


Are the Canons of Dordt a true reflection of Calvin's view of predestination?



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As the delegates to the Synod of Dordt were bound by oath to use only the Word of God and not human writings in deliberations about doctrine, in the documents of Dordt there are no references to Calvin as a source of specific ideas in the Canons. The approach of this article is thus to compare chapter I of the Canons on predestination with Calvin's views in his various writings on predestination. This comparison focuses on the main themes relating to predestination as taught in chapter I – the starting point of the discussion, double predestination, election, election in Christ, reprobation, the causes of election and reprobation, the infralapsarian emphasis, the purpose of election and reprobation, assurance of election, and election of infants who die. On the basis of this comparison, the conclusion is that the Canons reflect Calvin's views on some points relating to predestination and not on others. So, on this issue, the Canons are only a partial reflection of Calvin's views, and he could only have been a modest influence on the Canons.

The common concept, the *Five Points of Calvinism*, is directly based on the five points of the Canons of Dordt which were formulated as the Synod of Dordt's (1618–1619) response to the 1610 Five Articles of the Remonstrants (Arminians). Although the full concept did not originate with the Synod of Dordt, but appears to date from the early 18th century (Muller 2012:58–59), it gives rise to the question whether the five points of the Canons actually reflect the teaching of John Calvin. This article focuses just on the first point dealing with predestination.¹

The question whether the Canons reflect Calvin's view of predestination cannot be answered by seeking references to the reformer in the documents of the synod relating to the drafting of its Canons. These documents rarely refer to any theological source of the ideas they present, except for occasional references to Augustine and other patristic writers. The synod had a mandate from the States General of the Netherlands to base its deliberations on 'the Word of God alone as the sure and undoubted rule of faith, and not any human writings' (*Acta* 1620b:1:17). All delegates at the synod also swore an oath that in all synodical transactions regarding doctrine, they would 'not use any human writings, but the Word of God alone as the sure and undoubted rule of faith' (*Acta* 1620b:1:64–65).

Hence, the synodical documents of Dordt are full of biblical references, but they lack references to the Reformation or contemporary theological writings that may actually have had a profound impact on the deliberations of the synod. This is true not only of the Canons of Dordt, but also of the many judgements (*iudicia*) in which the 19 delegations at the synod gave their opinions on the Five Remonstrant Articles being examined and judged. The drafting committee primarily based its composition of the Canons on the views expressed in these *iudicia*. Of the 119 references to theological sources in these *iudicia*, most are to patristic writers; there are only six references to Reformation and post-Reformation sources. None of the *iudicia* ever refer to Calvin (Sinnema 2011:87–88).

In some of the documents that the Remonstrants submitted to the synod, however, there are many references to Calvin and other Reformed theologians whose teachings they objected to. It is thus easier to discern Remonstrant objections to Calvin than any direct influence of Calvin upon the Canons.

In spite of the lack of specific references to Calvin, one can compare the views of Calvin with the formulations of the Canons in order to determine to what extent the Canons do indeed reflect Calvin's views. In making such a comparison regarding predestination, I focus on the main elements of predestination as taught in chapter I of the Canons.

1. I have addressed the broader question of how all five points of the Canons relate to Calvin in Sinnema (2011).

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Chapter one on election and reprobation

The very first article (chapter I, article 1)² of the Canons begins with the premise that, because all people have sinned in Adam, God would have done no injustice if it had been his will to condemn everyone. This is the starting point of the Canons on predestination. In his *Congregation*, Calvin (1993) expresses a similar sentiment:

In him [*Adam*], we are all lost or condemned. If God rejected us all – from first to last – we would have nothing to plead against him. For if he did us justice, we would deserve to be cast into hell. (p. 713)

From this starting point, a brief overview of the first chapter of the Canons enables one to see its main line of thought on the topic of predestination.

This chapter thus begins with the fallen human condition and the gospel offer of salvation before rising to the eternal decree. Because all people have sinned, God has the right to condemn them all (I.1), but God manifested his love by sending his Son so that whoever believes in him may have eternal life (I.2). God sends proclaimers of this gospel message to call people to faith (I.3). But some do not believe the message and remain under God's anger, while others accept it with a true faith which is a free gift of God (I.4–5). The fact that some receive the gift of faith and others not, stems from God's eternal decree of election and reprobation (I.6). The chapter then provides a definition of election as God's eternal purpose by which he graciously chose to save some people (I.7). The cause of election is God's good pleasure alone (I.10) and not foreseen faith; faith is the fruit or effect of election (I.9). The elect can have assurance of their election not by inquisitive searching into God's decree, but by noticing various fruits of election in their own lives (I.12–13). Then the chapter offers a definition of reprobation as God's decree to leave the non-elect in their misery and to condemn them for their sins (I.15). Those who do not yet experience true faith or assurance should not fear reprobation, but those who do not turn to God have reason to fear (I.16). Believing parents should not doubt the election of their children who die in infancy (I.17). Finally, the proper attitude to election and reprobation is reverent adoration (I.18).

From the line of argument in chapter I, it is apparent that the Canons begin, not with God's decree in eternity, but with human experience within the temporal horizon. To explain the difference in the fallen human condition between believers and unbelievers, the Canons only then rise to the divine decree.

Calvin's approach was to address predestination in a similar way. In his 1559 *Institutes*, he also began from an experiential starting point rather than commencing with God's decree.

²Further references to the Canons will be indicated only by the chapter and article number, for example (I.1)

In Book III, his discussion of predestination began with the reality of the varied ways that preaching is received. To explain this diverse response to the gospel, Calvin (*Inst.* 3.21.1) then turned to eternal election:

It comes to pass by God's bidding that salvation is freely offered to some while others are barred from access to it ... We shall never be clearly persuaded, as we ought to be, that our salvation flows from the wellspring of God's free mercy until we come to know his eternal election, which illumines God's grace by this contrast: that he does not indiscriminately adopt all into the hope of salvation, but gives to some what he denies to others.

