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**The First Heading:
Divine Election and Reprobation**

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The Arminian heresy promulgated by the Dutch Remonstrants and answered in the Canons of Dort may be expressed in the acronym **LILAC**:

L = Limited Depravity

I = I Choose Christ

L = Limitless Atonement

A = Arrestable Grace

C = Carnal Security

The Reformed truth summarized in the Canons of Dort may be remembered in the acronym **TULIP**:

T = Total Depravity

U = Unconditional Election

L = Limited Atonement

I = Irresistible Grace

P = Preservation of the Saints

Neither acronym follows the order of either the five points of the Arminians or the five points of response by the Calvinists. The First Heading of the Canons, entitled “Of Divine Predestination,” concerns itself with the second subject in each of these acronyms. But the First Heading does concern itself with the First Heading of the Remonstrance of 1610. The First Heading of the Canons is the longest, by far, of the five Headings, which fact silently emphasizes its importance in the crucial debate between the two theological viewpoints. The First Heading was designed to confront head-on the dominant error of the Arminians: God’s election depended on the condition of foreseen faith, a frontal attack on the truth of Scripture and the Reformation. As Dr. Fred Klooster, for many years professor of theology at Calvin Theological Seminary, used to observe, “Arminianism is characterized by conditionalism.”¹ In contrast, the First Heading defends the blessed doctrine of Unconditional Election.

¹ See also Lee Gatiss, “Suffisance abondante et efficacité intentionnelle: La rédemption particulière au Synode de Dordrecht”, *La Revue Réformée* 70, no. 3 (Juillet 2019): 20.

This paper consists of a description of the contents of each of the eighteen articles in the First Heading, with a mention at the appropriate Heading for each of the nine Errors and Rejections, followed by an analysis of the work of our Reformed Fathers of Dordt in the First Heading.

Description

In **Article 1**, the Synod immediately addresses one of the most common of the charges made by the Arminians: it is unjust for God to have elected any to everlasting woe. The Fathers counter that, it is not unjust, for everyone is deserving of judgment to hell. In other words, “God is obligated to save no one.”² Mankind is not God’s judge anyway, as the Arminians imagined us, but rather, the judged of God.

Article 2 consists of a conflation of I John 4:19 and John 3:16, as follows: “[I]n this[,] the love of God was manifested, that he sent his only begotten Son into the world, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”³ The love of God is the cause of our salvation and, as a result, salvation should be conceived of as proceeding from within God, rather than from within human beings. The ground of our salvation is the work of Christ. Already, it has become patent that the Fathers exulted in the love of God toward the elect.

The argument of Article 2 raises the question: What means does God use so that someone comes to believe savingly? According to **Article 3**, “God mercifully sends the messengers of these most joyful tidings.” Yet, not all hear the message, for God sends the good news only “to whom he will and [in] what time he pleaseth.” The messengers of this message are preachers, according to Romans 10:14-15, which verses are cited here. It is these heralds “by whose ministry men are called to repentance and faith in Christ crucified.” Obviously, the good news cannot be divined from general revelation, or from human intellect, reason, or emotion. The gospel must be heard, and heard from God’s official ambassadors. Error and Rejection 9 completes the Fathers’ discussion of this question.

The “[C]anons approach the subject of divine predestination gradually and from the historical point of view,”⁴ in contrast to the Westminster Confession of Faith, which begins with the divine decree in its Chapter 3, “Of God’s Eternal Decree.” In **Article 4**, for the first time, the Fathers clearly insist that all human beings are not saved from the wrath of God. John 3:36 is surely in view here: “He who believes in the Son has everlasting life, and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him” (NKJV). The distinction made here is between faith and unbelief, or rather, the activity of faith and the activity of unbelief. The Synod is protecting its doctrine from any charge of passivity in those who are in the process of salvation from sin to grace.

But the Arminians did not necessarily disagree with the teaching of Article 4, so the Synod proceeds in **Article 5** to make the truth clearer by defining who it is who believes and who does not. Unbelief is caused by something in unbelievers, while faith is caused by God. This Article quotes Ephesians 2:8 and Philippians 1:29, adding an “etc.” showing that there are additional

² Martyn McGeown, *Grace and Assurance: The Message of the Canons of Dordt* (Jenison, Michigan: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2018), 28.

