



Election of Infants: A Study of Canons of Dort Article I/17

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This insert to Mid-America Reformed Seminary's newsletter, the Messenger, is the first in a planned series of "Reformed Pathways" inserts in which Mid-America faculty members will share their expertise regarding various areas of Reformed theology.

A common prejudice against the teaching of election is that it undermines the assurance of salvation; that it introduces fatalism and uncertainty that overshadow God's grace.

Despite this common misrepresentation, the *Canons of Dort* (the most definitive and universally received statement of the Reformed view) reverberates with praise to the Triune God for His amazing, undeserved grace and confidence in His invincible favor. A fair-minded reader, scouring every article, would discover an absence of any evidence for fatalism or uncertainty of salvation. Because salvation does not hang upon the thin thread of their own initiative and perseverance, but upon the solid chain of God's electing purpose in Christ, believers may be assured of their salvation. Sovereign and merciful election furnishes believers with the occasion to give thanks to God on the one hand, and rest confidently in His gracious favor in Christ on the other. For the authors of the *Canons*, the teaching of election serves "the honor of God's name...and the comfort of anxious souls."

This note of assurance comes to remarkable expression in one of the articles in *The First Head of Doctrine*, which treats the subject of "Divine Election and Reprobation." After a series of articles on election and reprobation, the authors address in Article I/17 the question

Since we must make judgments about God's will from his Word, which testifies that the children of believers are holy, not by nature but by virtue of the gracious covenant in which they together with their parents are included, godly parents ought not to doubt the election and salvation of their children whom God calls out of this life in infancy.

Article I/17

of the election and salvation of believer's children "whom God calls out of this life in infancy."

This Article, which seems to intrude abruptly into the sequence of the preceding articles, addresses a question that had arisen in the debates regarding election in the Reformed churches prior to the Synod of Dort in 1618-19. The remarkable feature of Article 17 is that it expresses a full confidence regarding God's favor toward such children. Sovereign and merciful election, far from casting a shadow over the question of assurance, undergirds and fuels a robust confidence in God's favor toward the children of believers.

This Article deserves special attention not only because it witnesses directly to the prominence of the theme of assurance in the *Canons*, but also because it has been relatively neglected in the study of the *Canons*. Article I/17 offers a ringing, unqualified affirmation of the confidence believers may have in the election and salvation of their children whom God calls to Himself in their infancy.

We have already noted that Article I/17 appears to intrude into the sequence of articles on election and reprobation. The impression of a break is not surprising, since Article 17 was not included in the first draft of the *Canons* and was only added at the encouragement of some delegates in answer to a common Arminian objection regarding sovereign election.

The occasion for this article's inclusion is mentioned in the "Rejection of False Accusations" that concludes the *Canons*, which refers to those who, contrary to "truth, equity, and charity," claim that the Reformed teaching of election implies that "... many of the infant children of believers are snatched in their innocence from their mothers' breasts and cruelly cast into hell so that neither the blood of Christ nor their baptism nor the prayers of the church at their baptism can be of any use to them."

The Synod of Dort was convened to formulate a consensus and to reject the errors of the Arminian party in the Dutch church.



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To appreciate the force of this objection, we need to remember the high rate of infant mortality. The Arminian complaint was particularly poignant since it robbed parents of any assurance of the salvation of their deceased children. This was not an abstract point of theology for Reformed parents, but a painful addition to their grief. They were also exposed to the fear of eternal condemnation of their children under the wrath of God.

The consensus opinion of the Synod of Dort is expressed in the Article as it has been received by the Reformed churches to this day. Believing parents ought to have no doubt regarding the election and salvation of their infant children whom God calls to Himself. The doctrine of election, particularly in respect to the question raised by the Arminians' accusation, supports a robust assurance of God's favor toward His people, including their deceased infant children. This assurance rests solidly upon the basis of what is revealed respecting these children in the Word of God, namely, that they are embraced by the covenant promise in Christ and set apart as holy.

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Dr. Venema's article, "The Election and Salvation of the Children of Believers Who Die in Infancy: A Study of Article I/17 of the *Canons of Dort*," which appeared on pages 57-100 in

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The Meaning of Article I/17: Two Views

One of the remarkable features of Article I/17 of the *Canons* is that it has not provoked any substantial debate throughout the history of the Reformed churches. Despite the relative absence of controversy regarding this Article, however, there are two distinct interpretations. The first, which might be termed the “stronger” or “positive” one, insists that Article I/17 affirms the election and salvation of the children of believing parents who die in infancy. The second, which might be termed the “weaker” or “subjective” one, argues that Article I/17 only speaks of the attitude or hope that believing parents should have with respect to their infant children.