Calvin's first formal treatment of predestination in his 1537 *Instruction in Faith* (ch. 13), likewise began with the contrasting attitudes of believers and unbelievers to the call of the gospel, and then proceeded to God's counsel. The seed of the Word takes root only in those whom the Lord predestined to be his children (Calvin 1949:36). The same approach is found in Calvin's *Congregation* (1993):

Here is where we must start. When we believe on Jesus Christ, it does not come from our own effort ... But it comes from the grace of God ... God gives his Holy Spirit to whomever he pleases, and illumines them in his Son. Experience shows this as well ... We have to conclude from this fact that faith proceeds from a higher and more hidden source and fountain: God's gracious election, by which he chooses to salvation those whom he pleases. (p. 699)

The immediate source of the opening of the Canons, moving from time back to eternity, appears to derive from 'the mode of popularly teaching the doctrine of predestination' that was recommended by the Palatine delegation at the synod.³ Yet, the emphasis of Calvin to begin with the experience of different responses to the gospel, may have been a factor.

Double predestination

The original title of the first chapter of the Canons is 'Divine Election and Reprobation'. The subtitle of this chapter indicates that this is 'The Judgement concerning Divine Predestination, which the synod declares to be in Agreement with the Word of God ...'⁴ This identification of predestination with both election and reprobation clearly expresses double predestination (Iudicium 1976:228).

Calvin's classic description of predestination also includes both election and reprobation:

We call predestination God's eternal decree, by which he compacted with himself what he willed to become of each man. For all are not created in equal condition; rather, eternal life is foreordained for some, eternal damnation for others. Therefore, as any man has been created to one or the other of these ends, we speak of him as predestined to life or to death. (*Inst.* 3.21.5)⁵

³'*Modus docendi populariter doctrinam de praedestinationem*', appended to the *iudicium* of the Palatine delegation on Article One (*Acta* 1620b:2:22–23). Because Palatine theologian, Abraham Scultetus, was a member of the drafting committee of the Canons, he may well have been a direct influence.

⁴From the only extant officially signed copy of the Canons, preserved in the Oud Synodaal Archief (vol. R), housed in the Utrechts Archief.

⁵Calvin's view of predestination is examined by Klooster (1977), Otten (1968) and Polman (1936).

Calvin did not invent the notion of double predestination. Augustine taught a predestination to eternal life and to eternal death (*De Anima*, IV, 6; *Enchiridion*, 100).⁶ In the 7th century, Isidore of Seville actually coined the term *double predestination*, and in the 9th century, Gottschalk advocated a rigorous form of double predestination. Following Peter Lombard, most medieval theologians viewed predestination and reprobation as opposites, and restricted predestination to election. But Thomas Bradwardine reasserted the Augustinian tradition and revived the concept of *double predestination*. Among the early reformers, Calvin was the foremost advocate of double predestination. Luther stressed that God predestines all things by his eternal will, including human destiny, and that both election and reprobation are unconditional, with God's hidden will as the sole cause. Zwingli followed the typical medieval practice of limiting predestination to election. Peter Martyr Vermigli also taught a single predestination that identified predestination with election, while also maintaining a separate doctrine of reprobation. Martin Bucer (1536:358) advocated a double predestination of saints to salvation and of the wicked to perdition, and he pointed out that the ultimate purpose of both is God's own glory. Heinrich Bullinger held to a mild form of double predestination, but he scarcely mentioned reprobation. It is clear that Calvin developed the idea of reprobation much more than the other reformers. He was not content with Augustine's usual emphasis that those not elected are simply left in their ruin, but he vigorously maintained the side of Augustine that taught a double predestination to life and to death. It was especially Calvin's advocacy of double predestination in a variety of writings that popularised the idea in the Reformed tradition. One may conclude that here Calvin was a probable influence on the Canons.

Election

Article I.7 of the Canons presents a definition of election. The following articles focus on implications of election (Iudicium 1976).

Est autem electio immutabile Dei propositum, quo ante iacta mundi fundamenta ex universo genere humano, ex primaeva integritate in peccatum et exitium sua culpa prolapsa, secundum liberrimum voluntatis suae beneplacitum, ex mera gratia, certam quorundam hominum multitudinem, aliis nec meliorum, nec digniorum, sed in communi miseria cum aliis iacentium, ad salutem elegit in Christo, quem etiam ab aeterno mediatorem et omnium electorum caput salutisque fundamentum constituit, atque ita eos ipsi salvandos dare et ad eius communionem per Verbum et Spiritum suum efficaciter vocare et trahere, seu vera in ipsum fide donare iustificare, sanctificare, et potenter in Filii sui communionem custoditos tandem glorificare decrevit, ad demonstrationem suae misericordiae et laudem divitiarum gloriosae suae gratiae (I.7, p. 232). [Election is God's unchangeable purpose by which, before the foundation of the world, out of the entire human race, which had fallen by its own fault from its original innocence into sin and ruin, according to the very free good pleasure of his will, by sheer grace, he elected in Christ (whom he also appointed from eternity to be the mediator and head of all those elected, and the foundation of their salvation) to salvation a definite multitude of

particular people, who were neither better nor more deserving than the others, but lay with them in the common misery; and so he decreed to give them to him to be saved, and to call and draw them effectively into his fellowship through his Word and Spirit, that is, to grant them true faith in him, to justify, to sanctify, and finally, after powerfully preserving them in the fellowship of his Son, to glorify them, for the demonstration of his mercy and the praise of the riches of his glorious grace.] (Author's translation)

In his writings on predestination, Calvin gave various descriptions of election, but he did not offer a formal definition. For example, he affirmed that 'God once established by his eternal and unchangeable plan those whom he long before determined once for all to receive into salvation' (*Inst.* 3.21.7).

Certain elements of the definition of election in article I.7 are standard to Calvin and other Protestant theologians who dealt with predestination. These include points such as a divine decree of election from eternity, election of particular persons, faith as a fruit of election, and election to salvation. On such points, the Canons reflect Calvin, but his view was not distinctive.

Other key elements of the definition of election are examined in the sections below: election in Christ, the infralapsarian emphasis, the cause of election and the purpose of election.