³ The text used in this paper is that found in printings of *The Psalter*, published by Eerdmans in Grand Rapids. Wherever text appears in quotes without attribution, the Canons are the source of the text.

⁴ Homer C. Hoeksema, *The Voice of Our Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1980), 135.

prooftexts for their beliefs. It would have been good if the Synod had added them.⁵ The unbelief described here is not mere ignorance, which might be overlooked, but enmity towards God, which cannot be.

How is it determined who shall receive saving faith and who shall not? **Article 6** answers that question by reference to “God’s eternal decree” of election and reprobation. The Fathers quote Acts 15:18 (“For known unto God are all His works from the beginning of the world”) and Ephesians 1:11 (“Who worketh all things after the counsel of His will”). By implication, the Synod is rejecting the Arminian belief that salvation results from God foreseeing the faith of those who will be saved. The decree occurs first, salvation occurs later, “in time,” two key words scandalously left out of some English translations of the Canons.⁶ The counsel of God is as eternal as God Himself, but it is not outside of God, for His counsel is His free and sovereign will come to expression, as Acts 15:18 makes clear. God “graciously softens the hearts of the elect, however obstinate, while He leaves the non-elect in His just judgment to their wickedness and obduracy.” The Fathers are writing here in an infralapsarian way, conceiving of all mankind as fallen, not merely fallible, so the decree of sovereign predestination follows creation and the fall rather than preceding it. The Synod recognizes that, “men of perverse, impure, and unstable minds wrest to their own destruction” the doctrine of double predestination, most typically by turning it into the straw man of fatalism, as the Arminians did. In contrast, the Biblical doctrine of predestination provides “holy and pious souls ... unspeakable consolation.”⁷

The longest article in the First Heading, **Article 7**, contains a clear delineation of God’s sovereign election. First, the origin of election lies in “the unchangeable purpose of God,” from “before the foundation of the world.” With such a source, election cannot be arbitrary. Second, election arises out of God’s “mere grace,” which is extended to “a certain number of persons,” not to “the whole human race.” The expression of limitation is actually stronger in the Latin original: “a certain definite number of persons.”⁸ Third, election is in Jesus Christ, appointed by the Trinity to be both “mediator and Head of the elect.” Christ “paid” for the elect, His life and death being the price He paid for them, although they are not specifically mentioned in this Article.⁹ Fourth, election is according to God’s pure grace, for the elect are “by nature neither better nor more deserving than others,” which effectively denies the Arminian canard of foreseen faith as the ground of any person’s election. Fifth, election serves to bring the elect to salvation, which includes faith, justification, sanctification, and glorification. The teaching of the Article is expressed in the two pertinent quotations of Scripture with which it concludes: “According as He has chosen us in Him, before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him; in love having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, in which he has made us accepted in the Beloved” (Eph. 1:4-6). And, “Whom He did predestinate, them He also called, and whom He called, them He also justified, and whom He justified, them He also glorified” (Rom. 8:30). Considering the importance of

⁵ Homer Hoeksema suggests the following additional prooftexts: Isaiah 45:7; Proverbs 21:1; Acts 2:23; 4:27-28; and John 12:39-40. *Ibid.*, 143.

⁶ For instance, the one found in many printings of *The Psalter of 1912*.

⁷ The clear implication is that this doctrine must be preached and taught for the benefit of the elect, as they live “pious and holy” lives. The Fathers consider the need to preach election and reprobation in Article 14.

⁸ Hoeksema, *Voice of Our Fathers*, 169.

⁹ Heading 2 is entitled, “Of the Death of Christ”, providing a full treatment of the death of Christ in relation to the work of the salvation of the elect.

Article 7, it is no surprise that the very first Error and Rejection completes the discussion begun here.

The Arminians maintained that there were many decrees of election, as many as six according to the related Second Error and Rejection; other heretics like the Pelagians and the Jesuits held similar viewpoints. **Article 8** maintains, in contrast, that there is only one decree of election, and it is the same in both the Old and New Covenants. This article thus rejects the later dispensationalist formulation of the truth, which *divides* redemptive history into dispensations rather than *distinguishing* between them. And the decree of election is “both to grace and glory, to salvation and the way of salvation,” one experience for the elect, assuring us of our preservation in grace by the sovereign God.