The first interpretation claims that its encouragement to believing parents is rooted in a confident judgment that their children who die in infancy are elect and saved. Doubt is vigorously excluded. There are several arguments defending this interpretation.

First, this interpretation has the sanction of a long-standing tradition and is often represented in commentaries on the *Canons of Dort*. The judgments submitted by the delegations provide evidence that a strong, if not prevalent, opinion at the Synod of Dort favored a ringing testimony to the election of such children. Many Reformed theologians have taken it to be a straightforward affirmation of the election and salvation of the children of believing parents who die in infancy. Among these commentators, it is observed that the language, “ought not to doubt,” is a *litotes*, the use of negative language to express a positive sentiment. The tradition of commentary on Article I/17 understands it to express, albeit negatively and pastorally, a strong certainty regarding the election and salvation of the deceased children of believing parents.

Second, this interpretation appeals to the occasion for its formulation. If the Article only encouraged hope that such children were elect, though all the while granting the possibility that some among them were reprobate, it hardly provides an answer to the Arminian accusation. The only answer to the Arminian accusation was to positively affirm the election of such covenant children.

Third, though the judgments of the delegations reflect a spectrum of opinion on this accusation, most called for a positive statement affirming the election and salvation of the children of believers who die in infancy. This is evident from the fact that Article I/17 was unanimously approved for inclusion in the final form of the *Canons*.

Fourth, the “Rejection of False Accusations” at the conclusion of the *Canons* declares emphatically that the Arminian accusation is false. If Article I/17 were stating a less than certain affirmation of the election of these children, the Arminian accusation could hardly be declared false. If any room were left for believing parents to be unsure of the election of their deceased infants, the Arminian accusation retains its punch.

And fifth, the pastoral form of Article I/17 does not mean that it falls short of a positive affirmation of the salvation of the children of believing parents who die in infancy. Though it is alleged that the language “ought not to doubt” speaks only to the subjective attitude such parents may have in the circumstance of the death of their infant children, this language is used because it answers precisely to the form of the Arminian accusation. A simple statement of the truth, that such children are elect, would not suffice to answer the pointed complaint of the Arminians.

For these reasons, rather than leave uncertain the election and salvation of such children, the first interpretation of the pastoral word of Article I/17 insists that nothing less than a certain affirmation of their election could enjoin upon believing parents the duty to be confident in this circumstance.

Despite the arguments often mustered for a strong interpretation of Article I/17, there are some interpreters who take a different, weaker view. In the opinion of these interpreters,

Article I/17 stops short of expressing a positive certainty regarding the election and salvation of such children. According to this weaker reading, believing parents are encouraged to have a good hope that their infant children are elect, but this is not tantamount to an affirmation of their election within God’s secret will and purpose. Article I/17 speaks to the “attitude” that believing parents should cultivate in the circumstance of



the death of their infant children. But it does not purport to speak objectively of the election of such children.

Though this interpretation of Article I/17 seems to have fewer advocates than the strong interpretation, it does have some able and clear advocates. The Protestant Reformed writers, Herman Hoeksema and Homer Hoeksema, have presented a fairly vigorous argument for a more subjective reading of the Article. In this reading, Article I/17 encourages believing parents to have hope respecting the salvation of their children who die in infancy, but this hope is a “subjective” attitude that leaves open the question of the status of such children within the hidden judgment of God.

Herman Hoeksema’s comments on this Article are surprisingly critical. Although acknowledging the important pastoral and historical occasion for the inclusion of the Article in the *Canons*, Hoeksema judges the Article to be inappropriate for a confessional statement in that it does not express “a definite view concerning the salvation of children who die in infancy” (*Believers and Their Seed*, p. 149). While he acknowledges that many interpreters take this definite view, Hoeksema is convinced that the Article speaks only to the attitude of parents in this circumstance and “does not express an objective item of faith....” (*Believers and Their Seed*, p. 150). Hoeksema also notes that the Article provides no help to parents who may be unsure whether their children belong to the

category of infants or whether they may have reached the age of discretion.

In addition to the subjectivity and uncertainty that characterize the language of the Article, Hoeksema adds another argument against taking it as a definite statement. Since we know from Romans 9 that not all of those who fall within the "sphere" of the covenant are elect, we cannot infer from the apparent covenant status of such children that they are elect. Upon the basis of these considerations and his rejection of the texts often cited to support Article I/17, Hoeksema concludes that the most the church can say on the question is that "the Lord saves His seed out of our seed" (*Believers and Their Seed*, p. 158).