Election in Christ

On the question how the phrase *in Christ* is related to election in Ephesians 1:4, the early draft of the Canons, which President Bogerman dictated to the synod, states that God 'elected to salvation in Jesus Christ (*in Iesu Christo ad salutem elegit*)'.⁷ This leaves it rather ambiguous whether salvation or election was in Christ. After the composing of the Canons went to a drafting committee and three more committee drafts were made, the final version of article I.7 was changed to: 'to salvation he elected in Jesus Christ (*ad salutem elegit in Christo*)'. The final wording makes it clear that it is election that is in Christ, an emphasis that reflects Ephesians 1:4. It is evident that 'in Christ' modifies election and not salvation; thus, Christ is not just the executor of the decree of election by bringing salvation to those who are elect. This article addresses Christ's role in salvation when it adds that Christ was *also* appointed from eternity to be 'the mediator and head of all those elected, and the foundation of their salvation'. The Canons do not define what 'elected in Christ' means, probably because there was some difference of opinion at the synod about what the phrase meant. The issue there was usually framed in terms of whether Christ is the foundation (*fundamentum*) of election or only the foundation of salvation and thus just the executor of the decree of election (Sinnema 2018:127–132; cf. Berkouwer 1960:132–154).

In his commentary on Ephesians 1:4, Calvin explained what to be elected in Christ means:

For if we are chosen in Christ, it is outside ourselves. It is not from the sight of our deserving, but because our heavenly

6. For a history of double predestination from Augustine to the Synod of Dordt, see Sinnema (1985:8–213), where sources are indicated.

7. Oud Synodaal Archief, in Utrechts Archief, vol. 5, 744.

Father has engrafted us, through the blessing of adoption, into the body of Christ. (Calvin 1965:125; cf. *Inst.* 3.22.1–2; 3.24.5; 1993:700; 1996:55)

Likewise, in his sermon on Ephesians 1:3–4, Calvin (1562) asserted:

It is necessary then that, before God chooses and calls us, he has there his pattern and mirror, in which he contemplates us, that is to say, our Lord Jesus Christ ... [Paul adds] that it was in Jesus Christ, who is like the true register. For when it pleases God to elect us, that is, when it pleased him from all eternity, then he as it were registered us. (p. 36–37)

Here Calvin appears to identify election with adoption of the elect as children into the body of Christ: ‘in electing his own, the Lord already has adopted them as his children’, even though they do not come into possession of this benefit until they are called.⁸

This is not an interpretation that is found in the Canons. In fact, the Swiss and Emden delegations at the synod, in their *iudicia*, appear to contradict Calvin on this point. They asserted that God elected us before the foundation of the world not as being in Christ before we were elected, but he elected us so that, within time, we may be in Christ and be saved by him (*Acta* 1620b:2:36, 2:65).

Elsewhere, Calvin stated that, along with God the Father, the Son is the ‘author of election’ with the right to elect, based on John 13:18: ‘I know whom I have chosen’ (*Inst.* 3.22.7; 1978:62; cf. Klooster 1977:31). This is one interpretation of election in Christ found among delegates at the Synod of Dordt. But only the Gelderland delegation explicitly asserted that, with the Father, the Son is the cause, source and author of election (*Acta* 1620b:3:27).

Calvin also referred to Christ as the ‘material cause’ of election, by which he meant that the elect are reconciled to God through Christ by his death (Calvin 1965:127 on Eph 1:5). The concept of Christ as material cause does not appear in the *iudicia* of the Dordt delegations.

In evaluating Calvin’s impact on the Canons on the matter of election in Christ, it is important to recognise that Calvin did not customarily pose the issue in terms of Christ as *fundamentum* of election,⁹ and he did not usually formulate his thinking on predestination within the decree-execution framework that was common at the time of the Synod of Dordt (Sinnema 2006:199, 206–207). For these reasons, and because of his particular interpretation of election in Christ,

8. Calvin 1618: 3.24.1: ‘Suos eligendo iam in filiorum locum Dominus adoptari’. Compare 3.21.5: ‘Praedestinationem, qua Deus alios in spem vitae adoptat’, 3.24.5: ‘Quos Deus sibi filios assumpsit, non in ipsis eos dicitur eligisse, sed in Christo suo (Eph 1:4)’. Nevertheless, Calvin (1965:126 on Eph 1:5; 1980:239 on Rm 11:2) also asserted that eternal election precedes adoption in Christ, but this appears to refer to actual adoption within the course of time. Such a twofold sense of adoption is apparent in Calvin’s *Articles concerning Predestination* (1954:179): ‘While we are elected in Christ, nevertheless, that God reckons us among his own is prior in order to making us members of Christ’.

9. However, there is one passage in his *Congregation* where Calvin (1993:717) describes Christ as the foundation (*fondement*) of the promises of salvation and of gracious election.

it is unlikely that Calvin was a significant influence on the formulation of the Canons on this point.

Reprobation

The Canons, in I.15, provide a definition of reprobation (*Iudicium* 1976) which is followed by articles that address pastoral implications of this topic.

Caeterum aeternam et gratuitam hanc electionis nostri gratiam eo vel maxime illustrat nobisque commendat Scriptura sacra, quod porro testatur non omnes homines esse electos, sed quosdam non electos, sive in aeterna Dei electione praeteritos; quos, scilicet, Deus ex liberrimo, iustissimo, irreprehensibili et immutabili beneplacito decrevit in communi miseria, in quam se sua culpa praecipitarunt, relinquere, nec salvifica fide et conversionis gratia donare, sed in viis suis et sub iusto iudicio relictos, tandem non tantum propter infidelitatem, sed etiam caetera omnia peccata, ad declarationem iustitiae suae damnare et aeternum punire (I.15, p. 234). [*Holy Scripture most especially highlights this eternal and undeserved grace of our election and brings it out more clearly for us, in that it further bears witness that not all people have been chosen, but that some have not been chosen or have been passed by in God’s eternal election – those, that is, concerning whom God, on the basis of his entirely free, most just, irreproachable, and unchangeable good pleasure, made the following decree: to leave them in the common misery into which, by their own fault, they have plunged themselves; not to grant them saving faith and the grace of conversion; but finally to condemn and eternally punish those who have been left in their own ways and under God’s just judgement, not only for their unbelief but also for all their other sins, in order to display his justice.*] (Author’s translation)

In this article of the Canons, the heart of the definition is that reprobation is God’s eternal decree, by his good pleasure, to leave those not elected, or passed by, in their common misery, not to grant them faith, but to condemn them eternally for their unbelief and other sins, in order to display his justice. This formulation clearly expresses the late medieval distinction between negative reprobation or preterition (the decree to pass over in election and leave in misery) and positive reprobation or precondemnation (the decree to condemn for sin) (Sinnema 1985:410).¹⁰ This distinction slowly gained acceptance among Reformed theologians toward the end of the 16th century: first, tentatively by Girolamo Zanchi and then more clearly by William Perkins and Franciscus Junius (Sinnema 1985:76–77, 87–88, 112, 138, 193–194). At the Synod of Dordt, two-thirds of the delegations expressed the full distinction between negative and positive reprobation in their *iudicia* on Article One (Sinnema 1985:378).

