses

### *Rejection of Errors, 3/4.7*

**Error:** The grace whereby we are converted to God is only a gentle advising. This manner of working which consists in advising is the most noble manner in the conversion of man and is most in harmony with man's nature. There is no reason why this advising grace alone should not be sufficient to make the natural man spiritual. Indeed, God does not bring about the consent of the will except through this moral persuasion. The power of the divine working surpasses the working of Satan, in that God promises eternal while Satan promises only temporal goods.

**Refutation:** This is entirely Pelagian and contrary to the whole Scripture, which teaches beyond this moral persuasion yet another, far more powerful and divine manner of the working of the Holy Spirit in the conversion of man: *I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh* (Ezek 36:26).

were non-existent, copies of the Scripture were limited. The only way for the vast majority of people to receive the Word was to *listen* to it being read out loud (cf. Rev. 1:3) and then preached. Today the Lord continues to work through the preaching. However, by the providence of God, the printing press has been invented (and the computer too) and so copies of the Bible are widely available to us today. Not only does this bring with it many advantages, but also privileges and responsibilities.

It is for us to be daily *busy* with Scripture, be it in meditation (Ps. 1:2; Ps. 119:1, 105), and in reading it. Just as we are better prepared for the battles of life with more than two meals per week, so we are better prepared for the spiritual battles of life with more than the two sermons we hear each Sunday. Appreciation for God's redeeming grace in Jesus Christ, and awareness of the intensity of the struggles of faith, prompt the child of God to stay busy on a daily basis with the Word of God. I for my part was privileged to grow up in a home where the Word of God was read to the family at the kitchen table three times a day. By the time I was an adult, I had been taken through the entire Bible some half dozen times. That habit in my parental home supplied me throughout my adult life with a much broader Bible knowledge than had the Word of God been opened but twice a day, or once. Continually being busy with the Word helps us discover wholesome answers to the vexing questions and challenges that confront us day by day. As David put it, "*Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day*" (Ps. 119:97), and that was because David knew that God's Word "*makes me wiser than my enemies*" (v. 98).

## To God All Glory

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

## Questions for Discussion:

16. The person brought from Satan's side to God's side is changed.
  - a. How does God change man's will? Does it happen suddenly or slowly? What role do our circumstances play in our growth in the Lord?

- b.** Consider this statement: Marriage is not intended first of all to promote your happiness but to promote your holiness. Would you agree? How might marriage foster greater holiness? Would fleeing a difficult marriage serve to promote your holiness or your happiness? Explain your answer.
  - c.** As the years of our time in God's school of life go by, does the Christian actually learn to image God better? What progress have you made over the years? Would you think it fitting, after many years as a Christian, still to call yourself a "wretched sinner"? Why or why not?
  - d.** What do you think about the injunction to "give your heart to the Lord"? Explain your answer.
  - e.** God is sometimes presented as the perfect gentleman, who patiently knocks on the door of your heart and then waits for you to respond. Would you agree with that description of God? Why or why not?
- 17.** God uses specific means to make/keep us spiritually alive.
- a.** What means does the Lord use? Are you in your church receiving the plain truth of God's Word? Are you confident that you are a good judge of that? Why or why not? How can you become a better judge? Do you pray for your minister that he may present the Word of God faithfully?
  - b.** Does it make much difference which church you attend? Explain your answer.
  - c.** Do you appreciate pointed admonitions in the preaching? Analyze why you feel as you do. What role has God assigned to admonitions for a Christian's growth in faith?
  - d.** God is pleased to use preachers as tools through whom he causes his powerful, regenerating word to come to his people. In your judgment, are there enough young men preparing themselves today so that you and your children will receive the preaching you (and they) will need in twenty years' time? Are enough men preparing for the needs of the wider community, near and far? Consider Jesus' words in Matthew 9:35–38. Would you be willing to give yourself to that work? Are there young men in your community whom you could encourage for that work?