Homer Hoeksema's discussion of Article I/17 in *The Voice of Our Fathers* is similar. He also argues that the "negative and subjective viewpoint" of the Article confirms that it only speaks to the attitude of believing parents in the circumstance of the death of their infant children (p. 276). Since the Article does not express a definite conviction, Homer Hoeksema concludes that it is "of little doctrinal or confessional value" (p. 277). Unlike Herman Hoeksema, who bases his discussion almost entirely upon the text of Article I/17, Homer Hoeksema appeals to the judgments of the various delegations at the Synod of Dort. According to him, these judgments confirm that it was not the intention of the delegates to express a definite conviction. Homer Hoeksema lists four considerations supporting a subjective interpretation: 1.) the primary point of doctrine affirmed is the teaching of the election and reprobation of infants, not the "narrow question of the salvation of children of believers who die in infancy" (p. 276); 2.) not one of the judgments of the various delegations expresses "a purely objective and Scripturally established statement" (p. 276); 3.) the Scriptures in the judgments of the delegates to the Synod do not teach that all children of believing parents who die in infancy are elect; and 4.) the judgments of the delegations prove that "the Synod by no means intended to express as a hard and fast ecclesiastical statement of doctrine that all children of believing parents who die in infancy are elect and are saved on the basis of the testimony of Scripture, but that the Synod exactly avoided such a statement" (p. 277).

The arguments of Herman Hoeksema and Homer Hoeksema illustrate the second interpretation, although our view coincides with the first interpretation: the Article forthrightly affirms the election of the deceased infant children of believers.

Article I/17 & the Westminster Confession

Is there any difference between the affirmation of Article I/17 of the *Canons of Dort* and the affirmation of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 10.3? The *Westminster Confession of Faith* affirms that elect "infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated, and saved by Christ, through the Spirit, who worketh when, and where, and how he pleaseth: so also are all other elect persons who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word." Since both of these statements express the common faith of the Reformed churches, a comparison is in order.

An obvious dissimilarity between these two confessional statements is that they address different questions. Though WCF 10.3 speaks about the election of infants, it deals primarily with "effectual calling." The first article of chapter 10 affirms that effectual calling occurs in the lives of the predestined, ordinarily through the means of Christ's Word and Spirit. WCF 10.3 explains that "elect infants," unable to make use of the "ordinary means," are saved through the Spirit of regeneration in an extraordinary manner.

A dissimilarity of less significance is that Article I/17 does not address the election of infants of non-believing parents. By contrast, WCF 10.3 describes the general category of all elect infants who die.

Each confession addresses the issue from a different perspective, but neither makes any affirmation that is inconsistent with the other. This is evident from the similarities that can also be detected between them.

The most significant similarity is their common teaching about God's sovereign election. Both statements assume that salvation or non-salvation depends ultimately upon God's sovereign and merciful election of some persons and not others. On this fundamental, biblical and Reformed teaching, these confessional statements fully concur.

WCF 10.3 affirms, and Article I/17 infers, that the deceased children of believing parents are not excluded from salvation due to their inability to make use of the ordinary means of salvation. God's electing purpose is invincible, and will be effected upon the basis of Christ's mediatorial work and the Spirit's application of that work to all the elect.

These two statements do not contradict each other, and a Reformed believer can in good conscience affirm both. Because they address distinct questions from different points of view, however, it is also possible that a believer who subscribes to WCF 10.3 might not subscribe to Article I/17. All Reformed believers, whether they hold to the *Canons of Dort* or the WCF, must agree that "elect infants who die in infancy" are regenerated without the ordinary means of grace.

WCF 10.3 expresses a truth common to the Reformed confessions: salvation depends entirely upon God's sovereign and electing grace. Article I/17, by comparison, expresses a truth that is particular to the *Canons of Dort* and constitutes one of its unique contributions to the Reformed confession of sovereign election.

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Concluding Observations

Though Article 1/17 of the *Canons of Dort* has been relatively neglected, it provides an important example of the Reformed view's stress on God's honor as the Savior of His people and the believer's comfort in His gracious favor. This study warrants three general conclusions.