Calvin did not offer a formal definition of reprobation. He used various terms and phrases such as ‘reprobate’ (*reprobare*), ‘reject’ (*reicere*), ‘predestine to death’ (*praedestinare ad mortem*), ‘predestine to destruction’ (*praedestinare ad interitum*), ‘predestine to damnation’ (*praedestinare ad damnationem*), ‘destine to destruction’ (*destinare exitio*), ‘devote to destruction’ (*devotere exitio*), ‘preordain damnation’ (*praeordinare damnationem*) and ‘pass by’ (*praeterire*), which suggest various

10. The negative-positive distinction was first articulated by Nicolas of Lyra (Sinnema 1985:33, 35).

facets of reprobation (Sinnema 2009:122),¹¹ but he never made use of the distinction between negative and positive reprobation (Sinnema 1985:60).¹² In the formulation of a definition of reprobation, Calvin could not have been an influence on the Canons.

Calvin (*Inst.* 3.21.1) did, however, express the thought that the grace of election is emphasised by contrast with those who are not elected:

his eternal election, which illuminates (*illustrat*) God's grace by this contrast: that he does not indiscriminately adopt all into the hope of salvation, but gives to some what he denies to others.

Likewise, in commenting on Romans 9:22–23, Calvin (1980:211) asserted that reprobation makes the vastness of God's mercy toward the elect 'better known and shine with greater clarity', and when the elect see how wretched are the reprobate, God's 'infinite mercy toward the elect is more and more commended (*commendetur*)'. On this point Calvin may have been an influence on the opening line of the Canons article I.15, although this thought was also advocated by Theodore Beza (1582:117) and others in their interpretation of Romans 9:23 (see Pareus 1608:866).

Cause of election and reprobation

The Canons are very clear that the cause of election lies only in the good pleasure of God's will. That is expressed not only in the definition: God elected 'according to the very free good pleasure of his will' (I.7). A specific article is also devoted to this point: 'But the cause of this undeserved election is exclusively the good pleasure of God ...' (I.10).

Calvin also insisted that election is caused only by the good pleasure of God's will. Based on Ephesians 1:5, he asserted: 'The efficient cause is the good pleasure of the will of God' (Calvin 1965:126). The *Institutes* (3.23.10; cf. 3.22.1–2) affirm: 'God elects as sons those whom he pleases, according to the good pleasure of his will, without any regard for merit, while he rejects and reprobates others' (also see Calvin 1961:68, 69, ch. V.1). Calvin (*Inst.* 3.22.4–5) emphatically denied that the cause of election is good works or divine foreknowledge of merit, as all are equally unworthy.

The Canons clearly reflect Calvin's position on the cause of election. On this point the influence of Calvin is probable, although the idea that the cause of election is God's will alone and not human merit or foreseen faith, was a common Reformed notion that was inherited from the Augustinian tradition.

In the Canons' definition of reprobation, the cause of the whole decree of reprobation is identified as 'on the basis of his entirely free, most just, irreproachable, and unchangeable

good pleasure' (I.15). This is particularly true of negative reprobation. The cause of the decree 'to leave' some in their common misery, in other words, why God elects one person and passes over another, is only found in God's will. But the cause of positive reprobation is more complex. While the decree 'to condemn and eternally punish' is also qualified by the good pleasure phrase, another cause is also added: 'not only for their unbelief, but also for all their other sins'. This formulation of article I.15 allows for the interpretation that the cause of positive reprobation is both God's will and human sin – a position held by several of the delegations at Dordt (Sinnema 1985:379–381, 411–412). For the Canons, the cause of actual condemnation within time is definitely the unbelief and other sins of the person.

As with election, Calvin found the cause of reprobation exclusively in God's will or divine plan (Sinnema 2009:125–128). 'The reason (*causam*) why God elects some and reprobates others is to be found nowhere else than in his plan' (Calvin 1980:203 on Rm 9:14).

Those whom God passes over, he reprobates; and this he does for no other reason than that he wills to exclude them from the inheritance which he predestines for his own children (*Inst.* 3.23.1; cf. 3.22.11; 3.23.2; 3.23.5; 1961:58, 85, 94, 120–121, 140, ch. II, V.3, 6, VIII.5, 11; 1980:242 on Rm 11:6)

The cause is not divine foreknowledge of one's sin, because everyone is equally unworthy and worthy of condemnation (*Inst.* 2.22.4; 1961:55, 81, ch. I, V.3; 1980:200 on Rm 9:11). Even though God reprobated certain people by his sovereign will, Calvin insisted that the reprobate still deserve their own destruction and God is just in condemning them (*Inst.* 3.23.8; 3.24.14; 1961:98, 120, 146, 156, ch. VI, VIII.5, IX.3, 7; 1993:714). In making this point, Calvin shifted the focus of attention from eternal reprobation to the actual temporal condemnation of the reprobate. It is on this temporal level of actual condemnation alone that Calvin identified a twofold cause based on his distinction between remote and proximate causality.¹³ Although the remote and hidden cause of condemnation is in God's will, its proximate cause is man's original corruption and sin (Calvin 1961:100–101, 116, ch. VII, VIII.4; *Inst.* 3.23.3; 3.23.8; 3.23.9; 1980:244 on Rm 11:7; 1983:366–367). Thus, the blame for their destruction remains in the reprobate themselves.

Calvin's strong advocacy of unconditional election and reprobation, based solely on God's will, had a profound influence on the Reformed tradition, although later Calvinists tended to give sin a place as a cause of reprobation. Calvin acknowledged the culpability of the reprobate in his distinction between proximate and remote causes of condemnation, but this rather limited way of taking human responsibility into account would find little acceptance in the Reformed tradition. Instead of employing Calvin's distinction between proximate and remote causes, later Reformed theologians tended to follow Beza in using the decree-execution distinction when discussing predestination.