Article 9 describes the Arminian heresy very clearly: election is by man’s sovereign exercise of faith and good works, which God foresees. The Remonstrants’ viewpoint turns God into a weather forecaster, a very good one, to be sure, but no more than a forecaster.¹⁰ The language is striking: the Arminians believed in pre-requisites, in causes, in conditions, all of them provided by man, upon which election depended. The Arminians were willing to teach an election unto faith, but one based only on God’s confirmation of man’s prior faith and good works. Some argue that the Fathers reject a conditional election but permit a conditional salvation, but the language here precludes this view: “election is the fountain of every saving good, from which proceed faith, holiness, and the other gifts of salvation.” The comparison of election to a fountain is apt: God is the sole source of the stream of election, as the fountain is the only source of the stream flowing from it. Ephesians 1:4 concludes Article 9: “He has chosen us” – the Fathers add here: “not because we were” – before continuing to quote, “but that we should be holy and without blame, before Him in love.” Errors and Rejections 4 and 5 address the same issue.

The Arminians were willing to speak of “the good pleasure of God” as the deepest or ultimate cause of election. The Fathers call them to account for their word games by affirming in Article 10 that the good pleasure of God is “the sole cause” of “gracious election.” Moreover, as Homer Hoeksema writes in his commentary on the Canons, *The Voice of Our Fathers*, the Remonstrants,

maintained that the good pleasure of God consisted in this, that[,] out of all possible qualities and actions of men[,] God has chosen some as a condition of salvation ... Thus it is that the Arminians exalted the good pleasure of sinful man to the position of sovereignty, and made the divine good pleasure dependent thereon.¹¹

For our Fathers, election is decidedly personal, for it concerns “some certain persons.” The Fathers marshal two texts which emphasize this personal and, indeed, definite election. First comes Romans 9:11-13, in many ways the classic proof-text for double predestination, which states so clearly that God loved Jacob and hated Esau, and not on the basis of anything either had done, like foreseen faith.¹² And then the Fathers quote one of the greatest affirmations of all

¹⁰ Homer Hoeksema suggests the comparison in *Voice of Our Fathers*, 180.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 189.

¹² “The unconditional election of Romans 9:11 is so patent that even a hurried reading forces it upon the mind. It cannot be circumvented. But not all are content to leave it there. And so another ploy is attempted. If God did choose Jacob over Esau without consideration of their character as the grounds of His choice, maybe it will help us if we can at least soften God’s emotions toward Esau. ‘Esau have I hated,’ hardly belongs in the Word. Let it read[,] ‘Esau have I loved less’[,] or “Esau have I disliked.” Kenneth D. Johns, *Election: Love before Time* (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976), 7.

Scripture, from Acts 13:48b, “And as many as were ordained to eternal life believed.” Error and Rejection 3 clearly opposes the conditions that the Arminians set out in their theory, against the good pleasure of God alone in election.

Election is unchangeable, according to **Article 11**, for it is “made by Him” who is “most wise, unchangeable, omniscient, and omnipotent.”¹³ The God of election is one and simple, so His attributes cannot and do not work at cross purposes; all God’s qualities serve His good pleasure in election, to everlasting glory or to everlasting misery. In contrast, the Arminians played off the attributes of God against one another. The Fathers counter that our election can never be interrupted, changed, recalled, or destroyed, because of the very nature of God. Such a definite doctrine is further defended in Error and Rejection 6.

Because of divine predestination, the Christian believer can attain assurance of election by grace, **Article 12** teaches. Assurance does not come from “inquisitively prying into the secret and deep things of God,” although that limitation does not preclude a godly contemplation of the wonders of God’s election in order to understand it better.¹⁴ Assurance leads to “spiritual joy and holy pleasure” because the Bible gives believers at least four “infallible fruits of election.” They are: 1) a conscious clinging to Christ in faith; 2) a child’s fear of God, not a slave’s; 3) a sorrow for sin, rather than for the punishment of sin; and 4) a heartfelt desire for greater personal righteousness than one presently enjoys. Error and Rejection 7 attacks the Arminians’ claim that there can be no certain assurance of election.