First, any interpretation of Article 1/17 requires careful attention to the precise question that it answers. Unless this question is properly defined, we will not be able to determine accurately what is affirmed in this Article. The question that Article 1/17 addresses is not merely the general question whether God elects or reprobates infants, though this was denied by the Arminians and affirmed by the Reformed delegates to the Synod of Dort. Nor is Article 1/17 addressed to the general question whether there may be elect as well as non-elect persons with whom God covenants in the covenant of grace. The judgments of the various delegations to the Synod of Dort indicate that there was a general consensus among those present that not all of the children of believing parents are elect. The opinions of these delegations include references to Romans 9, which teaches that some children of believing parents, like Esau, may be reprobate within the will and purpose of God. But these general points of biblical and Reformed teaching were not the specific focus



of Article 1/17. Rather Article 1/17 answers specifically a question regarding the election and salvation of the children of believing parents whom God calls out of this life in their infancy. As some of the judgments of the delegates are careful to observe, God did not will that these children should live and grow to an age of discretion. They are children who were not in a position to break the gracious covenant that God had established with them and their parents. The persons whose election and salvation is addressed in Article 1/17 are a special class of persons within the framework of the covenant of grace. The Arminian accusation was that the parents of such children could not be

certain of their salvation, since they might well be reprobate within the secret will of God. The great question, and the only question, to which Article 1/17 speaks, then, is the question whether believing parents may be confident of the election and salvation of these children.

Second, if we bear in mind the specific question to which Article 1/17 provides an answer, we will hardly be able to escape the conclusion that it amounts to nothing less than a definite statement of the election and salvation of these children. The arguments set forth in support of what I have termed the "stronger" reading of Article 1/17 all concur at this point. Only a strong affirmation of the election and salvation of the children of believing parents who die in infancy provides a satisfactory answer to the Arminian objection summarized in the *Canons'* closing "Rejection of False Accusations." Article 1/17 would be an evasion of that accusation, if it only encouraged a "strong presumption" or "hope" that such children are elect within the purpose of God. Even a strong, hopeful attitude that such children are elect leaves the door open to the possibility that they are not elect. But this would be tantamount to granting the truth of the Arminian complaint that the Reformed view provides believing parents no reason to be confident of the election of such children.

The principal objection to the "weaker" view of Article 1/17, is that it abstracts from the particular question to which this Article answers. The weaker view, which claims that Article 1/17 only encourages believing parents to have a good hope regarding the election of their children, opens the door to a speculative appeal to the secret will and judgment of God that would invariably undermine any such hope. The argument for this view emphasizes that God's electing will ultimately distinguishes between some children of believers who are genuinely recipients of the covenant promise (election) and others who are not (reprobation). It also observed that some children of believing parents grow up and fall away in unbelief and disobedience, and that this accords with the sovereign purposes of God. When proponents of the weaker view apply these general truths taught in Scripture to the particular persons who are envisioned in Article 1/17, they conclude that Article 1/17 could not be a positive affirmation of the election and salvation of such children. The problem with this line of reasoning is that it *undermines any possible basis for assurance, not only in the case of the deceased infant children of believers, but also in the case of any believer*. By opening the door to a measure of doubt by appealing to the secret judgment of God, this approach unavoidably



opens the door to similar doubt in the case of any believer's assurance of salvation. This line of speculative reasoning is expressly precluded by the opening phrase of 1/17, when it states that we "must make judgments about God's will from His Word." The way of assurance for believing parents set forth in Article 1/17 is the *same* way of assurance that all believers must follow, lest the assurance of election and salvation be no more than a hopeful attitude regarding what may possibly be the case. When Article 1/17 says that we must make judgments about the election and salvation of such children upon the basis of God's revealed Word, it reflects a long-standing Reformed conviction that the revealed Word of God in the gospel is the "mirror of election," and the principal basis for the believer's assurance of God's favor.

And third, our study confirms one of the characteristic features of the doctrine of election in the *Canons of Dort*. In the specific case of the deceased children of believing parents, the authors of the *Canons* desired a clear statement of assurance that would comfort parents and belie the false accusation of the Arminian party. Despite the Arminian charge that the doctrine of election undermines the assurance of salvation, the affirmation of Article 1/17 declares that God's sovereign and merciful election is the only solid basis for assurance regarding the salvation of the deceased infant children of believers. For such children to be saved, God must love them in and for the sake of Christ. Indeed, no one is saved whom God does not graciously choose to save in Christ. This holds true for children as much as for adults. As members of the fallen race in Adam, the children of believers whom God calls out of this life in infancy are saved solely by virtue of God's gracious favor. Far from intimating any doubt respecting the assurance of their election, this Article declares an assurance securely founded upon the biblical and Reformed teaching regarding election. It illustrates what we noted at the outset: the biblical and Reformed teaching safeguards the singular honor of God who sovereignly and graciously saves His people in Christ, and undergirds the believer's confidence in His gracious and invincible favor.