11. Beeke (2017:83–162) explores the development of Calvin's view of reprobation.

12. Klooster (1977:59, 71, 76) mistakenly sees in Calvin a distinction between preterition and condemnation as two aspects of reprobation. Calvin (and the Canons) clearly distinguished between eternal reprobation (decreed before creation) and condemnation at the end of history.

13. On Calvin's distinction between proximate and remote causality, see Sinnema (2006:196–198; 2009:128–131).

The Canons agree with Calvin that the cause of reprobation lies in the good pleasure of God's will. But, as the formulation of article I.15 allows for the interpretation that both God's will and human sin are causes of positive reprobation, the Canons present a more moderate position than Calvin (Sinnema 1985:448–450). As for the cause of temporal condemnation, the Canons identify this cause simply as the unbelief and other sins of the reprobate; they make no use of Calvin's remote-proximate distinction. By placing the cause of condemnation in some sense also in God's will, Calvin's position was more stringent than the Canons also on this point.

Supralapsarian or infralapsarian?

As is evident from the definitions of election and reprobation, the Canons are formulated in a clear infralapsarian sense. God elected particular people 'out of the entire human race, which had fallen by its own fault from its original innocence into sin and ruin' and who lay 'in the common misery' (I.7);¹⁴ and, in regard to the reprobate, he decreed 'to leave them in the common misery into which, by their own fault, they have plunged themselves' (I.15).

Although scholars have differed on whether Calvin was supralapsarian or infralapsarian,¹⁵ it is anachronistic to define his position as such, as this issue did not become formulated in terms of these alternatives until Theodore Beza – the first to present a clear supralapsarian position (Sinnema 2007:225–229). Calvin sometimes asserted that God predestined man before he was created or fallen and that his decree of election did not presuppose the fall of Adam¹⁶ (*Inst.* 2.12.5; cf. 3.23.7; 1961:101, 121, ch. VII, VIII.5; 1980:244 on Rm 11:7). But in other passages, Calvin spoke in a more Augustinian fashion of God electing and reprobating from the condemned mass of perdition. For example, 'God elected and reprobated out of the mass of perdition (*ex perdita massa*) those whom he willed' (Calvin 1961:125, ch. VIII.5); and 'God elected out of the condemned race of Adam (*ex damnata Adae sobole*) those whom he pleased, and reprobated whom he willed' (Calvin 1961:125; cf. *Inst.* 3.23.3; 1961:89, 101, 102, 121, ch. V.3, VII, VIII.5; 1993:700, 713).

When the infralapsarian and supralapsarian positions actually became an issue in the latter decades of the 16th century, the issue was formulated in two related ways: firstly, in terms of an order of divine decrees – whether God's eternal decree to elect and reprobate followed his decrees regarding creation and the fall (the infralapsarian order), or preceded these decrees (the supralapsarian order); and secondly, in terms of the 'object' (*obiectum*) of predestination – whether the object whom God predestined from eternity was man *considered* by God as created and fallen (infralapsarian), or man *considered* as yet to be created and yet to fall (supralapsarian).

14. See also article I.10: 'from among the common mass of sinners'.

15. Those who consider Calvin supralapsarian include Dijk (1912:25) and Fesko (2001:57–149). Others who consider Calvin infralapsarian include Blocher (1980:270–276) and Turretin (1992:1:349–350; cf. Beeke 2017:156–157).

16. In Ephesians 1, 'Here, surely, the fall of Adam is not presupposed (*non praesupponitur*) as preceding [election] in time' (*Inst.* 2.12.5).

These two ways of formulating the supra-infra issue were familiar in discussions at the Synod of Dordt, with Franciscus Gomarus present as the main advocate of the supralapsarian position. But as a popular document, the Canons avoided the technical formulations and presented the infralapsarian stance in a popular manner.

Calvin certainly cannot be called a supralapsarian or infralapsarian in the full sense of these terms, as he did not formulate his position in either of these two classic ways. Calvin never presented his ideas on predestination in terms of an order of decrees; he did not speculate about whether in God's mind the decree to elect or reprobate preceded or followed the decree of the fall. Nor did Calvin seek to identify the 'object' of predestination. Because this was not an issue for him, it is not likely that Calvin had a significant influence on the Canons' infralapsarian formulation.

Purpose or end of election and reprobation

The Canons' definition of election specifies that the purpose of election is 'for the demonstration of his mercy and the praise of the riches of his glorious grace' (I.7).

In various statements in his writings, Calvin addressed the purpose of election. In commenting on the passage that God elected us 'that we might be holy' (Eph 1:4), he stated that this is the 'proximate end (*finem proximum*)' of election, while the words of verse 6, 'to the praise of the glory of his grace', identify the 'highest and ultimate end'. Likewise, in regard to Ephesians 1:12, Calvin noted: 'He repeats the end, "that we might be for the praise [of his glory]," for only then does God's glory shine in us, if we are nothing but vessels of his mercy.'

Hence, 'the glory of God is the highest end (*summus finis*), to which our sanctification is subordinate' (Calvin 1965:125, 127, 130 on Eph 1:4, 5, 11; cf. Klooster 1977:42–43). Elsewhere, in the *Institutes* (3.24.5), Calvin paid more attention to the proximate end when asserting that the purpose of election is the salvation of the elect. Following Bucer, Calvin's usual accent was on the glory of God,¹⁷ and it was especially due to his influence that the glory of God became a hallmark of the Reformed tradition.

The Canons share with Calvin the emphasis on God's glory, as is especially evident in the doxological endings of its sections in articles I.18, III/IV.17, V.15 and the Conclusion. However, in specifically identifying the purpose or end of election, the Canons focus on the attributes of God's mercy and grace (the latter reflecting Eph 1:6),¹⁸ rather than highlighting his glory.

17. See also Calvin's emphasis that the glory of God is the highest and ultimate end of man's salvation and that the whole world was made for the end of being the theatre of his glory (Calvin 1961:96–97, ch. VI).

18. The Canons follow Beza's New Testament translation: '*ad laudem gloriosae suae gratiae*', rather than Calvin's reading in his Ephesians commentary: '*in laudem gloriae gratiae suae*' (Calvin 1600:347).