But will the doctrine of election and its resulting assurance of faith not render many believers careless in life and/or presumptuous in belief? The Arminians certainly thought so and did not hesitate to accuse the Calvinists of encouraging such negative tendencies.¹⁵ **Article 13**, one of the warmest of the articles in the First Heading of Doctrine, rejects these charges by maintaining that the doctrine of election actually produces four salutary effects among the people of God, for it encourages: 1) humility before God;¹⁶ 2) adoration “of the depths of His mercies;” 3) purity in lifestyle;¹⁷ and 4) ardent love for God. Our assurance is not carnal but spiritual. Yet the Fathers observe with sadness that some know much about the doctrine of election, but have never tasted of “the grace of election,” and so face “the just judgment of God” for their sin.

Should the true doctrine of election be preached? The Fathers answer with a resounding yes in **Article 14**. Why? Because it is the clear teaching of both Testaments!¹⁸ Such preaching must be conducted in four ways: 1) with a spirit of discretion, neither saying too much or too little; 2)

¹³ Although no Bible verses are quoted to support this affirmation, possible prooftexts include Is. 49:15-16; Mal. 3:6; John 6:37-40; 10:27-30; Romans 8:29-30; Hebrews 6:16-19; and James 1:17. Hoeksema, *Voice of Our Fathers*, 193-195.

¹⁴ “This does not mean that we may not penetrate with all our powers into the mysteries of God’s salvation as they are revealed to us by God’s Word,” as Herman Hoeksema puts it in his *Outlines on the Canons of Dordt* (Grandville, Michigan: Theological School of the Protestant Reformed Churches, circa 1970), 10.

¹⁵ More than fifty years earlier, the Heidelberg Catechism had addressed the same objection in Question and Answer 64, in a slightly different context.

¹⁶ The true doctrine of sovereign predestination renders the believer humble, not proud. Arminianism’s doctrine of predestination renders the believer proud, not humble, because such false predestination rests upon personal worthiness. Here we are confronted with a classic case of mental projection of the weakness of a point of view onto its opposite.

¹⁷ “It may safely be said that there is no greater reason and incentive for a sanctified life than in the truth of election as it is personally appropriated by God’s children.” Hoeksema, *Voice of Our Fathers*, 211.

¹⁸ Although all the prooftexts provided by the Fathers here come from the New Testament.

with piety and holiness, not as a cold doctrine;¹⁹ 3) in all the appropriate places within the whole system of revealed truth; and 4) without attempting to fathom the deep things of God. And the preaching of election should have two purposes: 1) the glory of the Name of God; and 2) the comfort of His people.

A literal translation of the opening of **Article 15** yields an interesting result: “that not all men are elect, but that some certain ones are not elect.” The Fathers are emphasizing here that reprobation as well as election is the decree of God,²⁰ and the decree of God is not according to anything in man or that man does, but solely “out of His most free, most just, irreprehensible, and unchangeable good pleasure.” Arminians, and many professing Calvinists, are troubled by this language.²¹ And yet the Fathers are pointing out that reprobation makes election all the more glorious for its objects, the elect. The Remonstrants accused the Reformed of making God the author of sin in their doctrine of reprobation, but the Fathers reject the accusation as nothing short of “blasphemy,” because God is “an awful, irreprehensible, and righteous judge and avenger,” not permitting the pot to question the ways of the potter (Romans 9:21).

Article 12 addresses the issue of assurance in relation to election; **Article 16** addresses the same issue in relation to reprobation. The Arminians attacked the whole doctrine of sovereign double predestination by attacking what they considered its weakest point, reprobation. The Fathers admit that reprobation is a sobering matter, but nonetheless true. Therefore, “[t]hose who do not yet experience a lively faith in Christ” should not suppose that they are reprobate, but use the means of grace to seek true faith.²² Nor should those of imperfect faith suspect that they are reprobate. However, “this doctrine is justly terrible to those who ... have wholly given themselves up to the cares of the world and the pleasures of the flesh.” But, our Fathers refuse to make the speculative statement that such people are reprobate. Error and Rejection 8 is concerned with the Arminian denial of reprobation.