In the definition of reprobation in the Canons, the purpose of reprobation is 'in order to display his justice' (I.15).

Like Bucer, Calvin saw the main purpose of reprobation as the revealing of God's glory. 'The reprobate are raised up to the end that through them God's glory may be illuminated' (*Inst.* 3.22.11; cf. Sinnema 2009:132–133). They are raised up 'by the just but inscrutable judgment of God to show forth his glory in their condemnation' (*Inst.* 3.24.14). Following Proverbs 16:4, Calvin (1961:97, ch. VI; cf. 1961:84, ch. V.3; 1980:206–208 on Rm 9:17–18; *Inst.* 3.21.5; 1996:48) asserted that:

the wicked were created for the day of destruction simply because God willed to illustrate his own glory in them; just as elsewhere [Ex 9:16] he declares that Pharaoh was raised up by him that he might show forth his name among the Gentiles.¹⁹

From Romans 9:22, Calvin concluded that God 'created [*the reprobate*] for dishonor in life and destruction in death, to become the instruments of his wrath and examples of his severity' (*Inst.* 3.24.12). They are vessels of wrath, 'made and formed for the purpose of being proofs of the vengeance and displeasure of God' (Calvin 1980:211). In Romans 9:23, Calvin (1980:211) found a second reason why God reveals his glory in the destruction of the reprobate: to confirm more clearly the fullness of divine mercy to the elect.

By formulating the purpose of reprobation as the display of God's justice, the Canons differ from Calvin's statements about the purpose. At the very least, the drafters of the Canons wanted to avoid the harsher side of Calvin's view, namely that the wicked were created for destruction.²⁰ Because of the differences, it is unlikely that Calvin had any significant influence on the Canons' formulations of the purpose either of election or reprobation.

Assurance of election

As the Synod of Dordt prepared to draft the Canons, almost all of the 19 delegations, in their *iudicia* on Article One, emphasised that, in this life believers can have certainty or assurance of their election. But they offered various opinions on the source from which a believer finds assurance. Fifteen of the 21 *iudicia* stated that this certainty derives from the fruits or effects of election that believers see in themselves (*Acta* 1620b:2:9, 18, 32, 40, 44, 51, 57, 61; 3:7, 12–13, 23, 29, 60, 66, 75–76, 86). Some described this as climbing from the effects to the cause (*Acta* 1620b: 2:9, 44, 51; 3:13, 76). Hesse and Gelderland called this becoming certain of one's election *a posteriori*, and Nassau-Wetteravia called this the analytical method (*Acta* 1620b:2:32; 3:30; 2:44). Relating to this, the Palatinate and Gelderland presented a version of the formal *sylogismus practicus* (*Acta* 1620b:2:23; 3:30). About half of the delegations (British, Hesse, Nassau-Wetteravia, Geneva,

three Dutch professors, Lubbertus, Gomarus, Gelderland, North Holland, Groningen and Walloon) added that certainty of election also comes from the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit in the heart of believers (*Acta* 1620b:2:9, 32, 40, 44, 50; 3:7, 13, 23, 29, 39, 75, 86). The British, Emden, Lubbertus and Gomarus also mentioned relying on biblical promises to believers (*Acta* 1620b:2:9, 72; 3:13, 23).

The Canons, in article I.9, address the issue of assurance of election, and in article I.10, they focus on the proper results of assurance such as humility, adoration, cleansing and love of God, as well as abuses such as laxity in obeying God and casual self-assurance. Article I.9 centres on the source of assurance:

Assurance of this their eternal and unchangeable election to salvation is given to the elect in due time, though by various stages and in different measure. Such assurance comes not by inquisitive searching into the hidden and deep things of God, but by noticing within themselves, with spiritual joy and holy delight, the unmistakable fruits (*fructus*) of election pointed out in God's Word – such as a true faith in Christ, a childlike fear of God, a godly sorrow for their sins, a hunger and thirst for righteousness, and so on. (Canons of Dordt 1988:125)

Good works are not specifically mentioned here among the fruits of election, but they are covered under the concept of *righteousness*.

Closely related is the assurance of an elect person's perseverance in faith – a matter addressed in Canons, Chapter Five (arts. 9–13). According to article 10, this assurance is derived from three sources: from faith in the promises of God revealed in his Word; from the testimony of the Holy Spirit; and from a serious pursuit of a clear conscience and of good works (Canons of Dordt 1988:140). Likewise, Rejection 5 of this chapter asserts that this assurance derives from 'the marks (*signis*) peculiar to God's children, and from God's completely reliable promises'. One of the biblical supports given for this is 1 John 3:24 which states that we know he remains in us by the Spirit he gave us (Canons of Dordt 1988:142; cf. Berkouwer 1960:298–302).

The Canons thus affirm three sources of assurance: the fruits of election, the internal testimony of the Spirit, and God's promises. But as article I.9 indicates, the Canons place the accent on seeking assurance of election from the fruits of election seen in believers themselves and in so doing, they followed the majority of the delegations at the synod.

On the question of assurance of election, Calvin spoke of this in various ways (Beeke 1991:47–78; Berkouwer 1960:287–290; Niesel 1956:169–181). He warned against seeking assurance by mounting up to search into the abyss of God's hidden counsel, and he directed believers to rather find comfort in the Word (*Inst.* 3.24.3–4; 1961:113, ch. VIII.4; 1993:717).

Calvin's primary answer (1993:717; cf. *Inst.* 3.24.6; 1961:126, 130, ch. VIII.6, 7) was that for assurance one must begin by looking to Christ.

¹⁹Calvin (2010:64) denied that this meant the purpose of creation was eternal destruction.

²⁰The view that the wicked were created for destruction was a point especially criticised by the Remonstrants, for example in their 'Syllabus Testimoniorum' appended to their *Declaratio* on Article One, which they submitted to the Synod of Dordt (*Acta* 1620a:2:33–34).

Do you want to know for certain if you are elect? Look at yourself in Jesus Christ. For those who by faith commune freely in Jesus Christ can be assured that they belong to God's eternal election and are his children.

'The certainty of faith dwells only in Christ's grace' (Calvin 1978:246, on 1 Jn 2:3). In this context, Calvin called Christ the mirror of election. 'Christ, then, is the mirror wherein we must ... contemplate our own election' (*Inst.* 3.24.5; cf. 3.22.1; 1993:712; 1961:113, 127, ch. VIII.4, 6). Thus, faith in Christ is at the heart of assurance. The nature of faith itself contains the element of full certainty (*Inst.* 3.2.15).

For Calvin, the Holy Spirit also has a vital role in assurance, because the Spirit testifies to our heart that we are the children of God. 'The Spirit is our surety because he testifies to our adoption ... It is the office of the Spirit to confirm within us what God promises in his Word' (Calvin 1964:23 on 2 Cor 1:21; cf. 1980:167–170 on Rm 8:15–16; 1965:75; 1978:278, 282 on 1 Jn 3:19, 24; *Inst.* 3.24.1; 1961:127, ch. VIII.6). Hence, relying on the biblical promises of God is also a factor in assurance (*Inst.* 3.24.6–7). It was especially Calvin who was responsible for the emergence of the idea of the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit in the Reformed tradition (Beeke 1991:69).

Beyond these primary sources of assurance, Calvin recognised a secondary role for what he called the 'latter signs (*signa posteriora*)' of election, that is, the resulting signs in one's life that flow from one's election. 'We shall be following the best order if, in seeking the certainty of our election, we cling to those latter signs which are sure attestations of it' (*Inst.* 3.24.4). Among these signs are one's calling and justification (*Inst.* 3.21.7; 3.24.4; 3.24.6). Calvin also regarded love and good works among the signs of election. Love is a 'sure symbol of regeneration', and a 'testimony to us that we are born of God', but love is only an 'accessory (*accessio*) or inferior aid (*adminiculum inferius*), a prop (*fulturam*) to our faith, not the foundation on which it rests' (Calvin 1978:275–276, 278 on 1 Jn 3:14, 19).

As for good works as a sign, Calvin (1978) did:

not deny that newness of life, as an effect of divine adoption, serves to confirm confidence; but as a secondary aid (*secundarium adminiculum*), whereas we must be founded on grace alone. (p. 295 on 1 Jn 4:17)

Although everyone has a witness to his faith from his works, it is not founded on them, but they are a 'subsequent proof (*posterior probatio*) added as a sign' (Calvin 1978:246 on 1 Jn 2:3). Good works in themselves are imperfect and so produce uncertainty. Hence, Calvin could say: 'None should conclude from this that we must look to our works for our assurance to be firm' (Calvin 1978:278 on 1 Jn 3:19; *Inst.* 3.14.19). The fact that good works can, in their limited way, contribute to assurance is only because saints 'regard them solely as gifts of God from which they may recognize his goodness and as signs of the calling by which they realize their election' (*Inst.* 3.14.20).

Apart from the warning against searching into the hidden counsel of God, the Canons do not closely reflect Calvin on the matter of assurance. The Canons place emphasis on finding assurance from the fruits of election in one's life, while, for Calvin, this was a very secondary source of assurance and his emphasis was on looking to Christ. On this matter of assurance, the Canons more closely reflect the thought of Theodore Beza whose main accent was on finding assurance by climbing from the fruits or effects of election to the decision of God's decree itself (Sinnema 2007:235–238).

Election of infants who have died

Late in the drafting process, one article (I.17) was added to the Canons to provide comfort to parents who lose children in infancy (Iudicium 1976):

Quandoquidem de voluntate Dei ex Verbo ipsius nobis est iudicandum, quod testatur liberos fidelium esse sanctos, non quidem natura, sed beneficio foederis gratuiti, in quo illi cum parentibus comprehenduntur, pii parentes de electione et salute suorum liberorum, quos Deus in infantia ex hac vita evocat, dubitare non debent (I.17, p. 236). [*Since we must make judgements 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.*] (Translation from the Canons of Dort 1988:126)

The first draft of this article (I.17) began with the words:

Although, properly speaking, God knows those who are his, 2 Tim. 2:19, and we are not to investigate his hidden judgment, nevertheless, since Scripture says in I Cor. 7:14 that the children of believers are holy ...

This formulation seems to allow for the possibility in God's hidden judgement of a reprobation of deceased children of believers, while assuring such parents not to doubt their election²¹ (Sinnema 1985:412–415). The final version of this article no longer refers to the level of God's hidden judgement, but limits itself to what Scripture has revealed (in Gn 17:7; Ac 2:39; 1 Cor 7:14). It more forthrightly affirms the election of such infants on the basis of participation in the covenant and assures believing parents of this. The article avoids speaking about the sensitive issue of dying children of unbelievers who are outside the covenant. In this case, although God's judgements are hidden, as 'all people are conceived in sin and are born children of wrath' (III/IV.3) due to original sin, the unstated assumption is that such children are subject to condemnation.

When Calvin (1961) dealt with children who die in infancy, he was clear that some are elect and others are condemned due to original sin:

If original guilt is for Pighius not sufficient to condemn men and the hidden judgment of God has no kind of place, what will he make of those infant children who are taken from this life before they could display any such example because of their age?

21. Three or four of the delegations at Dordt did not clearly deny the possibility of reprobation of such infants.

The infants of Sodom and of Jerusalem who died had the same condition of birth and death, nor was there any difference in their works ... Who does not here adore the admirable judgment of God by which it happens that some are born in Jerusalem and soon pass to a better life, while Sodom, the forecourt of hell, receives the birth of others? (p. 115–116, ch. VIII.4)²²

While Calvin did not explicitly say so, he apparently understood the dying infants of Jerusalem to be children of believing parents. It is not clear whether, for Calvin, all such infants of Jerusalem are saved.

In his commentaries on the biblical passages, which form the basis of the Canons' article I.17, Calvin made some observations relevant to the issue. His comments on Genesis 17:7 dealt with the point that all natural descendants of Abraham were part of the covenant, although he also mentioned Paul's argument that not all Abraham's offspring are to be considered his legitimate children (Rm 9:6–8) and that, with the coming of Christ, many of the Gentiles became Abraham's children by faith. Regarding Acts 2:39, Calvin observed that the promise of the covenant was to the Jews and their children, and then it was extended to Gentiles. In neither of these contexts did Calvin mention infants or their death.