Suddenly, **Article 17** brings up the question of the status of children dying in infancy. Why? Because the Arminians denied that such infants could be either elect or reprobate. The Remonstrants insisted that all such children are saved from their sins, since they are not old enough to meet the condition of faith in Christ and perseverance in it until death in order to become elect, and so these children are freed from meeting that condition. The Arminians did not appeal to Scripture to defend their doctrine, as the Article points out, but appealed to emotion. Yet the Fathers were careful not to go beyond Scripture, and so, recognizing that the decree divides even between infants of covenant parents, contented themselves with the words, “godly parents have no reason to doubt of the election and salvation of their children, whom it pleases God to call out of this life in their infancy.”

The final Article in the First Heading, **Article 18**, consists mostly of Scripture quotations, from Romans 9:30; Matthew 20:15; and Romans 11:33-36,²³ altogether comprising a fitting doxology to the sovereign, electing, and reprobating God. The Fathers address two groups here. First,

¹⁹ Both the ideas of piety and holiness are found in the Latin original.

²⁰ Hoeksema, *Outlines on the Canons of Dordt*, 14.

²¹ See, for instance, Harry R. Boer’s gravamen against this Article, as recorded in *Acts of the Christian Reformed Church 1977*, 665-679.

²² The implication here is obviously that the preaching of the gospel, the primary means of grace, must not avoid the doctrine of reprobation. But there is no separate article about the preaching of reprobation, as there was for the preaching of election, in Article 14.

²³ Although, curiously, the last reference is not given and the words are not placed in quotation marks.

“[t]o those who murmur at the grace of free election,”²⁴ the Fathers cite the apostle Paul and our own Savior in defense of what they call “the grace of free election and the severity of just reprobation.” Turning to the orthodox, the Fathers encourage us to wonder and praise before the God who glorifies Himself in both election and reprobation.

ANALYSIS

Following this brief description of the eighteen Articles and the nine Errors and Rejections in the First Headings of the Canons of Dordt, the following five generalizations can be made.

1. The Fathers of Dordt Showed Theological Courage

First, the Fathers of Dordt do not shrink back from addressing an issue that most Christians want to avoid. As Kenneth Johns has observed in his book, *Election: Love before Time*, “Some have relegated the issues of election and the Sovereignty of God to the category of the irrelevant.”²⁵

Second, as Herman Hanko writes: “The church has never claimed that this is an easy doctrine. It is not easy to understand; it is not easy to preach; it is not easy to hold and confess.”²⁶ Yet, the Fathers of Dordt do not hold back from proclaiming double predestination from the very First Article of the First Heading onwards.

Third, the First Heading, like the other Headings, is expressed in language that is Infralapsarian, which could have been divisive, since many of the Fathers were Supralapsarian in viewpoint. Yet the Supralapsarians still signed the Canons. Were they being duplicitous? No.²⁷ The Fathers, despite their courage, were not trying to take sides between the Infralapsarians and the Supralapsarians, and so wrote in a way acceptable to both.

May each of us, recommitting ourselves to the gospel of the sovereign grace of God, always speak with theological courage against the heresy of Arminianism, and every other heresy afflicting the church today.

2. The Fathers of Dordt Showed Polemical Concern

First, the First Heading is expressed in measured but stern language. The Fathers are engaging their theological opponents more than attacking them.

Second, the nine Errors and Rejections clearly bring out the aspects of the Arminian heresy implied or mentioned but not fully stated and critiqued in the various Articles. The Fathers use strong words here, like: contradict, invented, corrupted, gross error, and absurd.²⁸

Third, the Fathers write with clarity, unlike the Arminians, who deliberately cloaked their heresy in orthodox words, in order to hide the true import of their doctrines.

²⁴ Who, like the poor, it seems are always with us (Matthew 26:11)!

²⁵ Johns, *Election*, 16.

²⁶ Herman Hanko, “Jerome Bolsec and Predestination (2)”, *Standard Bearer* 70, no. 9 (Feb. 1, 2003): 200.

²⁷ Supralapsarians have historically held the axiom that what is last in execution is first in intention, *quod ultimum est in executione, debet esse primum in intentione*; See Gordon Clark, *What Do Presbyterians Believe?* (Philadelphia: P & R Publishing Co., 1976), 49-60; and Ronald Nash, ed., *The Philosophy of Gordon H. Clark: A Festschrift* (Philadelphia: P & R. Publishing Co., 1968), 395-98, 478-84.

²⁸ Other of the strong words include: fancy, broken, injurious error, made of none effect, opposed to the doctrine of the apostle, and destroy.

May each of us, recommitting ourselves to the gospel of the sovereign grace of God, always speak with polemical concern against the heresy of Arminianism, and every other heresy afflicting the church today.

3. The Fathers of Dordt Showed Biblical Comprehension

First, the Fathers emphasize election according to sovereign grace unto eternal life over reprobation according to sovereign wrath unto judgment, which is the Biblical emphasis.

Second, the Fathers include Biblical references in most of the Articles and all of the Errors and Rejections, and are obviously referring to many additional Biblical passages in the language which they use throughout the First Heading. Article 18 consists almost entirely of quotations from Scripture.

Third, the Fathers are careful not to go beyond the Scriptural evidence, for instance, concerning the status of infant children of covenant believers in Article 17.

May each of us, recommitting ourselves to the gospel of the sovereign grace of God, always speak with Biblical comprehension against the heresy of Arminianism, and every other heresy afflicting the church today.

4. The Fathers of Dordt Showed Pastoral Care

First, the First Heading is expressed in language which recognizes the wisdom of the Divines in the later Westminster Assembly, who wrote at the end of their treatment in Chapter 3 concerning the subject, Of God's Eternal Decree:

The doctrine of this high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care, that men attending the will of God revealed in His Word, and yielding obedience thereunto, may, from the certainty of their effectual vocation, be assured of their eternal election. So shall this doctrine afford matter of praise, reverence, and admiration of God, and of humility, diligence, and abundant consolation to all that sincerely obey the gospel.

Second, the Fathers devote two headings to the assurance of salvation that the doctrine of double predestination provides to the believer, in Article 12 in relation to election and in Article 16 in relation to reprobation. In stark contrast, no assurance is possible in the Arminians' theory, as Error and Rejection 7 observes.

Third, the Fathers address the heartache of many parents who lose a covenant child in infancy in Article 17. They did so not in a facile way, but in a way which honors the sovereignty of God in election, while comforting grieving parents.

May each of us, recommitting ourselves to the gospel of the sovereign grace of God, always speak with pastoral care against the heresy of Arminianism, and every other heresy afflicting the church today.

5. The Fathers of Dordt Showed Practical Clearheadedness

First, the Fathers insist that the true doctrine of election must be preached in Article 14, which raises the interesting question: Does one hear it in the pulpits of confessional, Reformed churches? And to those who are preachers, more pointedly, do you preach it?

Second, the Fathers insist that the true doctrine of election must be preached without any conditions, because it is sovereign, eternal, and unchangeable. Therefore, Heading 1, in particular, calls us to examine how we preach and talk about election and reprobation, so that

we do not, either directly or indirectly, undermine the unconditional nature of election and reprobation in our speech or preaching.²⁹

Dr. C. John Miller of Westminster Theological Seminary, used to warn solemnly his students about this danger. He had personally struggled over many years with how best to urge sinners to repent and believe without undercutting the very gospel message of sovereign grace he wanted them to embrace. The best he could come up with was, “collapse at the cross of Jesus Christ.”

May each of us, recommitting ourselves to the gospel of the sovereign grace of God, always speak with practical clearheadedness against the heresy of Arminianism, collapsing at the cross of Jesus Christ in faith, in repentance, and in awe at the grace shown to us, unworthy sinners that we are, through Jesus Christ.

²⁹ One of Kenneth Johns’s main conclusions in his book, *Election: Love before Time*, is: “Election can help us purify and make worthy our methods of evangelism.” Johns, *Election*, 88.