On the important passage in 1 Corinthians 7:14 about children of believers being holy, Calvin (1968) commented:

[*This passage*] shows that the children of believers are set apart from others by a certain special privilege, so that they are regarded as holy in the church. ... But how does this sentence harmonize with what Paul teaches in Ephesians 2:3, that we are 'all by nature children of wrath?' ... To that I answer that there is a universal propagation both of sin and condemnation in the seed of Adam. All, therefore, to a man, are included in this curse, whether they spring from believers or the ungodly ... Accordingly all are in the same natural condition, so that they are subject not only to sin but also to eternal death. But the fact that the apostle ascribes a special privilege to the children of believers here has its source in the blessing of the covenant, by whose intervention the curse of nature is destroyed, and also those who were by nature unclean are consecrated to God by his grace. So Paul argues in Rom. 11:16 that all Abraham's descendants are holy, because God had concluded a covenant of life with him. (p. 149)²³

Although Calvin dealt here with children of believers, he did not directly address the situation of dying infants of believing parents, as he went on to speak of how many children of believers fall away.²⁴

22. Compare Calvin's comments on the status of Jacob and Esau in the womb, although they did not die in infancy (*Inst.* 3.22.5; 1980:200 on Rm 9:11).

23. On the holiness of Abraham's descendants, in the *Institutes*, Calvin (3.22.4) asserted regarding Rm 9:6:

Paul, although he admits that, by virtue of the covenant, the offspring of Abraham are holy, still contends that many among them are outside of it. And that is not only because they degenerate from legitimate children to bastards but also because God's special election towers and rules over all.

24. Compare Calvin's commentary on Romans 11:16 and 11:22:

The children of believers, to whom the promise is due according to the covenant made with their fathers, are grafted in ... [They] are cut off when they reject the promise given to their fathers. (Calvin 1980:249, 253)

In his polemic against Sebastian Castellio, Calvin penned a rather harsh statement concerning dying infants. Castellio had argued that, if a godless person is reprobated from eternity before he has done any evil act at all, that would contravene all human and divine laws. Calvin's strong reaction (1558) was:

Tolluntur e vita innumeri adhuc infantes. Exere nunc tuam virulentiam contra Deum, qui innoxios foetus a matrum uberibus avulsos in aeternum mortem praecipitat. Hanc blasphemiam, ubi palam detecta est, quisquis non detestabitur, mihi pro sua libidine maledicat. (p. 105) [*To this day innumerable infants are taken from this life. Put forth your virulence against God, who snatches innocent babes from their mother's breasts and casts them into eternal death. Whoever will not detest this blasphemy, when it is openly exposed to view, may slander me as much as he pleases.*] (Author's translation)

These appear to be words of blasphemy that Calvin put in the mouth of Castellio as if this was Calvin's teaching. It needs to be noted that Calvin was arguing that all share the guilt of original sin, and the blasphemy does not specifically address infants of believing parents. Although repudiated by Calvin, later in the Arminian controversy these words became attributed to the Contra-Remonstrant position, and they evoked strong critique from the Remonstrants (e.g. Grevinchoven 1618:4–7).

Although Calvin did not clearly address the matter of the election of dying infants of believers, it is possible that he had an influence on the formulation of Canons, article I.17, because his theology may have informed the general thinking of the drafters of the Canons concerning original sin and children as heirs of the covenant. As for the blasphemy, mentioned by Calvin, the Conclusion of the Canons denounced several slanderous accusations; among them the notion that the Reformed teaching on predestination means 'that many innocent infants of believers are snatched from their mothers' breasts and cruelly cast into hell' ([Author's translation], cf. Canons of Dort 1988:144).

Conclusion

The fact that the Canons reflect Calvin's views on certain themes or that they are compatible with Calvin, does not necessarily mean direct influence. On any specific article in the Canons, the actual source of influence may well derive from other writers whose views were similar to Calvin. Due to the lack of evidence regarding sources in the documents of Dordt, one can best conclude that, on points where there is a similarity of expression, Calvin was a possible rather than definite influence on the Canons.

Calvin was not the single fountainhead of the Reformed tradition, and he was not regarded as such by the members of the Synod of Dordt. There were numerous Reformed theologians who may have contributed an influence on the Canons. Calvin was indeed a key source that shaped the tradition, but he was one voice among many.

Between Calvin and the Synod of Dordt there was some doctrinal development. Especially due to the challenge of new polemics with Catholics, Lutherans and Remonstrants, and an emerging scholastic tendency toward precision in analysis, new issues came to the fore during this period that were not in focus for Calvin; or issues were formulated with greater precision and framed in different categories or distinctions that were not used or emphasised by Calvin, for example the supra-infra question, the distinction between negative and positive reprobation, and the matter of assurance. Because some issues, current at Dordt, did not become matters of debate until after Calvin's time, it is anachronistic to expect that Calvin would have declared his stance on them or that he would have been an influence on such formulations of Dordt.

Some ideas were commonplace in the Reformed tradition, shared by Calvin and other orthodox Reformed theologians, for example the ideas that election is a divine decree from eternity, that election leads to salvation, and that faith is the fruit of election. In such cases, a specific influence of Calvin is impossible to identify. But in a matter such as double predestination where Calvin was a major advocate of certain ideas that came to dominate later Reformed formulations, one can conclude that Calvin was a probable influence on the Canons.

After comparing Calvin and the Canons, one is led to conclude that the Canons only partially reflect Calvin on predestination and his influence on the Canons could only have been modest. On the fallen human condition as the starting point, and the issues of double predestination and the cause of election, his influence is probable, or at least, possible. On other points—election in Christ, the infralapsarian emphasis, twofold reprobation, the purpose of election and reprobation, assurance of election—an influence of Calvin is minimal or unlikely.

On certain elements relating to predestination, the Canons present a more moderate stance than Calvin. This is the case on the issues of the causes of reprobation, the causes of temporal condemnation, and the purpose of reprobation, where the Canons avoid the harsh edges of some of Calvin's statements.

Calvin was not the unqualified source of the five points of the Canons, and therefore he was not the unqualified source of the 'Five Points of Calvinism'. Although he was a possible or probable influence on some elements of the five points, he was an unlikely influence on others (Sinnema 2011). This is true also of the first chapter on predestination. Hence, it is historically misleading to identify the five points of the Canons as 'Calvinism' in the sense that they all derive directly from Calvin himself.

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